

# Youth Disconnection in The Rapides Foundation Service Area

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Measure of America, a program of the Social Science Research Council

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**Measure of America** is a project of the nearly century-old nonprofit, nonpartisan Social Science Research Council. It was founded in 2007 to create easy-to-use yet methodologically sound tools for understanding well-being and opportunity in America. Through reports, interactive apps, and custom-built dashboards, Measure of America works with partners to breathe life into numbers, using data to identify areas of highest need, pinpoint levers for change, and track progress over time. The root of this work is the human development and capabilities approach, the brainchild of Harvard professor and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen. Human development is about improving people's well-being and expanding their choices and opportunities to live freely chosen lives of value. The period of young adulthood is critical in developing the capabilities required to live a good life: knowledge and credentials, social skills and networks, a sense of mastery and agency, an understanding of one's strengths and preferences, and the ability to handle stressful events and regulate one's emotions, to name just a few. Measure of America is thus concerned with addressing youth disconnection because it stunts human development, closing off some of life's most rewarding and joyful paths and leading to a future of limited horizons and unrealized potential. In addition to producing annual reports about youth disconnection, Measure of America works with partners to conduct local, customized research, develop goals, and track progress.

## YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN THE TRFSA REGION

The years of emerging adulthood are a critical time for young people to develop skills, earn credentials, and have experiences that will set them on a path to a fulfilling life. For some youth, though, this path is rocky; it is marked by spells of separation from school and work, institutions that are fundamental to the transition to adulthood. The presence of many disconnected youth, young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither working nor in school, in a community is a sign of limited opportunity and results in high costs to society. Recent research by Measure of America has shown that young adults who experience periods of disconnection go on to earn less and are less likely to be employed, own a home, or be in good health by their thirties. In The Rapides Foundation Service Area (TRFSA), more than one in five young people are disconnected.

This report presents the latest available data on youth disconnection in a region designated by the US Census Bureau that covers seven of the nine parishes in the TRFSA and one parish outside it. This analysis shows that the rate of youth disconnection is extremely high in the TRFSA region, particularly in rural areas. Generating effective solutions requires understanding which groups of young people are disconnected and why. This analysis of youth disconnection at the local level will allow TRF as well as policymakers, advocacy organizations, and youth service providers, among others, to identify areas and populations with the highest need while helping to set and track collective goals.

### KEY FINDINGS:

*The first section of the report looks at youth disconnection among all youth in order to understand how the region compares in the local, state, and national context.*

**TRFSA Region:** The rate of disconnection in the TRFSA region is 23.3 percent, more than twice the national rate (11.5 percent) and 7 percentage points higher than the rate in Louisiana as a whole. This translates to roughly 9,000 young people cut off from crucial pathways to a fulfilling life.

**Rurality:** Rural youth in the TRFSA region have particularly high disconnection rates. For the purpose of this report, the TRFSA region is divided into two sections: one containing Rapides and Vernon Parishes and one containing Avoyelles, Catahoula, Concordia, Grant, LaSalle, and Winn Parishes. The disconnection rate in Rapides and Vernon Parishes is 17.1 percent. The disconnection rate in the other, more rural subregion is nearly double, 33.5 percent.

*The second section of the report looks at disparities among different groups of youth in the region. Two groups, youth in the military and youth in prison, are transient and often transplants whose status does not necessarily reflect the challenges and opportunities that the region affords to young people. Since these two groups are very localized—based in a particular location and not spread across a region—their presence can have an outsized impact on local-level youth disconnection calculations. For this reason, the second section of the report removes these two groups from the analysis and looks only at civilian, noninstitutionalized youth. See **BOX 5** for more on this designation.*

**TRFSA Region:** Looking only at the civilian, noninstitutionalized population, the rate of disconnection in the TRFSA region is 21.4 percent. This is slightly lower (1.9 percentage points) than the rate among the whole population.

**Rurality:** Looking only at the civilian, noninstitutionalized population, the disconnection rate in Rapides and Vernon Parishes is 18.3 percent, 1.2 percentage points higher than the rate among the whole population. The rate in the

more rural subregion (Avoyelles, Catahoula, Concordia, Grant, LaSalle, and Winn Parishes) is 27.1 percent, 6.4 percentage points lower than the rate among the whole population.

**Gender and Race:** The disconnection rates for young men and young women are similar, 20.5 percent and 22.4 percent, respectively. The disconnection rate for white young people is 22.8 percent, and the disconnection rate for black young people is 18.9 percent. In Louisiana and the country as a whole, black youth have a higher disconnection rate than white youth—the opposite of the case in the TRFSA region.

**Educational Attainment:** Youth who do not graduate high school face severe barriers; by their early twenties, 52.4 percent are disconnected. While a high school diploma certainly helps, it is not the sole solution; 34.9 percent of youth with a high school diploma but no education beyond that are disconnected. These youth—high school graduates without postsecondary education—make up more than half of all disconnected youth in the region. Fewer than one in five disconnected youth has started college. These results suggest that while a high school diploma is necessary, in many cases it is not sufficient. Focusing not just on high school graduation but also on the transition into higher education or the workforce is crucial.

**Poverty:** Poverty creates numerous barriers to connection in communities across the country, including in the TRFSA region. Nearly three in ten youth (28.6 percent) living in poverty are disconnected, higher than the disconnection rate in the region overall. Thus while the poverty rate is already high in the region, it is even higher among disconnected youth.

**Motherhood:** The disconnection rate of young mothers between the ages of 16 and 24 is 40.2 percent, far higher than that of other young women that age in the region, 17.9 percent. Disconnected young women in the TRFSA region are 2.3 times as likely to be mothers as connected young women are. Particularly concerning is the very high poverty rate among disconnected mothers—84.2 percent live in households below 200 percent of the poverty line.

**Disability:** Nearly half—48.5 percent—of all youth with a disability are disconnected in the region, 19 percentage points higher than the rate among youth with disabilities nationally. Programs designed to support disconnected youth should take into account the needs of youth with disabilities.

These findings suggest that youth in the TRFSA region do not all experience disconnection in the same ways or for the same reasons. Creating opportunities for disconnected youth will require not only understanding the differences between groups but also listening to and including youth in decision-making processes to develop viable, long-term solutions. The report concludes with strategies for addressing the needs of disconnected youth in the region.

# INTRODUCTION

The years of emerging adulthood have an outsized impact on the rest of our lives, for good and for ill. Young people who are in school or working during their late teens and early twenties are gathering credentials and contacts, learning cognitive skills and unspoken behavioral norms, developing agency and confidence, and finding out about themselves and others. But this is not the case for everyone. Disconnected youth are teenagers and young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither working nor in school (see **BOX 1**). In 2017, there were 4.5 million disconnected youth nationwide, about one in nine young people (11.5 percent). These teens and young adults are cut off from the people, institutions, and experiences that would otherwise help them develop the knowledge, skills, maturity, and sense of purpose required to live rewarding lives as adults. The negative repercussions of youth disconnection extend beyond the individual and across the economy, the social sector, the criminal justice system, and the political landscape, affecting us all. For this reason, how the country's young people are faring in their transition to adulthood is a fundamental indicator of societal progress and well-being.

The purpose of this report is to provide a descriptive and analytical landscape of youth disconnection in The Rapides Foundation Service Area (TRFSA) (see **BOX 3** for the definition of the region). While economic gains at the national level after the Great Recession have contributed to declining youth disconnection rates nationally, the persistent gaps across geographies and racial and ethnic groups suggest that economic growth is necessary but not sufficient to tackle this complex issue. In fact, there is no silver bullet; addressing disconnection requires numerous stakeholders working in concert on multiple fronts. Learning from what has worked in other places is important, but addressing disconnection also requires learning about a region's particular challenges. Local conditions and resources have a direct impact on the opportunities and challenges young people face; for example, we know that rural counties as a whole have a far higher youth disconnection rate (18.7 percent) than urban (12.3 percent) or suburban counties (10.8 percent).<sup>1</sup> Analyzing youth disconnection at the local level is therefore crucial; analysis of local data can highlight priority areas and help set common goals that guide the collective work of local stakeholders—the ultimate goal of this report.

## **BOX 1 Who Are Disconnected—or Opportunity—Youth?**

Measure of America (MOA) defines disconnected youth as teens and young adults ages 16 to 24 who are neither in school nor working. This is the definition that MOA has used in its data calculations and analysis on youth disconnection since its first report on the topic, *One in Seven*, published in 2012. It's also the foundation for most other youth disconnection estimates.

MOA's data come from the American Community Survey (ACS). The survey's main advantage over other sources is that its sample size is extremely large, making it possible to calculate youth disconnection

### **DEFINITIONS**

### **AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (ACS) DEFINITIONS**

#### **IN SCHOOL**

Part-time or full-time students who have attended school or college in the past three months.

#### **WORKING**

Those who had any full- or part-time work in the previous week.

#### **NOT WORKING**

Unemployed in previous week or not in labor force and not looking for a job.

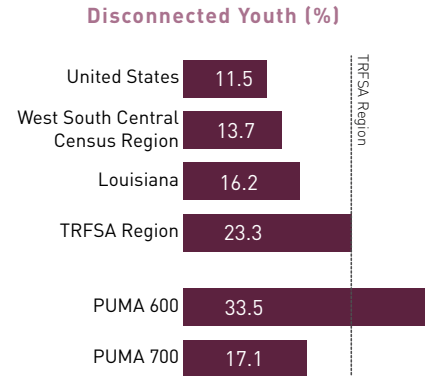
rates nationally and by state, as well as for counties, metro areas, and even smaller geographic areas. The ACS also allows for disaggregation by race and ethnicity and by gender for geographies with sufficiently large populations.

# NATIONAL, REGIONAL & STATE CONTEXT

Over one-fifth (23.3 percent) of youth in the TRFSA region are neither working nor in school. This is more than twice the national rate, 11.5 percent, and translates to roughly 9,000 youth disconnected from these crucial pathways to a fulfilling life. In this section, data for the United States, region, state, and TRFSA region are from 2017, the year of the most recent available American Community Survey. Data for the TRFSA region's two Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs) are a five-year average from 2013 to 2017 (see **BOX 3**).

Youth disconnection rates vary widely in communities across the US; rates at the state level range from 6.2 percent in Minnesota to 17.0 percent in Arkansas, and the range is even wider at the county and congressional district levels. Among the nine regions of the country, the West South Central region, which includes Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas, has the second-highest youth disconnection rate at 13.7 percent—only the neighboring East South Central region has a higher rate, 14.2 percent. The state of Louisiana alone has the fourth-highest rate in the country, 16.2 percent. The youth disconnection rate in the TRFSA region is 7 percentage points higher than the state average (see **FIGURE 2**). While the West South Central region and the state of Louisiana are large areas composed of many different types of communities, they provide important context and show that there is room for improvement in the TRFSA region.

**FIGURE 2 The TRFSA Region in Context**

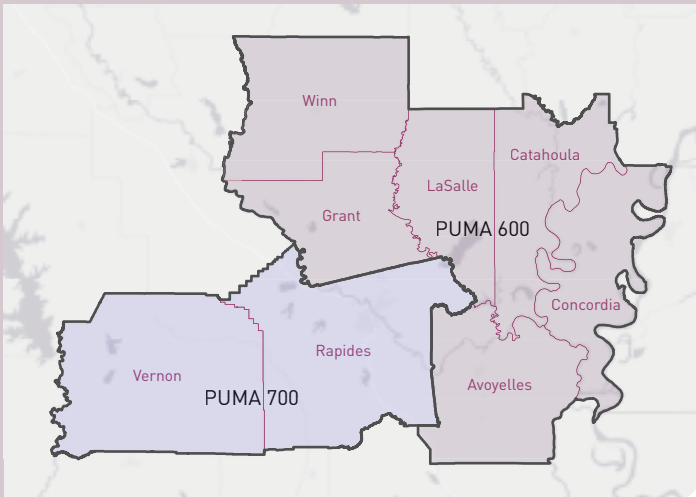


Sources: *US, state, region*: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2017. *PUMA*: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2013–2017.

The TRFSA region is not monolithic. The two PUMAs that make up the region have quite divergent outcomes for young people. The youth disconnection rate in PUMA 700, Rapides and Vernon Parishes, is 17.1

### BOX 3 Note on Geographies

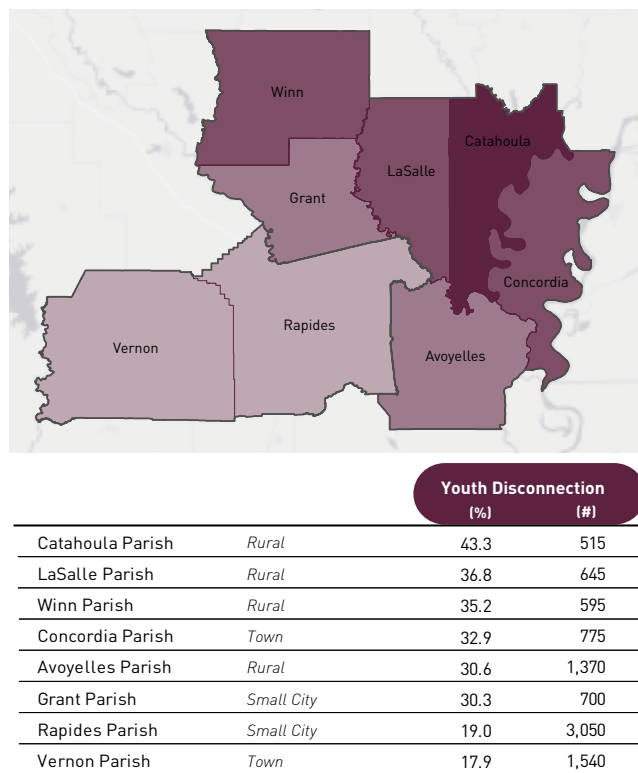
The data used in this study come from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample. The data are provided in geographic units known as Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs). PUMAs are collections of counties or census tracts within counties. They are defined by the US Census Bureau and have populations of at least 100,000 people and typically fewer than 200,000. Two PUMAs cover seven of the nine parishes in the TRF Service Area and one parish outside it: **PUMA 600, encompassing Avoyelles, Catahoula, Concordia, Grant, LaSalle, and Winn Parishes; and PUMA 700, encompassing Rapides and Vernon Parishes. These two PUMAs combined are referred to in this report as the TRFSA region.** For more information, see Methodological Note.



percent—similar to the statewide rate. In PUMA 600, however, one in three young people (33.5 percent) is neither working nor in school, more than double the rate in Louisiana overall. This difference reflects the challenges faced by rural areas across the country—they are farther from the centers of economic activity, and as a result, employment and educational opportunities can be limited or difficult to access. PUMA 700 is home to Alexandria, the largest city in the region, which likely contributes to its lower rate of disconnection.

At the parish level, Vernon Parish has the lowest rate of disconnection in the TRFSA region (17.9 percent), while Catahoula Parish has the highest rate (43.3 percent) (see **FIGURE 4**).<sup>2</sup> The gap between these parishes is 25 percentage points. The CDC National Center for Health Statistics<sup>3</sup> classifies the Catahoula Parish as rural, while Vernon Parish is in the town category. Nationally, rural counties have higher rates of disconnection than those containing towns or cities.<sup>3</sup> In general, rural areas have fewer employment opportunities and a narrower range of educational options, and transportation can be a difficult-to-overcome barrier. The TRFSA region follows this pattern. **The rural parishes (Avoyelles, Catahoula, LaSalle, and Winn) have higher disconnection rates on average than those containing towns (Concordia and Vernon) and small cities (Rapides and Grant).**

**FIGURE 4 Youth Disconnection by Parish**



Source: Custom tabulations from US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2013-2017.

Note: Allen Parish (35.0 percent) and Natchitoches Parish (15.9 percent) are not included in the two PUMAs that make up the region covered in this report. Visit [www.measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive](http://www.measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive) for youth disconnection rates for each parish in the state.

# DISPARITIES IN DISCONNECTION

Stubborn gaps in disconnection rates nationally among different populations of youth suggest that economic growth is not enough; there are other barriers to school and work that must be addressed. This section explores how different groups of youth are faring in order to identify some of the drivers of disconnection in the TRFSA region. It begins with a snapshot of the characteristics of connected and disconnected youth (see **FIGURE 6**) and then discusses a variety of groups in depth. Two groups, youth in the military and youth in prison, are transient and often transplants whose status does not necessarily reflect the challenges and opportunities that the region affords to young people. Since these two groups are very localized—based in a particular location and not spread across a region—their presence can have an outsized impact on local-level youth disconnection calculations (see **BOX 5**). **For this reason, the remainder of this study will discuss youth disconnection among the civilian, noninstitutionalized population, removing these two groups from the sample.**

## BOX 5 Institutionalized and Military Youth

One factor that can affect youth disconnection rates, especially in rural areas, is the presence of jails and prisons. In Measure of America’s national research, all youth are counted, including those living in institutional group quarters—the Census Bureau’s designation for institutional nonhousehold living arrangements, including prisons, detention centers, jails, group homes, residential treatment centers, and psychiatric hospitals. Most youth who are institutionalized are disconnected, so rates of youth disconnection can be quite high in a rural area with a large prison, for example. In the TRFSA region, 88.6 percent of the about 1,700 institutionalized youth are disconnected, and the vast majority are located in PUMA 600.

	STANDARD MEASURE OF AMERICA DEFINITION	PREVIOUS SECTION	THIS SECTION	REMOVING GROUP
<b>LIVING IN INSTITUTIONAL GROUP QUARTERS</b>	Youth in nonhousehold institutional living arrangements such as correctional facilities, residential treatment centers, etc. If enrolled in educational programs, they are considered connected.	<i>Included</i>	<i>Excluded</i>	<i>Decreases the youth disconnection rate</i>
<b>MEMBERS OF ARMED FORCES</b>	Counted as employed and thus as connected.	<i>Included</i>	<i>Excluded</i>	<i>Increases the rate</i>

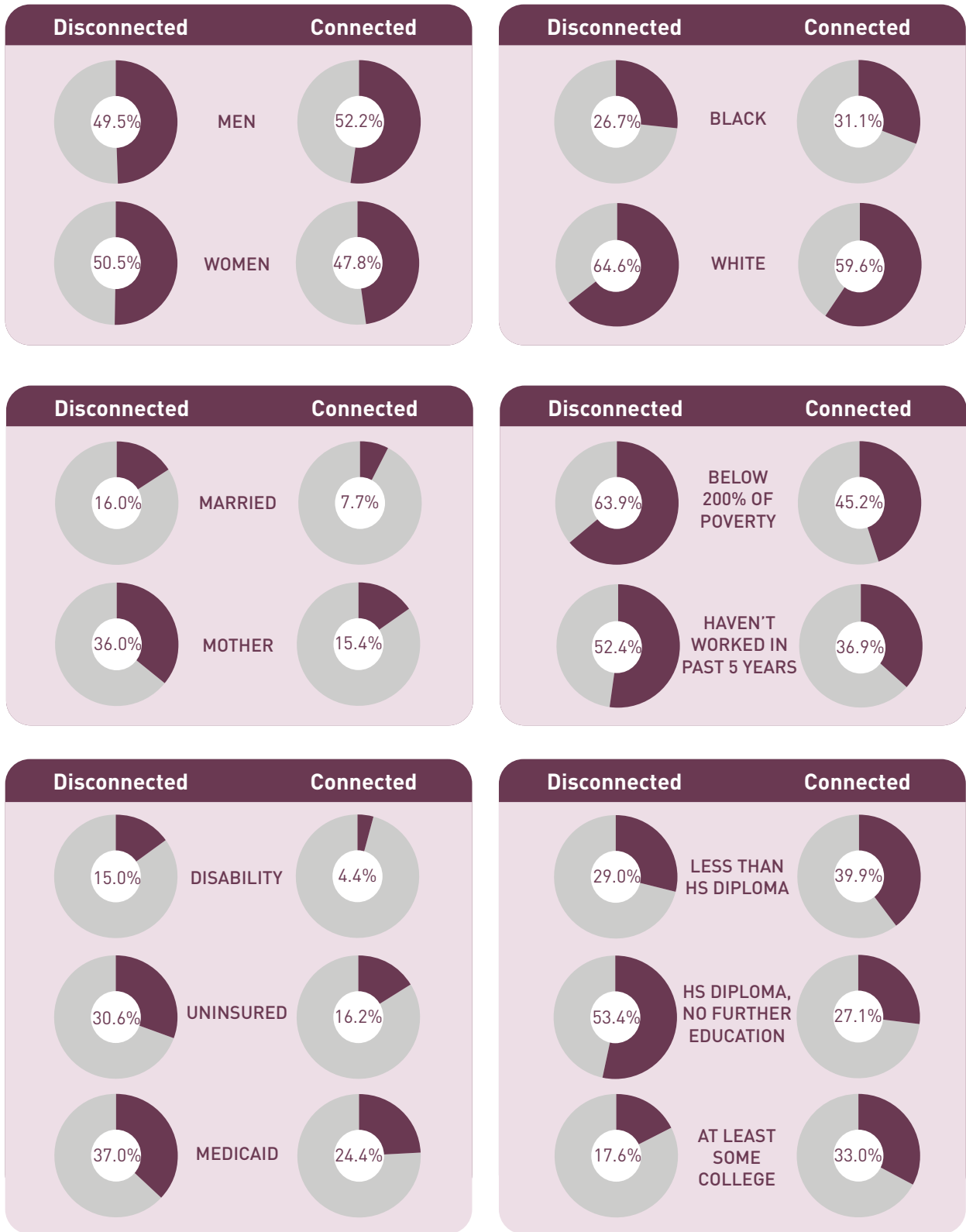
Conversely, youth in the military are classified as employed and thus by definition are connected, so the presence of a military base can reduce a region’s youth disconnection rate. In the TRFSA region, all youth in the military (2,600 youth) are located in PUMA 700, where they make up 10.3 percent of the total youth population.

	YOUTH DISCONNECTION				
	All Youth		Civilian, Noninstitutionalized Youth		
	(%)	(#)	(%)	(#)	Comparison to all youth
<b>TRFSA Region</b>	<b>23.3</b>	<b>8,653</b>	<b>21.4</b>	<b>7,464</b>	↓ <i>Lower rate</i>
<b>PUMA 600:</b> Winn, Grant, LaSalle, Catahoula, Concordia, and Avoyelles Parishes	33.5	4,687	27.1	3,384	↓ <i>Lower rate</i>
<b>PUMA 700:</b> Rapides and Vernon Parishes	17.1	4,312	18.3	4,080	↑ <i>Higher rate</i>

Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2013–2017.



**FIGURE 6 Contrasting Profiles: A Snapshot of Connected and Disconnected Youth in the TRFSA Region**



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2013–2017.

The following estimates are based on 2013–2017 data on the civilian, noninstitutionalized population (see **BOX 7**). The TRFSA overall youth disconnection rate among this group is 21.4 percent. The rate in PUMA 600 is 27.1 percent, and the rate in PUMA 700 is 18.3 percent. Throughout this section, references are made to 2017 disconnection rates in the US or Louisiana (which include military and institutionalized youth) to provide context, but this is not a perfectly equivalent comparison.

## Gender

On average, **young men and women in the region have similar rates of disconnection, 20.5 and 22.4 percent, respectively.** The case is the same in PUMA 600, where men and women have disconnection rates of 27.4 and 26.7 percent, respectively. In PUMA 700, however, 20.0 percent of women are disconnected, compared to only 16.7 percent of men.

## Race and Ethnicity

In the TRFSA region, **the rate of disconnection among white youth, 22.8 percent, is slightly higher than among black youth, 18.9 percent** (see **FIGURE 8**). White youth make up 60.7 percent of the total youth population and 64.6 percent of the disconnected youth population. Black youth make up 30.2 percent of the total youth population and 26.7 percent of the disconnected youth population. Both PUMAs show this pattern, with white youth disconnection rates slightly higher than black rates.

This stands in stark contrast to the national picture, in which black youth face disproportionate barriers to remaining connected and typically have higher rates of disconnection. In Louisiana as well, the rate of disconnection among black youth, 21.4 percent, is almost twice that of white youth, 12.3 percent. In contrast, youth of both races in the TRFSA region are on par with the state rate for black youth (see **FIGURE 8**).

While rates may be similar, in crafting solutions, it is important to keep in mind that different groups of disconnected young people—young women and young men, black young people and white young people—face different challenges. A one-size-fits-all solution that does not take into account issues such as racial bias in policing or gender bias in hiring could lead to improvements that are not shared equally among all youth.

## Poverty

Poverty creates many barriers to connection and has a systemic, intergenerational effect on limiting access to opportunities. For consistency with TRF’s previous work, youth in poverty are defined here as those living in households below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold.

In the TRFSA region, as in the US overall, living in poverty increases the

### BOX 7 What Do All These Numbers Mean?

In this section, percentages are presented in two ways.

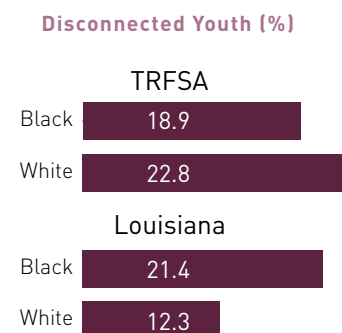
**1. Rate of Youth Disconnection among a Particular Group:** How many young people in a particular group are disconnected?

$$\frac{\text{\# of black youth who are disconnected}}{\text{total \# of black youth}} \times 100 = 18.9\% \text{ of all black youth are disconnected}$$

**2. Rate of a Particular Attribute among Disconnected Youth:** How many disconnected youth have a particular attribute?

$$\frac{\text{\# of black youth who are disconnected}}{\text{total \# of disconnected youth}} \times 100 = 26.7\% \text{ of all disconnected youth are black}$$

**FIGURE 8 Disconnection Rates by Race in TRFSA vs. Louisiana**



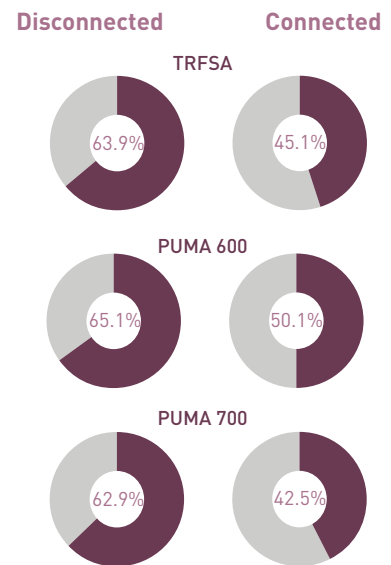
Sources: *Louisiana*: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2017. *TRFSA*: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2013–2017.

likelihood that a young person will be disconnected. **Twenty-nine percent of the region’s youth living in poverty are disconnected, compared to 21.4 percent of youth in the region overall.** Among youth living in households that receive SNAP benefits, the disconnection rate is slightly higher, 30.5 percent. This means that while the poverty rate is already quite high in the region (nearly half of all youth live below 200 percent of the poverty line), it is even higher among disconnected youth (64 percent) (see **FIGURE 9**).

As noted in Measure of America’s most recent national report on youth disconnection, “Poverty creates myriad barriers to connection, among them the concentration of low-income families in neighborhoods with poor-quality educational, health, and transportation services; the greater exposure of people living in poverty to violence and the resulting trauma; the inability of young people living in poverty to cover the costs of college; and the cumulative impacts of intergenerational, concentrated poverty.”<sup>4</sup>

Research—including Measure of America’s—suggests that place matters for poverty and social mobility, and disparities between neighboring communities can be large.<sup>5,6,7</sup> Looking at poverty and disconnection in the TRFSA region’s two PUMAs illustrates such disparities. In both PUMAs, youth living in poverty experience higher rates of disconnection than those not living in poverty. In PUMA 600, 32.5 percent of youth living in poverty are disconnected, 1.6 times the rate of those not living in poverty. In PUMA 700, 25.8 percent of youth in poverty are disconnected, twice the rate of those not in poverty. These results indicate that in the more rural portion of the region (PUMA 600), disconnection is more widespread and affects youth more evenly—even youth above poverty have fairly high rates of disconnection. In the more urban part of the region, there is a sharper divide; disconnection is an issue that more predominately affects youth below poverty. This wider gap in PUMA 700 can also be seen in the poverty rates of connected and disconnected youth (see **FIGURE 9**). The trend is also the same among youth receiving SNAP benefits: 34.6 percent of youth with SNAP are disconnected in PUMA 600, 1.4 times the rate among youth without SNAP. But in PUMA 700, 27.8 percent of youth with SNAP are disconnected, 1.8 times the rate of those without SNAP.

**FIGURE 9 Connected & Disconnected Youth Below 200% of Poverty**



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2013–2017.

## Health Insurance

In the TRFSA region, 19.3 percent of all youth do not have health insurance of any type. These youth are nearly twice as likely to be disconnected as their insured peers—**34.0 percent of those without insurance are disconnected, compared to 18.4 percent of those with insurance.** The region’s two PUMAs show stark differences, though. In PUMA 700, 22 percentage points separate the youth disconnection rates of those with insurance (14.6 percent) and those without it (36.7 percent). In PUMA 600, the difference is only 5 percentage points; 25.9 percent of insured and 30.7 percent of uninsured youth are disconnected. In the more urban part of the region, uninsured youth seem particularly at risk of disconnection, whereas

in the more rural portion disconnection is more widespread and a lack of health insurance does not stand out as strongly as a risk factor.

In the region overall, the disconnection rate among youth with Medicaid, a subset of those with health insurance, is 29.2 percent. But in PUMA 600, 39.9 percent of youth with Medicaid are disconnected, higher than the rate among uninsured youth and one of the highest rates among any of the subgroups this report looks at in either PUMA. In PUMA 700, only 22.2 percent of youth with Medicaid are disconnected, lower than the rate among uninsured youth. This indicates that in the more rural part of the region, receiving Medicaid is disproportionately associated with disconnection. It is also worth noting that Louisiana expanded Medicaid eligibility guidelines beginning in June 2016, partway through the timeframe of this data. As a result, insurance rates are increasing, and the composition of these groups of youth (uninsured, insured, Medicaid) is in flux.

## Disability

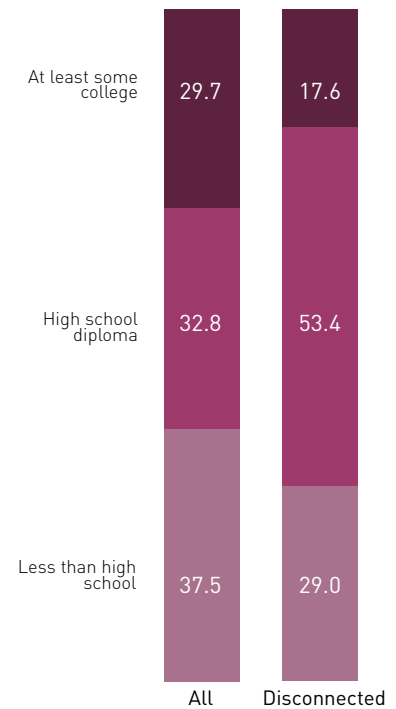
Living with a disability is still a barrier to full participation in society for too many Americans. **Almost half (48.5 percent) of all youth with a disability in the TRFSA region are disconnected.** This is 19 percentage points higher than the rate in the US overall, 29.9 percent. The Census Bureau considers a person to have a disability if they report difficulty with hearing, seeing even with glasses, walking, climbing stairs, dressing, bathing, doing errands alone, concentrating, remembering, or making decisions. This is based on responses to the ACS and does not necessarily indicate a medical diagnosis. In the TRFSA region, youth with disabilities make up 15.0 percent of the disconnected youth population, and only 6.6 percent of the total youth population. This is similar to the US overall, where youth with disabilities make up 16.6 percent of the disconnected youth population and 6.3 percent of the total youth population. In both PUMAs in the region, the population of disconnected youth with disabilities was too small to produce reliable estimates.

## Educational Attainment

Among all youth ages 16–24 in the TRFSA region, roughly one-third have not yet finished high school, one-third have a high school diploma but no further education, and one third have at least some college-level education. Among disconnected youth, the majority (53.4 percent) have a high school diploma but no further education, and only 17.6 percent have started college (see **FIGURE 10**). In part, this is because disconnected youth are older on average. But the fact that so many disconnected youth do have a high school diploma also points to a need for more accessible pathways for high school graduates—be they higher education, apprenticeships, technical education, or work that does not require a four-year degree. This is fairly similar to the picture nationally: in the United States overall, 51.3

Almost half (48.5 percent) of all youth with a disability in the TRFSA region are disconnected.

**FIGURE 10 Educational Attainment among TRFSA Youth (%)**



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2013–2017.

percent of disconnected youth have a high school diploma but no further education, and 23.3 percent have started college.

The impact of having a lower level of educational attainment becomes clear when looking at the outcomes of youth ages 22–24. At this age, many if not most young adults have finished their formal schooling. At this point, disconnection is most common among youth with lower levels of education. Over half of youth ages 22–24 who have less than a high school diploma are disconnected (52.4 percent), compared to 32.3 percent of those with a high school diploma but no further education and 16.7 percent of those who have at least some college-level education (see **FIGURE 11**). Higher educational attainment results in more opportunities for employment, and the data clearly reflect this. Helping youth continue their educations reduces the chance that they will be disconnected in the future. These findings also highlight the need for opportunities for youth who haven’t completed college as well as alternatives to higher education that put young people on the path to well-paying jobs.

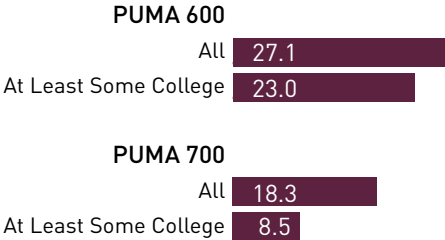
**FIGURE 11 Disconnection Rate for Youth Ages 22–24 by Educational Attainment**



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2013–2017.

Disconnection and educational attainment interact in different ways in PUMA 600 and PUMA 700. In PUMA 700, having some college education appears to protect against disconnection—only 8.5 percent of youth who have started college are disconnected, much lower than the rate among all youth in the PUMA, 18.3 percent. This is not the case in PUMA 600, where 23.0 percent of youth who have started college are disconnected, only four percentage points lower than the overall rate (see **FIGURE 12**). While there appear to be opportunities for youth who have started college in PUMA 700, the same is not true for youth with a high school diploma. The disconnection rates among youth with a high school diploma are identical in the two PUMAs, 35 percent.

**FIGURE 12 Low Rate of Disconnection among College-Educated Youth in PUMA 700**



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2013–2017.

### BOX 13 Who Are Disconnected Youth with a High School Diploma?

A large share of disconnected youth in the TRFSA region—more than half—have high school diplomas but have not begun any further education. The fact that 34.9 percent of youth with only a high school diploma are neither working nor in school may come as a surprise to many readers. Who are these disconnected diploma-holders?

First, they are more likely to be young women than young men. Young women who complete high school and do not continue on to higher education are more likely to be disconnected (38.9 percent) than their male counterparts (32.0 percent). This difference is especially stark among white youth; white women are 1.5 times as likely to be disconnected as white men in this group (47.1 percent vs. 31.7 percent). What could explain this higher disconnection rate among women? One reason could be the high rate of disconnected young people in this group who are mothers (35.6 percent of women) or married (14.8 percent). Another possible reason that the disconnection rate is higher among women is that job opportunities that do not require more than a high school diploma may be concentrated in male-dominated industries such as construction.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, for both women and men, limited access to higher education, especially in rural areas of the TRFSA region, may keep many young people from continuing their educations beyond high school. Further, while a high school degree was once sufficient for a living-wage job, today's labor market heavily favors those with education beyond high school, in the form of a bachelor's or associate degree or a professional certification of some kind. Today, high school is less an educational capstone than a stepping stone to further education and training.

## Labor Force Participation and Work Experience

Youth who are disconnected may be spending their time in any number of ways, including actively seeking employment. The survey data distinguish between youth who are unemployed and actively looking for work and those who are not looking for work, also known as being “out of the labor force.” In the TRFSA region overall, 32.2 percent of disconnected youth are actively looking for work. The remaining two-thirds may be discouraged workers who have given up seeking employment, they may be caring for children or other family members, or they may be doing something else. **Interestingly, the share of youth that are actively looking for work is quite different in the two PUMAs of the region.** In PUMA 700 (Rapides and Vernon), 39.1 percent of disconnected youth are looking for work, but in PUMA 600, only 23.8 percent are (see **FIGURE 14**). This difference may reflect the realities of the job market in the two places; PUMA 700 is home to Alexandria, the TRFSA region's largest city, which likely provides more job opportunities.

While some disconnected youth have previously held a job, many have not, and a lack of work experience often makes it difficult for youth to obtain

**FIGURE 14 Disconnected Youth Actively Looking for Work**



Sources: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2013–2017.

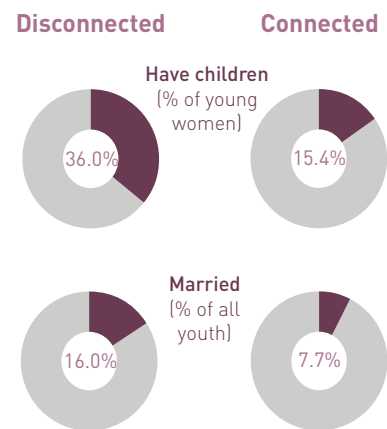
employment. In the TRFSA region, 52.4 percent of disconnected youth have not worked in the past five years. Among disconnected youth with the lowest levels of educational attainment, those without a high school diploma, that rate is an even higher 74.8 percent. **These more than 1,600 disconnected youth who have dropped out of high school and have no recent work experience face significant barriers to connection. They make up more than one-fifth (21.7 percent) of all disconnected youth in the region.**

## Motherhood and Marriage

**The rate of disconnection among mothers, 40.2 percent, is much higher than that of other women, 17.9 percent.** Compared to the US overall, mothers are overrepresented in the disconnected youth population in the TRFSA region. In the US, 26.7 percent of disconnected women are mothers; in the TRFSA region, 36.0 percent of disconnected young women are mothers. In the region, disconnected young women are 2.3 times as likely to be mothers as connected young women (see **FIGURE 15**). In PUMA 700, 44.2 percent of mothers are disconnected, the highest rate among any of the studied subgroups in that PUMA, and nearly three times as high as the rate among women without children. This estimate was not statistically reliable for PUMA 600.

Similar to the situation for mothers, the rate of disconnection among married young people, 36.1 percent, is higher than that among unmarried youth, 19.9 percent. Put another way, disconnected youth are more than twice as likely to be married as their connected peers (see **FIGURE 15**). Some married partners may choose to divide household responsibilities in such a way that one person works for pay and the other does not. While the partner who is not working for pay may be doing valuable domestic or child-rearing work, research shows that, on average, being out of the workforce, be it to raise children or for some other reason, limits later career trajectories and earnings.<sup>9</sup>

**FIGURE 15 Motherhood and Marriage Among Connected & Disconnected Youth**



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2013–2017.

### BOX 16 Who Are Disconnected Mothers?

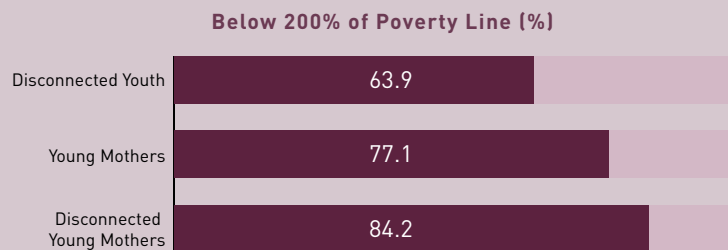
Early motherhood is much more common in the TRFSA region than in the United States as a whole. Only 8.6 percent of all young women between the ages of 16 and 24 are mothers nationally, compared to 20.0 percent in the TRFSA region. Women in the TRFSA region who have children are more likely to be disconnected (40.2 percent) than those who do not (17.9 percent).

Disconnected young mothers differ from those who are connected in some ways; they are, for example, more likely to be white, to be married, and to live in poverty. Among the most striking findings of this report is how pervasive poverty is among young mothers in the region—77.1 percent of all young mothers, and an alarming 84.2 percent of disconnected young mothers, live in poverty. These poverty rates are far higher than those of young women as a whole in the region (50.8 percent, about the same as that of their male peers) and even surpass that of disconnected youth as a whole (63.9 percent). It is worth noting that the poverty line takes into account the number of individuals in a household, so if a family grows but their income remains the same, the household moves closer to the poverty line. But this family also has the additional expenses of raising a child. **It is deeply concerning that more than eight in ten disconnected young mothers are living in poverty, parenting young children while struggling to cover the very basic costs of living—shelter, food, transportation, utilities, and the like—an extremely stressful combination.** This high rate of poverty among young mothers also impacts their children’s current and future well-being. Research shows that living in poverty in early childhood has severe health, educational, and employment repercussions later in life.<sup>10</sup>

Becoming a mother is a common life experience; 86 percent of US women have at least one child by the end of their reproductive years.<sup>11</sup> But the timing for doing so varies sharply for connected and disconnected women. Connected young women tend to postpone the joys and obligations of parenthood to pursue other appealing options in their teens and early twenties, such as continuing their educations or building their careers. For young women who lack such options, having a child may offer a rewarding role and an attainable route to adult standing.<sup>12</sup> Unintended pregnancies also play a role; we know that disparities in unintended pregnancies by income and educational attainment in the United States are large but narrowing.<sup>13</sup>

The point of this discussion is not to imply that there is a right or wrong time to have a child, but rather to acknowledge that having a baby affects educational and career prospects, that educational and career prospects affect the decision to have a baby, and that disconnection during emerging adulthood, no matter the reason, affects long-term economic prospects.

A flourishing life requires that girls and young women have access to the full range of opportunities as well as the tools they need to plan their families in ways that fit with their goals, whether they aspire to have children, to work, or both. This means empowering girls and young women to navigate the transition to adulthood with information, resources, and agency. It also means ensuring that young mothers have access to support in returning to or joining the workforce as well as high-quality, affordable child care.



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2013–2017.



## Data Summary and Findings

Of the groups addressed in this study, the ones with the highest rates of youth disconnection in the region overall are 22- to 24-year-olds who don't have a high school diploma (52.4 percent), youth with disabilities (48.5 percent), and mothers (40.2 percent). These rates are all more than one and a half times the region-wide average for all youth. The highest rates of disconnection in PUMA 600 are found among youth with Medicaid (39.9 percent), youth whose highest degree is a high school diploma (34.7 percent), and youth who receive SNAP benefits (34.6 percent). In PUMA 700, the highest rates are among mothers (44.2 percent), youth without health insurance (36.7 percent), and youth whose highest degree is a high school diploma (35.1 percent).

These findings indicate a few priority areas for focus and further investigation:

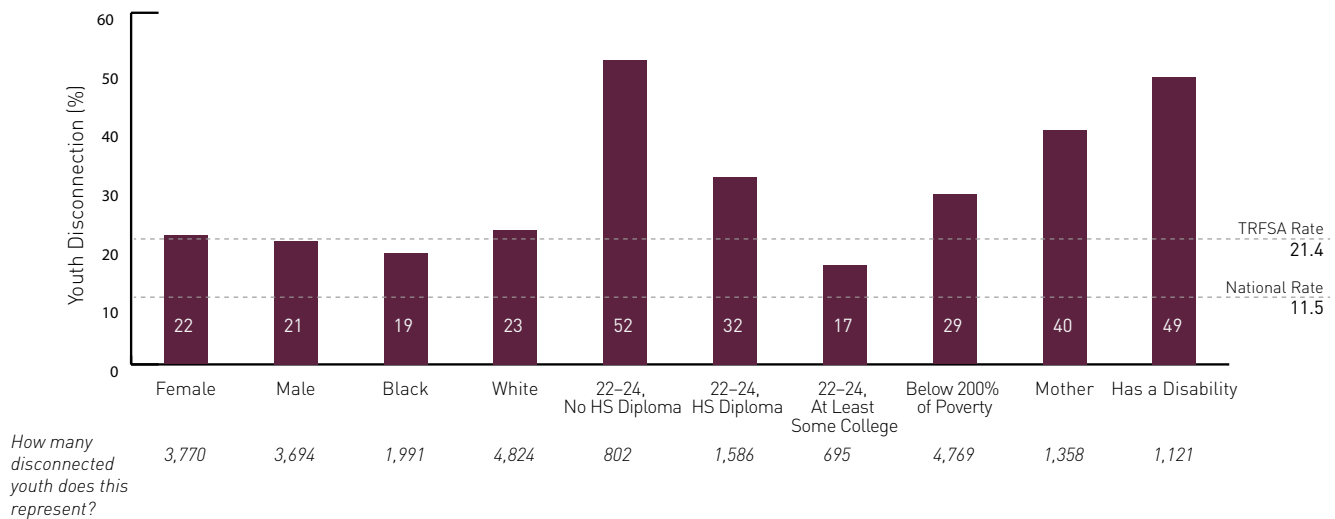
- **Continue to concentrate on high school graduation.** The high school graduation rate in the TRFSA region, 86 percent, is 5 percentage points higher than in the state overall, 81 percent.<sup>14</sup> But those youth who do not graduate face severe barriers. By their early twenties, over half (52.4 percent) are neither working nor in school. Interventions to keep youth on track for graduation and opportunities to complete high school after a period of disconnection are crucial.
- **Focus on what comes after high school.** In both PUMAs, over one-third (34.9 percent) of youth with a high school diploma are disconnected. Young people need programs and support in high school and in their communities that help them figure out and take their next step, be it training for a particular career, volunteer or employment opportunities to build professional skills, or assistance navigating college admissions. Young women need support in pursuing better-paying careers where men predominate, such as construction.
- **Support youth with disabilities.** With the proper support, many youth with disabilities can succeed in school and have a fulfilling career. Make sure the needs of youth with disabilities are not overlooked in interventions.
- **Focus on youth in poverty.** Poverty is undeniably intertwined with disconnection, and measures that alleviate poverty and its web of associated repercussions will reduce disconnection. Some of the highest rates of disconnection in the region are among youth with Medicaid or SNAP benefits, both proxies for severe poverty.
- **Support programs and policies that enable young mothers to pursue their educational and career goals.** Whether night classes to get an educational credential, affordable child care, or flexible work schedules, talk to disconnected mothers and see what supports they say they need.

- **Focus on youth in more rural settings.** The youth disconnection rate in the more rural PUMA 600 is 1.5 times higher than in the more urban PUMA 700. Many findings, including those on poverty and health insurance, indicate that place matters for how youth experience disconnection. Support solutions that concentrate on youth in these parishes and their particular needs.

In order to move this data to action, **APPENDIX E** presents the recommendations from Measure of America’s 2019 national youth disconnection report, *Making the Connection: Transportation and Youth Disconnection*, which synthesizes seven years of insights on the challenges related to youth disconnection and what works in addressing them.

**APPENDIX F** presents local recommendations and best practices specific to TRF’s work and rural context.

**FIGURE 17 Who Is Disconnected in the TRFSA Region?**



Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2013–2017.

## CONCLUSION

Every young adult deserves the opportunity to build skills and begin a career that will put them on the road to a freely chosen life of value. While The Rapides Foundation's grantmaking strategy may provide promising gains for Central Louisiana youth, the findings from this research suggest the need to expand relationships and partnerships that maximize the impact of funding. In addition, understanding the needs and potential gaps in services for disconnected youth, including specific subpopulations (e.g., mothers, youth living with a disability, and youth with a high school diploma but no further education) identified in this study, will require listening to youth and engaging them as partners in developing sustainable solutions. The research clearly shows the diversity of young people in the population of disconnected youth, as well as the need and opportunity to develop approaches that integrate resources from across multiple stakeholder groups (e.g., schools, businesses, health) to provide multiple routes to reconnection.

Given the complexity and scale of many challenges facing youth in rural areas, philanthropic organizations often are strategically engaged in multisector collaborations. As a catalytic partner in community health, The Rapides Foundation is well positioned to form and encourage collaborations that advocate for system and policy changes that improve the lives of disconnected youth and their communities. Creating opportunities for all youth to thrive requires a delicate balance of top-down and bottom-up engagement, where multisector actors work together alongside disconnected youth and community residents to promote solutions that are bold, systematic, and collaborative.

The literature and evidence of "what works" to address the challenges and opportunities facing disconnected youth in rural contexts is an emerging area. As new evidence becomes available, the challenge will be not only diffusing information on what works but also ensuring the infrastructure is in place to support potential program updates and changes. There is no silver bullet to reengage disconnected youth. However, using current knowledge about effective and evaluated practices to inform local implementation strategies can help reengagement efforts generate measurable positive results. Essential to moving the TRFSA data to action, as well as understanding the effects of strategies outlined in this report, will be The Rapides Foundation's ongoing focus on measuring and tracking progress. Considering the sense of urgency regionwide to address youth disconnection, we hope the insights in this report will inform current and future efforts to reengage youth and proactively prevent disconnection in Central Louisiana.

# APPENDIX A: INDICATOR TABLES

		Youth Disconnection	
		(%)	(#)
2017	<b>United States</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>4,501,800</b>
	<b>Louisiana</b>	<b>16.2</b>	<b>94,600</b>
	<b>TRFSA Region (All youth)</b>	<b>23.3</b>	<b>8,653</b>
	<b>TRFSA Region (Civilian, non-institutionalized)</b>	<b>21.4</b>	<b>7,464</b>
<b>GENDER</b>			
	Female	22.4	3,770
	Male	20.5	3,694
<b>AGE GROUP</b>			
	16–18	12.3	1,547
	19–21	24.9	2,697
	22–24	28.2	3,220
<b>RACE</b>			
	Black	18.9	1,991
	White	22.8	4,824
<b>EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT</b>			
	Less than HS Diploma	16.6	2,166
	HS Diploma or Equivalent	34.9	3,986
	Some College, No Degree	13.5	1,122
<b>MARRIAGE</b>			
	Married	36.1	1,196
	Not Married	19.9	6,268
<b>MOTHERHOOD</b>			
	Mothers	40.2	1,358
	Not Mothers	17.9	2,412
<b>DISABILITY</b>			
	Has a Disability	48.5	1,121
	Does Not Have a Disability	19.5	6,343
<b>HEALTH INSURANCE</b>			
	Uninsured	34.0	2,284
	Has Health Insurance of Any Type	18.4	5,180
	Has Medicaid, Medical Assistance or Any Kind of Government-Assistance Plan	29.2	2,762
<b>POVERTY</b>			
	Below 200% of Poverty Line	28.6	4,769
	Above 200% of Poverty Line	15.7	2,695
<b>LAST WORKED</b>			
	Worked in the Past Year	11.8	2,234
	1–5 Years Ago	72.2	1,316
	>5 Years Ago or Never	27.9	3,914
<b>SNAP BENEFITS</b>			
	Receiving SNAP Benefits	30.5	2,412
	Not Receiving SNAP Benefits	18.8	5,052

2013–2017

		Youth Disconnection	
		(%)	(#)
Catahoula Parish	<i>Rural</i>	43.3	515
LaSalle Parish	<i>Rural</i>	36.8	645
Winn Parish	<i>Rural</i>	35.2	595
Concordia Parish	<i>Town</i>	32.9	775
Avoyelles Parish	<i>Rural</i>	30.6	1,370
Grant Parish	<i>Small City</i>	30.3	700
Rapides Parish	<i>Small City</i>	19.0	3,050
Vernon Parish	<i>Town</i>	17.9	1,540

Source: Custom tabulations from US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2013–2017.

Note: Allen Parish (35.0 percent) and Natchitoches Parish (15.9 percent) are not included in the two PUMAs that make up the region covered in this report. Visit [www.measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive](http://www.measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive) for youth disconnection rates for each parish in the state.

Sources: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2017, and US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2013–2017.

# APPENDIX B: GLOSSARY

<b>BLACK</b>	Non-hispanic black.
<b>DISABILITY</b>	A person is considered to have a disability if they report difficulty with hearing, seeing even with glasses, walking, climbing stairs, dressing, bathing, doing errands alone, concentrating, remembering, or making decisions. This is based on responses to the ACS and does not necessarily imply a medical diagnosis.
<b>DISCONNECTED YOUTH</b>	Teenagers and young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor working. Young people in this age range who are working or in school part-time are not considered disconnected. Youth who are actively looking for work are considered disconnected.
<b>HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA</b>	Includes young people with GED.
<b>INSTITUTIONAL GROUP QUARTERS</b>	Non-household institutional living arrangements such as correctional facilities, residential treatment centers, etc. If enrolled in educational programs, youth in institutional group quarters are considered connected. Institutionalized youth are excluded from the second part of the analysis in this report.
<b>MILITARY</b>	Youth in the military are counted as employed and thus as connected. Youth in the military are excluded from the second part of the analysis in this report.
<b>NOT IN SCHOOL</b>	Has not attended any educational institution and has also not been home schooled at any time in the three months prior to the survey date.
<b>NOT WORKING</b>	Either unemployed or not in the labor force at the time they responded to the survey.
<b>POVERTY</b>	Living in household below 200% of the federal poverty threshold.
<b>PUMA</b>	Public Use Micodata Areas are geographic units designated by the US Census Bureau. PUMAs have populations of at least one hundred thousand and generally less than two hundred thousand.
<b>SNAP</b>	Youth living in a household that receives Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.
<b>WHITE</b>	Non-hispanic white.

# APPENDIX C: METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

## Who Is Considered a “Disconnected Youth”?

Youth disconnection rates in this report are calculated by Measure of America using employment and enrollment data from the American Community Survey (ACS) of the US Census Bureau. Disconnected youth, also referred to as opportunity youth, are teenagers and young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor working. Young people in this age range who are working or in school part-time are not considered disconnected. Youth who are actively looking for work are considered disconnected.

Several official data sources exist that can be used for calculating youth disconnection. As a result, researchers working with different data sets, or using different definitions of what constitutes disconnection, can arrive at different numbers for this indicator. A good summary of these various definitions can be found on a Huffington Post blog piece from October of 2016 here. Measure of America uses the Census Bureau’s ACS for four reasons: (1) it is reliable and updated annually; (2) it allows for calculations by state and metro area as well as by more granular census-defined neighborhood clusters within metro areas; (3) it includes young people who are in group quarters, such as juvenile or adult correctional facilities, supervised medical facilities, and college dorms; and (4) it counts students on summer break as being enrolled in school.

## Methods

In order to arrive at the percentage of disconnected youth, the total number of disconnected young people and the total number of young people overall are calculated for each geography from the ACS Public Use Microdata Sample. Not in school means that a young person has not attended any educational institution and has also not been home schooled at any time in the three months prior to the survey date. Not working means that a young person is either unemployed or not in the labor force at the time they responded to the survey. Disconnected youth are young people who are simultaneously not in school and not working. This population cannot be estimated by simply adding the number of young people not enrolled in school to the number of young people not working because many students in this age range do not work and many young workers are not in school.

In the second section of this report (What Factors Affect Disconnection?), the studied population is limited to civilian, noninstitutionalized youth. Civilian youth are those who are not on active military duty. Noninstitutionalized youth are those who are not residing in ‘institutional group quarters’, the Census Bureau’s designation for non-household living arrangements such as correctional or supervised medical facilities. See the definitions section below for more information.

The table below summarizes the populations and years of data used for estimates in the two data sections of the report.

<b>GEOGRAPHY</b>	<b>FIRST SECTION</b> (National, State & Regional Context)	<b>SECOND SECTION</b> (Disparities in Disconnection)
US	Full population, 2017	Full population, 2017
State	Full population, 2017	Full population, 2017
Census Region	Full population, 2017	Full population, 2017
TRFSA Region	Full population, 2017	Civilian noninstitutionalized population, 2013-2017
PUMAs	Full population, 2013-2017	Civilian noninstitutionalized population, 2013-2017

The ACS is an annual survey conducted by the Census Bureau that samples a subset of the overall population. As with any data drawn from surveys, there is some degree of sampling and nonsampling error inherent in the data. Thus, comparisons between similar values on any indicator should be made with caution since these differences may not be statistically significant.

## Geographies

Data from the [Public Use Microdata Sample](#) is provided in geographic units known as Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs). There are two PUMAs that cover most of the TRFSA region: PUMA 600 (Avoyelles, Catahoula, Concordia, Grant, LaSalle, and Winn Parishes) and PUMA 700 (Rapides and Vernon Parishes). These two areas combined are referred to in this report as the TRFSA region. Allen and Natchitoches Parishes are served by The Rapides Foundation, but they fall outside the boundaries of the PUMAs used in this analysis and are therefore excluded. Concordia Parish is not served by TRF but it is part of PUMA 600 and is therefore included in the analysis.

## Definitions

*Disability* – Disability status in this report refers to any enduring emotional, physical, or mental condition that makes everyday activities like walking, dressing, or remembering things difficult and restricts an individual's ability to work or to perform basic required tasks without assistance. This is self-reported; individuals who report having such a condition in the ACS are counted as having a disability. Those who do not report any mental or physical difficulties are counted as not having a disability.

*Group Quarters* – The US Census Bureau refers to people who live in any kind of non-household living arrangement as living in “group quarters”. These can be institutional group quarters such as correctional or supervised medical facilities or noninstitutional group quarters such as college or university dormitories or military bases. Read more about these categorizations [here](#).

*Poverty* – Throughout this report a threshold of 200 percent of the federal poverty line is used to designate youth living in households below poverty.

*Racial and Ethnic Groups* – Racial and ethnic groups in this report are based on definitions established by the OMB and used by the Census Bureau and other government entities. Since 1997, this office has recognized five racial groups and two ethnic categories. The racial groups include Asian, black, Native American, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and white. The ethnic categories are Latino and not Latino. People of Latino ethnicity may be of any race. In this report, members of each of these racial groups include only non-Latino members of these groups. All references to black and white youth include only those who are non-Latino. Due to the small population sizes of some of the racial and ethnic groups, we cannot always present reliable estimates of youth disconnection for these groups.

*Regions* – In the discussion of regional differences in disconnected youth rates, we use the four regions of the United States (Midwest, Northeast, South, and West) as defined by the [US Census Bureau](#).

*Unreliable* – Estimates with a coefficient of variance of greater than 0.2 are considered unreliable and are omitted from the report.

# APPENDIX D: NATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

*Excerpt from Measure of America's latest annual disconnected youth report, Making the Connection.*

Through our research and engagement with stakeholders over the years, we have learned in greater detail about the challenges related to youth disconnection, as well as what works in addressing them. Though they overlap, these challenges and related recommendations can be organized into four very general buckets: confronting historical and intergenerational disadvantage, especially racism; supporting vulnerable youth; keeping youth connected; and reengaging disconnected youth. What jumps out in reading through them is the need to create a just, kind, inclusive society, one in which all children—not just some—grow up loved and kept safe from harm, attend high-quality schools that meet their diverse needs and prepare them for flourishing lives, find fair and equal treatment in our institutions, and are set on pathways that lead to free, joyous adulthoods. *Note: This is a living document meant to reflect what we have learned and continue to learn. We will update it as new findings shape our understanding of challenges and solutions; we welcome your input.*



## 1. CONFRONT HISTORICAL & INTERGENERATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

*Disconnection is not just an individual issue, but a systemic one as well.*

**Poverty and low levels of human development.** Disconnected youth are, not surprisingly, considerably more likely to come from disconnected communities—areas in which high rates of poverty are evidence of and contributors to isolation from mainstream social and economic systems. Such neighborhoods tend to be ill-served by public transportation, education, and health systems and have low levels of social capital and trust. Addressing poverty is of particular importance to reducing disconnection among young people of color; while the probability of disconnection falls as household incomes rise across all groups, blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans are more likely to be disconnected than whites and Asians at the same income level.<sup>17</sup> High levels of youth disconnection are also associated with low scores on the American Human Development Index, MOA's measure of a population's well-being. In communities with high human development levels, young people have many opportunities to connect to school and work and greater access to adults with the skills, networks, and experience to help them navigate the transition to adulthood.

**Residential segregation.** Segregated housing patterns that persist today can be traced back directly to a pernicious web of discriminatory housing policies at the local, state, and federal levels from the 1930s through the 1970s.<sup>18</sup> Concentrated racial segregation within metro areas has dramatic but very different consequences for young people depending on their race. The neighborhoods at either end of the connection-disconnection spectrum are extremely segregated; the more segregated black and white residents are from one another within a metro area, the lower the likelihood of disconnection is among white youth, but the higher the likelihood is among black youth.<sup>19</sup>

**Disconnection across generations.** There is evidence that disconnection becomes entrenched within disadvantaged communities. In towns and communities with high unemployment and low levels of educational attainment among adults, young people tend to be disconnected from work and school as well. The rate of youth disconnection by neighborhood cluster in 2000 is highly predictive of the rate of youth disconnection ten years later, suggesting a cycle of disconnection,<sup>20</sup> a finding supported by research on the persistence of disadvantage in certain highly segregated poor neighborhoods with predominately black populations.<sup>21</sup> Measure of America recently identified ways in which youth disconnection affects individuals in the long term. Thirteen to fifteen years on—when young people enter their thirties—those who had remained connected throughout their teens and young adulthood made approximately \$31,000 more annually and were 45 percent more likely to own the home in which



they lived, 42 percent more likely to be employed, and 52 percent more likely to report excellent or good health than those who had been disconnected.<sup>22</sup>

**Discrimination.** Discrimination fuels and exacerbates disconnection. A recent Pew Research Center survey on views of race in the United States found that 21 percent of black respondents said they have been treated unfairly by an employer in the past year in hiring, pay, or promotion because of their race or ethnicity, as compared to only 4 percent of whites, a five-fold difference.<sup>23</sup> Another study found that job applicants with “black-sounding” names were far less likely to be considered than those with “white-sounding” names, backing up this finding.<sup>24</sup>

**Recommendation: Address the unequal conditions of daily life to prevent disconnection from happening in the first place**

The United States does far less to protect its citizens from the effects of misfortune than most of its peer countries;<sup>25</sup> we have fewer universal public services like health care and child care, and investments in public goods like schools and parks are generally far lower. Public investment must also consider and address the history of racist policies and disinvestment that continue to impact the conditions of daily life in marginalized communities today.

**Recommendation: Put an end to discrimination**

While de jure employment discrimination on the basis of race, gender, religion, national origin, or physical or mental disability is illegal, de facto discrimination in the job market persists. Addressing the many types of discrimination that keep far too many Americans from living freely chosen, rewarding lives has long been and will likely continue to be a central task for all who care about not just youth disconnection but also justice and freedom more broadly.

**Recommendation: Provide high-quality K-12 schooling**

Another clear investment priority is high-quality K-12 schooling. Children growing up in disadvantaged circumstances need schools with the expertise and resources to provide high-quality academic instruction; a safe, healthy, and respectful environment; and support, both during and out of normal school hours, for children who are at risk or exhibiting dropout warning signs. In some of America’s schools, we are exceeding standards in all of these areas. In others, particularly those in high-disconnection communities, we are coming up woefully short.



**2. SUPPORT VULNERABLE YOUTH**

*Certain circumstances put young people at a higher risk of disconnection than their peers.*

**Disability.** Disconnected young people are more than three times as likely to have a disability as connected young people. Despite laws requiring accommodations on the job and in schools, living with a disability is unfortunately still a barrier to employment and education, as evidenced by higher unemployment and lower on-time high school graduation rates.<sup>26, 27</sup> Inaccessible transportation systems, workplaces, and schools; prejudice and discrimination; and inflexible schedules add extra hurdles to employment and schooling for people with disabilities.

**Caretaking.** Disconnected young women are nearly four times as likely to have a child as connected young women. Disconnection may lower the barriers to early motherhood; in the absence of meaningful school and work opportunities, motherhood may be the most appealing and attainable route to adulthood. Once a young woman becomes a mother, reconnecting to school or joining the labor market becomes more difficult. Some young people

who are neither working nor in school are caring not for their own children but for other relatives, such as siblings, parents, or grandparents; unfortunately, we don't have the data required to estimate how many disconnected young people are engaged in these kinds of caretaking activities, nor do the data tell us about young men and fatherhood.

**Living apart from parents.** Disconnected children ages 16 and 17 are 3.2 times as likely to be living without either of their parents as connected young people of the same age. Connected young people are one and a half times as likely to be living with both their parents as disconnected young people. These statistics put the family situations of disconnected and connected youth in sharp contrast. A majority of connected young people (60 percent) live with two parents, benefiting from the emotional, social, and financial support of two adults, and only 8.3 percent live with neither parent. One in four disconnected young people, on the other hand, live apart from not just one but both parents; this reality indicates a profound family disruption at some earlier point.

**Language proficiency and citizenship status.** For Latino and particularly Asian young people, lack of language proficiency and citizenship are serious barriers. Nearly 35 percent of Asian disconnected youth overall, and over 40 percent (42.8 percent) of disconnected Asian girls and young women, are noncitizens. This is a marked contrast to 27.3 percent of connected Asian girls and young women in the same age range. Nearly three in ten disconnected Asian youth speak English "less than very well." This is a higher percentage than that of disconnected Latinos (18.7 percent).

**Rurality.** Measure of America found in a previous report that rural counties as a whole are faring considerably worse than more populous counties in terms of youth disconnection. In completely rural counties, the average youth disconnection rate is 19.3 percent, much higher than the rate for counties in urban centers (12.9 percent) or for suburban counties (11.3 percent).<sup>28</sup>

**Recommendation: Give at-risk and disconnected youth the wraparound support they need**

Too many young people face not one but many obstacles to educational or employment opportunities; addressing these obstacles is essential for prevention and reengagement efforts. Access to resources like language classes, transportation, and family planning can prevent disconnection in the first place. The same rationale applies to reengagement programs for youth who are already disconnected. While historically, second-chance programs for adolescents and young adults have had limited success, new models have shown great promise in recent years by not only providing job training but also connecting young people to employment and support services. Services like counseling, career mentoring, remedial learning, and help with problem-solving both during and after the life of reconnection programs are essential for successful reengagement and lasting connections. Consensus is growing that the problem of youth disconnection requires that the different agencies and systems that deal with disconnected youth align their resources such that their collective impact is greater than the sum of their parts.

**Recommendation: Pay attention to the local context in rural America**

Many young people who grow up in rural areas leave after high school, drawn by the opportunities metro areas afford. For those who stay, disconnection is a serious challenge. Efforts to help them should respond to local labor market demands as well as build transferable skills. The recent shift away from the "college for all" mantra is lessening the misguided sense that anything but a four-year college degree is somehow a second-best option. But the alternative must be high-quality career and technical education that is relevant to local employment needs and equips rural youth for security in the new economy.



### 3. KEEP YOUTH CONNECTED

*There are key junctures where young people fall into disconnection.*

**Dropout.** Disconnected youth are nine times as likely to have left high school without a diploma as connected young people. Reconnecting these young people to school is challenging; the road to high school dropout is lined with many discouraging and disheartening experiences in the classroom, with peers, and with school administrators. Bringing young people back to a system that has failed them and in which they felt like failures is not easy. While in theory young people can reenter the education system later in life, the reality is that even well into their thirties, the gaps in educational attainment between those who were connected and disconnected persist. About fifteen years later, over 90 percent of those who remained connected had completed high school, compared to 62 percent of those who experienced disconnection—and those who experienced long periods of disconnection had even lower rates of high school completion, below 50 percent.<sup>29</sup>

**Institutionalization.** A vanishingly small percentage of connected youth live in institutional quarters, just 0.3 percent. The rate for disconnected youth is twenty times higher—and higher still for some groups. Institutionalization is a particularly grave problem for black young people, especially for black boys and young men.

#### **Recommendation: Support all children so they can enter school on an equal footing**

While many assume that the effects of early childhood investments have worn off long before the teens, research shows that the seeds of high school completion are planted many years earlier. Harm to cognitive, social, and emotional development in the early years of a child's life sets them on a lowered trajectory for achievement and well-being across the life course. Interventions at this stage are highly effective and less expensive than seeking remedies at a later point. One way to do this is through two-generation approaches and other interventions that support parents in their efforts to promote healthy child development. Another is to provide high-quality early care and education to at-risk toddlers and preschoolers in center-based preschools with well-trained caregivers and teachers. For every dollar invested in high-quality preschool, benefits of 7.3 dollars result.<sup>30</sup>

#### **Recommendation: Take action on dropout warning signs**

Keeping children in school is easier and more cost-effective than luring back those who have slipped from the educational system's grasp. By the eighth grade, the red flags that a child will drop out of high school are already clear: repeating a grade, failing more than one class, and frequent absence from school.

#### **Recommendation: Develop a system with school-to-work alternatives for all young people**

One of the lessons from countries like the Netherlands and Germany, where youth disconnection rates are 4.0 and 6.3 percent,<sup>31</sup> is that youth-friendly economies offer multiple established pathways for young people to transition from school to work.<sup>32</sup> In many European countries, the majority of students undertake a vocational track for secondary education.<sup>33</sup> Many of the "jobs of tomorrow," jobs that allow for economic security and job satisfaction and cannot be outsourced, require some postsecondary education but not necessarily a four-year degree. Career and technical paths that are linked to internships, job placement, life skills classes, and postsecondary certificate or degree programs can build bridges to a productive, rewarding adulthood for young people whose interests and aspirations are not best served by a traditional bachelor's degree program. Already, many programs that link career and technical education in high school to postsecondary institutions and jobs have shown promise in the United States.

**Recommendation: Implement restorative discipline**

In the past decade, restorative justice, a movement for an alternative to punitive justice, has been gaining steam in courtrooms and school districts across the nation. In a school setting, restorative justice focuses on helping students understand the impact of their actions on others and often includes some form of peer adjudication. In the criminal justice system, evaluations of restorative justice programs for juvenile offenders are promising.<sup>34</sup> In schools, restorative discipline, rather than punitive school suspensions and expulsions, may reduce dropout rates and disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, though more research is needed.<sup>35, 36</sup> Educators and policymakers increasingly recognize the disproportionate impact of school suspensions and expulsions on young people of color and youth with disabilities.

**Recommendation: Embrace our boys and young men of color**

Young men of color in American society today are disproportionately marginalized in school, monitored in their neighborhoods, discriminated against in the labor market, and put behind bars. School discipline practices are pushing African American and Latino boys out of the classroom due to the lack of culturally competent curricula and loosely defined, unevenly applied suspension and expulsion practices. Our education and justice systems must take a different approach, one in which the vast resources now deployed to isolate and disenfranchise black and brown boys and men are instead deployed in support of their hopes and dreams.



**4. REENGAGE THE DISCONNECTED**

*While prevention is the best cure, youth disconnection is a reality that needs to be addressed. Here are some best practices for reengagement efforts.*

**Recommendation: Set goals and work toward them together**

Meaningful progress requires that organizations and individuals active in this area join together to establish measurable, time-bound targets for reducing youth disconnection. These targets should be ambitious, tailored to the on-the-ground realities of different cities, and based on an accelerated, but achievable, rate of progress. In our 2013 report, *Halve the Gap by 2030: Youth Disconnection in America's Cities*, we proposed setting a ten-year goal of cutting in half the gaps between racial and ethnic groups, as well as the overall rate of disconnection, at the neighborhood level. A number of community partners, including the San Diego Workforce Partnership, have taken up the challenge and are currently working toward those goals.

**Recommendation: Recognize that short-term engagement results in short-term benefits**

Summer employment and other sorts of short-term job placements can be an important first step for at-risk youth, giving them the chance to gain self-confidence, learn the norms of the workplace, and build an employment track record. But evaluations of short-term programs suggest that the positive effects frequently fade within a year or two. Youth struggling with connection require encouragement and attention beyond a one-off match with an employer; they need longer-term relationships with caring adults.

**Recommendation: Offer paid work to create virtuous circle**

A common reason teens and young adults leave school is the need to contribute to their family income. Whenever possible, programs should offer jobs with wages rather than unpaid internships or token living allowances or stipends. Paying wages addresses sometimes acute financial need. It also helps youth build bona fide employment records, allows them to participate in formal performance appraisals that can provide useful feedback, and gives them the sense of agency, autonomy, and pride that often accompanies a first paycheck.

**Recommendation: Provide careers, not jobs**

Young people need preparation for a career, not just a (low-wage, low-skill) job. In order to set at-risk youth on a trajectory for success, workforce programs should help them build not just very basic skills (such as preparing a resume, interviewing for a job, and managing their time), but also the higher-order, sought-after skills necessary for a secure career in today’s economy. Such skills include mid-level technical skills related to specific fields such as health care, skilled construction, information technology, and maintenance and repair, but could also include more broadly applicable skills like foreign languages, management training, and entrepreneurship.

**Recommendation: Address practical barriers to reconnection**

Disconnected young people can be easily stymied in their efforts to reconnect by lacking basic necessities—a few dollars for transportation, a hard-copy resume, a work-ready outfit. Successful reconnection efforts help address these comparatively low-hanging fruit by providing young people with transportation smart cards to attend classes and job interviews, by serving a meal during programming since youth may not have the money to buy lunch, and by addressing many common barriers in one go at one-stop job fairs. For instance, the 100,000 Opportunities Initiative provides disconnected and at-risk youth with a number of on-site resources, including on-the-spot resume reviews, interview practice sessions, and interview clothing stations that young people can visit before meeting potential employers, all at the job fair site.



## ENDNOTES

- 1 Measure of America, "[Youth Disconnection in America.](#)"
- 2 Custom Tabulations provided by special arrangement with the US Census Bureau, 2013–2017. View youth disconnection rates by county for the US at [www.measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive](http://www.measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive).
- 3 Burd-Sharps and Lewis, *More Than a Million Reasons for Hope: Youth Disconnection in America Today.*
- 4 Lewis, *Making the Connection: Transportation and Youth Disconnection.*
- 5 Chetty and Hendren, "The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility I: Childhood Exposure Effects."
- 6 Chetty and Hendren, "The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility II: County-Level Estimates."
- 7 Lewis and Burd-Sharps, *Zeroing In on Place and Race: Youth Disconnection in America's Cities.*
- 8 Sutton, Bosky, and Muller, "Manufacturing Gender Inequality In The New Economy: High School Training For Work In Blue-Collar Communities."
- 9 Buchmann and McDaniel, "Motherhood and the Wages of Women in Professional Occupations."
- 10 Duncan and Magnuson, "The Long Reach of Early Childhood Poverty."
- 11 Geiger, Livingston, and Bialik, "6 Facts about U.S. Moms."
- 12 Edin and Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage.*
- 13 Finer and Zolna, "Declines in Unintended Pregnancy in the United States, 2008–2011."
- 14 The Rapides Foundation calculations using Louisiana Department of Education, 2005–2018 State School System Cohort Graduation, and Credential Rate Summary, 2018.
- 15 Lewis and Burd-Sharps, *Halve the Gap by 2030: Youth Disconnection in America's Cities.*
- 16 Lewis, *Making the Connection: Transportation and Youth Disconnection.*
- 17 Burd-Sharps and Lewis, *Promising Gains, Persistent Gaps.*
- 18 Rothstein, *The Color of Law.*
- 19 Lewis and Burd-Sharps, *Zeroing In on Place and Race: Youth Disconnection in America's Cities.*
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Sharkey, *Stuck in Place.*
- 22 Lewis and Gluskin, *Two Futures: The Economic Case for Keeping Youth on Track.*
- 23 Pew Research Center, "[On Views of Race and Inequality, Blacks and Whites Are Worlds Apart.](#)"
- 24 Bertrand and Mullainathan, "Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment in Labor Market Discrimination."
- 25 OECD Data, "[Social Spending.](#)"
- 26 National Center for Education Statistics, "Common Core of Data: Table 1."
- 27 Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Table 1. Employment Status of the Civilian Noninstitutional Population by Disability Status and Selected Characteristics, 2018 Annual Averages."
- 28 Burd-Sharps and Lewis, *More Than a Million Reasons for Hope: Youth Disconnection in America Today.*
- 29 Lewis and Gluskin, *Two Futures: The Economic Case for Keeping Youth on Track.*
- 30 García et al., "Quantifying the Life-cycle Benefits of a Prototypical Early Childhood Program."
- 31 Eurostat, "[Young People neither in Employment nor in Education and Training \(15-24 years\).](#)"
- 32 Ayres et al., *States of Transition.*
- 33 Eurostat, "[Vocational Education and Training Statistics.](#)"
- 34 Wilson, Olaghere, and Kimbrell, *Effectiveness of Restorative Justice Principles in Juvenile Justice: A Meta-Analysis.*
- 35 Shollenberger, *Racial Disparities in School Suspension and Subsequent Outcomes.*
- 36 Augustine et al., *Can Restorative Practices Improve School Climate and Curb Suspensions?*
- 37 Opportunity Nation and Measure of America, "Connecting Youth and Strengthening Communities: The Data Behind Civic Engagement and Economic Opportunity."
- 38 Jaffee et al., "Northern New Hampshire Youth in a Changing Rural Economy: A Ten Year Perspective."
- 39 Carrico et al., "A Qualitative Analysis of Career Choice Pathways of College-oriented Rural Central Appalachian High School Students."
- 40 Wettersten et al., "Predicting Educational and Vocational Attitudes Among Rural High School Students."
- 41 Gibbons et al., "Evaluation of an SCCT-based Intervention to Increase Post-Secondary Awareness in Rural Appalachian Youth."
- 42 Lewis, *Making the Connection: Transportation and Youth Disconnection.*
- 43 Lin, Chyongchiou Jeng, et al., "Long-term Outcomes for Teen Mothers Who Participated in a Mentoring Program to Prevent Repeat Teen Pregnancy."
- 44 Bryant, "Exploring Innovative Solutions To Engaging Disconnected Youth In Rural Counties."
- 45 Buckwalter and Togil, "Accelerating Opportunity in Rural Regions: Designing Pathway Programs for Adults and Other Non-Traditional Learners."
- 46 Browning and Sofer, "Making Apprenticeship Work for Opportunity Youth."
- 47 Lewis, *Making the Connection: Transportation and Youth Disconnection.*
- 48 Ross and Holmes, "Meet the Out-of-Work: Local Profiles of Jobless Adults and Strategies to Connect Them to Employment."
- 49 Lewis, *Making the Connection: Transportation and Youth Disconnection.*
- 50 Ascend at the Aspen Institute, "Two Generation Playbook."
- 51 King et al., "Promoting Two-Generation Strategies: A Getting-Started Guide for State and Local Policy Makers."
- 52 Harrison et al., "An Evaluation of Family Economic Success – Early Childhood Education: Findings From a Two-Generation Approach."

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