

MAPPING OPPORTUNITY YOUTH NEEDS IN THE U.S.

A Research Scan



Executive Summary

In the United States, roughly 4.9 million youth—or, one in eight Americans ages 16 to 24—are not in school or working.¹

This figure translates into one in eight young Americans. Globally, the problem is even worse with one third of the world's 1.8 billion youth between the ages of 10-24 neither employed, nor in education or training.² In both cases, the negative impact to individuals and societies can be staggering.

In 2016, recognizing that solutions to this global challenge transcend national boundaries, the International Youth Foundation (IYF), with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), launched (Re)Connecting Youth: Exchanging Global Lessons. The two-year initiative seeks to identify and share innovative global approaches for increasing youth connection with practitioners, policymakers, and funders across the U.S. Ultimately, its goal is to foster learning and energize support for holistic solutions aimed at providing millions of youth in the U.S. who are not in work or school with opportunities to lead healthy, productive lives.

In its first phase, (Re)Connecting Youth set out to explore the drivers of youth disconnection in the U.S. and the nature of existing programs and services. Our research considered what’s working, where the gaps in services are greatest, and what could be improved.

Presented here is a summary of the priority needs we identified. To avoid reinventing the wheel, our research builds on available data and analysis from U.S. organizations and initiatives that have closely examined the needs of this population. We are grateful for the insights these organizations provided into the needs and aspirations of youth—across the U.S.—who are detached from school and the workforce.

OPPORTUNITY YOUTH IN THE U.S.

Our work began with defining who these young people are and the challenges they face. In 2012, the White House Council for Community Solutions tasked the Youth Leadership Institute (YLI) to document the status of the nation’s disconnected youth population. A special report, *Community Solutions for Opportunity Youth*, compiled by 11 YLI youth ambassadors, was presented to the President of the United States. The report introduced the term ‘opportunity youth’ to describe youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who are unemployed and out of school or not enrolled in training.³

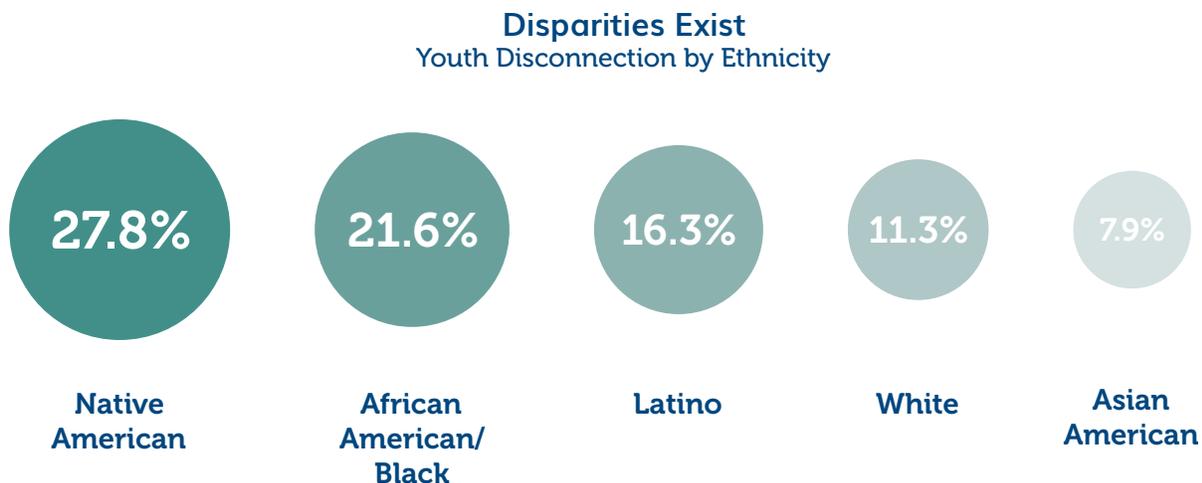
While the number of opportunity youth in the U.S. escalated following the economic crisis of 2008, recent data reflects an overall decline of 16 percent, due largely to a strengthened economy.⁴ While this progress comes as good news, the extent of youth disconnection in the U.S. remains alarming. Millions of young people are growing up on the margins of society, eager for opportunities to reconnect but without adequate support.⁵

CHALLENGES OPPORTUNITY YOUTH FACE

Opportunity youth face sizable obstacles along their journey to adulthood. More than half do not have access to jobs where they live; 40 percent lack transportation to get to jobs or school, and 47 percent lack the education needed to get the job they want.⁶

As a result of these and other challenges, today’s opportunity youth find themselves detached from the systems and structures that would provide them with essential knowledge and skills—and a feeling of belonging. Without a sense of direction or purpose, and lacking opportunities for positive engagement, many experience low self-esteem and alienation. What’s more, a prolonged experience of youth disconnection is linked—later in life—to lower wages and marriage rates, higher incarceration and unemployment rates, a greater risk of health problems, less job satisfaction, and reduced happiness overall.⁷

Figure 1



From Measure of America

“There is a level of unreality in the discussion about our youth. In a group of 20, 2 had brothers who were shot to death, at least 5 had periods of homelessness, 2 of the girls had been ‘trafficked.’ The level of trauma is palpable and must be addressed if these children are to have half a chance of success.”

— Anne Arundel Partnership for Children Youth and Families

COSTS TO SOCIETY

Youth disconnection comes at a considerable cost to society. Young people lacking sufficient education and training are unable to realize their contributions and potential as productive citizens. The financial implications, too, are staggering. According to a study commissioned by the White House Council for Community Solutions, “When lost revenue and direct costs for social supports are factored in, taxpayers will shoulder roughly \$1.6 trillion over the lifetimes of these young people.”⁸ Conversely, youth who are actively engaged as producers, consumers, and contributors bring tremendous benefits to society.

DISPARITIES ARE EVIDENT

The U.S. national rate of youth disconnection masks disparities among geographic locations and stark contrasts among different racial and ethnic groups. Native American, African American/black, and Latino youth experience disconnection at higher rates than white or Asian-American young people. (See Figure 1.) Research presented in *Zeroing in on Race and Place: Youth Disconnection in America’s Cities* cites nine metro areas where at least one in four African American/black youth are disconnected and 10 metro areas where at least one in five Latino youth are disconnected.⁹

Among white, African American/black, and Native American youth, young men are more likely than young women to be disconnected. However, the opposite is true among Latino and Asian-American young people. Among Latino girls and young women, the rate of disconnection is about 20 percent higher than among their male counterparts.¹⁰

RESEARCH DESIGN

Throughout 2016, IYF conducted research to better understand the needs of opportunity youth in the U.S., existing strategies and services designed to meet their needs, and the greatest gaps. This research included:

- » Desk research of available literature, data, and analyses
- » In-depth interviews with practitioners, policymakers, funders, and employers representing diverse geographic regions and sectors
- » A survey of key stakeholders working in the positive youth development sector
- » Four focus groups with former opportunity youth from New Orleans, Louisiana; Baltimore, Maryland; Boston, Massachusetts; and Durham, North Carolina
- » Six site visits with organizations in Baltimore, Maryland; Washington, DC; and New Orleans, Louisiana
- » Data comparisons between the perceptions of U.S. youth who had experienced disconnection and those who had not

There were in-depth interviews undertaken with 33 key individuals that informed the development of the 14-question survey. IYF distributed the survey to 554 stakeholders, 101 of whom (18 percent) responded. Fifty percent of survey respondents represented youth-serving organizations including foundations, government and business leaders, individuals from collaborative or consortium organizations and think tanks.

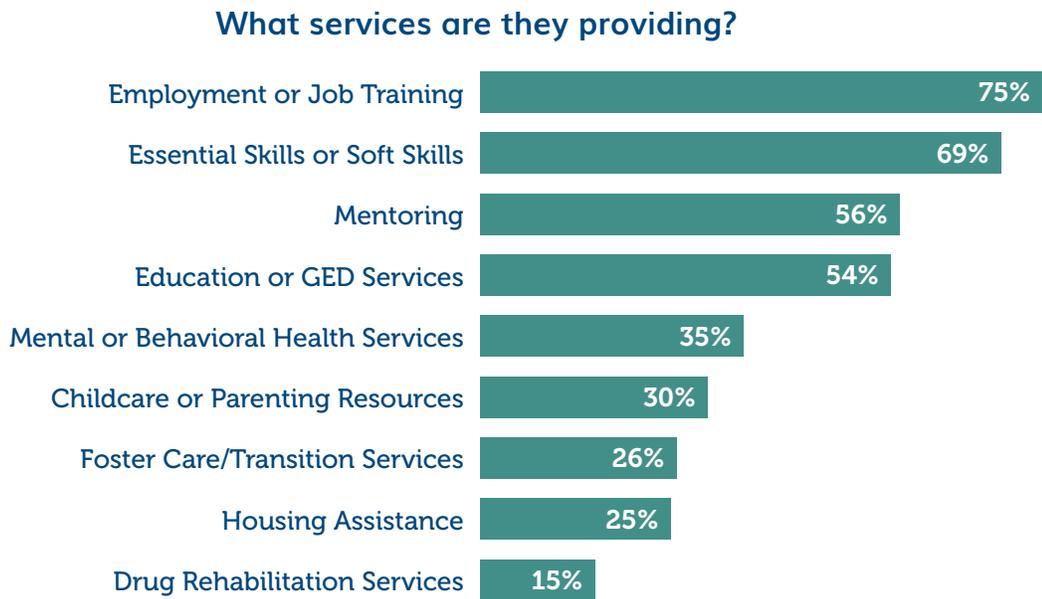
KEY FINDINGS

What did we learn? Below are key findings from the various research methods employed, with the survey data reinforcing much of what we heard in focus group discussions and in-depth interviews.

STAKEHOLDER SURVEY

Among those organizations surveyed the majority of services offered focused on employment or job training (75 percent), followed by essential skills or soft skills (69 percent). Fewer organizations reported providing support to opportunity youth in such areas as mental health (35 percent), foster care or transition services

Figure 2



Data taken from the 101 Key Stakeholder Survey responses.

Figure 3



Data taken from the 101 Key Stakeholder Survey responses.

(26 percent) and drug rehabilitation services (15 percent). (See Figure 2.) Although these results may point to a sampling bias, the interview responses we received reinforces a prevailing emphasis on employment or job training.

This disparity in services provided underscored the central theme echoed in our interviews: funding for education and work readiness tends to be prioritized over meeting basic youth needs (e.g., for housing assistance, psychosocial support, or drug rehabilitation).

Given this reality, survey respondents identified four subsets of young people who demand greater attention:

- » Youth in the juvenile or adult justice system
- » Youth in, or transitioning out of, foster care
- » Homeless or runaway youth
- » Youth with mental health needs

The survey also produced valuable insights into existing gaps and resource constraints. (See Figure 3.) Nationally, better cross-system coordination was noted as key

to improving outcomes for youth. Other priority areas included the need for greater wraparound and supportive services, increased staff capacity and training, and new strategies for recruiting and engaging youth.

Overall, responses pointed to a strong thirst for new ideas, strategies, and increased opportunities to learn about what’s working. Also stressed was the need for the workforce and education sectors to better understand how to apply youth development principles, given the extent to which these sectors are prioritized through funding and policymaking that impacts opportunity youth.

"There is limited information about what works for Opportunity Youth. Many of the best practices in the field of workforce development are in reference to older adults, for example."

— Baltimore’s Promise

Figure 4

Youth Perception Comparisons

Perception	Disconnected Youth	Youth Working or in School
Think that their standard of living will be better than their parents	37%	44%
Would like to have more mental health support	67%	55%
Feel that they can access reproductive healthcare or birth control when they need to	31%	60%
Indicate that violence, abuse, bullying, or harassment are one of the top three work/school safety concerns	31%	24%

Data taken from IYF’s Global Millennial Viewpoints Survey—meant to be illustrative, not representative

YOUTH PERCEPTIONS

How do the perceptions of opportunity youth differ from those of young people who are in school or working? To explore this question, we analyzed data from two sources: the *2016 Global Millennial Viewpoints Survey* dataset,¹¹ a scan of youth in 30 countries, and *Young, Underemployed, and Optimistic: Coming of Age, Slowly, in a Tough Economy*, a 2011 report produced by the Pew Research Center.¹² While our findings are not meant to be representative, they did point to some interesting trends that mirrored what we found through our other desk research and conversations with youth and adult stakeholders. Youth experience disconnection in different ways depending on age, place, ethnicity, and gender. Of note is how ethnicity affects how youth perceive their futures. When asked whether they would achieve a better standard of living than their parents, minority youth were found to be less hopeful about their futures than white youth. When perceptions of disconnected youth were compared with perceptions of youth that were in school or working, the data was also quite compelling. (See Figure 4.)

“I don’t want to be defined by the negative—the poverty, the crime, the drugs, the incarceration—but by the... youth-led art and culture initiatives that exist in my community and the desire we have to do better.”

– Kendra, Baltimore, MD

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

From our desk research, in-depth interviews, survey findings, and focus group discussions, we heard the following statements again and again:

- » Youth voice is often missing in program design.
- » Programs should offer more pathways, on-ramps, and alternatives, especially for youth facing the greatest barriers to employment (e.g., those with experience in the juvenile justice system, those with disabilities, and those transitioning out of foster care).

- » Young people need more civic engagement and safe spaces to help them re-engineer their futures.
- » Opportunity youth programs regularly face outreach, recruitment, and retention challenges.
- » Initiatives often lack a positive youth development approach.
- » Culturally-appropriate interventions are needed that account for varied youth realities and barriers.
- » Systematic and institutional barriers pose difficulties for practitioners.

Based on our consultations and research findings, four core themes emerged that will guide (Re)Connecting Youth’s efforts to identify promising practices outside the U.S., particularly in Latin America. (See Figure 5.) These priority areas include: promoting youth as assets, creative youth engagement and recruitment strategies, increased social and emotional learning opportunities, and the active engagement of employers in bridging the skills gap.

These themes will inform the identification and documentation of positive youth development practices globally that could aid U.S. practitioners and other stakeholders.

Figure 5

Key Elements of a Successful Youth Reconnection Program



Over the next year, we will document between six and ten promising global approaches for reconnecting youth that align with the identified themes. We will develop and package learning products from these approaches for dissemination among key U.S. stakeholders, including policymakers, practitioners, funders, researchers, youth leaders, and employers.

In addition to documenting promising approaches from abroad, we will facilitate two to four learning exchanges through which one or more U.S. organizations or public agencies can learn promising practices from a global organization working on similar issues related to opportunity youth.

We will synthesize lessons learned from these exchanges and other knowledge gathered through a range of online and print materials. We will share them broadly via the (Re)Connecting Youth website, webinars, conferences, speaking engagements, and social media.

In the final phase of the project, we will aggregate the core values that underlie an enabling environment for young people and showcase how they have been successfully applied in other countries. Again, we will share these learning documents broadly to facilitate knowledge-sharing and foster the adaptation of promising global practices and approaches in the U.S.

Our gratitude extends to all of the youth, practitioners, policymakers, and funders who contributed their knowledge and insights to the research phase of our work. To keep updated on (Re)Connecting Youth's progress in identifying and analyzing promising global practices for addressing the needs of opportunity youth, please visit: www.iyfreconnectingyouth.org.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The research and organizations highlighted in the next column represent a sample of studies, briefs, and reports from leading experts in the field to guide stakeholders' efforts to understand the range of needs of opportunity youth and the organizations and networks of communities working towards solutions.

- » **Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)** disseminates research, policy, and best practices for improving the lives of vulnerable populations, including opportunity youth, and serves as the convener for the national **Communities Collaborating to Reconnect Youth Network (CCRYN)**.
- » **Forum for Youth Investment (FYI)** works with stakeholders to advance state and federal policy and funding strategies to make sure that young people, especially opportunity youth, are prepared for life. FYI provides technical assistance for the **Opportunity Youth Network**, working to connect opportunity youth to education and employment pathways.
- » **Jobs for the Future (JFF)** is a national nonprofit working for educational and economic opportunity for vulnerable populations. JFF provides technical assistance to several community networks, including **Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund**, **Opportunity Works**, and **Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP)**.
- » **Measure of America** works to create tools for understanding the distribution of opportunity in America while bringing issues about health, education, and living standards to light. They have issued multiple research reports on disconnected youth in America.
- » **National Roadmap for Opportunity Youth** provides an overview of research, best practices, and action steps for communities working to reconnect opportunity youth to education, training, and social supports.
- » **Opportunity Nation** is a bipartisan national campaign of cross-sector organizations working to expand economic mobility and close the opportunity gap. The campaign manages the **Opportunity Index**, which enables users to explore how different communities across the U.S. rank in opportunity.
- » **The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions: Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund** is a cross sectoral partnership that brings organizations together to work collaboratively to alleviate complex social issues. The Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund

is the first funding collaborative developed and led by The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions.

- » **100,000 Opportunities Initiative** is a partnership between numerous organizations that seeks to create more pathways to economic prosperity for opportunity youth and connect employers with an underutilized pipeline.

ADDITIONAL PUBLISHED PAPERS

- » *White House Council for Community Solutions—Final Report: Community Solutions for Opportunity Youth*, June 2012
- » *Toward Solutions for Youth Employment—A 2015 Baseline Report*
- » *Stanford Social Innovation Review—Achieving Collective Impact for Opportunity Youth*
- » *The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth*

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Burd-Sharps, S., & Lewis, K. (2017, March 28). Promising gains, persistent gaps; youth disconnection in America. Retrieved June 05, 2017, from <https://s3.amazonaws.com/moa/YD%20by%20CD%20FINAL%202017.pdf>
- ² Goldin, N., Hobson, M., Glick, P., Lundberg, M., & Puerto Gonzales, S. (2015). Toward solutions for youth employment: a 2015 baseline report . Retrieved June, 2017, from https://www.s4ye.org/sites/default/files/Toward_Solutions_for_Youth_Employment_Full.pdf
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⁵ Measure of America . (n.d.). Youth disconnection overview. Retrieved June, 2017, from <http://www.measureofamerica.org/DY2017/#Overview>

⁶ White House Council for Community Solutions. (2012, June). Final report: community solutions for opportunity youth. (p. 18). Retrieved from https://www.serve.gov/sites/default/files/ctools/12_0604whccs_finalreport.pdf

⁷ Lewis, K., & Burd-Sharps, S. (2015, June). Zeroing in on place and race; youth disconnection in America's cities. Retrieved June, 2017, from <http://measureofamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/MOA-Zeroing-In-on-Place-and-Race-Final.pdf>

⁸ White House Council for Community Solutions. (2012, June). Final report: community solutions for opportunity youth. (p. 3), from https://www.serve.gov/sites/default/files/ctools/12_0604whccs_finalreport.pdf

⁹ Lewis, K., & Burd-Sharps, S. (2015, June). Zeroing in on place and race; youth disconnection in America's cities. (p. i). Retrieved June, 2017, from <http://measureofamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/MOA-Zeroing-In-on-Place-and-Race-Final.pdf>

¹⁰ Lewis, K., & Burd-Sharps, S. (2015, June). Zeroing in on place and race; youth disconnection in America's cities. Retrieved June, 2017, from <http://measureofamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/MOA-Zeroing-In-on-Place-and-Race-Final.pdf>

¹¹ Data analyzed from the *2016 Global Millennial Viewpoints Survey*. Data from this survey will inform the 2017 Global Youth Wellbeing Index. The Index project is in partnership with the International Youth Foundation, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, with financial support from Hilton.

¹² Taylor, P., Parker, K., Kocchar, R., Fry, R., Funk, C., Patten, E., & Motel, S. (2012, February 9). Young, underemployed and optimistic: coming of age, slowly in a tough economy. Retrieved June, 2015, from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/02/09/appendix-1-survey-methodology-4/>



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