

A Profile of Disconnected Young Adults in 2010

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Susan Wile Schwarz | Kalyani Thampi

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The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) is the nation's leading public policy center dedicated to promoting the economic security, health, and well-being of America's low-income families and children. Using research to inform policy and practice, NCCP seeks to advance family-oriented solutions and the strategic use of public resources at the state and national levels to ensure positive outcomes for the next generation. Founded in 1989 as a division of the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, NCCP is a nonpartisan, public interest research organization.

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This report is based on analysis of the U.S. Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, March 2010, conducted by Michelle Chau and Vanessa R. Wight of NCCP. Estimates include all young adults aged 18 through 24.

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Introduction

The purpose of this report is to highlight a growing segment of the population who are arriving at young adulthood disconnected from the main pathways leading to economic independence. Arriving at young adulthood in a state of disconnection can have consequences for both young adults and the larger society. Young adults who have low educational attainment or who are out of school or unemployed for extended periods of time may be more likely to engage in delinquent behavior, turn to illegal activities as a source of income, and be incarcerated.¹ The consequences of disconnection may also result in long-term penalties, such as underemployment and lower earnings over the life course. Young adults disconnected for three or more years are about 14 times more likely to be poor and earn about two and one half times less in earnings and are about two to three times less likely

to be employed full-time than young adults who had never been disconnected.² Disconnectedness experienced during young adulthood may also have serious health consequences. Research shows that different components of disconnectedness, such as having less than high school education or being unemployed is associated with suboptimal health and mental health outcomes.³ Furthermore, disconnected young adults are more likely to rely on some form of public assistance.⁴ Thus, the costs of disconnection to government can include increased transfer payments and social support expenses as well as a decrease in tax revenues from their lack of participation in the labor market. In short, this population deserves our attention given the long-term consequences being disconnected can pose for a successful transition to adulthood.

The Onset of Adulthood

Although social scientists have lacked a systematic definition of adulthood, the onset has historically involved emotional and economic independence and has been characterized by two main benchmarks: getting married and having children.⁵ Recent work in this area points to a changing notion of adulthood; one characterized less by marital and parental transitions and more by school completion, independent living, and full-time employment.⁶

Yet, recent trends in demographic processes suggest that the transition to adulthood is becoming increasingly protracted and delayed. Children are living at home longer than they were 30 years ago. In 1970, 47.3 percent of young adults aged 18 to 24 were living at home. By 2009 young adults living at home had increased to 52.8 percent.⁷ They are staying in school longer. Nearly 30 percent of young adults were enrolled in school in 1970. By 2008, the percentage of young adults enrolled had increased to 45.5 percent. And this trend is evident at older ages, as well, suggesting that children are staying in school further into adulthood.⁸

Young adults are also delaying marriage and childbearing. Since the 1970s, age at first marriage has steadily increased.⁹ In 1970, the median age at first marriage was 20.8 for women and 23.2 for men. By 2009, median age had increased by about five years for both women and men to 25.9 and 28.1, respectively.¹⁰ In addition, the average age of mothers at first birth has increased over this 30-year period, from 21.4 years in 1970 to 25 years in 2006.¹¹ Although there is a debate about why these trends have occurred, there are at least three different hypotheses.¹² One approach argues that changes in values and attitudes have contributed to rising individualism and an increased emphasis on the quality of adult relationships. Thus, we are less willing to marry or to remain in a bad union.¹³ A second approach argues that increased opportunities for women have reduced the returns of marriage for both women and men.¹⁴ Women are more likely today than in the past to be able to support themselves, and because more married women are employed today than in the past, men lose the services that were once part of the housewife role. In short, a trend toward a more egalitarian division of labor has eroded the benefits of marriage.

Finally, others argue the declines in marriage and childbearing are related to the deteriorating economic circumstances of young men. The lack of stable employment for men reduces both men and women's willingness to form partnerships and start a family.¹⁵

Amidst the backdrop of these dramatic changes in school enrollment, home leaving, marriage, and childbearing, there is a growing number of young adults for whom the transition is considerably more difficult. If one of the primary goals of a successful transition to adulthood is the ability to be self sufficient apart from parents, then a growing share of the young adult population is emerging from adolescence falling short of this goal. That is, they are not connected to any of the various activities which might lead to economic independence, such as being in school, working, or serving in the military. Past research that has focused on disconnected young adults has conceptualized this state as being disconnected from various means of support, including school and work, as well as spouse and parents.¹⁶ However, given the large shift in how young adults today conceptualize adulthood, marriage and parenthood no longer appear to be a necessary part of the definition of adulthood. Instead, important milestones include completing school, living independently, and being employed full-time.¹⁷ In short, the onset of adulthood appears to be defined more by the ability of both men and women to support themselves and less by the transition to marriage and parenthood. Thus, in this report, we define disconnection as a state in which young adults are not connected to any paths leading to economic independence. That is, young adults are disconnected if they are not enrolled in school, not employed or in the military, and have no degree beyond a high school diploma.¹⁸

Understanding the Rate

Defining Disconnection

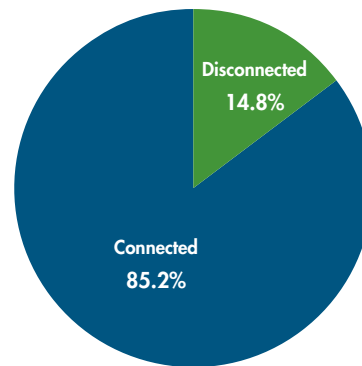
Active enrollment in school, employment or military service, or having education beyond high school are all considered pathways leading to economic independence. We use the combination of these factors to define whether or not a young adult was disconnected. In 2010, there were 29.3 million young adults aged 18 to 24. Nearly 15 percent (4.3 million) were disconnected (see Figure 1). In other words, they were not enrolled in school, not employed or in the military, and had no degree beyond a high-school diploma at the time of the survey.

Connected young adults comprised the remaining 85 percent (25.0 million) of young adults aged 18 to 24. That is, these young adults were either employed or in the military or enrolled in school and all had more than a high school diploma. In 2010, 37.7 percent of young adults were connected only through being employed or in the military (see Figure 2). Another 32.7 percent were connected only through their school enrollment. One-quarter (24.5 percent) were connected by both being employed/in the military and enrolled in school. Approximately five percent of young adults were classified as connected based solely on the fact that they have more than a high-school diploma. They were not however engaged in any other connected activities like employment, military service, or school.

Disconnection Among Young Adults on the Rise

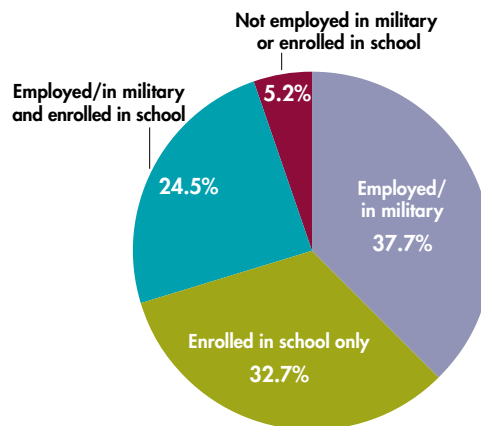
There is some debate about whether the size of the disconnected population has grown or shrunk over time. The most current research suggests that the trend in being disconnected among young adults has not changed much since 1980 and in fact may have declined.¹⁹ However, most of this research only documents trends through the 1990s. More recent estimates suggest that in the last decade, the percent of young adults disconnected has increased from 11.4 in 2000 to 14.8 in 2010 (see Figure 3). The overall number of young adults who are disconnected has also risen from three to 4.3 million – a 30.4 percent increase over 10 years.

Figure 1. Young adults by disconnected status, 2010



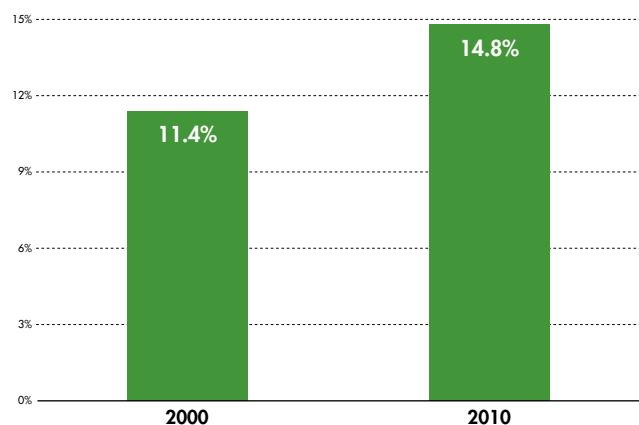
Note: Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

Figure 2. Connected young adults by type of connection, 2010



Note: Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

Figure 3. Disconnected young adults, 2000 and 2010



Disconnection Varies by Age, Race/Ethnicity, and Nativity

There is very little difference between women and men in the likelihood of being disconnected. Both experience disconnection at the same rate – 14.8 percent. However, disconnection varies significantly by age, race/ethnicity, and nativity. Disconnected young adults are, on average, 21 years of age. As shown in Table 1, young adults aged 19 to 21 face the highest rates of disconnection, ranging from 15.9 percent among 19 year-olds and 21 year-olds to 16.4 percent among 20 year-olds. The rate of disconnection is highest among American Indian/Alaskan Native young adults (28.8 percent). But black, Hispanic, and young adults of some other race also face a high likelihood of being disconnected relative to their white and Asian counterparts. Asian young adults have the lowest rate of being disconnected at 7.4 percent. Finally, the likelihood of being disconnected is higher among young adults who were born outside the United States (18.2 percent) compared with their native-born counterparts (14.4 percent).

Table 1. Disconnected young adults by age, race/ethnicity, nativity, 2010

	All Young Adults	Disconnected	
	N	N	%
Age			
18	4,277,304	480,247	11.2
19	3,881,235	616,598	15.9
20	4,382,987	719,630	16.4
21	4,257,940	677,019	15.9
22	4,217,221	616,852	14.6
23	4,083,088	600,514	14.7
24	4,213,061	620,407	14.7
Race/ethnicity			
White	17,764,415	2,038,908	11.5
Black	4,079,846	957,646	23.5
Asian	1,273,622	94,619	7.4
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	245,103	70,611	28.8
Other	479,496	70,019	14.6
Hispanic origin	5,470,354	1,099,465	20.1
Nativity			
Native born	26,331,018	3,789,489	14.4
Born outside the U.S.	2,981,818	541,778	18.2

Disconnected and Connected Young Adults: A Profile

Education

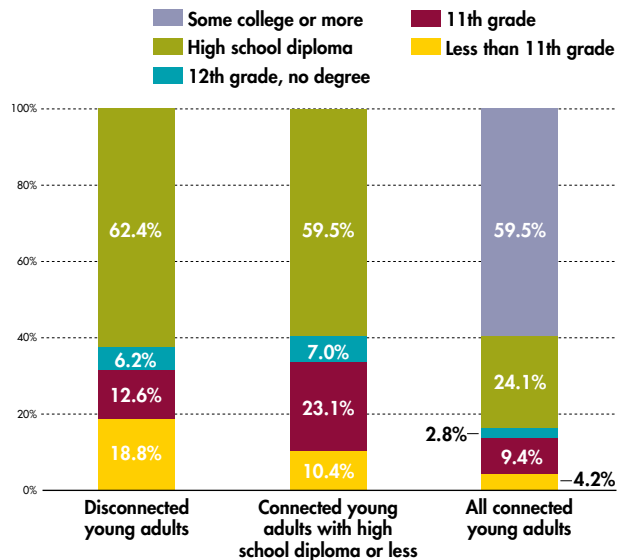
A majority of young adults aged 18 to 24 have at least some college under their belts (50.7 percent of all young adults, data not shown). Disconnected young adults by definition do not have a degree beyond a high school diploma (see Figure 4). However, a majority of those who are disconnected graduated from high school – 62.4 percent. The remaining 37.6 percent have some schooling, but no formal degree. About 19 percent of disconnected young adults have less than an 11th grade education, 13 percent have schooling through the 11th grade, and about 6 percent have schooling through the 12th grade, but no high school diploma. When we restrict the sample of connected young adults to those with a high school diploma or less (the sample most comparable with disconnected young adults), we see their educational attainment patterns are somewhat similar, although a few differences emerge. About 59 percent have a high school diploma – slightly lower than their disconnected counterparts. About 10 percent have less than an 11th grade education. Another 23 percent of these young adults have education through the 11th grade – nearly two times the share of the disconnected. And seven percent have schooling through the 12th grade, but do not have a diploma.

Employment

Lack of employment is another main reason young adults are considered disconnected. So it is no surprise that their employment status and reasons for not working differ considerably from their connected counterparts (see Table 2). Approximately 61 percent of all connected young adults are employed (column 1). The remainder are either unemployed (six percent) or not in the labor force because they are disabled or they have some other reason (31.9 percent).²⁰

When we compare disconnected young adults to those who are connected without employment (see columns 2 and 3), there are stark differences in their labor force characteristics. Disconnected young adults are more likely than connected young adults without employment to be unemployed.

Figure 4. Educational attainment by disconnected status, 2010



Note: Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

Table 2. Employment status of young adults by disconnected status, 2010

	Connected (%)		Disconnected (%)
	Total	Not Employed	
	100.0		
Employed	61.3		
Not employed	37.9	100.0	100.0
Unemployed	6.0	15.8	42.7
Lost a job [a]	1.8	4.6	19.7
Left a job [b]	0.2	0.6	2.9
Re-entrant [c]	3.0	7.9	13.5
New entrant [d]	1.0	2.8	6.7
Not in labor force	31.9	84.2	57.3
Disabled	0.6	1.6	9.5
Other [e]	31.3	82.6	47.8
Employment status not reported	0.9	—	—
N	24,981,569	9,458,863	4,331,267

Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

- a. Includes people whose employment ended involuntarily, who began looking for work, and who are already on layoff.
- b. Includes people who quit or terminated their employment voluntarily and immediately begin looking for work.
- c. Includes people who previously worked at a job full-time for at least two weeks, but who were out of the labor force prior to beginning to look for work.
- d. Includes people who never worked full time at a job lasting two weeks or longer.
- e. The majority of young adults responded they are not in the labor force for some other reason (undefined). However, a small number responded they are retired.

Approximately 43 percent of disconnected young adults are unemployed (i.e., they are not employed, but are available and looking for work) compared with 15.8 percent of nonemployed, connected young adults. While 57.3 percent of disconnected young adults are not in the labor force an overwhelming majority of nonemployed connected young adults share this status (84.2 percent), suggesting they are neither available nor looking for work.

While the reasons why young adults are not in the labor force are undoubtedly diverse, we do know that over one-quarter of disconnected young adults who are not in the labor force for some other reason report they want a job (26.2 percent) while only 10.5 percent of their connected counterparts express this sentiment (see Figure 5). The differences in the expressed desire to hold a job among disconnected and connected young adults likely reflects connected young adults' attachment to activities like school, which may decrease both the preference for and participation in the labor force.

Furthermore, of the disconnected young adults who are not in the labor force for some other reason and report wanting a job, nearly 27 percent are discouraged workers²¹ compared with 7.6 percent of connected young adults (see Figure 6). About 25 percent of these disconnected young adults and 23 percent of these connected young adults reported they were conditionally interested in work.²²

Living Arrangements

Like connected young adults aged 18 to 24, a majority of those who are disconnected live with either their parents or relatives – 62.4 of connected young adults versus 60.5 percent of disconnected young adults (see Figure 7). The remaining share of disconnected young adults – 39.6 percent – live apart from parents either in their own household or with non-relatives, which is similar to connected young adults (37.6 percent). However, the distribution of disconnected young adults by more detailed living arrangements is slightly different when compared to their connected counterparts. The share of the disconnected living with their relatives is nearly twice the share of those who are connected – 14.7 versus 7.8 percent, respectively. Further, among disconnected young adults, living in one's own household

Figure 5. Young adults who want a job by disconnected status, 2010

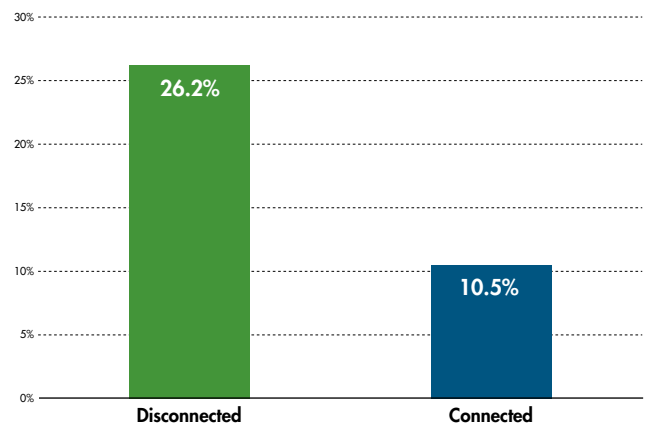


Figure 6. Discouraged and conditionally interested workers by disconnected status, 2010

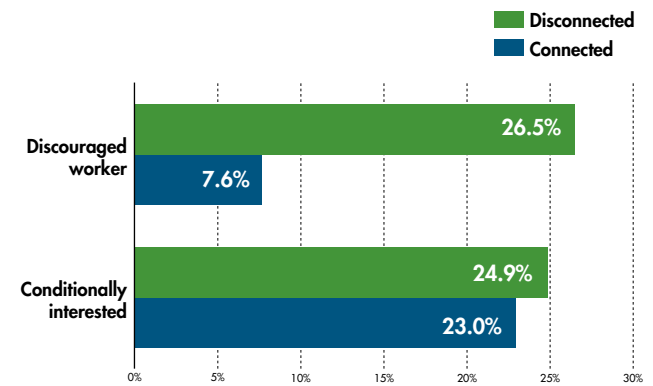
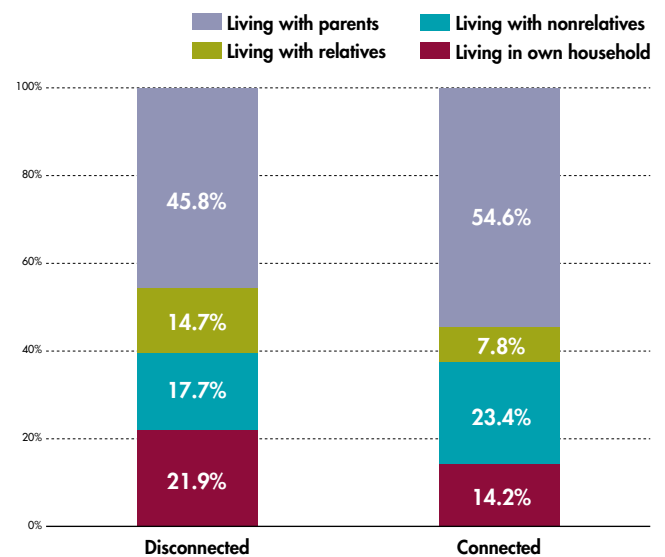


Figure 7. Living arrangements by disconnected status, 2010



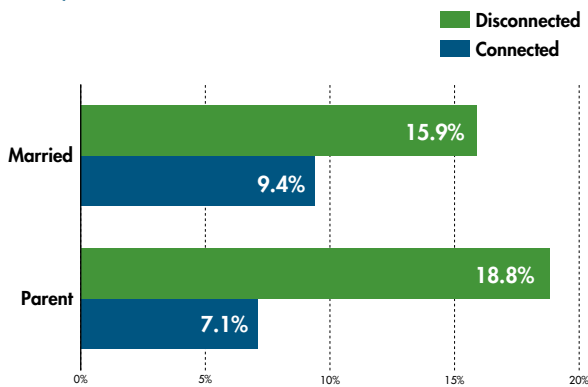
Note: Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding

appears to be more common than living with non-relatives (21.9 percent versus 17.7 percent) while the opposite is true for connected young adults with 14.2 percent living in their own household and 23.4 percent living with nonrelatives.

Marital and Parental Status

Most young adults are single and without children. Only 10.4 percent of young adults are married and about nine percent have children (data not shown). Yet, disconnected young adults are more likely to be married relative to their connected counterparts – 15.9 percent versus 9.4 percent – and the share of disconnected young adults with a child is more than two times the share of connected young adults – 18.8 percent versus 7.1 percent (see Figure 8). Although most single young adults are childless, those who are disconnected are more than twice as likely to be single parents compared to those who are connected (12.9 versus 5.0 percent, data not shown).

Figure 8. Marital and parental status by disconnected status, 2010

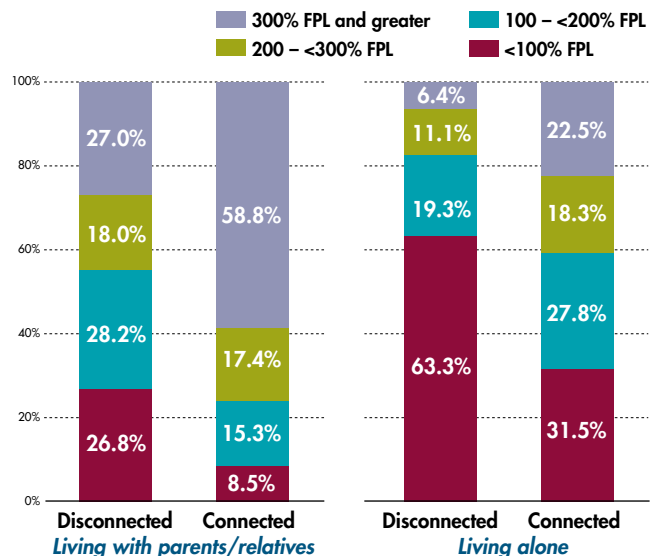


Income

Overall, the poverty rate among young adults aged 18 to 24 is 20.7 percent (data not shown). Broken down by disconnected status, young adults who are disconnected are more than twice as likely to be poor compared to their connected counterparts (41.2 versus 17.1 percent). Although the rate among disconnected young adults is high, this is not unexpected considering that the disconnected are, by definition, not employed and employment is the most common source of income.

One contributing factor to consider when examining income among individuals in this age group is their level of economic independence. Since a majority of young adults still live with parents and relatives, their income status likely reflects that of other family members in addition to their own. An examination of income status by living arrangements shows marked differences in poverty rates by living arrangements but consistent patterns between disconnected and connected young adults within groups. Among those living with parents/relatives, disconnected young adults are more likely to be poor compared to connected youth (26.8 versus 8.5 percent) (see Figure 9). However, young adults who live alone are more likely to be poor compared to those living with parents regardless of disconnected status. And disconnected young adults living alone are the most likely to be poor, with a poverty rate of over 63 percent.

Figure 9. Income by disconnected status and living arrangements, 2010



Note: Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

Health Insurance Coverage and Public Benefits

Thirty percent of all young adults aged 18 to 24 lack health insurance (data not shown). However, the uninsured rate among disconnected young adults is staggering with 48.0 percent lacking health insurance of any kind (see Figure 10). With the recent passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, health care plans and issuers are now required to extend dependent health insurance coverage to adult children up to age 26. The requirement to cover older dependents may help to reduce the relatively high uninsured rate within the disconnected young adult population. While private health insurance coverage is more common than public health insurance coverage among connected young adults (61.4 percent versus 15.7 percent), disconnected young adults are more likely to have public compared to private coverage (33.3 percent versus 22.6 percent).

Nearly one in five (18.0 percent) of all young adults aged 18 to 24 receive at least one of the following six public benefits: TANF/AFDC, food stamps, public housing, unemployment compensation, Supplemental Security Income, or some other public assistance income (data not shown). However the share of disconnected young adults who receive at least one of these types of public benefits (40.0 percent) is nearly three times greater than the share of connected young adults (14.2 percent) receiving public benefits (data not shown). While the difference in public benefit receipt by disconnected status is present across each of the six types, household receipt of food stamps is by far the most common source of public support among disconnected young adults (see Figure 11). Nearly one-third of disconnected young adults (31.6 percent) live in a household that receives food stamps.

Figure 10. Health insurance coverage by disconnected status, 2010

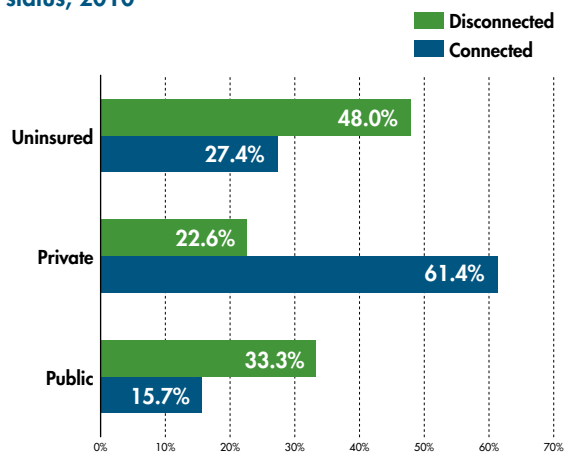
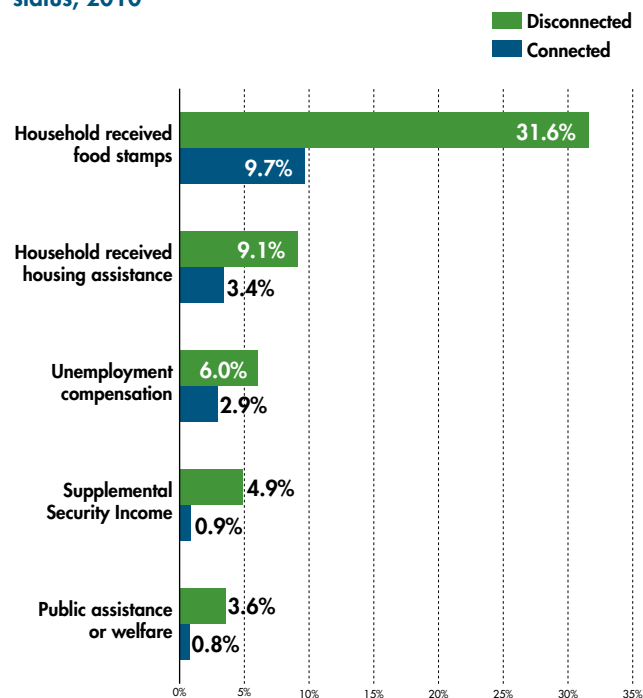


Figure 11. Type of public benefits received by disconnected status, 2010



(Re)Connecting Young Adults

While the road to adulthood for many young people today has become increasingly elongated with twists and turns that can even lead back to the family nest, there is a growing proportion of young people for whom the journey is exceptionally treacherous. One in seven young adults is emerging from adolescence disconnected from any pathway leading to financial and economic independence in adulthood.

Furthermore, the findings in this report indicate that disconnected young adults, when compared with their connected counterparts, are more likely to experience a range of factors that only amplify their precarious economic standing. They are more likely than connected young adults to be poor, to live apart from parents and to live alone, to have a child and to be raising the child outside of a marital union, to be uninsured, and not surprisingly, to be receiving some kind of public assistance. Reducing the rate of disconnection among young adults requires a two-pronged public policy strategy focusing on keeping youth on track to be connected in young adulthood and reconnecting those who fall off the track and fail to launch.

Staying on Track to be Connected in Young Adulthood

Research points to a handful of key initiatives that are instrumental in helping children and youth to stay on track to be connected in young adulthood.

Investments in Early Childhood Development

The benefits of investing early in children cannot be overstated. Findings from a growing body of research suggest that investments made in early childhood can have profound effects on children's long-term educational and employment outcomes.^{23 24} Interventions such as providing enriched preschool centers to disadvantaged young children and home visitation programs are effective interventions associated with a wide range of positive outcomes among children ranging from a boost in IQ and positive school achievement to a higher likelihood of completing high school and being employed in adulthood.²⁵

Youth Development Programs

Findings from a number of studies indicate that interventions at older ages are also beneficial to keeping students on track. Having an orientation toward high achievement, a positive self concept, a high degree of social maturity, and self regulation are important characteristics associated with positive youth outcomes such as high-school completion, delayed parenting, low delinquency, enrollment in postsecondary education, and career-oriented employment.²⁶ Review of a small number of youth development programs provides preliminary evidence of their success in improving the outcomes of at-risk youth.²⁷ Thus, programs that focus on positive youth development may be instrumental in helping adolescents avoid disconnection in young adulthood.

Mental Health Screening and Treatment in Middle and High Schools

Given that a large share of young adults who wind up disconnected are in school until at least the 11th grade (with a majority receiving a high-school diploma), we also need to consider the role that high schools can play as important sites of intervention. Adolescent socioemotional behavioral problems are positively associated with being disconnected in young adulthood.²⁸ Incorporating mental health screening and treatment in middle and high schools may be an effective way to identify those adolescents in need of mental health services. Research shows that school or community-based behavioral health services are most effective for youth under age 25.²⁹ Yet results from NCCP's survey of child mental health directors indicate that only 24 out of 50 states and US territories in the survey reported having state-wide strategies to promote school-based mental health services.³⁰ Thus, states should take steps to increase school-based behavioral health services at a state-wide level.

Promoting School Connectedness and Mentoring Relationships

High school not only serves as an opportunity to identify and treat those with mental health needs, but the actual act of attending is also associated with positive academic and socioemotional outcomes and future well being. Over the past 15 to 20 years, a robust body of research has emerged demonstrating the importance of school connectedness - the feeling of belonging to a school community - as a protective factor for adolescence. When students believe that adults in their lives care about their learning and their overall well-being, they are less likely to engage in risky behaviors and more likely to succeed academically.³¹ Policies designed to support teacher and counselor development in middle and high schools, funding for programs that foster a greater sense of belonging and investment in academic achievement among students, and policies that promote graduation can have a positive effect on health and wellbeing outcomes beyond improved graduation rates.

Similarly, research demonstrates the importance of mentoring relationships for adolescent development. A 2005 study using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that respondents who reported a natural mentoring relationship, that is, a close relationship with an adult outside of a formal mentoring setting, were more likely to exhibit favorable outcomes relating to education/work (such as completing high school, college attendance, working at least 10 hours a week), reduced problem behavior (such as gang membership, hurting others in physical fights, risk taking), psychological well-being (such as heightened self-esteem, life satisfaction), and health (such as physical activity level, birth control use).³² The results from the study suggest the need to build high-quality, youth-centered mentoring initiatives into more comprehensive interventions targeting at-risk youth.

Juvenile Justice Reform and Community-Based Alternatives to Incarceration

Youth involved in the juvenile justice system are at increased risk of falling off the track and being disconnected in adulthood, not least by virtue of their involvement in the legal system. Many of these adolescents have significant mental health needs that go unmet despite their time spent in state custody. Juvenile justice systems fail to systematically screen youth for substance use, suicide risk, or other mental health problems. In 2006, less than half of incarcerated juvenile offenders were housed in facilities that provide mental health evaluations for all, despite the fact that two-thirds reported at least one mental illness.^{33 34} In addition, the juvenile justice system has the potential to provide valuable educational and employment training necessary for remaining on track and connecting to the labor force after being incarcerated. Yet, education and job-training services in prisons are being reduced.³⁵ Thus, states need to secure adequate funding and professional capacity to support the education, employment, and mental health needs of this group of adolescents already at high-risk.

In addition, many youth arrive in residential facilities after being tried in criminal court, a trajectory that undermines the best interests of the individual and the interests of society. Research suggests that the portion of the brain responsible for executive function and complex decision-making is not completely developed until age 25. Further, studies comparing recidivism rates of similar juveniles sentenced to adult and juvenile facilities have found higher rates of re-offending for youths sentenced to adult prison.^{36 37} This evidence suggests the need to reevaluate legal systems that try and punish adolescents using the same criteria as adults.³⁸ Community-based alternatives to incarceration, such as those pioneered in Missouri and Illinois,³⁹ offer promising models that can simultaneously reduce present and future costs of incarceration to the individual and society while improving individual outcomes for youth through decreased recidivism – a result that will only improve the odds of being connected in young adulthood.

Getting Back on Track

The prospects for success in the labor market among young adults with minimal education have dimmed as the returns on having a high-school degree or less have declined over time.⁴⁰ However, policies and practices that provide job training and promote pathways to sustainable, long-term employment are important for reconnecting young adults who have prematurely left the formal education system and who remain disconnected from achieving economic independence.

Second-Chance Programs

Second-chance programs such as YouthBuild USA offer young adults the skills necessary to earn GEDs and enroll in post-secondary education.⁴¹ Targeting low-income communities, YouthBuild aims to simultaneously address multiple core issues such as housing, education, employment, crime prevention, and leadership development. In this program, low-income youth between the ages of 16 and 24 work towards a GED and learn job skills while serving their communities by building affordable housing.⁴² The shift towards joining the efforts of the service programs, such as YouthBuild, with conservation corps programs, such as Green Corps, has the potential to move at-risk, low-income youth into careers with potential for advancement. For example, high unemployment (especially among young adults) combined with high demand for green-collar workers in the green industry has created a natural bridge between the green economy and the conservation/service youth corps programs.⁴³ Two programs targeting youth and young adults were included in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009. Under ARRA, \$50 million has been allocated to the YouthBuild program and the economic recovery package provides \$3.95 billion for Workforce Investment Act (WIA) job training services, of which \$1.2 billion is for youth and young adult services.⁴⁴ States can use this grant for youth activities, including summer and year-round employment programs that reflect work and education (including remediation) across emerging job sectors, such as green jobs. In addition, Congress increased age eligibility to up to 24 years.⁴⁵

The Role of Community Colleges

Community colleges and other two-year institutions are positioned to provide educational development and employment training to young adults who might otherwise be barred from pursuing higher education due to academic under-preparation or financial and time constraints. However, students at two-year colleges are far less likely than those at four-year institutions to complete a postsecondary degree.⁴⁶ Remedial and bridge programs, such as Learning Communities and I-BEST, can help underprepared students transition from high school to community college.⁴⁷ Further, increasing investments to strengthen the community college system can increase the likelihood that students succeed and earn a degree once they enroll. One area for increased investment is in student advising and support services. Community colleges serve the least prepared and most nontraditional students, including those working and/or raising children while going to school. Yet they tend to offer the least in terms of academic support and services to a student population that is arguably most in need. Evaluations of enhanced counseling and student services programs suggest that they have the potential to improve student outcomes, but more research is needed to better understand why certain programs are effective.⁴⁸

Financial Aid Reform

Another opportunity to improve access to and success in higher education is through significant reforms to the current financial aid system. Policymakers at the state and federal levels can improve the effectiveness of academic financial aid by increasing performance-based scholarships, reevaluating and reorganizing the grants, loans, and text credits programs, and simplifying their application processes to ensure that assistance reaches those students most in need.⁴⁹

Linking Second-Chance Programs to Post-Secondary Education

Connecting disconnected young adults in second-chance programs to post-secondary education will also build their capacity to move beyond entry-level jobs. Linkages have already been created that tie second-chance service and conservation programs to community colleges through partnerships with

the Education Opportunity Centers, American Association for Community Colleges (AACC) and AFL-CIO Working for America Institute, among others.⁵⁰ In addition, ARRA provides \$500 million for community colleges and green jobs training programs to partner in providing opportunities for youth to acquire the skills necessary to compete in a green economy.⁵¹ Moreover, the American Association for Community Colleges (AACC) recently unveiled their Sustainability Education and Economy Development (SEED) initiative to begin sharing and promoting promising practices in green job training/education across the country. Indeed, community colleges, nation-wide, see the merits in investing in green energy programs to develop the skills of students who are entering the new economy and, as such, they are providing intensive training in tandem with apprenticeship programs to develop green jobs in their local community.⁵²

Apprenticeship Programs

Research indicates that apprenticeship programs at the local and state levels are associated with increasing employment and earnings among youth less likely to go to college.⁵³ Enrolling young, capable workers in apprenticeship programs can be somewhat cost-intensive (with employers shouldering most of the cost), but research suggests the rewards outweigh the costs in the long run.⁵⁴ In Washington State, for example, apprentices' annual earnings rose by nearly \$12,000. South Carolina's blended apprenticeship/technical college approach to youth employment has more than doubled the number of apprentices in everything from manufacturing to health care.⁵⁵ Moreover, in a recent survey of employers who sponsored apprenticeships, 97 percent said they would recommend the program to others, citing increased productivity, retention, and morale as observable benefits to their company.⁵⁶ Pathways into construction (such as training in green building, retrofitting and Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design [LEED] certification), manufacturing (such as training in weatherization), and engineering (such as training in solar/wind energy technology) are dominating the green economy, and apprenticeship programs are an efficient way of providing career training opportunities and investing in out-of-school youth at risk of becoming – or already are – disconnected. In short, second-chance programs, transitional services,

community colleges, and apprenticeship programs are initiatives that, when combined, can put disconnected youth on a path towards self-sufficiency.

Often defined as a time of transition, the ages between 18 and 24 are an important point in the life course – setting the stage for future well-being. Yet, research suggests that the costs of disconnection are widely distributed, touching not only the young adults themselves and the larger society, but also the young children of those who are disconnected – contributing to the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. Thus, with a rate of disconnection that appears to be growing over time, it is important that we make the needs of this population a policy priority.

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