

Child TRENDS RESEARCH BRIEF

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YOUTH WHO ARE “DISCONNECTED” AND THOSE WHO THEN RECONNECT: ASSESSING THE INFLUENCE OF FAMILY, PROGRAMS, PEERS AND COMMUNITIES

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OVERVIEW

The transition to adulthood can be a turbulent time. To succeed in this transition, adolescents and emerging adults must advance in several areas of development, such as education, work, financial autonomy, romantic relationships, peer involvement, citizenship, and avoidance of destructive health behaviors.¹⁸ However, some young people who have difficulty with this transition may disconnect from work or school for a lengthy period of time. The term “disconnected youth” is often used to describe these young people.

This Research Brief presents the results of new Child Trends’ analyses on factors that have a bearing on whether youth become disconnected, updating previous research on the subject, as well as factors relating to youth reconnecting after a period of disconnection. To conduct these analyses, Child Trends drew on data from a nationally representative survey of youth which followed a sample of young people for four years. Overall, we found that a variety of factors affect the likelihood of an adolescent’s disconnection and reconnection, including demographics, family processes, youth characteristics and behaviors, peer characteristics, and community characteristics. Most notably, we found that participation in a job search, job training or school-to-work program is related to a lower risk of becoming disconnected. Our work reinforces the idea that involvement in programs and support from caring adults can lower the risk of disconnection among disadvantaged young people, a finding that should inform the work of policy makers and program providers to address the needs of this vulnerable population.

SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

The exact number of disconnected youth is not known. In fact, the definition of “disconnected” varies across studies. However, it is estimated that more than 5 million young people between the ages of 16 and 24 (15 percent of the total youth population) were not in school or in the workforce in 2001.²⁰ Disconnected youth are more likely to be poor,^{2,3} to have academic difficulties, to suffer from mental health problems and/or substance abuse, to be involved in

violence,²² and to be teen parents.⁹ Moreover, youth who are disconnected for three or more years suffer long-term consequences³ such as lower incomes,^{2,14} lack of health insurance, and difficulty getting and keeping a job.² In addition, young women who are disconnected for three or more years are more likely to receive welfare payments and food stamps than are their counterparts who have never been disconnected.²

BACKGROUND FACTORS THAT PLACE YOUTH AT RISK

Many personal, family, community and neighborhood characteristics may put youth at risk for disconnection, either individually or in combination.

- **Household income, parental education level, family structure, and minority status.** Young people are more at risk if they grow up in a family that receives welfare payments or experiences poverty,^{2,3,22} if their parents have low levels of education, and if they are born into a family with a single parent or with no parent.²² Minority youth are at greater risk of long-term disconnection than are white youth with similar characteristics.^{2,22}

- **Involvement in the foster care, juvenile justice, and special education systems.** Young people who have been involved with these systems, either recently or in the past, are also at greater risk for disconnection than are other youth.^{5,6,9,15,22} Among the challenges these vulnerable young people face are limited skills; a lack of family support;¹⁵ learning disabilities; and

health, emotional and, behavioral problems.⁵ Conversely, adolescents whose families provide support are more likely to thrive during the transition to adulthood.^{6,17,19}

- **Community and neighborhood characteristics.** Some studies suggest that the type of neighborhood in which a young person lives may have particular relevance to disconnection. For example, evidence shows that youth who live in neighborhoods with a lower percentage of workers holding professional or managerial jobs^{1,4} have higher dropout rates and higher rates of teenage childbearing.

RESILIENCE AS A COUNTERVAILING FORCE

Despite the presence of background factors that may put youth at risk for disconnection, it should not be forgotten that many people who grow up under adverse conditions *do* succeed.^{7,13,24} Researchers and others use the term “resilience” to describe good outcomes despite high-risk status, sustained competence under stress, and recovery from trauma.²⁴ Resilient children take an active approach to solving problems, perceive even negative experiences

ABOUT THE DATA AND METHODS USED FOR THIS BRIEF

Child Trends used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 (NLSY97), a nationally representative study that has been following nearly 9,000 adolescents living in U.S. households in 1997 who were born between 1980 and 1984. The NLSY97 measures labor force outcomes, schooling, employment, and family relationships.

Our study sample consisted of 5,419 adolescents who were between the ages of 12 and 14 in 1997. We classified a subsample of these youth as disconnected, as defined by not being enrolled in school, not employed, not in the military, and not married for 26 consecutive weeks or more between the ages of 16 and 21 or between age 16 and December 31, 2003. In addition to examining data on these youth, we looked at data on adolescents who reconnected following a period of disconnection and remained connected for at least 13 consecutive weeks.

We focused on background factors that research suggests relate to disconnection, namely: race/ethnicity, gender, age, family poverty level, parental education level, family type (e.g., single parent, two-parent, stepfamily), welfare receipt, parental employment, and number of older siblings. We also focused on family factors such as parental awareness of child activities and friends, family routines, parent religiosity, mother-youth relationship, and parental involvement in school. To determine the influence of youth characteristics on disconnection, we considered delinquency, mental health, substance use, overweight status, parent rating of youth health status, and eighth-grade grades. In addition, we considered evidence of positive and negative peer activities and community characteristics. Finally, we looked at how participation in a program, such as job training or a vocational/technical course of study, affected disconnection.

constructively, have an ability to gain positive attention from others, and tend to draw on their faith to maintain a positive outlook on life.^{23,26} Resilience may also be linked to cognitive abilities and scholastic competence, an internal locus of control, and a positive self-concept.²⁵ Family and community factors associated with resilience include the characteristics and caregiving styles of the parents and the support of other adults, such as grandparents, mentors, youth leaders, and members of church groups.^{24,26}

INFLUENCE OF PROGRAMS

Many programs and institutions seek to facilitate a successful transition to adulthood. In addition to providing students with the academic skills needed to succeed in most jobs, schools can play a valuable role in this transition by providing a link between educational and work experiences.¹⁹ Moreover, school-to-work programs can help students see the relevance of what they are studying, help them gain skills that employers need,^{11,19} and help them develop the habits and attitudes necessary for work.^{19,29}

Other types of programs can also increase the chances that at-risk youth can make a successful transition to adulthood. For example, research finds that:

- Academic, employment, civic engagement, pregnancy prevention, substance abuse prevention, and other programs for educationally disadvantaged older youth can improve educational outcomes, as well as social and emotional well-being.⁸
- Participation in well-run, organized out-of-school time activities—such as sports, clubs, and religious youth groups—can have long-term benefits for participants, including completing high school at rates that are higher than those of non-participants and developing occupational and educational aspirations. For example, participating in one or two sports in high school has been shown to predict

higher income at age 25.^{12,27,28}

- Mentoring programs can supplement or, in some cases, be a substitute for relationships with parents.¹⁰ Youth participating in mentoring programs may improve on some educational measures and mentoring can help youth develop healthy and safe behaviors. Because students who do well in school are better able to make the transition to adulthood, these programs often have academic components.¹⁶

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH DISCONNECTION

Overall, 19.7 percent of youth in this sample experienced disconnection. Generally, being disconnected was related to multiple measures of being disadvantaged.

- **Family poverty level.** Among youth whose families were below the poverty line, more than one-third (39 percent) became disconnected. In contrast, for youth whose families were at 400 percent of the poverty line or higher, only about one in 10 was disconnected (8 percent). (In 2007, the poverty threshold for a family of four was \$21,027, thus 400 percent of poverty is approximately \$84,108 for a family of four in 2007.²¹)
- **Family structure.** About 13 percent of young people who lived with both of their biological or adoptive parents before age 16 experienced disconnection compared with about 27 percent of youth in stepfamilies, 29 percent of youth in single-parent families, and 33 percent of youth living with neither parent.
- **Parental unemployment.** Having a parent who reported not working at the beginning of the first round of data collection (1997) was associated with a higher rate of disconnection (28 percent versus 16 percent for youth with an employed parent or parents).
- **Welfare receipt.** Living in a family that received public assistance was also associated with a higher rate of disconnection

(43 percent versus 17 percent for youth in families that did not receive assistance.).

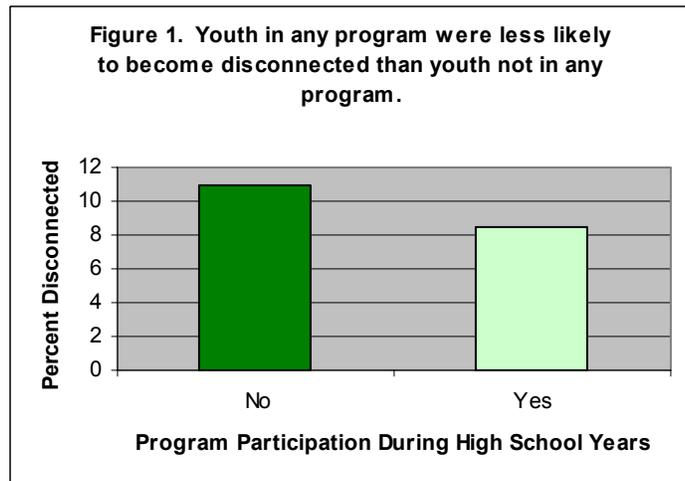
- **Parental education.** Youth whose parents lacked a high school diploma had higher rates of disconnection (40 percent) than those whose parents had a bachelor's degree or higher had lower rates of disconnection (7 percent).
- **Age.** A higher proportion of the older youth in the study sample became disconnected between the ages of 16 and 21 than was the case for younger youth. Approximately 16 percent of those who were 12 years old in the initial wave of the study were disconnected, compared with 20 percent of 13-year-olds in the initial wave of the study, and 23 percent of 14-year-olds in the initial wave of the study.
- **Race/ethnicity.** A greater proportion of non-Hispanic blacks were disconnected than non-Hispanic whites (35.4 percent versus 14.8 percent).
- **Existence of older siblings.** A greater proportion of youth with older siblings became disconnected than those without older siblings (25.4 percent versus 19 percent).
- **Gender.** Finally, a similar percentage of males (20 percent) and females (19 percent) experienced disconnection.

PREDICTIVE MARKERS

In looking at what predicts disconnection, Child Trends found that some factors seem to matter more than others. For example, family poverty, parental unemployment and low educational level, and single-parent and stepparent family structure seem to represent clear and measurable markers for youth being at a high risk for experiencing disconnection. In addition, over and above these factors, non-Hispanic black youth have a significantly higher risk of becoming disconnected than non-Hispanic white youth.

Youth who participated in some sort of job training, job-search, or school-to-work pro-

gram during their high school years were less likely to experience disconnection than youth who did not participate in this type of program (see Figure 1), even after taking other factors into consideration (8.5 percent versus 11.1 percent). This finding suggests that such programs



can provide a valuable protective buffer for youth.

In contrast and perhaps surprisingly, family interactions (though they matter for numerous other outcomes) do not seem to matter for disconnection. For the young people in the sample, having parents who were involved with their schools—as well as family routines, parental monitoring, parental religiosity, and the mother/youth relationship—did not seem to have much bearing on whether youth became disconnected. This finding should not be interpreted to mean that these factors are not important for youth development; however, our analyses suggest that they may not be as relevant to youth disconnection as other factors.

On the other hand, poor grades, poor health, and associating with peers who use drugs or get into trouble all raise the risk of becoming disconnected. Clearly, some of these behaviors are warning signals that parents and schools cannot afford to

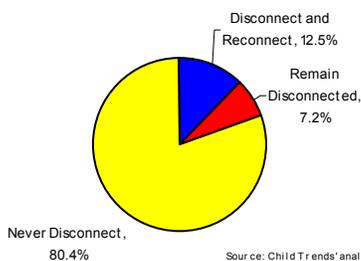
ignore. Young adolescents who get poor grades and hang out with negative peers are at risk of serious disconnection in the future; and youth with these characteristics may require special attention to help them navigate the transition to adulthood successfully.

RECONNECTION AFTER DISCONNECTION

Sometimes young people who have dropped out of school, quit working, or become disconnected in other ways manage to turn their lives around. These are the youth who reconnect after having experienced a spell of disconnection. The second part of our study focused on these often-overlooked youth. We focused particularly on the time frame in which youth reconnected, what form this reconnection took, what effect being disadvantaged had on reconnection, and what role, if any, programs played in spurring youth reconnection. Our key findings are highlighted below.

- **Time frame.** About two-thirds of these youth reconnected within the limited time

Figure 2. Most youth never disconnect and more than half of those who disconnect are able to reconnect.



Source: Child Trends' analyses of NLSY97. Numbers may not add to 100% due to rounding.

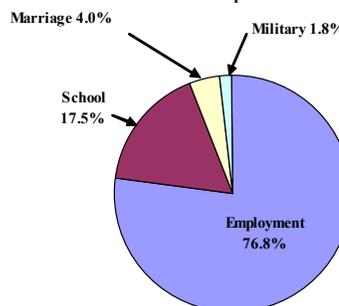
frame of these analyses, i.e., between the ages of 16 and 21 or the age of 16 and December 31, 2003 (see Figure 2).

- **Method of Reconnection.** Among young people who reconnected, more than three-quarters (77 percent) got jobs, 17 percent went back to school, and smaller percentages got married or joined the military (see Figure 3).

- **Doubly disadvantaged.** Youth from low-income families consistently were less likely to reconnect, a finding that mirrored our findings on disconnection among disadvantaged youth. In addition, black youth were less likely to reconnect.

Figure 3.

Methods of Reconnection Among Total Disconnected Population



Source: Child Trends' analyses of NLSY97. Numbers may not add to 100% due to rounding.

- **Program participation.** Being in a program was not linked to becoming reconnected, in contrast with our findings for becoming disconnected. This finding may reflect the smaller sample size for these analyses, or it may suggest that this group does not receive program services that are appropriate to address their high-risk status. Indeed, the very word “disconnected” may speak to the heart of the problem. When youth are not in school, not at work, not in the military and not married, they are disconnected from the major institutions that can enable them to reconnect.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The analyses conducted for this *Research Brief* were designed to examine influences on becoming disconnected and reconnected. In combination, these findings tell a compelling story. Disconnection can be predicted by many factors, and, while reconnection can occur through many methods, employment appears to be the most frequent method of reconnection. More importantly, these findings can help

policy makers and program providers target efforts to prevent disconnection and to foster reconnection among the nation's youth.

The findings suggest a role for effective preventive programs in these efforts. Indeed, many youth development programs exist that are designed to facilitate the transition through adolescence and into adulthood. In addition to providing students with the academic skills needed to succeed in most jobs, schools can play an important role in the transition to adulthood by providing a connection between educational and work experiences.¹⁹ School-to-work programs can help students see the relevance of what they are studying, help them gain skills that employers need, and help them develop habits and attitudes necessary for the workforce.^{8,10,11,19,29} Policies directed at high-risk populations, such as school dropouts, teen parents, teens in foster care, and adjudicated teens, may help prevent disconnection.

Once youth are disconnected, however, recruitment, enrollment, and retention of these young people into programs may require stronger and more persistent outreach, more intensive services, and more long-term participation. Effective programs directed at such vulnerable populations are likely to require greater resources than prevention efforts; however, the benefits associated with reconnection are likely to make evidence-based approaches cost-effective.

Community colleges also can play important roles in the transition to adulthood because of their capacities to reach large numbers of young people, their flexibility, and the connections they provide to varied career paths.¹⁹ Apprenticeships and training represent additional possibilities for preventing and combating disconnection among youth. A body of research on effective programs and best practices is emerging that can guide deci-

sions about expansion and funding.³⁰

Finally, the findings underscore the feasibility of finding solutions to the problem of disconnected youth. The number of disconnected youth is not so large as to overwhelm the nation's resources, especially because keeping youth in school or the workforce—along with bringing lapsed youth back into the worlds of education and employment—is an investment with a potentially high return for society.

CONCLUSION

This study of a national database represents an analysis of *average* programs and *average* participation, and yet we find evidence that participation is associated with a lower risk of disconnection, net of numerous confounding influences. What if participants had participated in *high-quality* programs over time? Though studies of disconnection are rare, evidence from rigorously evaluated out-of-school time programs suggests that such programs have positive impacts on numerous outcomes.³¹

Overall, while social and economic disadvantages place youth at risk of becoming disconnected from school and work, several protective factors—such as support from adults and program participation—can lower the risk. The good news from our analyses is that involvement in programs offers significant protection from becoming disconnected, over and above the effects of a disadvantaged background. For example, program participation can offer safeguards such as emotional support and career guidance, and can increase both academic outcomes and self-sufficiency.^{8,10}

At the same time, this good news comes with an important caveat, namely that our results show that, on average, program participation is not *in itself* sufficient to create reconnection. Clearly, being involved in a program may help prevent a young person from being disconnected in the first place, but once a young per-

son has become disconnected, stronger programs and other efforts may be needed to ensure that he or she gets back on track. Reconnecting after disconnection is the most daunting challenge—for the youth involved but also for society at large.

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- ³⁰ See the Child Trends database of experimental evaluations of social interventions for children and youth, LINKS (Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully), available at www.childtrends.org/LINKS.
- ³¹ See the Child Trends fact sheets that synthesize the lessons learned from experimentally evaluated programs in the LINKS database, available at www.childtrends.org (click on What Works).