

**Connected by 25: Improving the Life Chances of the
Country's Most Vulnerable 14-24 Year Olds**

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INTRODUCTION

There are currently 4 million fourteen-year olds youth in the United States. Ten years from now over 90% will have made at least a minimally successful transition into early adulthood, in that they will have acquired the skills needed to connect with the labor force on a regular basis and they will have established positive social support systems.¹

However, at least 200,000-300,000 of these youth, five to seven percent, will reach age 25 without having successfully transitioned to independent adulthood.² At an age when most young adults are benefiting from fulltime work and close interpersonal relationships, these youth will not have connected to the labor force; most will lack social support systems. About sixty percent will be men; of these, over half will be in prison, while the remaining young men will be mired in protracted spells of long-term unemployment. By age 25, nearly all of the young women will have started families; however, most of these young mothers will face the daunting challenge of raising their children alone and with little income, or with the help of their own impoverished families. Almost all of these youth will have spent their childhoods in families in the lowest third of the income distribution and will likely spend much of their own adult lives in poverty, unemployed or marginally employed.³ From both an economic and social perspective, these young people will be "disconnected".⁴

Virtually all youth not connected by age 25 begin the process of disconnection much earlier, usually before age 19. In our society, almost all youth require support until they have connected successfully with the labor force, which generally does not occur until their mid-twenties. Most young adults experience detours on the road to economic independence, including periods of unemployment and periodic interruptions in their education.

Fortunately, the majority of youth are embedded in networks--families, friends, and communities--that provide guidance, support, and help, both financial and otherwise, when they face the crises that are an inevitable part of the transition. These support networks enable them to access programs, including higher education, and services that promote their development. They convey cultural expectations, as well. In contrast, most disconnected youth have extremely limited support systems, including family support, to help them through the difficult transition to adulthood. Society provides them little in the way of resources to help them reconnect.

The lack of societal support for disconnected youth stands in stark contrast to the extensive support provided to the best situated, most likely to succeed young adults--the

25-30 percent of all youth who attend four-year colleges and obtain Bachelor degrees. Most of these youth receive strong family support; the majority live in higher income households. Beyond what their parents provide, society invests billions of dollars in these youth and provides them with an extensive support system. At college, they are provided room and board, health and mental health services, and have dorm counselors to guide them. They have the best-paid and most highly qualified teachers. There are career-counseling offices and employers often come directly to campus to recruit. Youth and their families receive federally subsidized loans or benefit from highly subsidized tuition at public universities. They are among peers who encourage and facilitate their progress. While students attending two-year colleges have fewer support services, they too benefit from a system designed to aid their development and transition. Colleges also convey to their students a sense of being special, a message that is rarely, if ever, conveyed to disconnected youth, who are ignored at best and demonized at worst.

There is a compelling need to create a similar system of support and opportunity for those youth least likely to make a successful transition by age 25 and to attract youth to it.⁵ In this paper, we address several issues relevant to developing such a system of services. We begin by identifying those groups of youth at highest risk of long-term disconnection. This is critical for developing policies and programs and for deciding how to target such programs. Research indicates that those youth who are unable to make a successful transition differ in important ways from other out of school/unemployed youth. Those less likely to connect have lower basic literacy and fewer years of formal schooling. In addition, many have a history of behavioral problems that result in suspension, expulsion, and arrest. They are more likely to suffer from untreated mental illness, substance abuse, or other disabilities, more likely to reside in neighborhoods where many other residents are unemployed, and, more likely to have experienced child abuse or neglect.⁶ The women are more likely to be single mothers of young children and exposed to a great deal of domestic violence. Programs and policies designed to serve the general population of adolescents or unemployed young adults are not likely to adequately serve the needs of those at highest risk of long-term disconnection. We also try to create a reasonable estimate of the number of high-risk youth, in order to inform future estimates of the costs and potential benefits of interventions designed to help these youth connect.

We conclude that the vast majority of youth who do not make a successful transition fall within one or more of the following four groups of 14-17 year olds: 1) those who do not complete high school, 2) youth deeply involved in the juvenile justice systems, 3) young, unmarried mothers, and 4) adolescents who experience foster placement. Thus, adolescents in any of these statuses should be a major focal point of public policy. There needs to be substantial improvement in the current systems that work with these youth while they are still minors, with the goal of reconnecting them to school and social support to the maximum degree possible. This support should continue until they have made a successful transition into young adulthood.

While a major focus should be on working with youth under 18 at the point that they begin disconnecting, there also should be a much stronger commitment to helping young adults, 18-24, who are experiencing major problems connecting with the labor force. At present, many services designed to help children, including free education, terminate when youth reach 18. There are some *programs*, such as job training, available to those seeking them out, but these are limited. Moreover, there are no *systems* or government

agencies, like schools and child welfare agencies, which have the responsibility of helping young adults experiencing difficulty in making the transition to adulthood. Since the transition to independent adulthood rarely occurs at 18, we need to create, at the local, state and national levels, **young adult** systems of support. As noted, colleges serve this function for some youth; it is time for an equal commitment to those youth who need other services in order to help them become self-sufficient, productive citizens.

THE CASE FOR A NEW APPROACH

Over twenty percent of all youth come within one of the risk categories before reaching age 24.⁷ There are compelling reasons to increase societal attention to these youth.⁸ Helping them become productive and emotionally stable would produce enormous social benefit. They now contribute little to the economy. Rather, as a group, they impose significant social costs, including criminal activity and the use of very expensive services. Most of the women face the challenge of raising children on their own; many have difficulty providing adequate care. Their children experience numerous problems and are at increased risk of placement in foster care.

The moral case for not abandoning these youth is equally compelling. Most were afforded little opportunity to succeed. The great majority grew up in very poor households. Many were abused or neglected by their families. They are the victims of failed schools, failed child welfare systems and failed neighborhoods. Their poor outcomes are exactly what is predicted when children grow up under these circumstances.

Moreover, while we estimate that around five percent of the overall youth population is disconnected at age twenty-five, the proportion more than doubles for minority males, especially African-American males. Our society is unlikely to ever achieve racial equality if it abandons this group.

Some commentators believe that trying to alter the lives of older youth is too difficult and therefore resources should be invested primarily in younger children or that, if there is a focus on adolescents, the emphasis should be on prevention of dropping out of school and delinquency. Prevention is seen as more efficient than after the fact intervention. Most public and private funding reflects these priorities.

It would be a mistake to focus only, or primarily, on prevention. First, while prevention programs are likely to reduce the number of disconnected adolescents and young adults, a substantial number of youth will not be involved in, or benefited by, these programs. Moreover, with respect to lowering the number of disconnected youth, it will be many years before programs focused on young children bear fruit. In the meantime, large numbers of youth are, or will become, disconnected. These youth will be unable to contribute to society. Society will continue to see major differences in outcome along racial lines. In addition, helping disconnected youth who are parents is necessary to prevent their children from experiencing the same problems. The most successful early childhood programs all have included a focus on the parents as well as the child. Ignoring disconnected youth also ignores the dynamics of very poor neighborhoods—many of these youth are street role models for younger kids and keep crime and school failure rates high enough to ensure that businesses do not enter the neighborhood. Putting them

in jail provides little deterrent and—as we are now seeing across the country—when released they return to their communities. Thus, ignoring them ignores a major force working against other investments in poor children and communities.

In fact, programs serving disconnected youth can be as cost effective as programs focused on young children.⁹ Most of these youth want to succeed. For example, approximately half of all high school dropouts return to school or obtain a GED by the time they are 25.¹⁰ However, there is far too little in the way of support to help these youth connect. If there were a system of services dedicated to helping these youth connect to positive institutions, there is reason to believe that many more would make it.

IDENTIFYING THE AT-RISK POPULATION

There are approximately 40 million youth ages 14-24 in the U.S. It is not possible to predict, with a high degree of accuracy, whether an *individual* youth is likely to experience long-term joblessness and social isolation. For example, the fact that a young adult is unemployed does not tell us much. Since the 1970's, the labor market situation of non-college educated youth has worsened considerably in the U.S. and throughout the world, both in terms of the likelihood of experiencing periods of unemployment and in terms of wages.¹¹ Throughout the past twenty years between 4 and 6 million young adults, ages 18-24 (14 -18% of this age group), have been out of work at any given time, depending on general economic conditions.¹² Young workers suffer the highest rates of unemployment during periods of high overall unemployment. At times, macro-economic conditions leave even those people with reasonable job skills unemployed for relatively long periods of time.¹³ Any period of involuntary employment is potentially problematic for young adults. Still, most youth eventually connect successfully with the labor force and most unemployed youth are not disconnected from social support systems.

It is possible, however, to identify *groups* of youth at high risk of long-term disconnection, based on studies that have followed cohorts of youth from adolescence into early adulthood,¹⁴ as well as data from cross-sectional studies looking at the characteristics of long-term unemployed and incarcerated youth. These studies find that the great majority of those who will not make it by age 25 fall into at least one of the groups of youth identified previously—high school dropouts, adolescents in the juvenile or criminal justice systems, adolescents in the child welfare system, and unmarried mothers under age 18.

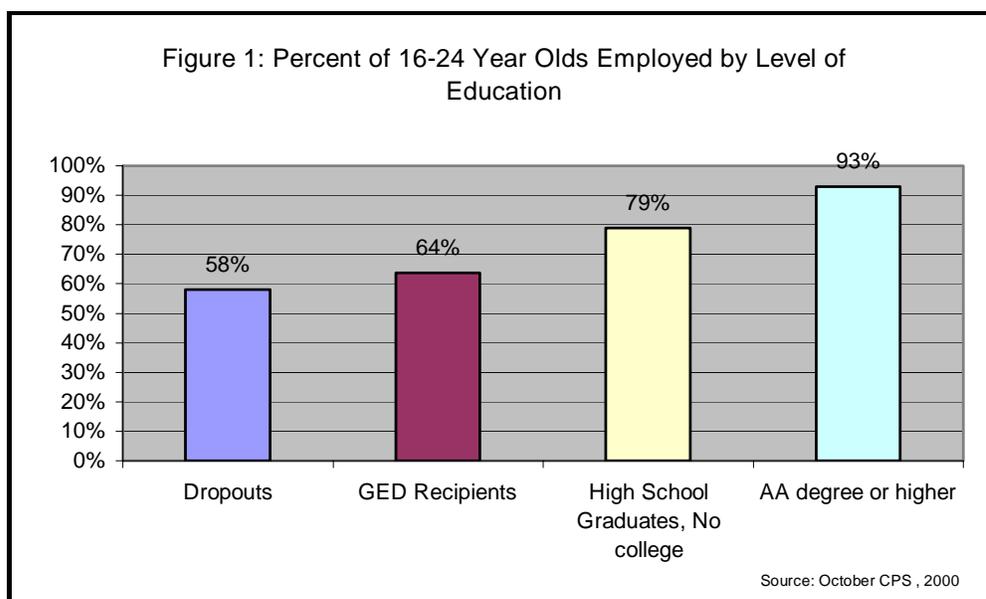
Dropouts. Between seventy-five and eighty percent of the four million current 14 year olds will graduate high school with a regular degree. Approximately twenty-eight percent of these youth, a little over a million, will go on to obtain a bachelors degree. Another thirty percent will complete 1-3 years of college.

However, between 20 and 25% will dropout of high school—*nearly as many as those who obtain a BA.*¹⁵ Many of these dropouts will subsequently return to school. If past trends continue, sixteen percent of dropouts will have gone back to high school and completed their degree by age 20; an additional 29% will have gone on to attain a GED.¹⁶ By age 25, the number of native-born youth without a high school degree or GED will have fallen from nearly one in four to less than one in ten (8%).¹⁷ See Table 1.

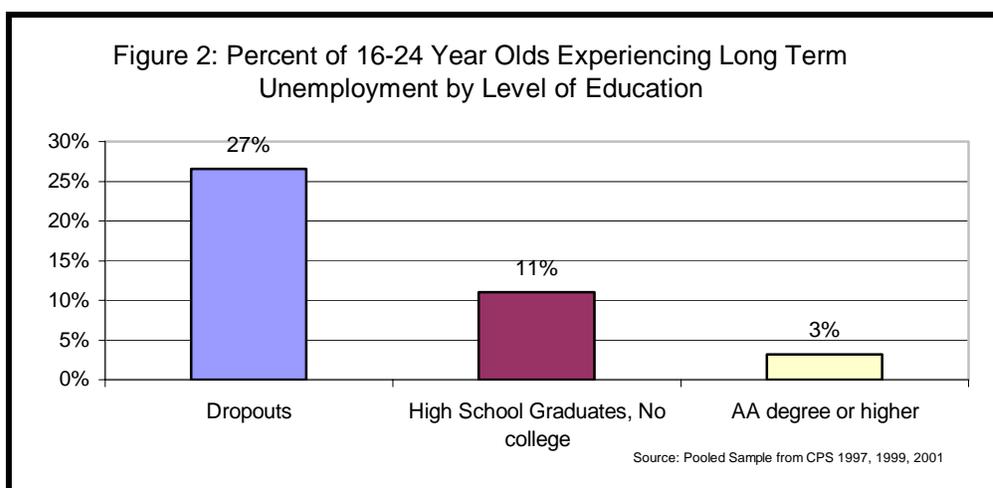
Table 1: Educational Attainment Among Native Born and Foreign Born Young Adults (Ages 24-26) by Race and Hispanic Origin					
	Some High School or Less	GED Recipient	High School Graduate	Some College, No AA Degree	Bachelor's Degree or Higher
Native Born	7.8	5.0	27.0	31.3	28.9
Race/Ethnicity¹					
White, non-Hispanic	5.7	4.6	26.4	31.0	32.4
Black, non-Hispanic	12.6	5.9	27.8	37.2	16.6
Hispanic	16.5	7.8	31.5	28.3	16.0
Asian or Pacific Islander	4.6	0.0	14.5	37.7	43.3
American Indian	25.9	4.4	40.8	13.9	15.0
Foreign Born	29.9	3.8	19.6	22.0	24.7
Race/Ethnicity¹					
White, non-Hispanic	10.0	0.0	13.8	33.0	43.3
Black, non-Hispanic	9.1	3.9	30.6	29.5	26.9
Hispanic	51.4	5.8	23.2	15.3	4.3
Asian	6.1	1.9	11.3	26.0	54.7
¹ People of Hispanic origin may be of any race					
Source: Original analysis by Child Trends of 2001 Current Population Survey Data					

Virtually all youth who attend college make it, in our minimal sense, without much difficulty. While not all these youth complete college, almost all connect with the labor force in a relatively straightforward trajectory.

In contrast, youth who drop out of high school are at very high risk of long-term disconnection, including those who later get a GED. While the majority of high school dropouts do manage to eventually connect with the labor force, the great majority experience long periods of unemployment. One study that followed a large group of high school aged youth from 1979 until 1992 found that eighty percent of all those without a high school diploma were unemployed for at least a full year; half were disconnected from the labor force for 3 or more years between their 18th and 25th birthdays¹⁸. More recently, in 2000, a time of very low unemployment, only slightly over half of all dropouts were employed at any given time.¹⁹ See Figure 1.

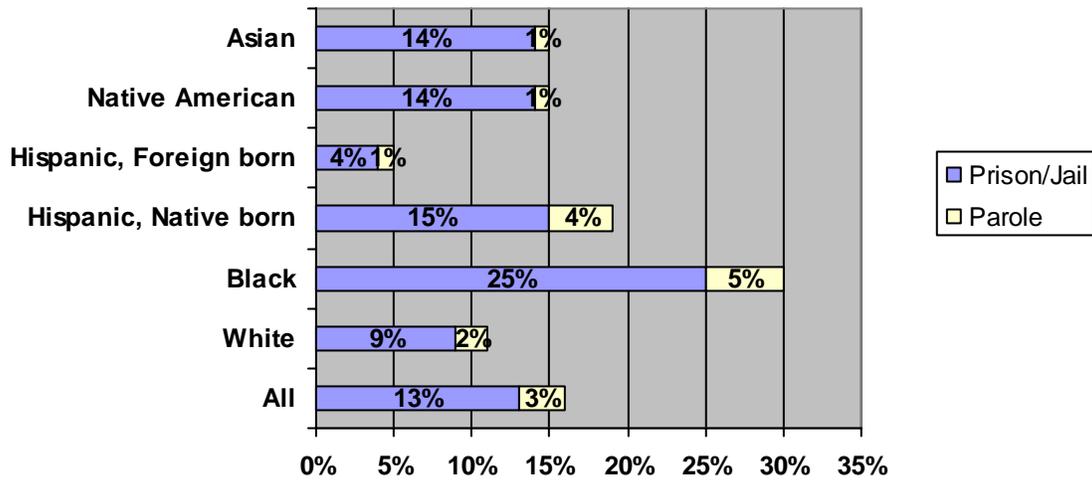


Moreover, between 1997 and 2001, more than a quarter of all dropouts were unemployed for a year or longer. See Figure 2. This compares with only eleven percent of those with a high school degree or GED.



Male high school dropouts are especially at-risk of very bad outcomes, with a large percentage incarcerated at some point before they are 25. Approximately 16% of all young men, ages 18-24, without a high school degree or GED are either incarcerated or on parole *at any one point in time*; among African American males the proportion is thirty percent. See Figure 3. Brown, in his study of youth in the 1979 Longitudinal Survey of Youth, found that thirty-three percent of all males who failed to complete high school experienced incarceration at some point before reaching age 25.²⁰ Over half of all African-American male dropouts born in the years 1965-69 experienced imprisonment.²¹ Eighty-six percent of young men in prison failed to finish high school.²²

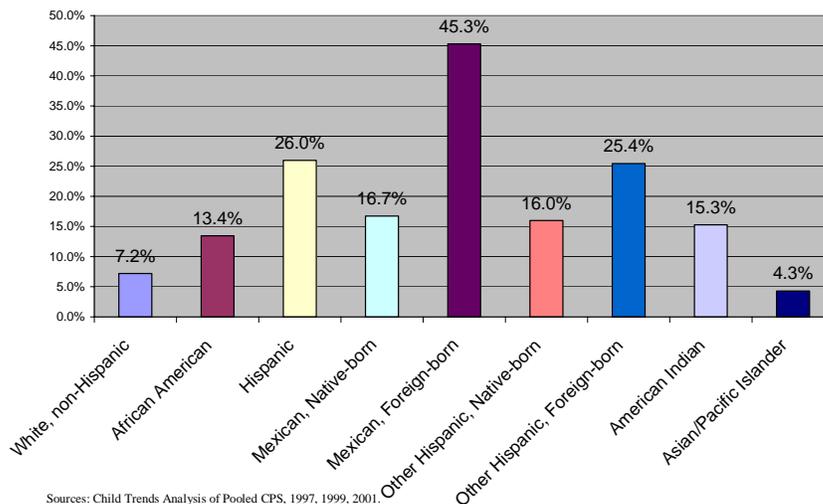
Figure 3: Percent of 18-24 Year Old Male Dropouts Currently Incarcerated or on Parole by Race/Ethnicity and Nativity



Sources: Pooled Samples from CPS 1997, 1999, 2001; 1996 Survey of Inmates of Local Jails, 1997 Survey of Inmates of Prisons; National Prisoner Statistics counts and the Annual Survey of Jails, 2000.

While all youth who do not finish high school are at risk of long-term disconnection, the degree of risk varies by race or ethnicity. Dropout rates vary significantly among different ethnic groups, a factor related in large part to income differences, and by nativity. See Figure 4.

Figure 4: Percent of 16-24 Year Olds by Race/Ethnic Group that are Status Dropouts

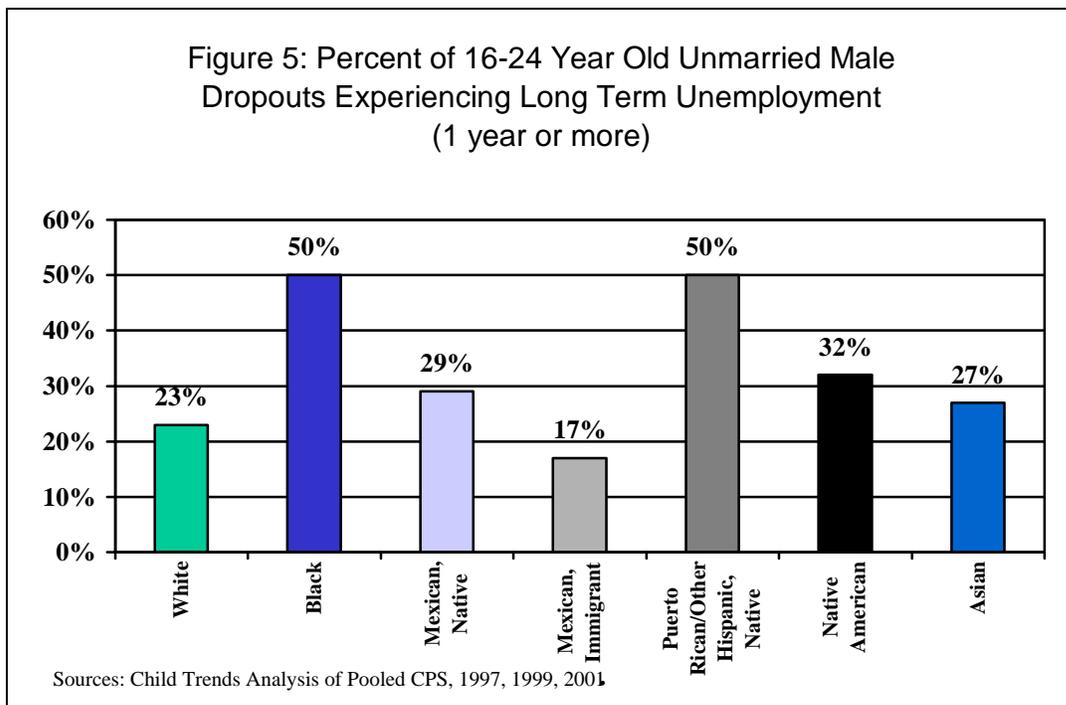


Sources: Child Trends Analysis of Pooled CPS, 1997, 1999, 2001.

There are several significant patterns. First, non-Hispanic whites have the lowest dropout rate, although because they constitute such a large proportion of the entire U.S. population, non-Hispanic whites comprise forty-one percent of the total number of dropouts.²³ Hispanics are far more likely than non-Hispanic whites or African-Americans to dropout of school. However, this is basically due to the very high dropout rate among Hispanic immigrants, many of who never entered a U.S. school and must be considered separately for policy purposes; sixty-nine percent of Hispanic dropouts are immigrants.²⁴ The dropout rate of native-born Hispanics is about the same as that of African-Americans, approximately double that of non-Hispanic whites. The rate for Native Americans is similar.

Among those without high school degrees, African-American males and U.S. born Hispanics of Puerto Rican background are far more likely to be disconnected from the labor force than any other group. See Figure 5. The reasons are not totally understood, but include discrimination by employers, geographic isolation and more limited contact with people in the labor force, the negative impact of high arrest rates, and the unavailability of jobs perceived as “suitable.”²⁵

Foreign-born youth with limited education in contrast, are highly connected to the labor force. Twenty-six percent of all 18-24 year olds without a high school degree are foreign born. Many of these men are economic migrants who never “dropped in” to the US educational system. They enter the U.S. to find work and send money back to their wives and families in their home country.²⁶ They are a vulnerable population – but certainly not a disconnected population.



Almost all youth who attend some college make it; many dropouts do not. What about those who graduate high school but do not attend any college? It appears that most youth who graduate high school with a regular degree, but do not attend college or vocational training, are not at high risk of long-term disconnection (this is not true for African-Americans males, as discussed below.) Although this group is at heightened risk of losing employment during economic slowdowns, the great majority of these youth are not disconnected from social support networks, they are not likely to become disconnected from the labor force on a long-term basis and very few end up in prison.²⁷ That does not mean that they do not require support or services. Unless they obtain some additional credentials, most high school graduates will be stuck in low wage jobs. However, most high school graduates are likely to require less intensive and lengthy services than programs focused on helping dropouts and other high-risk youth.

A relatively small proportion of high school graduates, probably less than ten percent²⁸, will experience substantial difficulties connecting to the labor force; however, as we discuss below, these individuals comprise about one-third of all high-risk young adults. They include many young mothers and males with disabilities. Their needs must be considered in developing a system of support for young adults experiencing difficulty connecting with the labor force.

Youth in Justice Systems. Youth under the supervision of the juvenile justice system and young adults involved with the criminal justice system comprise a second target group. Youth incarcerated in facilities for juveniles or in jail or prison are already disconnected from regular schooling or work; they are at especially high risk of very long term disconnection, given recidivism rates that are generally over fifty percent and the negative effects of incarceration on school completion and employment prospects.²⁹

The risk of long-term disconnection is less clear with respect to juveniles arrested and put on probation. Most youth who come in contact with the police or probation do not become adult offenders, or even repeat juvenile offenders. In fact, there is a long-term debate among criminologists as to whether these youth are best served by being left alone or by better and more intensive community based-services.

While there are many reasons for rethinking all aspects of the response to delinquency and crime by young adults, it is clear that special attention ought to be focused on those youth who end up incarcerated. Among the group of youth charged with crimes, the incarcerated youth will include most of the youth who will not make it by age 25. They are a clear target population.

Foster Youth. Youth placed in foster care when teenagers are an especially vulnerable population. Most enter placement because their families failed to provide adequate care. They are unlikely to get much social support from their families as they make the transition to adulthood. In addition, most of these youth have major problems with respect to educational achievement and the majority suffers from mental and physical health problems and/or substance abuse. As a result, many dropout of school and/or get involved in the juvenile justice system. One study found that nine percent of the young women in foster care became pregnant and gave birth to a child while in care.³⁰

It is now well recognized that teenagers who remain in care until they reach 18 experience major problems after they leave the child welfare system. Several studies over the last 15 years find that from 2 to 4 years after leaving foster care only half of all the youth were regularly employed, over half the young women had given birth to a child and were dependent on welfare support, nearly half the population had experienced arrest, and a quarter had been homeless.³¹ The great majority of those experiencing these problems had failed to finish high school.

It is not only those youth who remain in care until adulthood that experience problems. A recent study of adolescents in foster care placement showed that the nearly half (47%) return to their families before they are 18, nearly four times the number that emancipate (12%)³² While there is not much longitudinal research on this group, the evidence indicates that they too experience major difficulties during early adulthood.³³

Unmarried Teen-Age Mothers We include all unmarried 14-17 year old mothers among the risk groups, regardless of whether they are in school. While the majority ultimately graduate high school and connect with the labor force, they are in high need of services for their children, even if they do not become disconnected from school or the labor force. Moreover, approximately one in three (35%) teen mothers is a dropout.³⁴ Even those who finish school have generally have very limited earnings, especially when their children are young.

Youth 18-24 We believe that there should be a system of services for young adults experiencing substantial difficulties in connecting to the labor force. The issue of identification and targeting youth who need special services is more complicated with respect to young adults than it is with those under eighteen. As discussed previously, most young adults experience periods of unemployment. Thus, the fact that a young adult is unemployed is not, in and of itself, a strong predictor of long-term disconnection or an indication of a need for special services.

It would be reasonable to target any unemployed young adult who also comes within one of the other four categories. Even though many of these young adults will ultimately make it in our minimal sense, most are likely to experience substantial difficulty in connecting. We have opted however, for purposes of estimating the size of the population and identifying their characteristics, to use a more conservative standard-young adults experiencing lengthy unemployment. A protracted period of unemployment, especially for youth in poor families that cannot provide support, increases the risk of criminal behavior and decreases the chances of eventually obtaining better quality jobs. This measure also captures high school graduates experiencing substantial difficulties. We therefore focused our analysis on unmarried 18-24 year olds with a high school degree or less who have been unemployed for a year or longer. We also include all young adults incarcerated following conviction for a crime, those in local jails as well as state or federal prison.³⁵

...

We believe that more than ninety percent of all youth who will not succeed, in the minimal sense, by age twenty-five come within these groups.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH RISK YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

We now take a closer look at the characteristics of the youth falling into these groups. We focus on those characteristics that seem particularly relevant to policy or program design. We look separately at youth under and above age 18, since the policy options are likely to differ once youth are beyond the normal age of high school graduation.

We also estimate the number of youth and young adults falling into these categories. However, the numbers, drawn from cross-sectional data, are just an approximation. This is especially true in estimating the number of high-risk 18-24 year olds, since they are based on employment status, which is heavily influenced by the macro-economic conditions of the particular years we have used.

Youth Under 18.

Numbers. For those under 18, we have estimated the number of youth who fall within one of the four risk categories at any given time. This number provides a sense of the scale of services and resources needed to reach the highest risk adolescents at any given point in time. We also estimate the number of youth who will drop out of high school at some point between ages 14 and 18.³⁶

Based on data from 1997 to 2001, approximately 1 million youth ages 14-17 fall within one of our four categories *at any given time*, approximately six percent of the total age group. This includes 520,000 dropouts residing in households; 95,400 young people incarcerated in the juvenile justice (83,900) or in the adult (11,500) systems; 337,657 fourteen to seventeen year olds in foster care or recently returned from foster care; and 175,000 unmarried 14-17 year old mothers).³⁷ These numbers exclude from the dropout statistic all foreign-born youth who entered the US after age 14. As discussed previously, many of these youth never “dropped in” to the US school system, yet they have a high rate of connecting with the labor force and social support networks.³⁸

Because these numbers are based on cross-sectional data, they do not reflect the total number of any age cohort that will come within one of these categories prior to turning 18. We estimate that, if the trends of the last five years continue, over twenty percent of all 14-17 year olds, approximately 3.2 million youth, will fall into one of the four categories at some point before they turn 18.³⁹

Demographic Characteristics. Looking at the youth already in one of the four statuses, there are equal numbers of young men and women. Young men have significantly higher dropout rates and levels of incarceration. The proportion of women reflects the fact that we have included all 14-17 mothers. Teen mothers account for thirty-seven percent of the women. However, while adolescent childbearing plays a strong role, the majority of disconnected 16 and 17 year-old women are dropouts who are not mothers.⁴⁰

As is well known, youth of color are significantly over-represented. Still, non-Hispanic white youth comprise the numerically largest group of at risk young people, making up 50% of the population (they constitute 66% of the general population.) This group often does not receive much attention. African American (27% vs. 15% in general youth population), and Hispanic youth (21% vs. 13% in the general youth population) are over

represented among high-risk 14-17 year olds. The overrepresentation of young African Americans is driven by high rates of involvement in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. Hispanics, in contrast, are only slightly over-represented in both of these systems. They are, however, by far, the most over represented among current dropouts of all racial/ethnic groups (23% of all dropouts vs. 13% of all 14-17 year olds).

The impact of family income is even more pronounced than that of race/ethnicity. To a large degree, racial disparities are associated with economic factors. Family income is highly correlated with being in each of the risk groups. The families of nearly seventy percent of all these youth are in the lowest third of income distribution; forty-four come from families with income below the federal poverty level for a family of four. These findings are consistent with other research indicating that family poverty is one of the most powerful predictors of dropping out of high school.⁴¹ Findings from a national longitudinal study of high school students during the first half of the 1990's indicate that, among youth in the lowest quartile of the income distribution only 64% manage to graduate from high school compared to 86% of youth from families in the middle two quartiles and 92% of youth from families in the top quartile.⁴² Not only are poor adolescents at higher risk of dropping out, once they do leave school they are much less likely to return and finish their degree than youth from wealthier families.⁴³ While nearly three quarters of dropouts from families in the highest income quartile returned and finished high school by age 20, only a third of dropouts from families in the lowest income bracket managed to find their way back to high school.

Family Situation. Many of these young people also lack the emotional and social resources that stem from well-functioning families. More than one in five current dropouts are not living with any parent whatsoever (22% compared with 6% of the general youth population).⁴⁴ About half of this later group lives with a relative; the remaining half lives with a non-relative foster parent, in a group home, or are homeless.

In fact, at any given point in time, current and former foster youth make up over on third of all the 14-17 year olds we consider high risk. Over half of these youth are no longer in care, most (60%) having exited the system to be reunified with their families.⁴⁵ However, a significant number ran away from placement and often are homeless; estimates range from between 11% and 25% (20,168 to 37,000 individuals.)⁴⁶

Geographic Variation. Another striking fact relates to the location of these youth. They are disproportionately found in the southern states.⁴⁷ While the south is home to about one third (35%) of the nation's 14-17 year olds, it accounts for 43% of all high-risk youth. This regional overrepresentation is particularly marked among dropouts and teen mothers: fully one in two lives in the southern states. In contrast, high-risk youth are underrepresented in the northeast (thirteen vs. seventeen percent of all youth) and west (twenty versus twenty-three percent of all youth). Both regions account for a disproportionately small share of all dropouts (northeast=9%; west=17%) and teen mothers (northeast=9%; west=17%). However, youth from the northeast and the west are significantly over represented among youth involved in the foster care system, primarily due to the high number of foster children in New York and California.

Compared to all 14-17 year olds, youth at risk of disconnection are more likely to live in central cities (34% v. 27%) or rural areas (31% v. 24%); suburban youth are doing comparatively well (35% v. 50%).⁴⁸

Young Adults-18 to 24

Numbers. There were about 1.8 million long-term unemployed or incarcerated young adults, 18-24, at any given time in the years 1997 and 2001, a period of very low unemployment. See Table 2. These youth constituted approximately seven percent of all 18 to 24 year olds. This does not include approximately 132,000 long-term unemployed immigrant youth who entered this country after age 14. As noted, while little is known about this group, we believe their needs are distinct from those of youth who are born in this country or arrive at younger ages. In particular, we think that they are more likely to be embedded in supportive social networks of employed peers. We also hypothesize that many of these young immigrants classified as long term unemployed are, in fact, working under the table.

Table 2: 18-24 Year Old Disconnected Youth

Total Youth*	1,774,351	7%		
Age			Race-ethnicity	
18	241,630		White	676,157 38%
19	310,753		Black	680,723 38%
20	286,899		Hispanic	357,672 20%
21	276,764		Hispanic Native-born	252,522 14%
22	242,522		Hispanic Foreign-born	105,150 6%
23	212,700		American Indian	31,295 2%
24	204,041		Asian/Pacific Islander	27,278 2%
Gender			Educational Level	
Male	1,046,229	59%	Less than High School	912,416 51%
Female	728,122	41%	GED	285,917 15%
			High School Diploma	600,343 34%
Incarcerated	420,436	24%		

Sources: Pooled Samples from March CPS 1997, 1999, 2001; October CPS 2000; Survey of State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1997; Survey of Inmates in Local Jails, 1996; National Prisoner Statistics counts and the Annual Survey of Jails, 2000.

* Due to rounding errors, the breakdown of population estimates by demographic characteristics is imprecise; subcategories may not sum to equal the exact number of total youth.

Demographic Characteristics. Men comprise nearly three fifths of the population (59%). Because their profile contrasts sharply with that of the women, we describe each group separately.

Males

Approximately one million young men fell within our categories, representing about eight percent of the age group. See Table 3. Thirty-six percent were non-Hispanic, white, forty-one percent African-American, and nineteen percent Hispanic.

Table 3: Young Men, Ages 18-24 at Risk of Long Term Disconnection

Total Young Men*	1,046,229	8%			
Age			Race-ethnicity		
18	135,319		White, non-Hispanic	375,474	36%
19	170,619		Black, non-Hispanic	426,337	41%
20	157,049		Hispanic	204,512	19%
21	162,842		Hispanic, Native-born	148,196	14%
22	158,042		Hispanic, Foreign-born	56,416	5%
23	132,749		American Indian	19,793	2%
24	131,194		Asian/Pacific Islander	19,335	2%
Incarcerated	396,525	38%	Educational Level		
			Less than High School	558,715	53%
			GED	186,321	18%
			High School Diploma	229,123	29%

Sources: Pooled Samples from March CPS 1997, 1999, 2001; October CPS 2000; Survey of State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1997; Survey of Inmates in Local Jails, 1996; National Prisoner Statistics counts and the Annual Survey of Jails, 2000.

* Due to rounding errors, the breakdown of population estimates by demographic characteristics is imprecise; subcategories may not sum to equal the exact number of total young men.

Over half (53%) lacked a high school degree. Another eighteen percent had dropped out of high school but went on to attain their GED. Twenty-nine percent held a regular high school diploma. Long-term unemployed youth with a diploma are more likely to be non-Hispanic white and disabled and less likely to be Hispanic.

Of the total group, nearly two fifths (38%) of the men were incarcerated. Those not incarcerated relied heavily on their family of origin for shelter; early nine out of ten lived with their parents (n=538,475) or other relatives (n=42,101). Very few (4%) report living with a spouse or partner; even fewer, just one percent, report living alone or with their own minor child. African-Americans and non-Hispanic white men are more likely to live with their parents than Hispanics, who are more likely to cohabit or to live with other relatives.

A significant proportion reported having a disability that “prevents them from accepting any kind of paid work.” Nineteen percent of the young men living in households and twenty-four percent of prisoners report that they are disabled. The combined rate of twenty-one percent is more than double the rate found among disconnected young women (10%).

Females

Approximately 730,000 young women, ages 18-24, fell within our categories. See Table 4. However, this includes 78,564 unemployed women living with a partner to whom they are not married. Many are unemployed by choice and could reasonably be excluded.

Total Young Women*	728,122	6%		
Age			Race-ethnicity	
18	106,378		White	300,707 41%
19	140,154		Black	254,267 35%
20	129,849		Hispanic	104,452 21%
21	113,933		Hispanic, Native-born	48,773 14%
22	84,512		Hispanic, Foreign-born	101,927 7%
23	79,898		American Indian	11,555 2%
24	72,762		Asian/Pacific Islander	7,845 1%
Incarcerated	23,938	3%	Educational Level	
			Less than High School	353,702 49%
			GED	66,987 9%
			High School Diploma	306,829 42%

Sources: Pooled Samples from March CPS 1997, 1999, 2001; October CPS 2000; Survey of State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1997; Survey of Inmates in Local Jails, 1996; National Prisoner Statistics counts and the Annual Survey of Jails, 2000.

* Due to rounding errors, the breakdown of population estimates by demographic characteristics is imprecise; subcategories may not sum to equal the exact number of total young women.

Six percent of all young women fell within our categories, compared with eight percent of men. This reflects both higher rates of employment and much lower rates of incarceration among women. The difference in rates of disconnection between men and women varies significantly across racial and ethnic groups. Among African-Americans the difference in rates of disconnection by gender is striking: twelve percent of young women compared with nineteen percent of young men. A similar pattern emerges among Native Americans; eighth percent of women compared with fourteen percent of men.

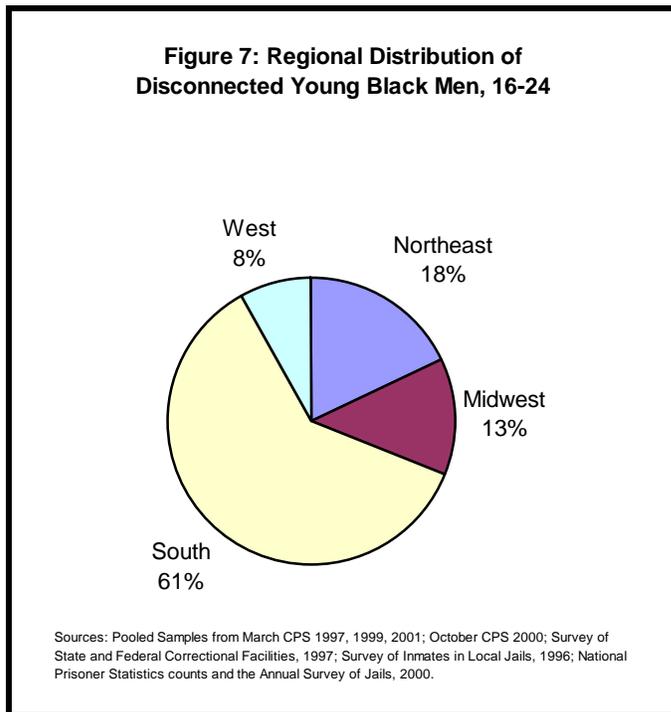
These young women are significantly more likely than the men to have a high school degree—49% compared to 29%. Women are also less than half as likely as men to report receiving a GED (9% vs. 18%). The high numbers of incarcerated men with GEDs (70% of who report receiving the certificate while in custody) explains much of this discrepancy. Disconnected young women with high school degrees are disproportionately white and African American.

We had assumed that most long-term unemployed young women would be mothers and that this would explain the lack of participation in the labor force, especially for those with high school degrees. However, as shown in Figure 6, most are not mothers. It is not until age 22 that the proportion of mothers is greater than non-mothers. Overall, about

four out of ten report living with their minor child. Of these, ninety percent gave birth to their first child as a teenager (41% between ages 14 and 17 and 49% between 18 and 20.) While half the mothers report receiving welfare, half do not. More research is needed to understand the reasons these young women, especially those with a high school degree, are having so much trouble connecting with the labor force. Like the men, the women, especially those without children, share a household with their mother or another relative. They are far more likely than their male counterparts to either live on their own (17% vs. 1%) or cohabit with a partner (11% v. 4%). There are no differences by race/ethnicity in terms of living arrangements, motherhood, and use of welfare.

Location. Even more than with the younger age group, these young adults are disproportionately in the south. While about thirty-five percent of all 18-24 year olds live in the southern states, these states are home to forty-seven percent of the disconnected men and forty-two of the women. In fact, the south has more disconnected young adults than the northeast and west combined. The situation is especially disparate with respect to African-American men. Fully sixty-one percent of all disconnected African-American males live in the south.

These regional differences in part reflect demographic differences. However, elevated high school dropout rates and the number prisoners per 1,000 residents explain the bulk of the regional disparity. As such they also reflect differences in policies towards incarceration and in resources devoted to schools and social services.

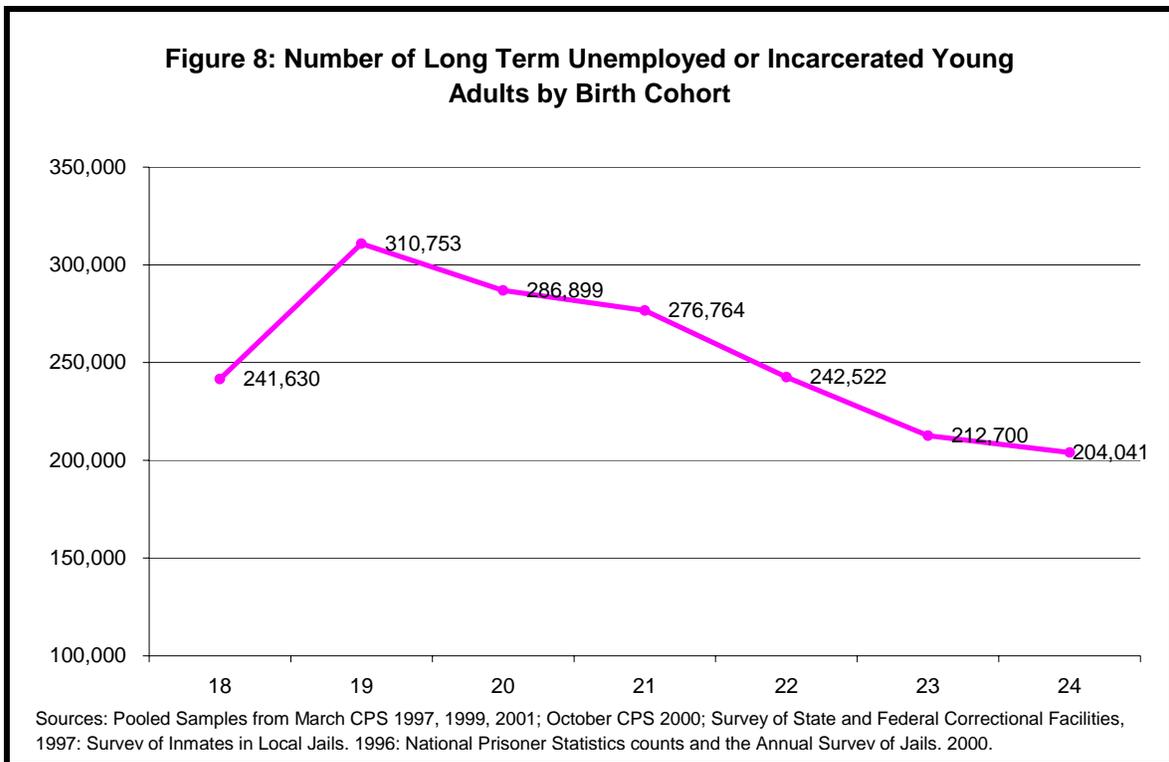


Trajectories

Although there is little longitudinal research tracking high-risk youth into young adulthood, we believe that two important patterns can be surmised from existing data. On

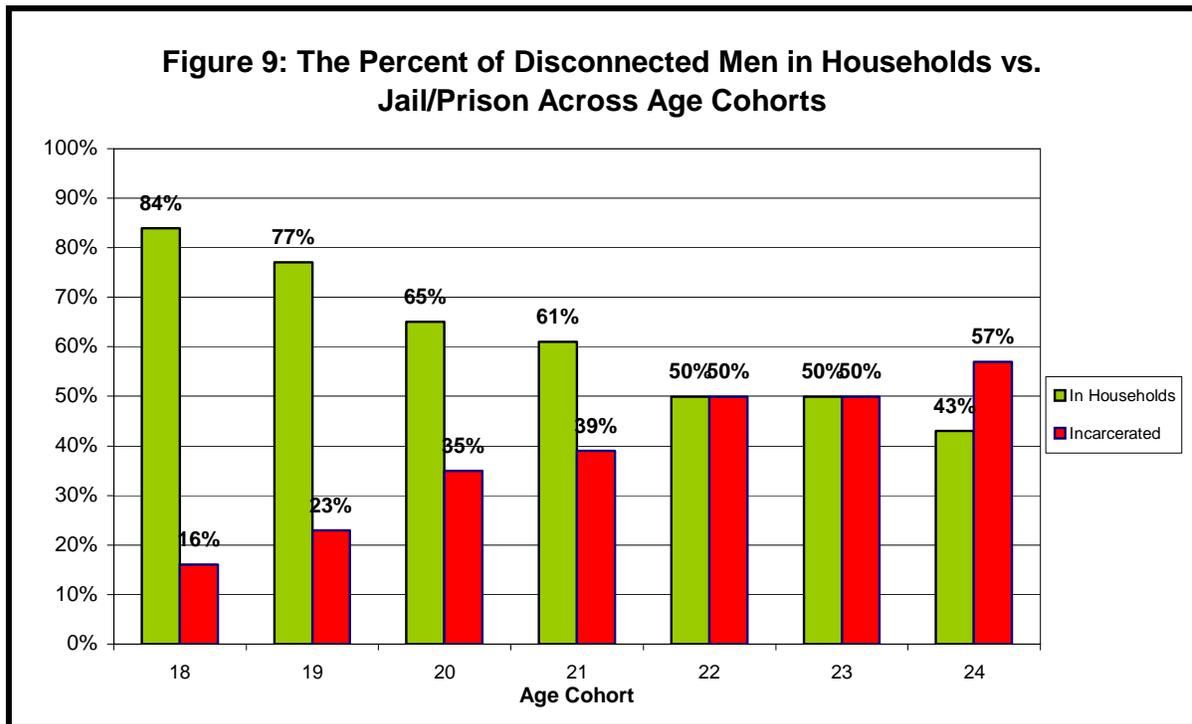
the positive side, it appears that a substantial number of high-risk youth and young adults do manage to connect by age 25, at least with respect to our minimal goals. We have estimated that at least twenty percent of all 14 year olds fall into one of the risk categories before they reach 18. As noted above, we estimate that in the late 1990's between five and seven percent of 25 year olds were disconnected from the labor force.

This pattern can be seen in cross-sectional data. Looking at the time period between 1997 and 2001, in any given year there were approximately 310,375 high-risk 19 year olds compared to only 204,041 twenty-four year olds. The number of youth falling within our definition of disconnection peaks at ages 18-19 and then begins to decline. See Figure 8. The jump between ages 18 and 19 reflects the fact that many youth dropout of high school between their 18th and 19th birthdays. They, along with high school graduates having trouble finding employment, swell the ranks of long-term unemployed 19 year olds. By age 24, six percent of all twenty-four year olds come within our definition. . While these numbers are derived from cross-sectional surveys, this suggests that many of the youth in the younger cohorts eventually enter the labor force on a permanent basis.⁴⁹ High-risk youth also are connecting in other ways. Many high school dropouts return to school or acquire another credential. The National Educational Survey (NELS) of 1988, which followed a group of eighth graders into early adulthood, found that, by age 26, sixteen percent of those who had dropped out had completed a diploma, twenty-nine percent had completed a GED, and twenty-four percent were working on a diploma or GED.⁵⁰ Thus, only a third of the dropout group had no credential and was taking no steps to obtain one.



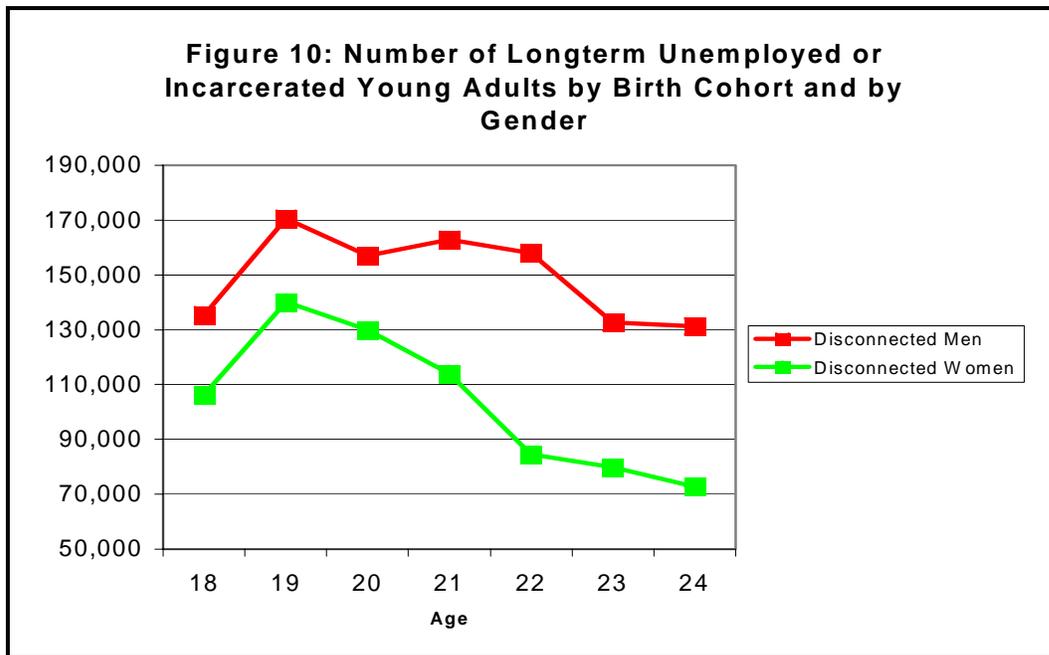
However, the data also indicate a very disturbing pattern. Our total young adult population is comprised of both the long-term unemployed and all incarcerated young adults. Overall, incarcerated youth comprise a high proportion of the male group. Nearly four in ten of disconnected 18-24 year old men are in jail or prison *at any one time*. Thus, the number with a *history of incarceration* must be significantly higher. Rates of current incarceration vary by race and ethnicity, ranging from about one in three among non-Hispanic whites (31%) to approximately two in five among African-Americans (42%) and Hispanics (39%).

The proportion of the total group that is incarcerated, rather than unemployed, increases sharply across the age cohorts. While sixteen percent of disconnected 18 year olds are incarcerated, nearly sixty percent of 24 year olds who come within our definition of disconnected are currently in prison or jail. See Figure 9.⁵¹ Again, while these numbers are derived from cross-sectional samples, they suggest that the longer a young male remains disconnected from the labor force, the greater the likelihood he will become incarcerated.⁵² In any case, reconnecting older populations is made more difficult by the fact that many more of them will have been incarcerated.



Sources: Pooled Samples from March CPS 1997, 1999, 2001; October CPS 2000; Survey of State and Federal Facilities, 1997; Survey of Inmates in Local Jails, 1996; National Prisoner Statistics counts and the Annual Survey of Jails, 2000.

Connection rates for young women are greater over time than for young men perhaps due to the impact of long-term incarceration. See Figure 10.



Sources: Pooled Samples from March CPS 1997, 1999, 2001; October CPS 2000; Survey of State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1997; Survey of Inmates in Local Jails, 1996; National Prisoner Statistics counts and the Annual Survey of Jails, 2000.

Clearly, it would be better to help youth become successful prior to their incarceration or having children. We turn next to that process.

The Process of Connecting

Te demographic factors tell us something about how to design and target programs. But demographic characteristics tell only part of the story. In creating policies and programs, other characteristics of high-risk youth must be considered. These include certain problems that they must overcome, their attitudes about their situation and their motivation to change their situation, and the context in which they live. All these are influenced by, and influence, the set of opportunities available to the youth.

There is no comprehensive assessment of the entire population we focus on. However, evaluations of dropouts, youth in the justice system, foster youth and young mothers consistently find that many of these youth are far behind academically and often have extremely low reading skills. Moreover, many of the youth suffer from serious mental health problems and or substance abuse. They have been the victims of violence, at home and in the community, and are the perpetrators of violence in their relationships. Programs to help these youth must be capable of addressing these problems; coordination of services is critical.

Many of these youth face other major obstacles that prevent them from connecting. Besides lacking skills, these youth often experience a sense of shame, unworthiness, and inadequacy. They may feel that they get more of a sense of self-respect on the streets than in a job. Family, friends, romantic partners, gangs, neighborhoods, as well as their own sense of inadequacy, may all work against their making a change. The tenuous of jobs in the low skill segment of the economy creates further challenges.⁵³

A major challenge for program development relates to motivation. All of these youth have fallen off the normal path to adulthood, some further than others. Many end up disconnected because they have been ill served by the institutions—families, schools, neighborhoods—that are supposed to help them grow into successful adults. They may need services not currently available, that have long waiting lists or that are provided in ways inadequate to meet their needs. Thus, perseverance often is critical. Others have not taken advantage of good opportunities. Reconnection requires both a set of opportunities and a willingness to take advantage of them.

In terms of attitude and motivation, these youth fall along a continuum: for many, these attitudes often in flux—and subject to influence. Ethnographic studies indicate that most disconnected youth would like to have good jobs and loving relationships.⁵⁴ But their level of motivation to make these connections differs--among different individuals and within the same individual overtime. These differences are determined in part by the opportunities available to an individual, in part by the cultural system in which he or she is embedded, and in part by individual factors.

As previously discussed, a significant number of disconnected youth find a way of connecting. These youth, we think of them as “seekers”, often reconnect by taking advantage of a variety of very good programs; such as alternative or charter schools, Job Corps, Conservations Corps, and YouthBuild, that provide the youth with the support and training that makes successful connection possible.

Other youth bounce from job-to-job, program-to-program, home-to-home, not fully ready to make the connections or take advantage of the opportunities needed to alter their situation. They often take a step forward but then fall back. They make attempts to change their lives, but often are discouraged by limited job availability and their own very low earning power or, in the program context, long wait lists and highly structured and demanding interventions. In the competition for limited and valuable services, they are routinely passed over in favor of the motivated seekers.⁵⁵ Youth facing racial discrimination, or lacking supportive families with some financial resources, may be especially vulnerable.

Virtually everyone who works with this population believes that for some youth the movement from disconnection to connection requires a “transformation”--a mental/emotional decision by the youth that he or she wants to change the situation, no matter how difficult accomplishing that change may be. Until this occurs, these youth will not respond to opportunities. There is some evidence that receptiveness to programs may increase with age and length of disconnection. Maturity, experience, fatigue with criminal activity, and increasing responsibilities all serve as incentives to reconnect with education or to accept employment or training that was not attractive at earlier ages. A major challenge is finding ways of helping younger youth become seekers, since the longer a youth remains disconnected the more likely he or she is to become incarcerated or a single parent.

However, unless opportunities are there at the point of transformation, change may be impossible. These youth need major, ongoing support- in overcoming the sense of inadequacy, in acquiring job skills and education, and in staying connected once change has begun to occur.⁵⁶

Towards a Commitment to Disconnected Youth

We have looked at the worst off youth in the United States. There is a critical need for a concerted effort to help these youth connect—for their sake and society's. Altering the situation of these youth will be challenging. There are some very good programs that now serve these some portions of these youth; there are even a few places where major efforts are under way to develop a more systematic response. But there is no comprehensive commitment to these youth, at the national, state, or local levels.

With respect to the younger populations, those ages 14-18, there are government systems that have contact with, and responsibility for, a large portion of these youth. Over one third of these youth are currently in high school, including large numbers of teen mothers and current and former foster youth. Among the “out of school” youth, ten percent are incarcerated and thirteen percent are either in foster care or recently exited from the system. In total nearly three fifths of all high-risk youth are under the direct care or supervision of a major public institution or system. Moreover, school systems are obligated to serve all of the dropouts.

There is no system responsible for helping young adults experiencing substantial difficulties, with the exception of those young adults those who have aged out of foster care and are entitled to “independent living” services.⁵⁷ These troubled young adults are no longer required to attend school and they have aged into a punitive adult criminal justice system. A variety of programs are available to some older youth, ranging from job training to various forms of adult education. However, these programs do not, for the most part, focus on the highest risk youth; they generally serve youth who seek out training or education. The services they provide are critically important but not sufficient.

The population is diverse. Different youth face different barriers. There is variation in the nature and level of problems faced by women and men and by different ethnic groups. Young African-American and Native American males are at especially great risk. It seems extremely unlikely that sound policy can be developed without recognizing and addressing these ethnic/racial differences. The fact that many of these youth are concentrated in a few highly disorganized urban neighborhoods, or live in rural areas with few services, exacerbates the problem of helping them. There is a pressing need to better understand the factors that serve as both incentives and barriers to disconnected youth as they make decisions about whether to seek schooling, training or work.

But this challenge is not insurmountable. The number of highly at risk 14-24 year olds at any given time, around three million, is not that large in absolute terms or in relationship to the entire youth population. It is feasible to fund the services that are needed. In fact, many dollars are already being spent on them-but mainly in ways that do not promote their ultimate connection; for example, in corrections and emergency health care. There also are individual programs that have been quite successful in reconnecting these youth.

Moving from programs to creating sound systems is the challenge. The obstacles begin with the lack of public demand. As Thomas Smith has recently written, “national policy (especially education policy) has generally failed to acknowledge the continuing presence

of school-age young people who have left school and failed to find a suitable alternative.... (T)he learning opportunities available to them outside the school building have generally been haphazard and deficient in quality....”⁵⁸

Thus, the starting point for any reform is changing the public’s awareness, and image, of the population. The public and policymakers at the local, state and federal levels must conclude that society has an interest in, and obligation to, helping these youth make it.

For 14 to 18 year olds, the most critical goal is reconnecting⁵⁹ dropouts to good education. Youth this age generally cannot enter the labor force; even if they could it would be far better if they entered the labor force with a regular high school degree. In addressing this problem, serious thought must be given to the implications of the fact that nearly one in four youth dropout of school. Most school reform has focused on raising the performance of those in school. Yet schools are failing on a more massive scale. They are not just failing to deliver an adequate education to the students who stay in school – they cannot even keep a quarter of their students attached to the system for 4 years. Something more than standards-based testing will be needed to address this issue; in fact, the current approach may contribute to the problem.

There also is widespread recognition of the need for major reform of the child welfare system. An extraordinarily high percentage of all disconnected youth are, or have been, in the child welfare system during the time they are 14-17. There would be a major reduction in the number of youth not making it by 25 if child welfare systems were able to help all of these youth finish high school and obtain additional credentials or connect with the labor force.

It is widely acknowledged that, despite years of effort at reform, most child welfare systems are doing a poor job of protecting children, especially adolescents who come into these systems. Recent federal legislation seeks to address some of these deficiencies, especially with respect to youth exiting foster care-about 20,000 youth each year. Following federal law, local jurisdictions have established “independent living” programs.

But these programs may be too little, too late. Most programs help only a portion of emancipating youth and for relatively short periods after they turn eighteen. In contrast, most youth who are not in the child welfare system have substantial support from their families as they make the transition to adulthood; this support often continues until youth are in their mid to late twenties. Foster youth need support for at least as long a period. Moreover, it is not just those youth emancipating from care that need services. The majority of adolescents placed in foster care return to their families before turning eighteen. Most are as much in need of continuing services, including help in the transition to adulthood, as are those who remain in foster care.

While there is at least recognition of the need to improve the education and child welfare systems, there is no Federal, and little state, attention, to the needs of youth deep in the juvenile corrections system. There is little chance of substantially reducing the number of disconnected males, especially African-American males, unless this situation is changed. At present, the primary objective of most juvenile justice systems is short-run community protection, often equated with incarceration. There is little emphasis on helping offenders

move towards successful lives. Yet, these systems even fail to prevent recidivism among the most troubled youth, let alone provide them with the skills, especially educational, needed for successful reconnection. The public seems to accept recidivism rates of 50-80 percent for youth that have been incarcerated; no other government agency could be so unsuccessful without a major outcry.

It is essential to alter the goals of the juvenile justice system, so that helping these youth make a successful connection to education and or the labor force becomes central. Achieving these goals must be the goal of the juvenile justice system, and the standard for measuring the performance of correctional administrators, is the starting point for reform. In addition, current laws towards young offenders, those 18-24, should be reconsidered. Over the past fifteen years, prison ranks have jumped enormously, in large part due to drug law policies that have had an especially harsh effect on African-American males. As noted above, sixteen percent of male dropouts are in prison or on parole. Over twenty-five percent of African-American male dropouts are in one of these statuses.

In the past, many states had young offender systems, recognizing that young adulthood is still a time of development and transition and therefore efforts should be made at helping offenders succeed. Unfortunately, most states have abandoned such policies; in fact, the movement has been to send move minors into the adult system. Moreover, education and job training services in prisons are being reduced. Parole officers have such large caseloads that they cannot provide meaningful help. There should be a return to young offender programs. The use of drug courts as an alternative to imprisonment also is a promising new approach. This is an area that requires political leadership and courage.

Young women face a different set of barriers. It is surprising that there is not more public commitment to helping very young mothers succeed. Besides having to deal with poverty, school problems, family problems, and the tasks of rearing a child, these young mothers often are exposed to violence in their romantic relationships.

It is now widely accepted that service programs, delivered from the point of conception until the child reaches school, would greatly increase the likely the children will succeed and will also increase the mother's well-being. There are service systems, including WIC, home health visiting, TANF, Early Head Start, and Head Start, each providing valuable support for many young mothers. But there is no continuity of services, universality or entitlement, and many of the programs fail to include the mothers as full participants and beneficiaries. If society guaranteed a full set of services to these young mothers, plus those who have children at 18 or 19, it could substantially reducing the proportion of women who do not make it by age 25.

Most disconnected youth are over 18 and not incarcerated; among women incarceration is always rare. Yet, unless they become incarcerated, once they turn 18, there is no system that even theoretically (like the public schools have a responsibility for those under 18) has a responsibility for educating them or other protecting their wellbeing.

Again, there are programs available for these youth, if they seek them out—for example, job training through the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), TANF, and education programs through community colleges. Many programs do a reasonably good job, aided

by the fact that the youth who enroll in them begin with enough motivation to take this step. Still, virtually all organizations need help in improving their practices, especially the education component.

But programs are not enough. There needs to be system that has responsibility for reaching out to those not making it, with adequate dedicated resources, in the same way that resources are provided for youth attending college. Community colleges might be central to such a system and public programs, like Pell Grants, might be made available. There are many potential directions that will need to be debated. The key is accepting the public responsibility.

Conclusion

Over the past twenty-five years the situation for youth who fall off the ladder as they move to adulthood has gotten considerably worse. Education has become more important. The consequences for misbehavior have become much more severe. The need for family support has become far more critical and now extends well into young adulthood; yet the number of families that fail to provide even basic support has increased; the number of youth in foster care doubled between 1982 and 2002. During this period, there was increased recognition of the critical importance of early childhood and a substantial increase in the resources devoted to children under five. There needs to be a similar revolution in how we think about older children and young adults-for their sake and for the sake of children under five.

¹ There are many possible goals for social policy towards children and youth. Eight seem particularly important. At a minimum, the members of any cohort of children would reach age 25 not incarcerated, capable of being self-sufficient, not suffering from a major, preventable physical or mental illness (including addictions), embedded in a social support network, and an adequate parent, if they have a child. In addition, we might hope that each individual has acquired the skills and credentials to earn at least twice the poverty level, feels like a valued member of society, and has an interest in civic involvement. We focus on the minimal goals in this paper.

² See, Brett Brown, *A Portrait of Well-being in Early Adulthood* (unpublished paper, Child Trends 2003) available at. While the percentage varies from year to year, based on the state of the economy and the impact of various public policies, the percentage of disconnected twenty-five year olds appears to have remained fairly stable over the past twenty years. In an earlier study, Brown examined the outcomes for a cohort of youth surveyed regularly between ages 16 and 24 during the 1980's. He found that approximately 40% of the group experienced at least half a year of unemployment at some point between ages 16-24; however, less than six percent of the men and eight percent of the women were unemployed for more than a full calendar year. B. Brown, *Who Are America's Disconnected Youth?* (unpublished paper, Child Trends 1996). Age 25 is an arbitrary line. Life does not end at 25. We have picked achieving connection by 25 because this is an age when most young adults have achieved self-sufficiency and established their own households. It also is likely that there are significant development differences between younger adults and those over 25 that are relevant in the design of programs.

³ There is very little research following a cohort of disconnected youth into later life. Brown found that while half of all youth who were out of school and out of work for three years between the time they were 18 and 24 were still disconnected at age 27, half were successfully employed at age 27; many were also married. Through perseverance and personal change, many people manage to alter their lives.

⁴ See, Douglas Besharov, **America's Disconnected Youth** (1999). Commentators have used the term "disconnected" in various ways. Some use the term to refer to any youth out of school and out of the labor force. As we discuss later, we believe that this is too broad a definition. The majority of youth unemployed at any given time do not experience lengthy unemployment and most are embedded in social support networks. We reserve the term for those youth who are likely to have substantial difficulty connecting with the labor force and social support networks.

⁵ Those young adults who graduate high school and try to enter the labor market directly also face formidable obstacles, without much of a public support system. The issues confronting this group were thoughtfully discussed fifteen years ago by the W.T. Grant Foundation's Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship. See, **The Forgotten Half** (W.T. Grant Commission 1988)

⁶ See, Brown 1996, note 2, Besharov note 4 at 7-15; R. Freeman, *Disadvantaged Young Men and Crime* in D. Blanchflower and R. Freeman, **Youth Employment and Joblessness In Advanced Countries (2000)**.

⁷ See discussion infra. Since many youth who are at risk at some point between ages 14-24 do successfully connect before they are 25, the proportion of 14-24 needing services at any given time is considerably lower than the percentage ever at-risk.

⁸ Programs to help older disconnected adults also are needed. However, the earlier we reach disconnected youth, the more likely that they will not become incarcerated. In addition, they are the parents of the most at risk young children; it is very important to help these parents while their children are very young. Thus priority should be given to programs focused on teens and young adults.

⁹ See, Lynn Karoly; *Caring For Our Children and Youth: An Analysis of Alternative Investment Strategies* (unpublished draft 2003)

¹⁰ Jennifer Burkhold, Sonya Geis, Phillip Kaufman, and C. Dennis Carol, *Subsequent Educational Attainment of High School Dropouts* (National Center for Education Statistics 2002).

¹¹ See David Blanchflower and Richard Freeman, "The Declining Economic Status of Young Workers in OECD Countries", in D. Blanchflower and R. Freeman, **Youth Employment and Joblessness in Advanced Countries** (NBER 2000) Chapter One.

¹² There were 5.7 million unemployed 16-24 year olds in 1992, 4.8 million in 1998, and 5.2 million in 2002. The percentages ranged from 14 to 18 percent of each cohort. Andrew Sum et.al., *Left Behind in the Labor Market: Labor Market Problems of the Nation's Out-of-School, Young Adult Populations* (unpublished paper, Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, January 2003) pp.7-8.

¹³ Disadvantaged youth without a high school diploma youth are especially vulnerable to bad economic times. Such youth (especially African American men) did not fare well during the economic boom of the 1990's and have been most vulnerable to layoffs during the most recent economic downturn. See Paul Offner and Harry Holzer, "Left Behind in the Labor Market: Recent Employment Trends Among Young Black Men" (The Brookings Institution, Survey Series, April 2002).

¹⁴ The most extensive analysis is by Brett Brown, who examined the transitions into adulthood of the participants in the 1979 National Longitudinal Study of Youth. Brown 1996, note 2. This study looked at a sample of youth who were between the ages of 14 and 21 in 1979. They were all interviewed at that time and on a regular basis for the next twelve years. Thus, it is possible to see how they fared when they were age 25. This study enables us to draw some conclusions about trajectories. However, more recent cohorts of youth face a different economic structure, with education assuming greater importance. In addition, changes in welfare policy alter the situation for women. The

current youth population also reflects the impact of immigration policy; far more youth are immigrants, primarily from Mexico.

¹⁵This is the percentage of students that enter eighth grade and leave school at some point. See Jay Greene, *High School Graduation Rates in the United States* (Manhattan Institute 2002); Andrew Sum et. al., *The Hidden Crisis in the High School Dropout Problems of Young adults in the United States*, (Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University 2002).

¹⁶ Jennifer Burktdol et al, *Subsequent Educational Attainment of High School Dropouts*, note 11.

¹⁷ This later figure is the one most commonly used in describing the number of dropouts. However, it is a seriously misleading figure in terms of understanding how many students actually dropout of school at some point, since many dropouts later return.

¹⁸ Brown 1996, note 2.

¹⁹ The percent of high school dropouts currently employed would be significantly lower if individuals born and educated in foreign countries were excluded. These immigrants have high rates of labor force participation despite low levels of education.

²⁰ Brown 1996, note 2.

²¹ Bruce Westin, Vincent Schiraldi, and Jason Ziedenberg, *Education and Incarceration* (Justice Policy Institute, August 2003).

²² This includes those prisoners with GEDs.

²³ In all of these figures, we are using the term dropout to refer to youth 16-24 who are not in school and do not have a degree or GED. As noted, the number of youth who leave school before age 18 but then return is higher. The predominance of non-Hispanic whites among dropouts is even more pronounced if we limit our analysis to only those youth who dropped out of a US high school, as opposed to those who terminated their schooling in a foreign country.

²⁴ As discussed later, many of these youth connect quite well with the labor force. However, there is a subpopulation of Hispanic immigrant dropouts that are at significant risk for disconnection. These youth are not economic migrants. Rather, they arrive in the US between ages 10 and 16 accompanied by their parents and most enroll in public school. Referred to as “late entrants,” these youth received limited or inadequate education in their native countries prior to their arrival in the US; some are not literate in their first language. Faced with the daunting challenge of mastering English as well as several content areas in a very limited number of years, many fail to complete high school.

²⁵ See Harry Holzer, *Career Advancement Prospects and Strategies for Low-Wage Minority Workers*, in R. Kazis and M. Miller ed., **Low-Wage Workers in the New Economy** (2001).

²⁶ Although they never attended school in the U.S., they are often included in statistics about dropouts because the Census Bureau lists them as having less than a high school education.

²⁷ See Debra Donohoe and Marta Tienda, *The Transition From School to Work: Is There a Crisis? What Can Be Done?* in S. Danziger and J. Waldfogel ed. **Securing the Future** (2000) Chapter 8.

²⁸ Brown 1996, note 2.

²⁹ See Joan Petersilia, **When Prisoners Come Home** (2003).

³⁰ Barbara Needle, *Youth Emancipating from Foster Care in California: Findings Using Linked Administrative Data* (Center for Social Services Research, UC Berkeley 2002).

³¹ The findings from these studies are summarized in Richard Wertheimer, *Youth Who “Age Out” of Foster Care: Troubled Lives, Troubling Prospects*, Child Trends Research Brief (December 2002).

³² Fred Wulczyn and Brunner Hislop, *Children in Substitute Care at Age 16: Selected Findings from the Multistate Data Archive*. (Chapin Hall Center for Children 2001).

³³ See Robert George, *Employment Outcomes for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care* (Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2002); See also Mark Courtney and Darcy Hughes, *Young Adults in the Foster Care System as Adolescents* (unpublished paper, 2003); Marian Busey et al, *Transition from Foster Care: A State by State Database Overview, Technical Report* (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2000); R. Cook, E. Fleishchman, and V. Grimes, *A National Evaluation of Title IV-E Foster Care Independent Living Programs for Youth in Foster care: Phase 2, Final Report Volume 1* (Westat 1991).

³⁴ Based on Child Trend’s analysis of the October 2000 Current Population Survey (on file with author).

³⁵ Including the entire jail population is undoubtedly over-inclusive, since this includes many people not deeply engaged in criminal activity, for example those convicted of offenses like drunk driving.

³⁶ Due to data limitations, we have not estimated the total number who will fall in the other three categories at some point between ages 14 and 18.

³⁷ Because the four subgroups are not mutually exclusive, the sum of our estimates of the size of the subgroups does not equal our final estimate of one million. We adjusted our final number to take account of the estimated overlap between the groups. For a description of the methodology used to estimate both the population size of the subgroups and the overlap, see Appendix A.

³⁸ Optimally, we would have preferred to exclude only those immigrant youth who reported never attending school in the US. However, the October CPS did not include the appropriate variables. Thus we relied on the less precise age cut off method described above. By excluding these youth we potentially miss a group of high-risk immigrant youth who enter the country with their parents during adolescence – termed late entrants. See Jorge Ruiz-de-Velasco and Michael Fix, **Overlooked and Underserved: Immigrant Students in U.S. Secondary Schools** (2000).

³⁹ We rely on event drop out rates to estimate the annual incidence of early school leaving by age cohort. We adjust the numbers to account for re-enrollment by relying on findings from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS)

to estimate the probability of return to and completion of high school among dropouts (14%). Due to data limitations, we do not attempt to calculate the period prevalence of involvement in foster care system, incarceration, or teen childbearing. Our final number should thus be interpreted as a lower bound estimate of the total number of youth at risk.

⁴⁰ The CPS categorizes women as mothers only if they are *living* with their children. If their child is being taken care of by relatives or is in state custody they are not included as mothers. Thus, the actual rate of teen childbearing could be substantially understated.

⁴¹ Jeffery A. Owings, *Coming of Age in the 1990s: The 8th Grade Class of 1988 12 Years Later – Initial Results from the Fourth Follow-up to the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988* (National Center for Education Statistics 2002).

⁴² Jennifer Burktdold et al, note 10.

⁴³ Jennifer Burktdold et al.

⁴⁴ Child Trends' Analysis of the October 2000 Current Population Survey (on file with author).

⁴⁵ See Appendix A for details on methods used to come to estimates.

⁴⁶ Marian Busey et al, note 33.

⁴⁷ These figures come from the US Census Bureau. Under its categorization scheme, the southern region includes the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

⁴⁸ Data on urban vs. rural residence was available only for dropouts.

⁴⁹ The few longitudinal studies show this pattern. See Brown 1996, note 2.

⁵⁰ Cited in T. Smith, *Taking Stock: A Review of U.S. Youth Employment Policy and Prospects* (Public/Private Ventures, April 2002).

⁵¹ This underscores the importance of looking beyond household based surveys to describe disconnected male populations. CPS numbers, which are based on household surveys, suggest a steep decline in the number of disconnected men after age 20. However, when the increasing number of incarcerated individuals is included the apparently steep drop off flattens out.

⁵² Longitudinal data are needed to test this, since the cross sectional numbers could be explained by lengthy prison stays.

⁵³ There are many very insightful ethnographic studies. See, Adrian LeBlanc, **Random Families** (2003); Philippe Bourgois, **In Search of Respect** (2nd ed. 2002); Elijah Anderson, **Code of the Street** (1999); Mercer Sullivan, **“Getting Paid”-Youth Crime and Work in the Inner City** (1989).

⁵⁴ See references in note 53.

⁵⁵ For example, some residential drug programs require youth on the waiting list to call in regularly to avoid losing their place. In many ways these screening procedures make a lot of sense – expensive and rare services should be allocated to those most interested and most likely to benefit from them. Since services are free, providers cannot rely on the consumers' willingness to pay as a means of effective rationing; in its place they frequently opt for some form of queuing. However, service systems can become dependent on the “luxury” of a waitlist to ensure a motivated clientele – and programmatically cease to innovate or grow and, certainly, become less effective in serving all but the most motivated.

⁵⁶ There also is a very small number of youth who are the “not readies.” Some may be so damaged that they will never be ready. Unfortunately, a good deal of public policy is created with this group in mind. However, they are just a very small part of the group and should not drive public response.

⁵⁷ Some TANF programs have developed good services for young mothers.

⁵⁸ T. Smith, note 50, at 15.

⁵⁹ Of course, it is desirable to prevent dropping out. However, prevention is very hard to do. See, Mark Dynarski and Philip Gleason, *Lessons from Federal Drop-out Prevention Programs* (Mathematica Policy Research, September 1999).

Appendix A

Calculating the Number of Status Dropouts, Ages 14-17

We used the October 2000 Current Population Survey (CPS) to estimate the number and characteristics of 14 to 17 year old dropouts. Dropout status was defined as not being enrolled in school at the time of the survey and lacking a high school degree. Our estimate is significantly lower than others commonly cited because we exclude the nearly half a million dropouts who are 18 years old.

Calculating the Number of Foster Youth Currently in Care, Ages 14-17

We used the data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System to establish the number of youth currently in care on September 30, 2000. The standard AFCARS report does not provide a detailed breakdown of the demographic characteristics youth in the 14-17 year old age bracket. Therefore, we applied Bussey and DiLorenzo's analysis of teens in foster care from the AFCARS 1998 data, which does have these breakdowns, to the AFCARS September 2000 numbers to estimate the number of youth falling into separate age, gender, and race categories. See Bussey and DiLorenzo, *Snapshot of Teens in Foster Care and Adoption, The AFCARS Data in Transitions from Foster Care: A State by State Database Overview, Technical Report* (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2001).

Calculating the Number of Former Foster Youth Who Exited Care Between the Ages of 14-17

The AFCARS, September 2000 reports on the total number of 14-17 year olds that exited foster care during the previous year. It does not break this number down by age. We applied the percentages reported in Bussey and DiLorenzo's analysis of teens in the AFCARS 1998 data, which breaks down exits by age, to the September 2000 total to estimate separately the number of 14, 15, 16, and 17-year-old exits during the previous year.

We assume that the annual number of exits at each age remains constant year to year. We further assume, based on various studies, that twenty percent of 14-17 year olds exiting foster care in any given year had exited the system at least once before and reduce our total number by this percentage. We use these estimates of the annual, age-specific incidence of foster care exits to calculate the total number of unduplicated adolescents at a point in time with a history of having left the system between ages 14 and 17. See Bussey and DiLorenzo, *Snapshot of Teens in Foster Care and Adoption, The AFCARS Data in Transitions from Foster Care: A State by State Database Overview, Technical Report* (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2001).

Calculating the Number of Teen Mothers, Ages 14-17

We relied on birth records of first births to women ages 14-17 from 1998-2001 to calculate the total number of teen mothers at a point in time. We used a pooled sample

from the 1997, 1999, and 2000 March CPS to estimate the demographic characteristics (including dropout status) of 14-17 year olds living with their minor children.

Calculating the Number of Incarcerated Youth, Ages 14-17

The total number of incarcerated youth in juvenile facilities came from the Census of Juvenile Residential Facilities, 2000. The total number of youth in adult facilities came from Allen J. Beck and Jennifer Karberg, *Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2000*, (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2001).

Estimating Number of Youth in Two or More Categories

It is not possible, with existing data, to precisely estimate how many youth who fall within one category also come within one or more of the other categories. Our estimate of the total number coming within one of the four categories at any given time errs in the direction of underestimating the total number.

We began with the total number of high school dropouts, the largest single group. We added those teen moms that were *not high school dropouts*. For this, we used the CPS which estimates directly the percentage of teen moms currently not in school.

It is more difficult to estimate the proportion of current and former foster youth who are also dropouts. There is no survey of all foster youth that includes data on their school status. We used Courtney's 2001 finding that thirty-seven percent of foster youth, in a reasonably large sample, did not have a high school diploma 12 to 18 months after emancipating from care to estimate status dropout rates for current and former foster youth 14-17. We assumed that emancipating youth and non-emancipating youth had similar rates of school leaving. In addition, we assumed that every foster youth who did not have a diploma at 19 or 20 had been a status dropout from 14 through 17. Both of these assumptions likely overestimate the true number of foster youth out of school at any one time.

To estimate the number of foster youth who are teen mothers, we relied on Barbara Needell's 2002 finding that nine percent of all young women emancipating from foster care in California became pregnant and gave birth to a child while in placement. We assumed all foster youth who were teen mothers were also high school dropouts, again an overestimate.

Due to data limitations, we did not attempt to estimate the overlap between incarcerated youth and any of the other categories.

For all these reasons, our estimate of the total number of individual youth falling into one of the four categories is conservative.