

Disconnected Youth

Millions of young U.S. men and women don't have jobs and aren't in school, a waste of enormous potential and a huge drain on our economy. The good news is that the trend can be reversed by keeping these teens and young adults in school

The U.S. Department of Labor announced in January it was halting enrollment into the Job Corps program until the end of the fiscal year—and possibly longer. It was an unprecedented move for the nation's largest workforce training program for at-risk youth, a sudden and painful decision made as administrators faced

a \$60 million budget shortfall.

Although questions loom about what precipitated the program's financial woes, the news was yet another setback for a growing segment of the population that analysts have termed "disconnected youth" or "opportunity youth."

Definitions and figures vary, but

disconnected youth are generally recognized as those between the ages of 16 and 24 who don't have a job, aren't in school, and lack a strong support system. In other words, they are not connected to any of the anchors of a functioning society: employment, education, family, or social services.

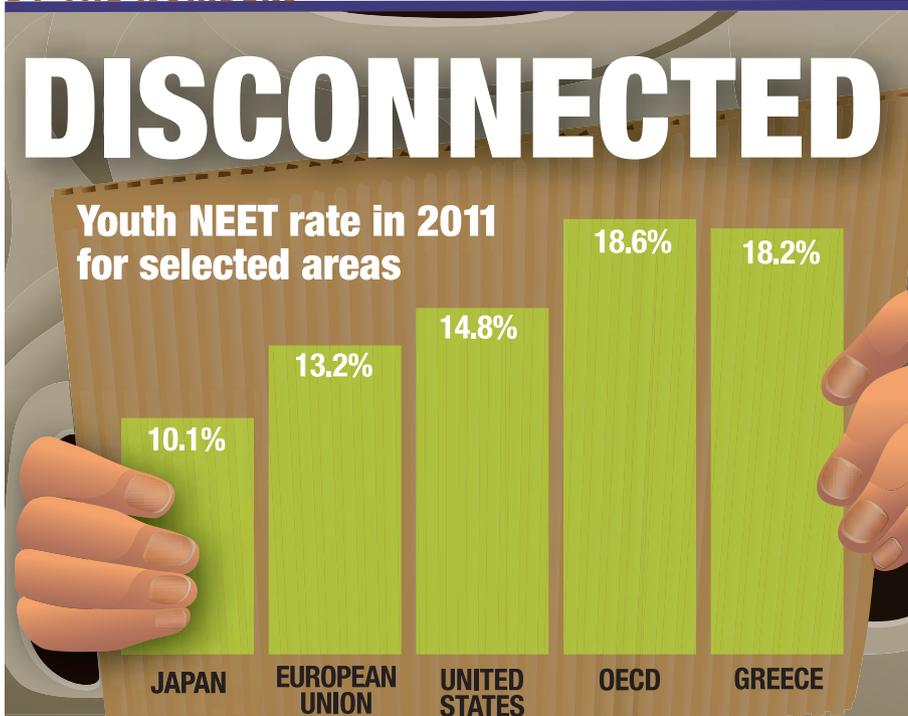
Not surprisingly, this group has grown in recent years.

In 2000, the percentage of workers under 25 who filed for unemployment claims was 9.3 percent. A decade later, that figure had soared to 18.4 percent. Youth employment has sunk to a level not seen since World War II, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which found just half of all 16-to-24-year-olds held a job in 2011.

But these figures don't paint the full picture of disconnected youth, who are not only absent from the labor market but also from school. In a 2012 report for the Corporation for National and Community Service, researchers estimated that 17 percent of 16-to-24-year-olds, or some 6.7 million in this age group could be classified as disconnected youth, with about half never having held a job or attended school beyond the age of 16.

Obviously, a substantial proportion of disconnected youth never finished high school. The same report

BY THE NUMBERS



NEET: Not in Education, Employment, or Training
SOURCE: Center for Public Education

estimated the graduation rate for this segment to be 18 percentage points lower than that of the rest of the youth population. Low levels of education are a recurring and generational theme among disconnected youth, who are more likely to have parents who also dropped out of high school.

In a 2009 study of 5,417 adolescents, Child Trends found that youth disconnection rates of children whose parents lacked a high school diploma were substantially higher (40 percent) than of those whose parents completed high school (7 percent).

Other risk factors the research brief noted:

Family poverty level. Nearly 40 percent of disconnected youth in the sample hailed from families that lived below the poverty line, which at the time of the study was \$21,027 for a family of four.

Family structure. One-third of disconnected youth didn't live with their parents; 29 percent came from a single-parent household.

Welfare receipt. In households that received public assistance, youth disconnection rates were 43 percent compared to 17 percent in families that didn't receive assistance.

Race/ethnicity. More than twice as many non-Hispanic black adolescents were disconnected (35.4 percent) as compared to non-Hispanic whites (14.8 percent).

This is not just an American problem. In its 2010 report, "Off to a Good Start? Jobs for Youth," the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that, in the 26 countries where data was available, the proportion of youth between the ages of 15 and 24, who weren't employed or enrolled in training or education programs amounted to 12.5 percent of the total youth population, or 16.7 million.

The bad news? The U.S. portion of disconnected youth was and remains one of the highest among OECD coun-

tries, and has actually grown by about five percentage points in the past decade. What are the societal consequences of having such a large population of these young people?

Taken over a lifetime, researchers estimate the total taxpayer burden of the current cohort of disconnected youth to be \$1.6 trillion.

The 2012 study for the Corporation for National and Community Service found that each disconnected youth cost taxpayers \$51,330 annually in lost tax revenue, higher government expenditures, and by posing a higher social burden. These youth are much more likely to be involved in crime, for instance, contributing some \$188 billion annually in fiscal and victim costs to society.

Disconnected youth, of course, eventually become disconnected adults, and so the costs associated with this segment of the population don't end when they turn 25. In fact, only a quarter of the fiscal and societal costs that disconnected youth impose occur when they are between the ages of 16 and 24.

Taken over a lifetime, researchers estimate the total taxpayer burden of the current cohort of disconnected youth to be \$1.6 trillion, and the total social burden to be \$4.75 trillion in present-day dollars. These costs continue and build with each new generation that joins the ranks of disconnected youth.

How can we reverse this dangerous trend? The first effort should be to keep youth in school longer. The OECD found that, on average, youth who didn't complete secondary school and were low-skilled had an unemployment rate 1.8 times that of college graduates. That risk index nearly doubles in seven OECD countries, including the U.S., underscoring the demand among American employ-

ers for higher-skilled and educated workers.

But simply requiring youth to attend school, which most states do through compulsory education laws,

doesn't mean they will stay there, which is why policymakers also should focus on providing a variety of educational and skills-based offerings ranging from career academies to vocational-technical schools.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, evidence is strong that expanding early childhood education is a wise investment, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, considering that many disconnected youth have similar circumstances.

The Center for Public Education has conducted a number of studies examining what works and what doesn't at both the primary and secondary levels. These can be found in our high school and pre-k toolkits.

For those students who do leave the K-12 system early, programs like Job Corps—where participants can earn a high school diploma and receive free training and certification in more than 100 specializations—are a lifeline and pathway back to independent adulthood.

While determining the root causes of Job Corps' financial mess is important, finding a way to bring disconnected youth back into the labor and education market is even more important. ■

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