

# OPPORTUNITY ROAD

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The Promise and Challenge of America's Forgotten Youth

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A report by Civic Enterprises & America's Promise Alliance in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and James Irvine Foundation

Informed by a Practitioner Advisory Committee from the Forum for Youth Investment, Jobs for the Future, and YouthBuild USA

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DESCRIBED AS "DISCONNECTED YOUTH" IN RECENT SOCIAL

SCIENCE LITERATURE YOUTH WHO ARE NOT CONNECTED TO

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## AN HISTORIC OPPORTUNITY

They number in the millions—young people ages 16 to 24 who are out of school and out of work—and they are often forgotten by our society. Many have left high school without a diploma. Others may finish high school and even attend college, but still lack the essential education, skills and credentials needed to obtain a decent job in a 21st century economy—a job that will not only help them support a family, but also become the engaged citizens our nation needs them to be. Their future is our success. If we don't help them find a path, given the billions of dollars they cost this country every year and over their lifetimes, all of our futures will be affected.

We frequently mention the more than one million young people that drop out of high school every year. But what is less often discussed is that the movement to keep these youth in school must also embrace those who have already left. Like any major pandemic threatening the vitality of a nation, we cannot focus solely on prevention without helping recuperate those who have already been stricken. They have equal importance to our society. This scenario is as true for the dropout crisis as it is for any disease.

WE FREQUENTLY MENTION THE MORE THAN ONE MILLION YOUNG PEOPLE THAT DROP OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL EVERY YEAR. BUT WHAT IS LESS OFTEN DISCUSSED IS THAT THE MOVEMENT TO KEEP THESE YOUTH IN SCHOOL MUST ALSO EMBRACE THOSE WHO HAVE ALREADY LEFT.

Time is of the essence. Although still the place of dreams and opportunity, America's light in the world has dimmed—educationally and economically. We have one hope to turn this around—our young people.

The good news is that most youth out of school and out of work, whom we will call "opportunity youth" because they represent enormous untapped potential for our society, start out life with big dreams that include graduating from college. Notwithstanding challenging life circumstances, including living in poverty, they remain optimistic about their futures and believe they will achieve their goals in life. They accept responsibility for their decisions, but also yearn for support along what they hope will be a road to opportunity. Our society often treats them as problems to be addressed, but their voices show that they are potential to be fulfilled and can become key leaders in our society if given a chance.

This report shares a perspective not often heard – the voices of these young people themselves who struggle to finish school and enter the workforce. The President and Congress, governors and mayors, and employers and non-profit leaders have increasingly focused attention on this population for good reason. The upward churn of social mobility has slowed, the educational attainment of this generation has slipped below that of their parents for the first time in history, and the costs of inaction are high. America has a skills gap that can be closed if our nation will do a better job educating and training its young people, including those who struggle on the path to productive work. We know this is true because, as this report highlights, there are effective strategies that are currently working to give opportunity youth the right combination of training, support and experiences to make successful transitions to meaningful careers.

We helped found America's Promise Alliance 15 years ago because we know that when more children experience the Five Promises—caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, effective education and opportunities to help others—their odds of success skyrocket and so does our nation's as we have more children and youth prepared for college, work and life.

This report shares both the reality and opportunity of America's forgotten youth and points the way forward, ensuring the American Dream is something every young person has the chance to achieve. The future of our communities, economy and nation depends on our response and we hope it will further rally the nation to action.



General Colin Powell



Alma J. Powell

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are millions of youth ages 16 to 24 who are out of school and out of work. They cost the nation billions of dollars every year and over their lifetimes in lost productivity and increased social services. They also represent an opportunity for the nation to tap the talents of millions of potential leaders and productive workers at a time when America's skills gap is significant. The central message of this report is that while these youth face significant life challenges, most start out with big dreams and remain confident or hopeful that they can achieve their goals; most accept responsibility for their futures; and most are looking to reconnect to school, work and service. They point the way to how they can effectively reconnect to education, productive work and civic life.

On behalf of Civic Enterprises and the America's Promise Alliance, Peter D. Hart Research Associates undertook a national cross-section of opportunity youth in 23 diverse locations across the United States in August 2011 to learn about common elements in their personal histories and their lives today, and to explore opportunities to reconnect them to work and school. At the time of the survey, respondents were ages 16 to 24, neither enrolled in school nor planning to enroll in the coming year, were not working, and had not completed a college degree. In addition, they were not disabled such as to prevent long-term employment, were not incarcerated, and were not a stay-at-home parent with a working spouse.

THERE ARE MILLIONS OF YOUTH AGES 16 TO 24 WHO ARE OUT OF SCHOOL AND OUT OF WORK. THEY COST THE NATION BILLIONS OF DOLLARS EVERY YEAR AND OVER THEIR LIFETIMES IN LOST PRODUCTIVITY AND INCREASED SOCIAL SERVICES. THEY ALSO REPRESENT AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE NATION TO TAP THE TALENTS OF MILLIONS OF POTENTIAL LEADERS AND PRODUCTIVE WORKERS AT A TIME WHEN AMERICA'S SKILLS GAP IS SIGNIFICANT.

### Opportunity Youth Are Confident or Hopeful about Achieving their Goals, and Accept Responsibility for Their Futures, but Need Additional Supports

Despite coming from challenging circumstances, the majority of opportunity youth are very confident or hopeful that they can achieve their goals and they accept responsibility for their own futures. Having clear goals and a dependable support system are strongly associated with feeling confident about the future.

- **Nearly three in four (73 percent) are very confident or hopeful that they will be able to achieve their goals in life.** Forty-four percent of youth we surveyed say that they are very confident that they will be able to achieve their goals in life, while another 29 percent are hopeful but not confident. Only one in five (20 percent) say they are uncertain, and only 7 percent say that they are worried (4 percent) or pessimistic (3 percent) about achieving their life goals.
  - **This confidence or hope builds on big dreams.** Boys surveyed stated that when they grew up they wanted to be policemen, athletes, lawyers or join the military, while girls wanted to be nurses, teachers, lawyers, doctors or veterinarians;
  - **Despite hardship, they remained optimistic growing up.** Few opportunity youth grew up in households with a parent who graduated college, yet more than half (53 percent) definitely saw themselves graduating when growing up and another third (33 percent) say they occasionally thought about graduating. Only 14 percent say they never saw themselves graduating college; and
  - **Being “disconnected” does not mean these youth lack career and educational aspirations.** Nearly two in three (65 percent) opportunity youth say that the statement “I have a goal to finish high school or college and I know that I can achieve it” describes them extremely (43 percent) or quite (22 percent) well; and 85 percent say that it is extremely (65 percent) or quite (20 percent) important to have a good career or job that lets them live the life that they want.

- **The vast majority of opportunity youth accept responsibility for their futures, with 77 percent agreeing with the statement that getting a good education and job is their own responsibility, and whether they succeed depends on their own effort.** In contrast, only 23 percent agree that society puts up a lot of roadblocks to getting a good job or education, and their success depends largely on forces outside of their control.
- **Having clear goals and supports appear to go hand-in-hand with the confidence levels of opportunity youth.**
  - **Seventy percent of those with clear goals say they are very confident they can achieve their goals,** whereas 25 percent of those who still have not made up their minds say the same. Nearly half (48 percent) of opportunity youth with a high school degree or GED say that they have clear goals, whereas only 34 percent of those who lack a diploma say they have clear goals; and
  - **Whereas 52 percent of those who say that they get a lot of help and support feel very confident that they can achieve their goals,** only 37 percent of those who say that they are on their own feel the same.

## Opportunity Youth Are Looking to Reconnect to School or Work, Build Strong Families, and Make a Difference, but Significant Challenges Stand in the Way

Their lack of education and work experience are among the biggest barriers.

- **More than half (54 percent) of opportunity youth say they are looking for full-time work.** While many cite the lack of jobs in their area as a major factor, they also say their lack of education and work experience is equally challenging.
  - **A nearly equal proportion (50 percent) say they do not have enough work experience to get the kind of job they want as those (47 percent) who say they lack enough education to get their ideal job.** Thirty-nine percent of respondents cite family responsibilities as an obstacle to working full time, including 42 percent of women and 35 percent of men. Transportation is a concern to 37 percent of opportunity youth, and 32 percent say they do not know how to prepare a resume or interview.
- **While many surveyed express a desire to go back to school, in reality, significant barriers prevent them from achieving their goal.** Forty-two percent say reconnecting to school is frequently (19 percent) or sometimes (23 percent) a problem. As respondents age, the proportion who express difficulty going back to school increases, from 37 percent of 16- to 21-year-olds to 50 percent among 22- to 24-year-olds.
  - **The top obstacles to reconnecting to school are:** cost is more than they or their families can afford (63 percent); they need to make money to take care of their families (48 percent); they do not have transportation or they need to work and cannot balance work and school (40 percent in each case). Nearly one-third (32 percent) say no one showed them how to apply to college or figure out how to pay for it.
- **More than 8 in 10 (86 percent) say that having a good family life is extremely (66 percent) or quite (20 percent) important to them.** And more than two in three (68 percent) say they feel that they have a support system in their life, people who care about them, want them to do well, and will help them through hard times. However, this support does not appear to always translate to concrete help in achieving their goals. When asked to think about how they achieve their goals, 45 percent say they get a lot of help and support, whereas 55 percent say they are pretty much on their own.
- **Nearly seven in ten (69 percent) want to make a difference in improving life for others,** while only 3 percent report they are volunteering in their communities, suggesting their disconnection from school and work is impeding their desire to give back.

WHILE MANY SURVEYED EXPRESS A DESIRE TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL, IN REALITY, SIGNIFICANT BARRIERS PREVENT THEM FROM ACHIEVING THEIR GOAL.

## Opportunity Youth Point the Way to Reconnecting

According to opportunity youth, opportunities to simultaneously earn money and attend school to build

credentials are the most attractive avenues to reconnecting. Peer groups and mentors are also important to helping them get back on track.

- **Training that allows students to earn money and to attend school at the same time ranks highest on a list of programs designed to help young people go back to school, find work, or help them with everyday problems**, with 78 percent expressing interest in this type of support. Job training and apprenticeships receive the second highest marks at 70 percent, including 76 percent of men and 67 percent of women.
- **Opportunity youth want to work with peers and mentors.** When asked who they would like to see in a new community center dedicated to helping them succeed, **successful peers (79 percent), college mentors (69 percent), parents or family (67 percent) and business mentors or advocates from my community (65 percent) rank highest**, suggesting that many sectors in local communities can help them reconnect.

## The Effects of Disconnection Are Significant, as Are the Opportunities

According to recent research from Teachers College, Columbia University, commissioned as a companion piece to this report, the number of opportunity youth is large and the immediate and long-term economic costs to society of opportunity youth are staggering.<sup>1</sup>

- **Seventeen percent, or 6.7 million of the 38.9 million youth 16-24 years old, are opportunity youth, meaning that they are not in school or work nor college graduates, and there is an opportunity to re-engage many of them.** A deeper look at the work and educational commitments of such youth on a per month basis shows that almost one-third (32.6 percent) of all youth time is devoted neither to work nor enrollment in school.
- **Approximately 3.4 million, or nearly 9 percent of all 16 to 24 year olds, are chronically disconnected**—after 16, they never attended school, went to college or worked; **nearly 1 million of all youth ages 18-24 are heads of household with incomes below the poverty line**; and 770,000 youth have family care-giving responsibilities.
- **Approximately 3.3 million youth are “under-attached”**: they have some education and some work experience, but it is very limited. These youth are good candidates for receiving educational, job training, economic, and social supports to fully integrate them in to either the education system or the labor market. **If this were achieved the taxpayer savings would amount to \$707 billion. The gain to society would amount to \$2 trillion.**
- **In 2011, opportunity youth ages 16-24 cost the taxpayer \$93 billion** in lost revenues from a lack of productive workers and increased social services; the social cost (including costs beyond the taxpayer such as earnings loss and loss to victims of crime) **is \$252 billion for 2011.**
- **In total, the lifetime economic burden of opportunity youth in 2011 is \$1.6 trillion to the taxpayer and \$4.7 trillion to society.** Opportunity youth cost the nation billions in crime and incarceration (37 percent of all violent crimes and 43 percent of all property crimes in the U.S. are committed by 16-24 year olds, some studies suggest opportunity youth are more likely to be involved in these crimes due to their lower incomes); health care (18 percent of opportunity youth are on Medicaid compared to 5 percent of all 16 to 24 year olds); and welfare and social supports (opportunity youth are more likely to receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), housing assistance, food stamps and for females, The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)).

THERE ARE 6.7 MILLION OPPORTUNITY YOUTH—ABOUT 1 IN 6 OF ALL YOUTH 16 TO 24 YEARS OLD.

## Paths Forward

We must recognize the value of all youth to our communities, economy and nation. These young people want to gain educational credentials and job training, while recognizing their need to simultaneously earn a living to support themselves and, in many cases, their families. We must do this through integrated and supportive responses that do not treat education and a job as mutually exclusive goals nor fail to recognize the individual issues and lack of support that calls the young people's attention away from the classroom.

## 1. Forge Youth Opportunity Pathways: Integrated Community Solutions that make a Difference.

In communities with dropout rates exceeding 50 percent, it will take interventions at scale to put young people back on track to re-engage them in school, work and civic life. It will require constructive engagement of our youth service systems and our public and private resources to build these pathways to opportunities and support young people over time as they navigate from the streets to the programs and campuses, to the labor market, and to adult success. Youth Opportunity Grants should target low-income communities, foster community collaboration among multiple sectors, and adopt systemic approaches to re-enrolling dropouts into local charter or “back on track” schools or programs focused on dropout re-engagement and preparation for the labor market.

## 2. Reinvest in Success: Reward and Scale Up Effective Programs so Providers Can Open their Doors to Youth Stranded on Waiting Lists

All existing comprehensive programs designed for opportunity youth that have been shown to be effective and have waiting lists should be expanded to welcome all the young people seeking a chance to get back on track. When programs are successful at reconnecting youth, they do not necessarily receive additional funding. The money the government saves by successfully reconnecting youth is often saved by a different program or agency than the one that served the youth. For example, if a program like the U.S. Department of Labor’s YouthBuild program is able to successfully train and graduate a youth who was perhaps on food stamps or statistically more likely to commit a crime, the savings gained as a result of the youth no longer needing food stamps or not entering the juvenile justice system benefit these other agencies; they are not reinvested in YouthBuild. We need to turn that equation around by rewarding successful programs with more funding, which could be done at a fraction of the cost of the social services opportunity youth will otherwise need, so we can further reduce the need for government spending over these youth’s lifetimes and reduce the enormous costs to the taxpayer. Innovative funding mechanisms such as the Maryland Opportunity Compact, Social Impact Bonds and Pay for Success Initiatives ensure that savings are reinvested in scaling up successful programs.

IN 2011, OPPORTUNITY YOUTH COST THE TAXPAYER \$93 BILLION. OVER THEIR LIFETIMES, THIS COHORT OF OPPORTUNITY YOUTH WILL COST TAXPAYERS \$1.6 TRILLION.

## 3. Invest in Invention to Create and Pilot New Approaches

Investing in the spread of effective programming is necessary but not sufficient. National investment is also needed to support the invention and piloting of new pathways to success for opportunity youth. Such investment can build on the creativity of local community-based organizations across the country that are on the front lines of serving these young people. The Investing in Innovation Fund (i3)-type developmental grants and the President’s Workforce Innovation Fund are potential models for such an investment.

## 4. Measure Performance and Ensure Accountability: Disconnected Measurement Systems Lead to Disconnected Youth

As our call for integrated community solutions made clear, reconnecting opportunity youth requires a number of institutions, systems and organizations working together. To do so with precision, community leaders need rigorous data to hold decision-makers collectively accountable for results. Too often, instead of having one effective data and accountability system, communities have multiple fragmented data systems, each of which lacks the breadth and capacity to be used to drive overarching accountability for opportunity youth. These parallel data systems often make redundant technological expenditures, collect overlapping sets of information, and are built in ways that inhibit the flow and transfer of data among them. As a result, despite new resources devoted to data systems, most community leaders still do not have the information they need to be effective. The U.S. Government is also behind other industrialized nations in regularly reporting on youth who are out of school and out of work, presenting an opportunity for the U.S. to more regularly collect and report information on opportunity youth, perhaps quarterly through the Current Population Survey or American Community Survey.



## 5. Cut Red Tape and Align Disjointed Policies to Reduce Fragmentation, Improve Efficiency, and Get Better Results

Communities often have multiple, fragmented efforts to serve opportunity youth, each governed by a separate federal policy which creates red tape and frustrates efforts by community leaders to align disjointed services into a coherent strategy to reconnect young people to productive adulthood. Most obvious are the differences in eligibility requirements for various federal programs, and different data management systems to measure demographics and impact.

## 6. Incentivize Employers to Train and Hire Opportunity Youth

Employers play an essential role in helping create career pathways for disconnected young adults. While some employers are actively providing career pathways for these young adults, incentives are needed to get more employers to the table as a partner in this critical role. The federal government took a small step in that direction by authorizing the Disconnected Youth Opportunity Tax Credit (DYOTC) in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2010. The DYOTC provided a tax credit to employers who hire an opportunity youth, as defined by the law. This approach needs to become permanent and, rather than just reward employers for hiring opportunity youth, it should include incentives for employers to provide a range of valuable experiences such as training and internship opportunities provided directly by an employer or in partnership with a community-based program.

Another tool for employers is the youth employment toolkit being developed by the White House Council for Community Solutions. The toolkit is a resource that helps companies build an engagement program for opportunity youth or expand on an existing program by focusing on activities that can provide opportunity youth with work-related skills, exposure to workplace experiences, and employment.

OUR SURVEY SHOWED THAT OPPORTUNITY YOUTH ARE MORE LIKELY TO RESPOND TO RECONNECTION STRATEGIES THAT PROVIDE STRONG, INTEGRATED SUPPORTS AND TREAT THEM AS PART OF THE SOLUTION RATHER THAN THE PROBLEM.

## 7. Listen to the Consumer: Bring Opportunity Youth to the Table as Policies Are Developed that Affect Their Lives

Our survey showed that opportunity youth are more likely to respond to reconnection strategies that provide strong, integrated supports and treat them as part of the solution rather than the problem. It is important to recognize their responsibility and their voice in reconnecting to school or career training. The programs that engage them should likewise offer a place at the table for opportunity youth and successfully reconnected youth to incorporate their feedback and evaluation in refining programs that serve youth. The federal government could help by establishing a Presidential Youth Council to empower disadvantaged youth across the country, and to ensure that scarce federal resources for youth programs are directed toward where they can bring the most benefit.

## 8. Create a Federal Child and Youth Cabinet to Set Goals and Targets and to Oversee Work Across Agency Lines; Support Similar Efforts at the State and Local Levels

As was made clear by the 2003 White House Task Force on Disadvantaged Youth, the Federal government runs hundreds of programs to serve children and youth ages 0-24, spread across at least 12 departments and agencies. Many of these efforts are essential and effective; however, they are not part of an integrated, strategic plan to help opportunity youth achieve successful adulthood and they too often work in silos that create barriers that frustrate outcomes. By creating a Federal Child and Youth Cabinet and publishing a cohesive national youth policy strategy, government could provide leadership that transcends silos, provides a clear vision for success for all efforts supporting children and youth, and helps communities implement holistic solutions that work.

## OPPORTUNITY ROAD

### Introduction

The transition from youth to adulthood has arguably become more complex as the skills required for today's jobs have increased considerably over previous generations. While most young adults eventually make their way with possibly a few bumps on the road and support from parents or family and friends, many vulnerable youth without strong supports find the transition more difficult and some do not make it at all. Described as "disconnected youth" in recent social science literature, youth who are not connected to school or to work may be vulnerable to negative outcomes as they make the transition to adulthood.

Their disconnection also represents a significant loss of opportunity for the nation. America is engaged in the toughest global competition in our history. Yet some of our brightest players will never even get in the game. Among our youth, every dropout from high school or college means we lose a future scientist, doctor or teacher. America will not be able to compete while a significant share of the next generation is left behind.

And the number of opportunity youth is significant and growing. Recent estimates conservatively put the figure at 6.7 million opportunity youth or 17 percent of the total youth population between the ages of 16 and 24.<sup>2</sup>

The number of youth who may be 'partially connected' or struggling to make the transition to adulthood may be far higher. In the summer of 2011, the unemployment rate for 16-24 year olds actively looking for work was more than 18 percent or twice the overall unemployment rate; and for young African Americans and Hispanics it was 30 percent and 20 percent, respectively.<sup>3</sup> We have chosen to call them "opportunity youth" because new survey data show they seek opportunity for education, employment, and community service; and because they offer an opportunity to the nation to benefit from their talents if we can mobilize the political will and resources to offer them appropriate pathways to productive adulthood.

On behalf of Civic Enterprises and the America's Promise Alliance, Peter D. Hart Research Associates undertook a national cross-section of opportunity youth in 23 diverse locations across the United States in August 2011 to learn about common elements in their personal histories and their lives today, and to explore opportunities to reconnect them to work and school. At the time of the survey, respondents were neither enrolled in school nor planning to enroll in the coming year, were not working, and had not completed a college degree.

What we found was both heartbreaking and uplifting, frustrating and hopeful. Despite many growing up in trying circumstances of little economic means and weak family and social supports, the youth we surveyed were optimistic about their futures. More than half believed they would graduate college when they were growing up and their hopes remain high that they will achieve the American Dream with a strong family life of their own and a good job one day. For this reason, we believe they are truly "opportunity youth"—both for their belief in themselves that must be nurtured and for the opportunity they hold for America.



We believe the results of our survey bear out that with strong encouragement and supports, beginning as early as possible, and with effort from the youth themselves, these opportunity youth can become productive members of their community and contributors to American society. A companion report and research from Clive Belfield, Henry Levin and Raechel Rosen at Columbia University shows the return on investment for taxpayers far outweighs the greater costs of lost productivity, revenues, incarceration, and remediation if we do nothing and let this generation founder. The stakes are high, but the path forward is clear and hopeful.

**Defining Opportunity Youth**

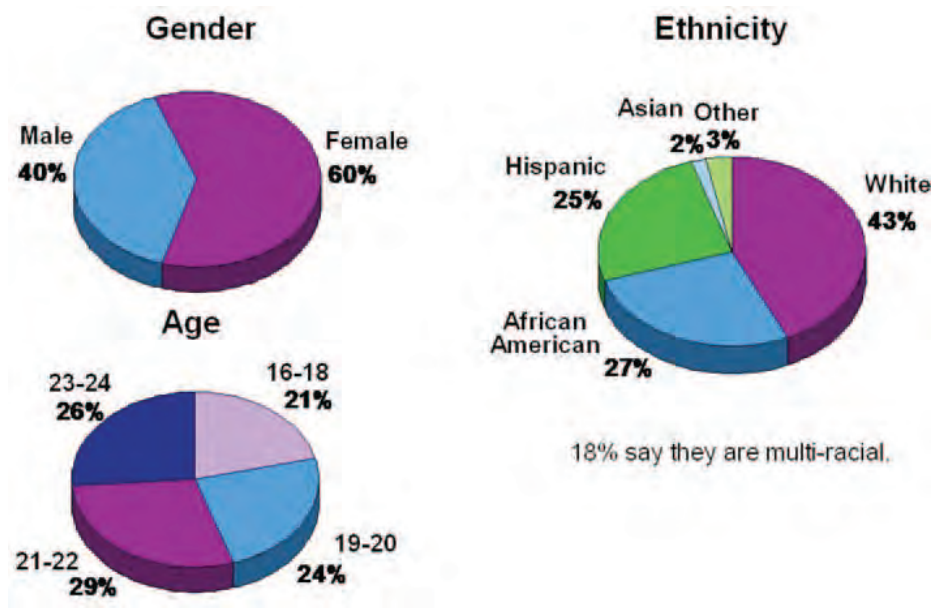
For our survey, we defined opportunity youth as youth ages 16 to 24 who are currently out of school and do not expect to enroll in the next year, have not been employed for at least six months, do not hold a college degree, are not disabled to prevent long-term employment, are not incarcerated, and are not a stay-at-home parent with a working spouse. Where possible, we compare our results to a range of estimates from the disconnected youth literature.

**Who are Opportunity Youth?**

The racial and ethnic profile of our survey is diverse and representative of census demographics for opportunity youth (figure 1): 43 percent described themselves as white, 27 percent as African American or black, 25 percent as Hispanic, 2 percent as Asian, and 3 percent as something else. Moreover, of those sampled, 18 percent of all respondents identified as multi-racial. The sample comprises more women (60 percent)

than men (40 percent), also consistent with national demographics for this population, and is concentrated on the older end of the spectrum with more opportunity youth who are older (55 percent ages 21-24) than younger (45 percent ages 16-20).

**Figure 1: Who are Opportunity Youth?**



This is consistent with current research. According to a comprehensive review by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) of nine independent studies conducted from 1999 through 2007 and CRS's own analysis of Current Population Survey (CPS) data, more female and minority youth are disconnected. The rates of disconnection have also remained stable from 1988 to 2008 with disconnection rates for females consistently higher than for males and for minorities than non-minorities.

“ ONE DAY, I JUST LOOKED BACK, I SEEN HOW MANY LIVES I DESTROYED. YOU KNOW HOW MANY KIDS TURNED BLOOD BECAUSE OF ME? YOU KNOW HOW MANY KIDS GOT SHOT BECAUSE OF ME, SOLD CRACK BECAUSE OF ME?... I WANT TO REBUILD LIVES. I WANT TO RESTORE. I JUST TOOK SO MUCH FROM MY NEIGHBORHOOD AND GOT SO MANY PEOPLE LOCKED UP AND SHOT AT, NOW I’M READY TO PUT THAT BACK IN.” —FOCUS GROUP, AUGUST 12, 2011, LED BY HART RESEARCH

CRS determines the difference between males and females can be partially explained by the fact that females were more likely to be parenting (2.5 percent of females compared to 0.1 percent of males). Parenting status also seems to explain the difference between non-Hispanic white males and females and between non-Hispanic black males and females. If parenting youth were removed from the population, black and white females would be somewhat less likely to be disconnected than their male counterparts. Even after accounting for parenting status, Hispanic females are more disconnected than their male counterparts (6 percent compared to 4 percent).<sup>4</sup>

Overall, non-Hispanic black females had the highest rate of disconnection (11.2 percent) compared to 9.5 percent of Hispanic females and 4.2 percent of white females. The same was true among males: 6.8 percent of blacks, 4.0 percent of Hispanics, and 3.0 percent of non-Hispanic whites were disconnected. And disconnectedness was found to increase with age: 2-3 percent of males and females ages 16-18 were disconnected, compared to 5 percent of 19-24 year old males and 8-9 percent of 19-24 year old females.<sup>5</sup>

CRS also finds that opportunity youth typically have fewer years of education, live away from their parents, have children, and are twice as likely to be poor when compared to their connected peers. Their parents are also more likely to be unemployed and have lower education levels. Levels of opportunity youth are expected to rise due to the current economy.

**Many Opportunity Youth Started Out on the Bottom Rungs of the Socio-economic Ladder**

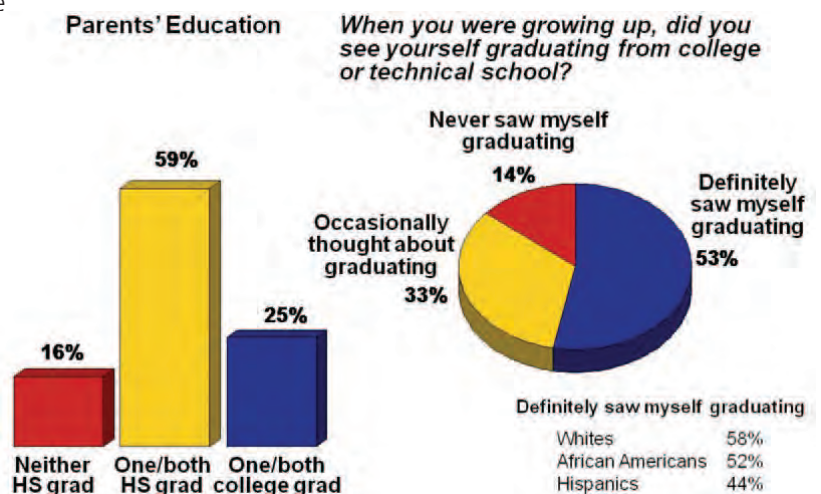
Many opportunity youth in our survey started out on the bottom rungs of the socio-economic ladder. Three in five opportunity youth say they grew up in a poor (22 percent) or working-

class (38 percent) home (figure 2). However, two in five opportunity youth describe their family’s economic situation when they were growing up as middle class or better suggesting their disconnection may be signaling downward mobility.

They were also more likely to be raised in a single parent family than connected youth. Forty-four percent of opportunity youth in our survey were raised by a single parent. Far more were raised by a single mother (38 percent) than by a single father (6 percent). Forty-five percent (45 percent) grew up in a two-parent home and another nine percent were raised by a family member other than their parents. By comparison, 27 percent of U.S. children lived in single-parent families in 2010.<sup>6</sup>

This is consistent with research from Child Trends that found that young people who lived with both of their biological or adoptive parents before age 16 experienced disconnection at a much lower rate (13 percent) than did those youth in stepfamilies (27 percent), single-parent families (29 percent), and those who lived with neither parent (33 percent).<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 2: Family Situation Growing Up**

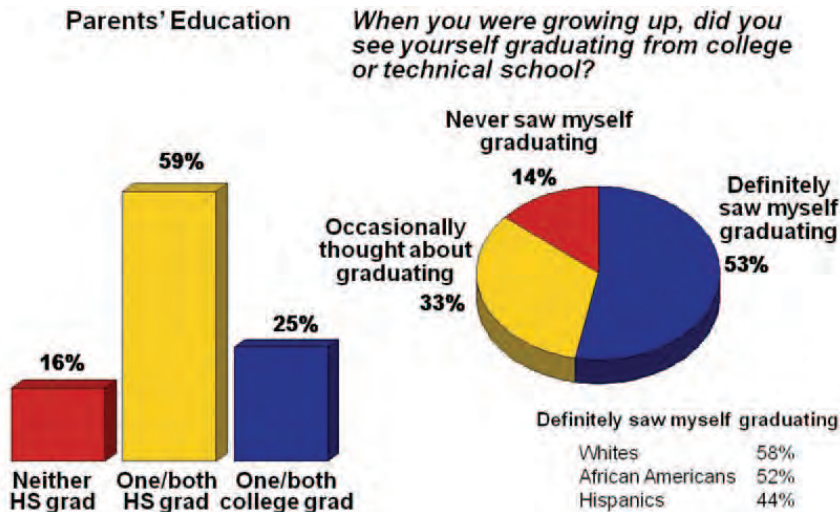


*However, They Remained Optimistic Growing Up*

Very few opportunity youth in our survey grew up in households with a parent who had graduated college, yet more than half definitely saw themselves as graduating college when they were growing up (figure 3). Only one-quarter (25 percent) of those surveyed have at least one parent who graduated from college, and a full 44 percent say that at least one of their parents lacks a high school degree. Yet despite their parents' circumstances growing up, when asked whether they saw themselves graduating from college or technical school, more than half (53 percent) say that they definitely thought they would do so and another third (33 percent) say that they occasionally thought about graduating from college. Only 14 percent say that they never saw themselves as a college graduate. Whites were more likely to see themselves definitely graduating from college (58 percent) than blacks (52 percent) or Hispanics (44 percent).

The education level of an individual's parents has been shown to have a significant impact on the likelihood of that individual becoming disconnected.<sup>8</sup> One study found that youth with parents who lacked a high school diploma had significantly higher rates of disconnection (40 percent) than those whose parents had a bachelor's degree or higher (7 percent). A similarly strong correlative relationship was found between parent unemployment and youth disconnection. Twenty-eight percent of youth whose parents were unemployed at the time of the CRS study were disconnected compared with 16 percent of those with employed parents. Also, those with parents on welfare were far more likely to become disconnected (43 percent versus 17 percent). Of course, this is not surprising considering that the parent education and employment variables are likely a proxy for living conditions in early childhood (e.g., wealth, social network, quality of education, etc.).

**Figure 3: Opportunity Youth Saw Themselves Graduating College**



**YOUTH STORY 1:**

STANLEY NARCISSE, YEAR UP BOSTON GRADUATE; INTERNSHIP, GOODWIN PROCTER

Who am I? I ask myself this question every morning while staring in the bathroom mirror.

During my pre-adolescent years, my situation at home became volatile. I would stay out to avoid the drama at home by going to the streets. I fell deeper into this new lifestyle and it began to dominate everything. My grades were dropping. Hopes of going to college were always in my head, but it was all to no avail. I was accepted to a couple of schools but didn't get any grant or scholarship money. In short: If you can't pay, you can't play.

I watched myself turn into the embodiment of a stereotypical disconnected inner-city youth. I enrolled in community college, but I would still stay out participating in questionable activities. My mother discovered my double life and ultimately kicked me out. Being homeless and more deeply involved in the streets, I lost the things that were most important to me—my relationship with my family and my dreams for the future.

While I was struggling to find employment, my daughter—Solynda Ivette Alvarado-Narcisse—was born. Her life directly depended on me, and I would never forgive myself if I was taken away from her to serve time or worse. I guess God heard my prayers because a few months later I heard about Year Up. I really didn't know what to expect. All I knew was that they would pay me to come to school, and that was enough for me. Little did I know, I was about to embark on a life-altering journey.

At Year Up, I formed a circle of support with my newfound comrades that will last a lifetime. My IT instructor, Damien Rudzinski, provided me with a sound foundation in technology, which enabled me to excel at my apprenticeship at Goodwin Procter. I made the transition from being a dependent novice to a valued member of the Goodwin Procter team, and I am happy to announce that they have offered me a position as a helpdesk analyst.

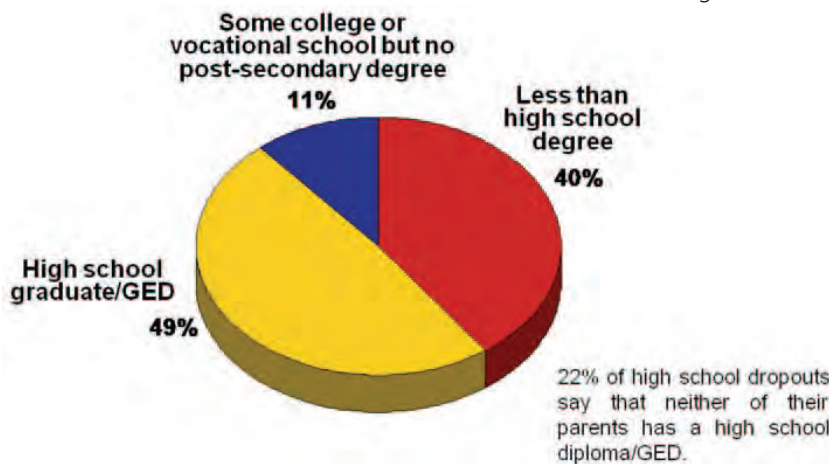
So again I ask, who am I? I am a father. I am a role model and support system. I am a man who has persevered through many personal hardships in life, strengthening my resolve to succeed. I am a man with drive and purpose who is destined for greatness. I thank you, Year Up.

Stanley Narcisse graduated from Year Up Boston in January of 2009. He was hired by the law firm Goodwin Procter as a Helpdesk Analyst after his internship there, and is still with the company.



“ I ACTUALLY ENJOYED SCHOOL. WHEN I STARTED, YOU KNOW, I WAS LIKE JUST ALL RIGHT, OKAY, I’M GOING TO GET THERE. I’M GOING TO TAKE MY TIME, BUT I’M GOING TO GET THERE, YOU KNOW. I MIGHT NOT PASS THIS YEAR, OR I MIGHT NOT PASS THIS CLASS, BUT I’M GETTING THERE. ACTUALLY, I DROPPED OUT OF SCHOOL. WELL, I GOT KICKED OUT OF SCHOOL MY 12TH GRADE YEAR. I WAS SHY OF THREE CREDITS. I WAS SO MAD THAT THEY KICKED ME OUT OF SCHOOL. BUT, AGAIN, I WAS LETTING MY EGO GET AHEAD OF ME IN THE HALLWAYS, WASN’T PAYING ATTENTION... IF I JUST WOULD HAVE STAYED IN SCHOOL FOR THOSE THREE DAMN CREDITS, I WOULD HAVE HAD MY HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA.” —FOCUS GROUP, AUGUST 12, 2011, LED BY HART RESEARCH

**Figure 4: Educational Attainment of Opportunity Youth**



Despite great optimism growing up to go to college, two in five (40 percent) of those surveyed have not graduated from high school or completed their GED (figure 4). Among 19- to 24-year-olds, 36 percent lack a high school diploma or GED. Further establishing the link between parents’ education and disconnection, 22 percent of the high school dropouts interviewed for our survey say that neither of their parents graduated from high school.

Among the 60 percent of opportunity youth who have completed high school or a GED, 70 percent graduated with a diploma and did not go on to college or technical school, 12 percent obtained their GED, 16 percent went to college for a short period of time, and 2 percent started but did not complete technical school in our survey.

Nationally, the high school dropout population is disproportionately represented among opportunity youth, with 30-40 percent of opportunity youth lacking a high school diploma or GED in comparison with only 10-13 percent of the connected youth population. Moreover, only 20.8 percent of opportunity youth have attained any form of higher education in contrast with 62 percent of connected youth. It is important to note, however, that the issue of low educational attainment results both from voluntary dropouts and expulsions. Strict disciplinary policies and fears that such students will hurt their schools’ ability to conform to national guidelines often create incentives for schools to take unnecessarily harsh actions.<sup>9</sup> Many opportunity youth tell stories of being “kicked out,” and indeed our survey finds one in three report having been kicked out of school.

**CASE STUDY 1:**  
COLLEGE, CAREER, AND TECHNOLOGY ACADEMY



The Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district had an alarmingly high dropout rate when Daniel King became superintendent in 2007. In a district of more than 31,000 children, nearly 500 had dropped out the previous year and the four-year graduation was well below the national average at 62 percent. What he also found startling was that nearly half of all dropouts, made it to their senior year before leaving school. In an effort to create a program to re-engage dropouts, he partnered with Dr. Shirley Reed, the President of South Texas College, to create a program that presented a pathway to adulthood to entice dropouts to return to school.

Realizing that dropout prevention programs are most successful if they are tailored to the specific problems of a school district, King and Reed

specifically targeted the population of students who had three credits remaining for graduation and/or needed to pass a specific portion of Texas' standardized test requirements. They called this program the College, Career, and Technology Academy (CCTA). In taking their new plan to the community, the school was advertised all over the district under the tagline, "You didn't finish high school? Start college today!" in an effort to reignite interest in learning. Also, knowing that young people respond to personalized outreach, team members went door-to-door to get students back in school. Over 200 students enrolled in the program in its first month. This not only benefited the youth in the program, but the school itself, as Texas law immediately grants increased funding to schools as enrollment increases.

Once students begin the CCTA, they are afforded great opportunities and individual attention. Upon entrance to the school, students are given a one-on-one meeting with an advisor to identify what requirements they need to graduate and to pass the state mandated exams. From there, each student's curriculum is designed to meet those goals. Once students satisfy the requirements and meet the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) college readiness assessment, students may dual enroll in college courses. Within a carefully selected range of options, students can explore various fields with high payoff potential. Students are also afforded an adult mentor, who guides them through their process, and tutors them if needed.

The CCTA has been a resounding success since its inception. The number of dropouts in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district had declined from 485 in 2006 to only 42 in 2011; a decline of more than 90 percent. During that same period the 4-year high school graduation rate rose from 62.4 to 86.7 percent, while the percent of dropouts dropped from double to half the state average.

As the program was initially successful, it has been expanded in three ways. First, students with five credits needed to graduate have been included; second, students who end their senior year without the requirements to graduate are automatically enrolled in the program; and third, students up to the age of 26 can be enrolled in the program.



**Fewer Than Half of Opportunity Youth Live with Their Parents and Many Lack Stable Housing**

Forty-five percent of opportunity youth in our survey live with one or both of their parents and another 11 percent live with a family member other than their parents. The number of opportunity youth living with their parents drops sharply with age: 68 percent of 16- to 18-year-olds say they live with one or both of their parents, whereas 42 percent of 19- to 21-year-olds and 35 percent of opportunity youth age 22 to 24 say the same (figure 5).

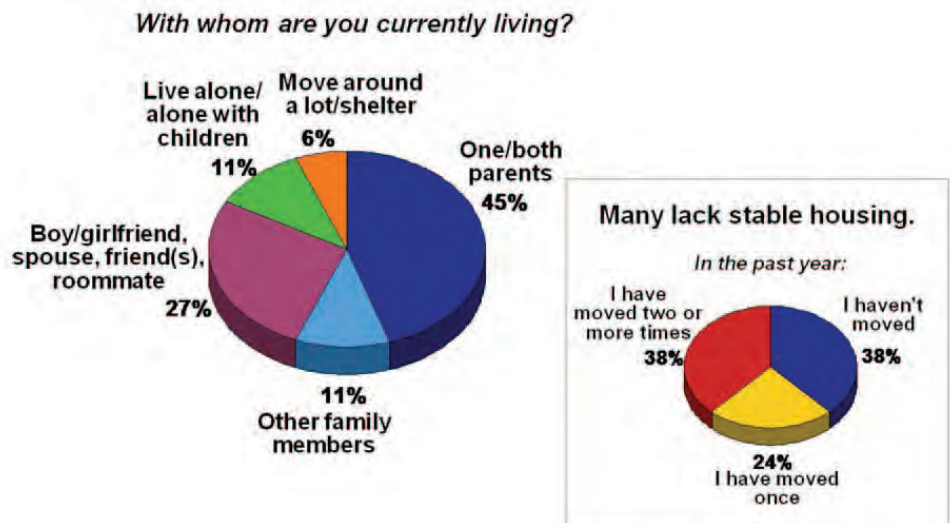
Of the 55 percent who do not live with their parents, 11 percent live with another family member, 18 percent live with their significant other (i.e., boyfriend, girlfriend, spouse), and 9 percent live with a friend or roommate. More than three in five (62 percent) opportunity youth say that they have moved more than once during the previous year. Twenty-eight percent say that having a regular or stable place to live is sometimes (16 percent) or frequently (12 percent) a problem for them.

According to the CRS analysis of opportunity youth nationally, opportunity youth are more likely to be low-income than their connected peers even after accounting for living arrangements. Of those opportunity youth living with both parents, 13.4 percent are poor compared to 4.4 percent of connected youth, of those living with only one parent, 40.7 percent are poor compared to 19.6 percent of connected youth, and of those living apart from parents, 71.3 percent are poor compared to 26.5 percent of connected youth.<sup>10</sup> And according to Census data, low-income individuals are more likely to lack stable housing. Generally, individuals with incomes below the poverty line were more likely to move than those with incomes just above the poverty line. In 2010, 23.6 percent of people with incomes below the poverty line had moved within the last year as compared with 16.5 percent of people with incomes between 100 and 149 percent of the poverty line.<sup>11</sup>

Those in our survey who identified themselves as coming from poor or working class backgrounds see fewer

support systems in their lives than those who identified themselves as middle class, and are more likely to be experiencing unstable living environments. Twice as many poor (42 percent) and working class (28 percent) opportunity youth say that having a stable place to live was frequently or sometimes a problem for them growing up than middle class opportunity youth (21 percent). Furthermore, poor (49 percent) and working class (44 percent) youth are almost twice as likely as their middle class (25 percent) peers to have moved two times in the last year. And poor and working class youth are less likely to feel safe walking around their neighborhood. Twenty-nine percent of poor opportunity youths and 17 percent of working class opportunity youths do not feel safe in their neighborhood compared to 14 percent middle class opportunity youth surveyed.

**Figure 5: Current Living Situation**



Aside from these factors, the parents of opportunity youth tend to have lower educational attainment and are more likely to be unemployed than the general population. In fact, one-third of children whose families are below the poverty line become disconnected. Twenty-eight percent of youth whose parents were unemployed at the time of the CRS survey were disconnected compared with 16 percent of those with employed parents. Also, those with parents on welfare were far more likely to become disconnected (43 percent versus 17 percent). A higher percentage of children living with only one parent (29 percent) or neither parent (33 percent) become disconnected in comparison with children living with both parents (13 percent) before age 16.<sup>12</sup>

**YOUTH STORY 2:**

FRANK ALVAREZ, LA CAUSA YOUTHBUILD, LOS ANGELES, CA, CLASS OF 2004

My name is Frank Alvarez, a graduate of the 2003-2004 LA CAUSA YouthBuild program, a ten-month youth leadership and community development organization for youth living in East Los Angeles. After graduating from LA CAUSA YouthBuild with my high school diploma and GED, I successfully completed Public Allies, an intensive 10-month social justice and nonprofit fellowship. I'm also a founding member of the Youth Justice Coalition, a nonprofit organization that addresses the educational and rehabilitation needs of incarcerated youth in Los Angeles County juvenile detention centers.

Five years ago, I joined YouthBuild with no education, job skills or any sense of responsibility for my community. I had spent the majority of my young life involved in gangs, selling and using drugs, and destroying my community. I was 23 with no future and nothing to offer my 3-year-old daughter. YouthBuild was able to develop my leadership skills, reignite my desire to learn, and instill in me a commitment to improve my community. I was able to channel my newly developed skills into a successful career in the youth development field. Today I'm proud to say that I'm a respectable member of my community, who is seen as a leader and a solution to the problems I once created. Most important, I'm fully able to support my child, and live as exemplary role model for her.

I now (2011) work full-time with LA CAUSA YouthBuild as their AmeriCorps Coordinator. LA CAUSA's AmeriCorps program has risen to new heights under my leadership, and has doubled the amount of students receiving an AmeriCorps Education Award. As a student, I've been able to maintain an excellent GPA of 3.7, while working full-time and raising my 8-year-old daughter. I am currently working towards an AA in Community Planning and Economic Development with plans to transfer to the University of Southern California. In my exploration of the community and economic development field, more specifically the community organizing, advocacy, and social capital development, I've been recognized as an up-and-coming leader with tremendous academic and intellectual potential. I've made my community college Dean's and President's honors list 2 years in row. This October I was awarded the "Inspirational Award" from The International Association for Truancy and Dropout Prevention for my work with at-risk youth.

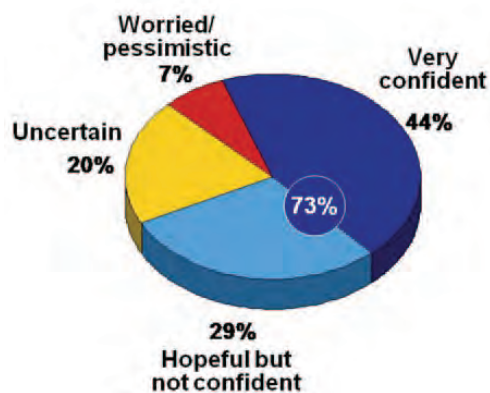
I'm always asked, "What motivates you to do this work?" In my family, education was never emphasized. My male relatives have graduated from Juvenile Hall, to County Jail, and then on to State Prison. As a youth I was destined for a long walk on the same path. This is why I believe that YouthBuild is the great equalizer in my life, because it has allowed me to chart a new path, and thus overcome the challenges posed by poverty. It has also allowed me to make amends to my community for the damage I caused as a gang member. It is my responsibility to assist other youth through their process of self-improvement while guiding them to a commitment for community improvement. All of my accomplishments would not be possible without YouthBuild in my life.

## OPPORTUNITY YOUTH ARE CONFIDENT OR HOPEFUL ABOUT ACHIEVING THEIR GOALS AND ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR FUTURES BUT NEED ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

Despite coming from challenging circumstances, the majority of opportunity youth are very confident or hopeful that they can achieve their goals and they accept responsibility for their own futures. Having clear goals and a dependable support system are strongly associated with feeling confident about the future.

Nearly three in four (73 percent) of youth surveyed are very confident or hopeful that they will achieve their goals, with 44 percent of such youth saying they are very confident that they will be able to achieve their goals in life, while another 29 percent are hopeful but not confident (figure 6). One in five (20 percent) says that they are uncertain, and 7 percent say that they are worried (4 percent) or pessimistic (3 percent) about achieving their life goals. Younger opportunity youth are slightly more confident than older opportunity youth: 48 percent of 16-18 year olds say that they are very confident compared to 44 percent of 19-21 year olds and 42 percent of 22-24 year olds.

**Figure 6: Confidence in my Ability to Achieve my Goals in Life**



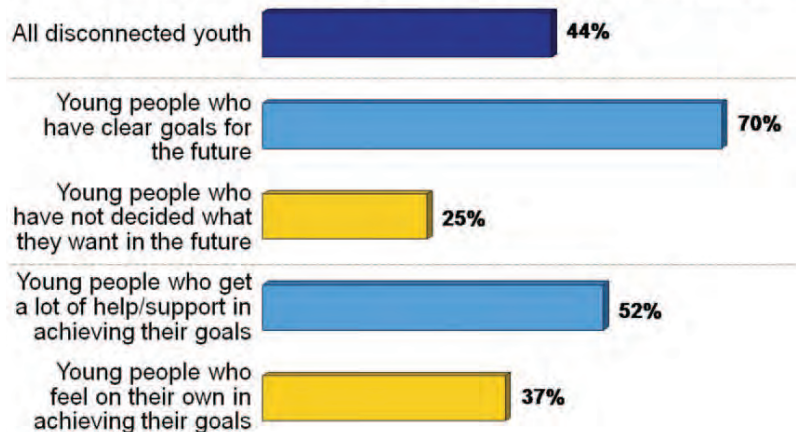
Having clear goals appears to go hand-in-hand with opportunity youths' confidence levels: 70 percent of those with clear goals say they are very confident that they can achieve their goals, whereas 25 percent of those who still haven't made up their minds say the same (figure 7). However, opportunity youth are more likely to say that they still haven't made up their minds (58 percent) than that they have clear goals (42 percent).

Opportunity youth who feel supported also are more confident about their futures. While 52 percent of those who say that they get a lot of help and support feel very confident that they can achieve their goals, only 37 percent of those who say that they are on their own feel the same. Youth who grew up in two parent homes were more likely to say that they get a lot of help and support (54 percent) than youth who grew up in non-traditional households. Meanwhile, youth who grew up in non-traditional households were more apt to feel they were on their own (63 percent).

A clear association exists between having specified goals and accomplishing something, such as graduating from high school or obtaining a GED: 48 percent of opportunity youth with a high school degree or GED say that they have clear goals, whereas only 34 percent of high school dropouts say that they have clear goals.

**Figure 7: Confidence Goes Hand-in-Hand with Goals and Supports**

*I am very confident in my ability to achieve my goals in life:*



Poor and working class youth are more than twice as likely to say that they do not have much of a support system, with nearly a quarter (21 percent) of poor youth saying that they don't feel like they have people who care about them, who want them to do well, and will help them through hard times compared with 7 percent of middle class opportunity youth and 14 percent working class opportunity youth.

**YOUTH STORY 3:**

BEATRICE SWEET, CENTURY CENTER FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY, INC. (CCEO)  
YOUTHBUILD, GARDENA, CA, CLASS OF 2000

When I joined CCEO YouthBuild I couldn't see the full picture. All I knew was that I wanted to get my high school diploma and I wanted to gain the leadership skills I had read about on the flyer that I found. I wanted to undo all the negativity that had been programmed in my head, since coming into the world. Sometimes it is not just outsiders, or so called friends that do you wrong. Sometimes we're born into families who knock you down before even getting started. Nothing hurts more, than to have your own blood tell you things like, "You'll never amount to anything." You reach out for hugs and kisses, to be embraced, and all you get is closed doors.

Well for once, I finally found a door that was open and that door was CCEO YouthBuild. For me that was where the transformation started. While attending YouthBuild, I became a completely new person. I can remember joining the program with many needs and then graduating being able to choose what I wanted to do in life.

YouthBuild changed my life entirely. I obtained both my high school diploma and GED. My self-esteem, self-confidence, reading, math and writing skills were at an all time high. For the first time in my life, I felt a sense of accomplishment. YouthBuild heightened my values and made me feel that I was just as important as everyone else was in the world. YouthBuild taught me to know, "I am somebody".

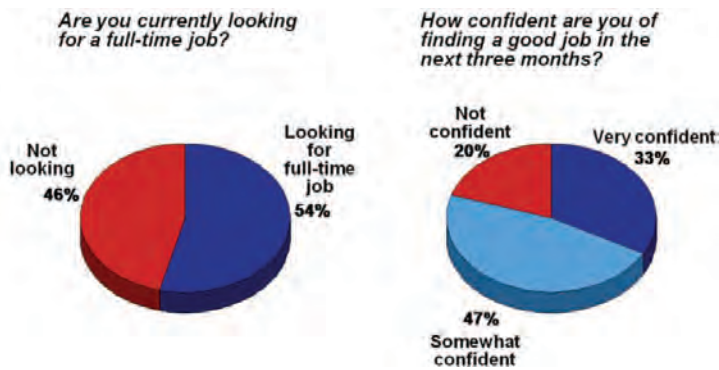
I went from being a person who knew how to Hope and Dream to a person knowing how to make those Hopes and Dreams a reality. I went from a person who used to blame everyone else for my problems, to a person being able to take responsibility for my own actions. I went from a person who knew nothing about the issues that face our communities every day, to an active person in the community fighting for the issues that we face daily. I went from a person who lived by fear, to a person who learned love and compassion. I went from a person who thought they could never accomplish anything to a person that has accomplished so many things since graduating the YouthBuild Program and still have many more things to achieve. I know that anything I put my mind to is possible.

## OPPORTUNITY YOUTH ARE LOOKING TO RECONNECT TO SCHOOL OR WORK, BUILD STRONG FAMILIES, AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE, BUT SIGNIFICANT BARRIERS STAND IN THE WAY

More than half of opportunity youth say they are looking for full-time work. While many cite the lack of jobs in their area as a major factor in their unemployment, they also say their lack of education and work experience are equally challenging.

Slightly more than half (54 percent) of opportunity youth were looking for a full-time job at the time of our survey, yet only a third (33 percent) are very confident that they will find work in the next three months (figure 8). Forty-six percent are not currently looking for full-time work. Half (51 percent) cite a lack of jobs in their area as the major hurdle to their employment, although a full quarter (25 percent) says that a lack of employment opportunities is not an obstacle at all.

**Figure 8: More than Half are Looking for Full-Time Work**

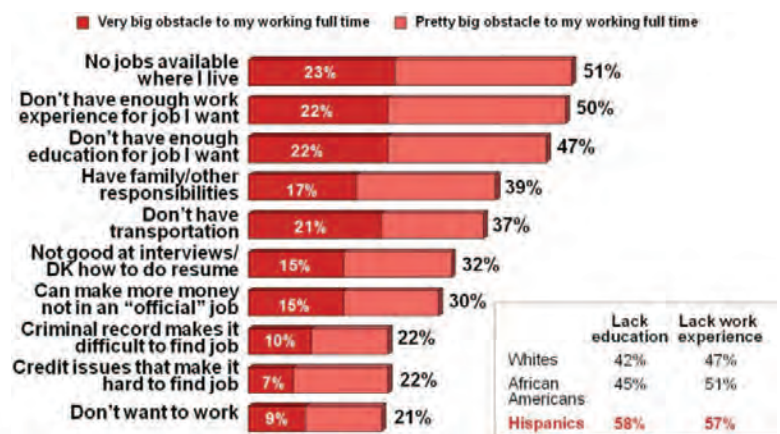


A nearly equal proportion (50 percent) say that they do not have enough work experience to get the kind of job that they want and as those (47 percent) who say that they lack enough education to get their ideal job. Hispanics particularly are concerned about a lack of education and work experience for employment—57 percent cite a lack of work experience as a major obstacle, compared with 51 percent of blacks and 47 percent of whites who say the same; and 58 percent cite a lack of education as an obstacle, compared with 45 percent of blacks and 42 percent of whites who say the same.

Thirty-nine percent of respondents cite family responsibilities as an obstacle to working full time, including 42 percent of women and 35 percent of men. Transportation is a concern to 37 percent of opportunity

youth, and 32 percent say they do not know how to prepare a resume or interview. Nearly a third (30 percent) of respondents say they can make more money in other ways without having an “official” job.

**Figure 9: Obstacles to Connecting to Work**



Poor and working class opportunity youth are more likely to say that they have trouble finding a job than their middle class peers. They attribute this to several factors—from an overall lack of jobs in their area, to a lack of work experience, and to a lack of transportation. Three quarters of poor or working class opportunity youth (74 percent poor/73 percent working class) have trouble finding a job compared to half (54 percent) of their middle class peers. Moreover, more poor and working class opportunity youth say that there aren't any jobs where they live or that transportation is an obstacle for them to finding a job. Nearly two in three poor or working class opportunity youth (63 percent poor/59 percent working class) say there aren't any jobs where they live compared to one in three (36 percent) middle class opportunity youth. Fifty percent of poor and 36 percent working class opportunity youth say that transportation is a very or pretty big obstacle to finding a job compared to 32 percent of middle class opportunity youth.

Despite these obstacles nearly all poor or working class opportunity youth (94 percent poor/95 percent working class) say that having a good career is important to them. And while the same share of opportunity youth are currently looking for a full time job (53 percent poor,

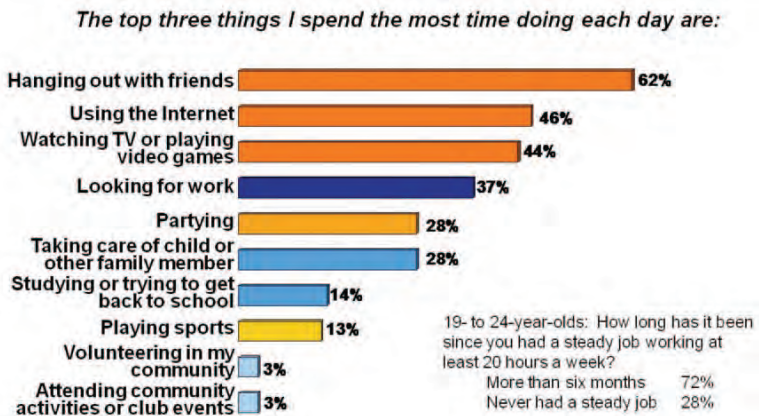
54 percent working class, and 54 percent middle class), poor opportunity youth were less confident in their ability to get a job. Only 21 percent of poor opportunity youth surveyed are very confident that they will find something in the next three months, in contrast to 33 percent of working class, and 41 percent of middle class opportunity youth.

However, despite a willingness to accept responsibility for their futures, they do not always take the next step of investing their time and energy in activities pointing toward school, job training, or employment. When asked to name the top three things they spend the most amount of time doing each day, the most popular answers are recreational activities: 62 percent say hanging out with friends, 46 percent say using the Internet, and 44 percent say watching TV or playing video games (figure 10).

The top three activities for men were: 64 percent hanging out with friends, 48 percent watching TV or playing video games, and 38 percent looking for work. The top three activities for women were: 60 percent hanging out with friends, 52 percent using the Internet, and 41 percent watching TV or playing video games. Women, however, were twice as likely to spend time caring for a child or family member: 35 percent of women compared to 17 percent of men.

Nevertheless, a large minority says that one of the activities they spend the most amount of time doing each day is looking for work (37 percent). Over one quarter (28 percent) say that they take care of a child or other family member and 14 percent say that they spend their time studying or trying to get back to school.

**Figure 10: Opportunity Youth are Not Focused on Activities Pointing Toward Success**



Forty-two percent say that reconnecting to school is frequently (19 percent) or sometimes (23 percent) a problem for them (figure 11). As respondents age, the proportion who express difficulty going back to school increases, from 37 percent of 16- to 21-year-olds to 50 percent among 22- to 24-year-olds.

Completing a college or technical degree is a goal for 83 percent of respondents who receive government assistance. However, nearly half (48 percent) of opportunity youth surveyed who receive government assistance also say that they have difficulty reconnecting to school.

One in three respondents (35 percent) have been kicked out of school—interestingly, the proportion is similar across men (39 percent), women (32 percent), whites (33 percent), blacks (39 percent), and Hispanics (38 percent). Nonetheless, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of those kicked out of school want to obtain a college degree.



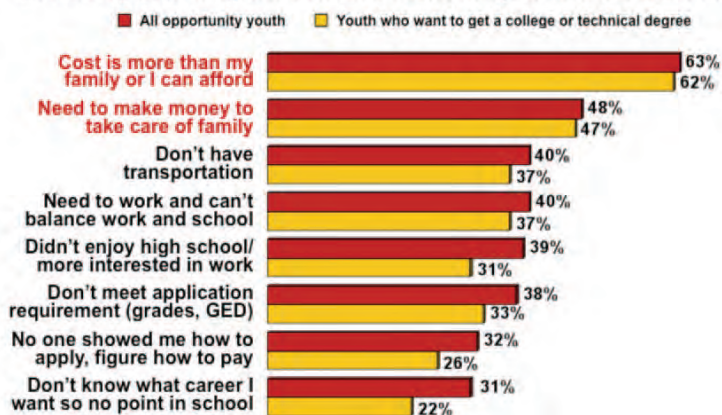
**Figure 11: Despite Clear Goals Many Say Reconnecting to School is Difficult**

	I want to get a college or technical degree some day	Reconnecting with school is frequently or sometimes a problem for me
All opportunity youth	76%	42%
Receive public assistance	83%	48%
Kicked out of school	64%	55%
Age 16 to 18	75%	34%
Age 19 to 21	77%	38%
Age 22 to 24	75%	50%
Whites	79%	41%
African Americans	73%	43%
Hispanics	72%	49%

By far, the cost of a college or a technical degree is the most commonly cited challenge to going back to school, with 63 percent claiming it to be a very (38 percent) or pretty (25 percent) big factor (figure 12). Nearly half of youth in our survey cited money concerns as a challenge to returning to school; 48 percent say they need money to take care of their family and 40 percent said they need to work and they are unable to balance work and school. Forty percent also cite a lack of transportation as a factor in their inability to go back to school. Nearly one-third (32 percent) say that no one showed them how to apply to college, such as how to fill out a college application, write a college essay, or help them figure out how to pay for school.

**Figure 12: Obstacles to Reconnecting to School**

*This is a big factor in my decision not to attend college or technical school this year:*



Poor and working class opportunity youth are more skeptical about society. They have felt the real limitations of being poor in America, and it shows in their reflections on self and society. Poor and working class youth are less confident that they will be able to achieve their goals in life. Only 37 percent of poor and 35 percent of working class opportunity youth are very confident they will reach their goals, compared to 57 percent of middle class opportunity youth—a difference of 20 percentage points.

Nearly one-third of poor (30 percent) and working class (28 percent) opportunity youth feel that society has put up roadblocks to getting a good education and job, compared to 16 percent of middle class opportunity youth surveyed. Sixty percent of poor and 49 percent of working class opportunity youth say that they are not in school because they needed to make money for their families—a 20 percentage point difference from their middle class peers (40 percent).

Poor and working class youth also feel that college is more than their family can afford. Seventy-seven percent of poor and 68 percent of working class opportunity youth compared to 50 percent of middle class opportunity youth are put off from applying to college due to the cost. Poor and working class opportunity youth cite not knowing how to apply for college—including figuring out how to pay for school—a very big or pretty big factor in their decision not to attend school (41 percent poor, 35 percent working, and 23 percent middle class opportunity youth). Moreover, although not as dramatic a point differential, poor and working class opportunity youth are less likely to know where to go for information on making life decisions (61 percent poor and 57 percent working class opportunity youth say they know where to find info for life decisions compared to 70 percent of middle class opportunity youth).

#### YOUTH STORY 4:

ONEYDA ESCOBAR, YEAR UP PROVIDENCE GRADUATE; INTERNSHIP, COVIDIEN

“Quédate en la escuela y trabaja duro”. These are two statements that my mom and dad repeated over and over while I was growing up: stay in school and work hard. My mom and dad grew up in El Salvador and had to give up their education to work before the age of 12. Because of their sacrifices, I have always taken school very seriously.

I’ll never forget the day that I got into the University of Rhode Island. I was extremely excited. It seemed that not only my dream had come true, but the dream of my entire family.

Just when I thought everything was going well, I received a financial aid letter from URI stating that it was a mistake that I had received financial assistance. I didn’t qualify due to my immigration status, and I had to pay back a total of \$11,000. My mom and I hopped from bank to bank, only to be turned down. Eventually, it hit me that I wouldn’t be able to return to school. All of my hopes had been crushed.

This resulted in me having to put my education to the side to find a job. With just a high school diploma, I couldn’t find any job with a career path. I was stuck in dead-end jobs for three years. That’s when I stumbled upon Year Up. I was looking for a job when my cousin told me about a program you get college credits for and you get paid for attending. I said, “Wow, that sounds way too good to be true.” When I received the letter of acceptance in the mail, I felt a great sense of relief and hope. This was the opportunity I needed to make my dream a reality again. Year Up was the most intensive educational opportunity I’ve encountered. I had to push myself further than ever before. We had many long nights trying to finish essay after essay, studying for certifications, working on our business plans, and overcoming many years of self-doubt.



I consider myself so lucky to have interned at Covidien and I’m so grateful that they hired me as a helpdesk analyst. I troubleshoot with end users about connecting to the VPN, logging into the AS/400 and EMNET systems and going through hundreds of tickets a day. A year ago all this would have been a foreign language, but today it’s what I do for a living, and I love it.

In the end, all my hard work and dedication is paying off. I have the confidence and skills to overcome any and all challenges. I honestly believe that there should be more Year Up sites because Year Up is truly closing the Opportunity Divide for many young adults. Thank you, Year Up.

Oneyda Escobar graduated from Year Up Rhode Island in July of 2010. She was hired by Covidien as a Helpdesk Analyst after her internship there, and is still with the company.



Having a good family life is a unifying aspiration among opportunity youth. An overwhelming 86 percent say that having a good family life is extremely (66 percent) or quite (20 percent) important to them. And more than two in three (68 percent) say that they feel that they have a support system in their life, people who care about them, want them to do well, and will help them through hard times. However, opportunity youth appear to receive more emotional support than help achieving their life goals. When asked to think about how they achieve their goals, 45 percent say that they get a lot of help and support whereas 55 percent say that they're pretty much on their own.

**Figure 13: Many Are Confident They Can Achieve Their Goals**



Nearly seven in ten (69 percent) also say making a difference in improving life for others is extremely (41 percent) or quite (28 percent) important to them. Yet just 3 percent report they are currently volunteering in their communities (figure 10), suggesting their disconnection from school and work is impeding their desire to give back. According to America's Civic Health Index, those who get a bachelor's degree are nearly five times more likely to volunteer as high school dropouts. Even getting just a high school diploma makes it twice as likely that a person will vote or belong to a group and three times as likely that a person will volunteer or work with neighbors to solve problems than those who never walked the graduation line.<sup>13</sup>

The fact that there is a high motivation for improving life for others indicates that those initiatives that include community service in their comprehensive education and job training programs will be attractive to opportunity youth.

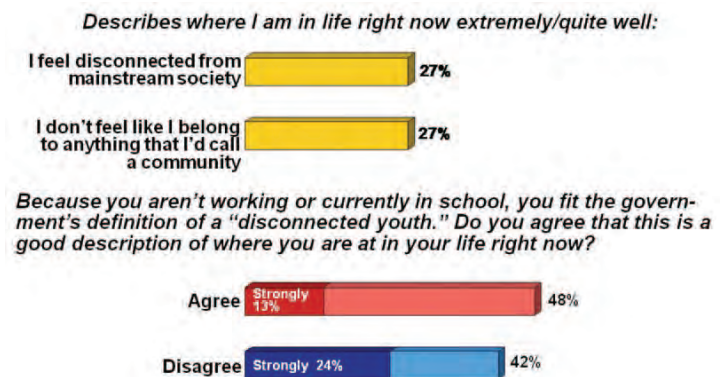
**Opportunity Youth Do Not Always See Themselves as "Disconnected"**

Relatively few of those interviewed feel disconnected from mainstream society, and they are divided on whether the term "disconnected youth" accurately describes young people who are not working or in school.

When given a series of phrases that could describe their current life circumstances, only 27 percent say that "I feel disconnected from mainstream society" describes them extremely (11 percent) or quite well (16 percent). Likewise, only 27 percent say that the phrase "I don't feel like I belong to anything that I'd call a community" describes them extremely (11 percent) or quite well (16 percent).

Those surveyed are split on whether the term "disconnected youth" is a good description for where they are at in their life right now: 48 percent agree that it's a good description whereas 42 percent disagree. When asked what term they would use to describe people like themselves who are out of school and out of work, only 4 percent used the term disconnected or disconnected youth. By contrast, 12 percent said "lazy, not motivated, or slackers," 7 percent prefer the term "unemployed," 6 percent would describe others like themselves as "free or independent spirits," 5 percent say "struggling, unlucky," and 5 percent "lost, troubled, hopeless, helpless."

**Figure 14: Most Don't Feel 'Disconnected' but Understand the Perception**



## OPPORTUNITY YOUTH POINT THE WAY TO RECONNECTING

Reconnecting and reengaging opportunity youth with school, work, community service opportunities, and social support networks are the overarching goals in addressing the opportunity youth challenge. This section highlights several different reconnection models including education, work, job training, and national service programs.

The age range of opportunity youth may raise different challenges and require different solution strategies. School-age opportunity youth, or those aged 16 to 20, may be eligible for more services than their young adult (21 to 24 year old) peers. For example, in New York, individuals over the age of 21 are ineligible to obtain a high school diploma and instead must take the GED and youth aging out of foster care are only eligible for Medicaid until age 21. According to the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, while single service programs such as GED prep, adult literacy, and workforce training provide valuable assistance to the client, they are typically more adult-oriented and do not provide “developmentally appropriate support services.”<sup>14</sup>

For school-age opportunity youth, education programs that help them obtain their high school diploma or pass the GED in preparation for a postsecondary credential may be more appropriate. For older opportunity youth, a combination of educational programming, job training and income earning opportunities may result in a more effective reconnection. Regardless, any model must motivate opportunity youth to participate and remain engaged long enough to ensure a successful outcome.

“YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD THEY GOT TO... SEE IT WITH THEIR EYES. ... BUT ONCE THEY SEE IT, LIKE WHEN THEY SEE MIKE HAD HIS BRAND NEW CAR, AND IT WASN'T STOLEN AND I PULLED UP TO THE SAME BLOCK THAT I USED TO SELL DRUGS ON, IT'S LIKE YEAH, I GOT A PAYCHECK, AND I GOT A BANKCARD, AND I GOT A CREDIT CARD, AND I GOT MY KIDS AND THEY ALL LOOK GOOD, AND WE'RE DOING THIS THING... WE'RE HANGING OUT, AND IT'S ALL LEGAL AND LEGIT, AND I LOVE WHAT I DO. AFTER A WHILE IT'S LIKE, CAN YOU HELP ME? AND IT'S FUNNY, BECAUSE THE FIRST TIME THEY'RE ACTUALLY KIND OF ASHAMED TO ASK YOU. LIKE THEY'RE ASHAMED TO ASK FOR HELP. AND THAT'S WHAT REALLY THE MAIN THING IS, IS TO SAY THAT THEY NEED HELP. AND ONCE THEY, ONCE YOU TELL THEM LIKE IT'S OKAY, MAN, TO GET HELP, THEY BE ALL FOR IT AFTER THAT.” —FOCUS GROUP, AUGUST 12, 2011, LED BY HART RESEARCH



**CASE STUDY 2:**  
EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL YOUTH INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

*AmeriCorps:* AmeriCorps and the AmeriCorps\*National Civilian Community Corps provide young people with the opportunity to gain work experience and job skills, a living allowance, and funding for continued education. AmeriCorps provides grants to public and nonprofit organizations to address critical community needs, including education, disaster services, health, environmental stewardship, economic opportunity and service to veterans and military families. AmeriCorps service members are placed with grantees and provide direct services to residents in their communities. AmeriCorps\*NCCC is a full-time, team-based, residential program for young people between the ages of 18 and 24. NCCC members participate in service projects in their region and help with disaster response and recovery efforts across the country. Opportunity youth can serve as AmeriCorps members or may receive services from organizations supported by AmeriCorps funding.



*Improved Solutions for Urban Systems:* ISUS, an affiliate of the National Youth Employment Coalition in Dayton, Ohio, has created dropout recovery career and technical charter schools focused on in-demand careers—construction, advanced manufacturing, renewable energy, and health care. Through an articulation agreement with Sinclair Community College, designated ISUS teachers can be certified as adjunct faculty to teach college-approved curricula leading to an Associate’s degree in health care and other selected fields. To support this postsecondary bridging, ISUS has lengthened the school day and school year. Once enrolled at Sinclair, students can also earn nationally recognized “stackable” industry credentials, Associate’s degrees, and apprenticeships.

*Manchester Bidwell Corporation National Center for Arts and Technology (NCAT):* NCAT is a national strategy to build arts and technology centers to engage youth at-risk of dropping out of school and help keep them in school. Four affiliate centers have opened up in cities around the country and a dozen more are in development. The Pittsburgh, PA affiliate, Manchester Craftmen’s Guild (MCG), serves students in 9th to 12th grades and provides year-round complimentary mentored studio arts programming in photography, film, and digital multi-media, ceramics, design and fiber arts. MCG found that 97 percent of seniors participating in one of the programs graduated on time and 86 percent of them were accepted to a postsecondary education institution. The affiliate in Grand Rapids, MI, West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology (WMCAT), gives high school students the opportunity to participate in school day, after school, and summer programs in photography, film, digital and graphic design, fiber arts, painting and drawing. According to WMCAT, 85 percent of the high school students served by their programs graduated on time.

**CASE STUDY 2:** continued

*National Guard Youth Challenge Program:* Operated by the National Guard of the United States, the program's aims are "to intervene in and reclaim the lives of at-risk youth to produce program graduates with the values, skills, education and self-discipline necessary to succeed as adults." The program is open to male or female high school dropouts who do not have drug problems or trouble with the law. It consists of a seventeen and a-half month course and operates at thirty-two different sites in twenty-eight states. During that time, program participants receive instruction in numerous core areas including academia, life-coping skills, leadership, and physical training among many other areas of learning. The Youth Challenge program has graduated over one hundred thousand teens and over sixty percent of program graduates received their high school diploma or GED. Moreover, over fifty percent joined the workforce and twenty-eight percent continued on to higher education.

*Postsecondary Success Initiative:* Launched in 2008, the Postsecondary Success Initiative is an ambitious effort to create momentum toward postsecondary credits and credentials among young people who are low income, mostly minority, and disconnected from both the educational and workforce systems. The initiative is a collaboration of Jobs for the Future (JFF), YouthBuild USA, the National Youth Employment Coalition, and, as of 2011, the Corps Network, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Open Society Foundations.

Through this initiative, these national organizations are providing technical assistance and support to a total of 29 participating sites and two dozen affiliated college partners across 15 states to enrich their academic offerings, create bridges to postsecondary education, and collaborate with postsecondary partners to build

supports to ensure that young people get the academic momentum they need to attain a postsecondary credential. Central to this effort are partnerships, codified in memoranda of understanding, between community colleges and local schools or programs.

Across the initiative, young people's aspirational goals have become a reality for the first cohort of students: they are graduating from high school, enrolling in college, and persisting in the first year at two to three times the rate of their peers. For example, 71 percent of all students entering YouthBuild USA's first cohort of Postsecondary Success Initiative sites earned a high school diploma or GED—even though over 90 percent of them had dropped out of previous schools and many were disconnected from both school and work. Of the graduates, 51 percent enrolled in postsecondary education and 59 percent persisted through their first year.



**CASE STUDY 2:** continued

*Service and Conservation Corps:* Service and Conservation Corps, like those advocated for by The Corps Network, are state and local programs that provide service opportunities for youth between the ages of 16 and 24, many of whom are opportunity youth. Participating youth receive mentorship, a modest stipend, continuing education opportunities, job training, and work experience. Many of the programs prepare corps members with the skills they need to compete in the emerging green technology economy, by exposing them to opportunities in energy auditing and building retrofitting, solar panel installation, natural resource conservation and land management, and disaster preparation and recovery. For example, the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps (RMYC) in New Mexico engages disconnected men and women with green job training programs. Through a partnership with the University of New Mexico at Taos, corps members participate in individually-tailored education programs that help them obtain their GED and continue on to college and career success. This partnership and the focus on creating a college-going culture have improved RMYC's GED attainment record.

*YouthBuild:* Operated in 46 States by the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration (DOL-ETA), this program offers a comprehensive mix of education, job training, personal counseling, community service, and leadership development to low-income 16 to 24 year olds, 75 percent of whom must lack a diploma. Court involvement is not an obstacle to inclusion. All fit the definition of opportunity youth. Young people enroll full-time for 6 to 24 months, during which they spend 50 percent of their time in individualized academic classrooms



working toward their GED or High School diploma, 40 percent of their time on well supervised construction sites building affordable housing for homeless and low-income people, and 10 percent in personal counseling and leadership development skills training. They get paid a stipend or wage for the time they spend producing housing. Many are YouthBuild AmeriCorps members earning an education award for college. YouthBuild programs typically have substantial waiting lists.

Since its inception in 1992 as an authorized federal program, 110,000 YouthBuild students have produced 21,000 units of affordable housing, internalizing the ethic of service. In 2010, 273 community-based

YouthBuild programs enrolled 10,000 young people. Half obtained their GED or high school diploma within the program period, 60 percent were placed in college or jobs averaging \$9.90/hour. In pilot YouthBuild programs funded by the Gates Foundation, these programs have increased college entrance to 43 percent of all their students, and college retention to 59 percent of those who enroll in college.

*Avenues to Reconnecting: What Opportunity Youth Say They Need*

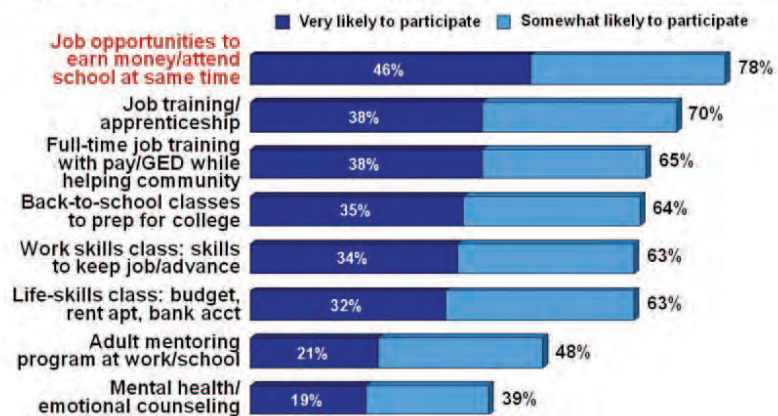
According to opportunity youth, training that allows students to earn money and to attend school at the same time ranks highest on a list of programs designed to help young people go back to school, find work, or help them with everyday problems, with 78 percent expressing interest in this type of support. Job training and apprenticeships receive the second highest marks at 70 percent, including 76 percent of men and 67 percent of women (figure 15).

Among high school dropouts, two in three (67 percent) say that they would be very or somewhat likely to participate in full-time job training program with pay and a chance to earn a GED while helping the community. The majority of respondents also say they would be interested in taking classes that help them go back to school, improve their work skills, or help with life-skills that train them to succeed (64 percent, 63 percent, and 63 percent respectively). Regardless of the type of class offered, it's key that more than 60 percent of respondents say that they want to do something that will help them become productive citizens.



**Figure 15: Programs that Address both Financial Needs and Educational Goals Prove Largest Draw**

*If it were available to you, how likely would you be to participate in this kind of program or resource to help young people like yourself find work, go back to school, or just help with everyday life problems?*



**CASE STUDY 3:**  
EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL 'EARN AND LEARN' MODELS

*Career Pathways Programs:* Many states and localities have recognized that large numbers of low-income and underprepared youth or adults need more than short-term training and credentials to secure a family-supporting wage in a high demand industry or occupation. To address this challenge, many have turned to a kind of sector-based initiative that maps and connects varied skill development opportunities that together form a pathway from low skills to successful completion of a credential and to career employment. These Career Pathways initiatives address the fragmentation and misalignment of learning opportunities, progressions, and funding streams across the education continuum. They typically combine and integrate educational programs with support services, work experience and on-the-job training, bringing disparate public agencies, service providers, and employers into close collaboration to fill gaps in local labor markets. Not a separate program in itself, Career Pathways provide a framework for weaving existing adult education, training, and college programs, based upon careful alignment of a high demand sector, one or more target populations, and specification of what it takes to support the target population in its progression to higher skills, credentials, and employment. The State of Oregon, which has one of the most fully-developed statewide Career Pathways programs, has issued completion certificates to over 2300 students in the last two years, after having scaled the program across all 17 community colleges in the state and their partners in the workforce, adult education, ESL, and employer communities. Other states such as Arkansas, Kentucky, Virginia, and Washington have used Career Pathways to align economic development, workforce development and occupational education investments.

*Southwire:* Southwire is a privately held wire and cable manufacturer headquartered in Georgia whose commitment to improving the communities in which it operates has put it on the leading edge of education initiatives for decades. With high school dropout rates approaching 30 percent around Southwire's western Georgia facilities, the company partnered with Carroll County Schools to examine how they could help. In 2007, they launched 12 for Life – a program that lets students combine their studies with practical real-world experience at a customized Southwire manufacturing facility. Through contextualized work-based learning, a robust support system, and a paycheck, Southwire's 12 for Life program gives at-risk students a pathway to success by completing 12 years of school while meeting Southwire's high production standards and filling the company's talent needs.



**CASE STUDY 3:** continued

The 12 for Life program allows students to combine a four-hour shift at a specially-designed plant, with an additional four hours of school. The program runs three shifts between 8:30am and 9:30pm, and Carroll County Schools uses their open campus night school to accommodate this schedule. At the 12 for Life plant, students rotate among workstations so they gain experience in the entire manufacturing process. They also earn two high school credits per semester. Because the workers are students, Southwire has made some modifications in the plant and processes; however, the plant functions like other production facilities. Materials the students manufacture wind up at large distributors across the country, part of a stream of Southwire products that supply wiring to one in three new homes in the United States.



*Year Up:* Year Up was founded in October 2000 as a one-year intensive education and internship program for urban young adults age 18-24. Year Up's program recognizes that both job skills (technical and professional) and higher education are necessary to provide a viable path to economic self-sufficiency. They created a high support, high expectation model that combines marketable job skills, stipends, internships and college credits. The holistic approach focuses on students' professional and personal development to place young adults on a viable path to economic self-sufficiency.

Year Up currently serves more than 1,400 students a year at sites in Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Providence, Puget Sound, New York City, San Francisco Bay Area, and National Capital Region. During the first six months of the program, participants focus on skill mastery in either Desktop Support / IT Help Desk or Investment Operations. Equal emphasis is placed on developing the professional skills required in today's workplace such as effective communication, leadership, and teamwork. During the second six months of the program, students are placed in internships with local partner companies. A stipend is provided to all participants throughout the one-year, full-time educational program and 84 percent of graduates are employed or in college full time within four months of graduation from the program.



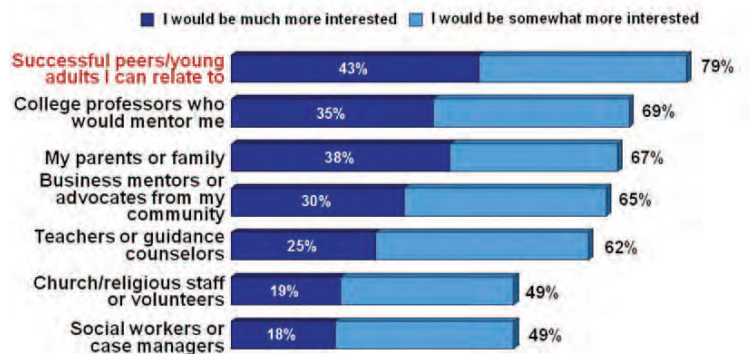
Opportunity youth want to work with people who want to work with them. When asked whom they would like to see in a new community center dedicated to helping them succeed, successful peers (79 percent) and college mentors (69 percent) rank highest. Family also is important, as 67 percent say that they would be more interested in a center if their parents or family worked there (figure 18). Business mentors or advocates from their community are also very attractive to opportunity youth, with 65 percent of such youth wanting such mentors.

Opportunity youth who want to complete a college degree are especially likely to want to see college professors who mentor youth at a center: 75 percent of opportunity youth who want to complete a college or technical degree say that this would make them more interested, whereas 50 percent of those who say that completing a college degree is not a goal for them say the same. Even social workers and case managers, the lowest ranked support group to help reconnect this population, still wrought 49 percent of support. However, more than one in five (21 percent) says that they would be less interested in a center if they knew that social workers or case managers worked there.



Figure 16: Opportunity Youth Want to Work with Successful Peers and Mentors

*If a new center opened in your community dedicated to helping young people like you find jobs, go back to school, and develop everyday life skills, how would this type of people working at the center affect your interest in using the center?*



## THE EFFECTS OF DISCONNECTION ARE SIGNIFICANT, AS ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES

Youth who experience periods of disconnectedness are likely to experience significant educational, economic, and social hardships. The low educational attainment of opportunity youth impacts their rate of employment and economic earnings. Among adults over the age of 25, the average annual earnings of high school dropouts was \$18,900, compared to \$25,900 for high school graduates and \$45,400 for college graduates.<sup>16</sup> Over a lifetime, the earnings difference between a high school dropout and a high school graduate is between \$250,000 and \$500,000 and between a high school dropout and college graduate more than \$1 million.<sup>17</sup>



Additionally, long-term opportunity youth experienced higher rates of poverty and unemployment in adulthood. Besharov and Gardiner (1998) analyzed the differences between long-term disconnected youth (those who had been disconnected 3 or more years) and short-term disconnected youth (disconnected 1-2 years). They found that at age 25 to 28, only 41 percent of long-term disconnected men and 21 percent of long-term disconnected women were employed full-time, compared to 61 percent of short-term disconnected men and 48 percent of short-term disconnected women, and

75 percent of never disconnected men and 62 percent of never disconnected women. The long-term disconnected also experienced higher rates of poverty than their peers. Forty-four percent of long-term disconnected men were poor, compared to 15 percent of short-term disconnected men and 3 percent of never disconnected men; for women the rate of poverty is 56 percent of long-term disconnected women, 22 percent of short-term disconnected women, and 4 percent of never disconnected women.<sup>18</sup>

Youth who experience long periods of disconnectedness are also less likely to get married by their late twenties. Among all opportunity youth, less than 30 percent were married between the ages of 25 to 28. For women, only 28 percent of the long-term disconnected were married, compared to 48 percent and 65 percent of the short-term disconnected and never disconnected, respectively. The marriage rates for men were lower, 23 percent, 39 percent, and 54 percent, respectively. Long-term opportunity youth who did get married were more likely to get divorced than their never-disconnected peers. Additionally, long-term disconnected women were twice as likely as short-term disconnected women to have a child before the age of 18.<sup>19</sup>

Opportunity youth are also less likely to participate in civic life. In the 2004 presidential election, only 15 percent of opportunity youth voted, compared to 47 percent of all youth between the ages of 18 and 24.<sup>20</sup>

### *Economic Cost of Long-Term Disconnection*

According to recent research from Columbia University, commissioned as a companion piece to this report, the long-term economic cost to society of opportunity youth over their lifetimes is staggering. Each year, opportunity youth cost the taxpayer \$93 billion. The social cost (which includes costs beyond the taxpayer, such as earnings loss and loss to victims of crime) is \$252 billion (2011 dollars).<sup>21</sup>

After age 25, these individuals go on to impose a future lifetime taxpayer burden of \$1.2 trillion and a social cost

of \$3.6 trillion. In total, the lifetime economic burden of a single cohort of opportunity youth is \$1.6 trillion to the taxpayer and \$4.7 trillion to society.<sup>22</sup>

The fiscal or taxpayer burden includes lost tax payments and public expenditures on crime, health and welfare. It also includes the public savings from lower schooling and college subsidies from government agencies. The social burden is larger and adds costs to victims of crime and from private expenditures on health care, among others.

Youth crime is a substantial portion of all crime committed in the U.S. (16 -24 year olds are arrested for 37 percent of all violent crimes and 43 percent of all property crimes) and some studies suggest opportunity youth are more likely to be involved in crime, in part because their incomes are lower. Opportunity youth also cost the nation billions in health care (18 percent of opportunity youth are on Medicaid compared to 5 percent for the entire cohort) and billions in welfare and social supports (opportunity youth are more likely to receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), housing assistance, food stamps and for females, The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)).<sup>23</sup>

Both the cost of inaction and the savings from reconnecting even a portion of opportunity youth are extremely high. There are approximately 3.3 million “under-attached” opportunity youth who have some education or work experience beyond 16. These youth are good candidates for receiving educational, job training, economic, and social supports to fully integrate them in to either the education system or the labor market. If this were achieved, the taxpayer savings would amount to \$707 billion. The gain to society would amount to \$2 trillion.<sup>24</sup>

Given the current economic outlook, rates of disconnection could climb in the next few years as more youth struggle to compete for scarce jobs while employers have many candidates, including those that have finished school, to choose from. However, the downturn, like all business cycles, is temporary even if longer than expected. Our economy will recover and employers will demand skilled workers to produce the

products and deliver the services of a modern 21st century economy. Helping opportunity youth successfully connect to the labor market through job training or completing degrees is not just about their success, it is also crucial for America’s success in the global economy.

The path forward is clear. We must recognize the value of all youth to our economy and our society. We must engage them in ways that both support educational attainment and job training while recognizing their need to simultaneously earn a living to support themselves and possibly their family as well. And we must do this through integrated and supportive responses that do not treat education and a job as mutually exclusive goals, nor fail to recognize the individual issues and lack of support that calls attention from the classroom. We need to integrate the concept of community service into these programs to make them more attractive to the young people and more beneficial to the communities both short and long-term.



## PATHS FORWARD

### 1. Forge Youth Opportunity Pathways: Integrated Community Solutions that Make a Difference

In the early 1990s, the Harlem Children's Zone ran a pilot project in one block in New York City's Harlem neighborhood. The pilot idea was to approach poverty through integrated community solutions by addressing housing, education, crime, and health together. The Harlem Children's Zone has since grown to 100 blocks and in the process redefined how policy makers now approach low income communities by incorporating whole community solutions in reform efforts to address failing schools, crime, and other issues associated with poverty. The Forum for Youth Investment's Ready by 21 National Partnership<sup>25</sup> has brought together leading national organizations such as United Way Worldwide, Corporate Voices for Working Families, and the American Association of School Administrators to scale up whole community solutions nationwide. The Administration has even begun to pilot "Promise Neighborhoods" and "Choice Neighborhoods" around the country.

While these programs are transforming communities and are crucial for families and young children still in school, they do not necessarily provide enough support for opportunity youth. We propose using the community model to reconnect opportunity youth to education, training or jobs in the community through "Youth Opportunity Grants."

Youth Opportunity Grants were originally authorized by the Workforce Investment Act and awarded by the United States Department of Labor to 36 high-poverty urban, rural, and Native American communities in May 2000. The communities targeted by the Youth Opportunity Grants were among the most economically distressed communities in the nation, all characterized by high dropout rates, high youth unemployment rates, and greater incidence of juvenile crime, violence, and gang activity. Independent evaluations showed that these grants boosted the employment of minorities in many of the communities served.

Youth Opportunity communities were successful in reaching and engaging a substantial portion of the youth in the target area, particularly out of school youth. An independent evaluation by DIR, Inc. for the U.S. Department of Labor found that the Youth Opportunity



program had a penetration rate of 42 percent of all eligible youth and 62 percent of out-of-school youth. The saturation approach appears to have worked well in terms of attracting and connecting traditionally hard-to-serve (and hard-to-find) groups. Youth Opportunity Grants also reduced the overall number of out-of-school and out-of-work youth and increased the number of Pell grant receipts in urban sites from 3 to 6 percent as well as the employment rate among blacks, teens, out-of-school youth, and native-born youths and had a positive effect on the hourly wages of women and teens.<sup>26</sup>

A Study by the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) found the program impacted the way communities organized their systems and resources to respond to the needs of youth in high-risk categories, which contributed to the increased professionalism of the youth delivery system. The consistent focus on upgrading staff skills, creating institutes and academies, establishing a youth practitioners' apprenticeship program, and ensuring peer-to-peer collaboration across sites has increased the expertise and caliber of youth workers in these communities. According to CLASP, the Youth Opportunity sites were very successful in connecting youth to internships and employment opportunities:<sup>27</sup>

- 23,652 internship opportunities were created
- 28,302 youth were placed in short-term unsubsidized jobs

- 18,456 youth were placed in long-term unsubsidized work
- 23,478 were engaged in training

The Youth Opportunity Grant program should be reauthorized, either as part of the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act (where it would be administered by the U.S. Department of Labor), or as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (where it would be administered by the U.S. Department of Education). In so doing, Congress could direct funding to areas of high youth distress to bring the education system, the justice system, community providers, and employers together to build pathways to opportunity for youth who are disconnected or at high risk of disconnection from school or work including dropout recovery efforts for opportunity youth that have dropped out of school. Economies of scale and efficiencies could be achieved by integrating programs and efforts.

In communities with dropout rates exceeding 50 percent, it will take interventions at scale to put these young people back on track to successful education, labor market, and civic engagement outcomes. It will require constructive engagement of our youth service systems and our public and private resources to build these pathways to opportunities and support young people over time as they navigate from the streets, to the programs and campuses, to the labor market, and to adult success.

Youth Opportunity Grants should target communities adopting systemic, multi-sector approaches to re-enrolling dropouts into local charter or “back on track” schools or programs focused on dropout re-engagement and preparation for the labor market. Successful examples of this type of innovation have begun to yield compelling outcomes in a small number of cities and towns that range from major districts, such as New York City, Philadelphia, and Chicago to smaller cities such as Mobile, Alabama and the towns of the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. Far from dropouts being an intractable problem, such efforts indicate that local educational agencies (LEAs) and charter networks, such as the Youth Connection Charter Schools in Chicago, can make significant progress when they start from a

well-designed data analysis and draw upon lessons from groundbreaking interventions and school designs.

For example, in the last four years the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo district in south Texas, has improved its graduation rate from 62 percent to over 85 percent, in part by reengaging over 750 dropouts in its College and Career Technical Academy (CCTA), many of whom are now on a path to college. New York City used data analyses to put in place a system of 46 multiple pathways that are tripling the graduation rates of returning dropouts and over-age, under-credited youth, and have graduated over 10,000 youth in the last four years.

## **2. Reinvest in Success: Reward and Scale Up Effective Programs so Providers Can Open their Doors to Youth Stranded on Waiting Lists**

With limited federal funding available for education and workforce training, it is critical that national investments place a priority on spreading models that work. Yet programs that are successful at reconnecting youth are often “rewarded” with less federal funding rather than more. One of the quirks of federal funding formulas, the money the government saves by successfully reconnecting youth is often saved by a different program or agency than the one that served the youth. For example, if a program like YouthBuild is able to successfully train and graduate a youth who was perhaps on food stamps or statistically more likely to commit a crime, the savings gained by the youth no longer needing food stamps or not entering the juvenile justice system are saved by these other agencies, not reinvested in YouthBuild. We need to turn that equation around by rewarding successful programs with more funding so they can further reduce the need for government spending over these youths’ lifetimes.

At the same time, successful programs often have higher demand than the supply of spaces available—all the more reason to reinvest in success and extend program enrollment to youth on waiting lists. In addition, there are some highly effective programs, such as Year Up and 12 for Life, that receive little or no public funding at all. Programs such as U.S. Department of Labor’s proven comprehensive YouthBuild education, job training, counseling, service, and leadership development program; National Guard’s federal ChalleNGe program

for 15 to 18 year old dropouts; local charter or “back-on-track” schools with track records of recovering older youth; Service and Conservation Corps; and part-time AmeriCorps programs that engage opportunity youth in service while supplying them with academic programming all have demonstrated proven success under rigorous evaluation and consistently higher demand than spaces available.

At this time of tight federal budgets, it is important to invest scarce resources in those programs that have a demonstrated record of producing effective outcomes. For example, a subset of programs affiliated with YouthBuild USA are achieving strong postsecondary and career outcomes among a population largely comprised of high school dropouts.<sup>28</sup> National leaders should seize opportunities to shine a spotlight on such programs, as well as on partnerships and policies that show strong results among young people who have disconnected from school and work. Existing vehicles for doing so include the White House Council on Community Solutions, and public/private efforts such as Graduation Nation, Opportunity Nation, and Ready by 21.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, the reauthorizations of both the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Workforce Investment Act provide opportunities to support effective programs for young people who have fallen off track or dropped out altogether from low-performing schools. The High School Graduation Initiative within the ESEA should be expanded, deepened, and retooled to focus more intentionally on proven dropout recovery pathways. The Department of Education’s School Improvement Grants should provide incentives for grantees and their communities to sharpen their focus on investing in models that work for off-track and out-of-school youth.

There are innovative ways to reinvest in success. The Maryland Opportunity Compact, for example, secured private sector seed capital to invest in proven strategies to give all children a good start and responsible adults and youth a second chance. These investments reduce the need for last resort public programs and save the state money as a result. As savings grow, they are reinvested in maintaining proven programs, further expanding opportunity and improving the lives of more Marylanders.

Another approach to reinvest in success is the Social Impact Bond model being tested in England. A nonprofit group named Social Finance secured several million dollars of seed capital which it used to fund social service groups helping former prisoners find work, stay healthy and the like. For the investors to get their money back—with interest—the recidivism rate must fall at least 7.5 percent, relative to a control group. If the rate falls even more, the investors could make a profit of up to 13 percent per year over an eight-year period. This profit could then be reinvested in scaling the proven successful model of preventing recidivism.

Efforts are already underway to test this model in the United States, referred to domestically as a “Pay for Success” approach. President Obama included \$100 million in his budget to fund Pay for Success initiatives across seven program areas, including workforce development, education, juvenile justice and care of children with disabilities. Given the high costs to society that opportunity youth create over the course of their lifetime, and the relatively low cost of proven successful programs such as those discussed above, an opportunity youth initiative could be an ideal use of this Pay for Success funding.

### 3. Invest in Invention to Create and Pilot New Approaches

Investing in the spread of effective programming is clearly essential to improving outcomes for disconnected youth. But it is not enough. Due to the historical underinvestment in and marginalization of this population, it is also critical for there to be continuing national investment in innovation and invention.

Such invention is currently occurring “beneath the radar”—in community-based organizations across the country that are on the front lines of serving opportunity youth. When youth begin to seek out housing, or health services, or educational pathways, they turn to these organizations, most of which exist on a shoestring, drawing on local creativity and energy to survive. What’s needed is a national investment that will leverage the best of these local efforts and help them create the partnerships, program models, and pathways to postsecondary credentials and success that these youth seek.

The Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) established under section 14007 of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) is an important precedent and potential model for such an investment. A similar approach could be undertaken with a particular focus on the invention of new pathways to success for opportunity youth. As in i3, there would be eligible entities—in this case, local intermediaries, community based organizations, and national non-profit organizations serving multiple states—that would partner with postsecondary institutions to improve the attainment of postsecondary credentials of this population of young people.

The proposed Workforce Innovation Fund represent another possible vehicle for supporting such invention.

#### 4. Measure Performance and Ensure Accountability: Disconnected Measurement Systems Lead to Disconnected Youth<sup>30</sup>

It almost goes without saying that we must be able to measure rates of disconnection accurately to ensure we are accountable to improving them. But 'official' accounting of the number of opportunity youth is problematic and compounded by the lack of a clear and common definition for disconnection.

Other industrialized countries have recognized the problem of opportunity youth, known as the Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) challenge. Australia and the United Kingdom have been focusing on the problem for more than a decade. In the first quarter of 2011, this group accounted for 12.2 percent of all youth aged 15-24 in the 30 OECD countries for which data are available, up from 10.7 percent in the first quarter of 2008.<sup>31</sup>

In the U.S., this population has only recently become a topic of interest and much less is known about this group in the U.S., presenting an opportunity for the U.S. to more regularly collect and report information on opportunity youth (perhaps quarterly through the Current Population Survey or American Community Survey), which could be part of an "Opportunity Youth Initiative." It would also be useful to continue collecting data on how many young people are actually ejected from public schools.

As our call for integrated community solutions made clear, reconnecting opportunity youth requires a number of institutions, systems and organizations working together. To do so with precision, community leaders need rigorous data to hold decision-makers and program delivery systems collectively accountable for results.

Too often, instead of having one effective data and accountability system, communities and governments have multiple fragmented data systems, each of which lacks the breadth and capacity to be used to drive overarching accountability for opportunity youth. All federal programs targeting low-income youth who have disconnected from school and work should be required to report on postsecondary enrollment and first-year persistence among low-income youth, and they should get credit for meeting these benchmarks.



Federal policies do not help reduce the fragmentation. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)<sup>32</sup> and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) were originally written before personal computers were invented, and actually prevent the responsible use of data across agency lines. And numerous other pieces of legislation call for the creation of independent data systems, but don't do enough to allow communities to align them with each other. A small sampling of existing federal efforts that could be better aligned includes:

- McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (\$70M), which requires local education agencies to "collect and disseminate data and information regarding the number and location of homeless children and youth, the education and related services such children and

youths receive, and the extent to which the needs of homeless children and youth are being met”;

- National Youth in Transition Database, which collects case-level information on youth in care including the services paid for or provided by the State agencies that administer the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, as well as the outcome information on youth who are in or who have aged out of foster care;
- Workforce Data Quality Initiative (\$15M) “provides “competitive grants to support the development of longitudinal data systems that integrate education and workforce data”;
- Statewide, Longitudinal Data Systems (\$245M), which the Department of Education provides for “statewide, longitudinal data systems to improve student achievement”; and
- Electronic Health Records (\$140M/yr) which the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services provides to accelerate the adoption of certified electronic health records by health professionals through the development of systems and incentives.



These efforts are being implemented, by and large, in isolation from each other, even though in many cases they are collecting information about the young people. Instead of pooling resources to develop one effective, interconnected, interagency set of data systems, many states and localities are developing parallel data systems—one for each federal, state, local and

foundation-funded grant. These parallel data systems often make redundant technological expenditures, collect overlapping sets of information, require local programs to submit nearly duplicate but slightly different data reporting systems to different funders, and are built in ways that inhibit the flow and transfer of data among them. As a result, despite new resources devoted to data systems, most community leaders still do not have the information they need to be effective, and most program operators have redundant requirements in different accountability systems.

## 5. Cut Red Tape and Align Disjointed Policies to Reduce Fragmentation, Improve Efficiency, and Get Better Results<sup>33</sup>

Communities often have multiple, fragmented efforts to serve opportunity youth, each governed by a separate federal policy which creates red tape and frustrates efforts by community leaders to align disjointed services into a coherent strategy to reconnect young people to a productive adulthood. Far more communities would replicate what works if eligibility criteria, uses of funds, and reporting requirements were aligned and simplified across programs and agencies. Such an approach would allow greater flexibility and more effective use of funds among community-based organizations that are often the first responders for opportunity youth.

### *Cutting Red Tape*

Most policies include a predictable set of elements dictating funding mechanisms, application processes, regulations and reporting requirements. When each grant is implemented independently, grantees lose valuable time cutting through red tape—time that could better be used to advance their missions.

### **Recommendations:**

- Allow communities to apply for multiple federal grants for disadvantaged youth with a single unified application. A similar approach has proven successful for students who are applying for college: they can fill out a single Common Application to apply to more than 400 colleges and universities. Adapting this approach to streamline community applications for federal funds would reduce the red tape burden significantly. (Certain grants could of course require specific targeted questions above what is covered in the common application.)



- Allow communities to submit a single unified report to satisfy the reporting requirements of all federal funds they receive for disadvantaged youth. (Certain grants could require a few specific targeted questions above what is covered in the unified report).

### *Aligning Policies that Establish Governance Bodies, Advisory Groups and Strategic Plans*

Too often, communities end up having lots of different interagency governance bodies (e.g., interagency councils, commissions, working groups, collaboratives), advisory groups (e.g. advisory boards, stakeholder groups), and strategic plans (e.g., planning documents, needs assessments) related to disadvantaged youth. For example, in 2010 the Deputy Mayor for Education in Washington, D.C. cataloged existing child and youth strategic plans and found that the District had 14. All of them held a piece of the puzzle, but few had the resources to be effective over time.

Aligning federal policies that mandate the creation of new governing bodies, advisory groups and strategic plans related to youth would help communities stay focused and get results.

### **Recommendations:**

- All policies that call for the creation of a governance body, an advisory group, or a strategic plan related to opportunity youth should allow communities to build upon existing governance bodies, advisory groups and strategic plans, rather than creating new ones (if effective ones exist and are willing and able to address the topic the specific policy is focused on).

### *Aligning Policies that Dictate Eligibility Criteria and Allowable Uses of Federal Funds*

Federal policies often force communities to use narrowly defined eligibility criteria and allowable uses of funds, which wastes valuable community time and energy which could be better directed toward working with opportunity youth. Opportunity youth receive a seemingly haphazard set of services that are selected not by what they need, but by the impenetrable intricacies of governmental bureaucracy. Young people fall through the cracks when their unique needs don't fit a specific bureaucratic definition of what a community is allowed to provide. Often they reappear later in much costlier settings, such as juvenile justice facilities.

### **Recommendations:**

- Create a unified intake system, so that a young person who walks into any federally funded program can receive a global assessment and automatically be accepted into all programs that they are eligible for.
- Provide all disadvantaged youth with an interagency case manager to help them navigate the services they need. Currently, several federal programs support case managers (e.g., Title IV, Title V, Title XIX, Title XXI) so that a young person could end up with several different case managers, each from a different government agency. By aligning the federal definitions of case managers and allowing communities to blend existing federal funding to create a unified interagency case management process, services would be more efficient and more effective.
- Add a 15-25 percent waiver to all eligibility requirements so as to allow flexibility in response to need at the local level and to avoid rigid divisions between groups of people. For example, Youth Opportunity Grant eligibility guidelines used to be geographic, resulting in the rejection of young people who lived across the street from others who were accepted; with 25 percent flexibility, the program could use its best judgment. The YouthBuild law provides a 25 percent waiver, thereby preventing the exclusion of young people who actually need the education services even though they have a high school diploma.
- Implement a policy that all opportunity youth are instantly eligible for all federal programs which provide the full range of services they need to transition to responsible adulthood (and that all federal funds can be used to provide the range of services the opportunity youth need). Such eligibility could be based on risk factors, such as disconnected status (e.g., out of school and out of work) and early warning indicators for in-school, off-track youth (e.g., over-age, under-credited, non-attendance). Income proxy measures (e.g., ESEA Title I, free and reduced lunch status, high-poverty census tracts) could also be used to establish eligibility. And in order to serve opportunity youth, age eligibility must be extended to 24 (as it was in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009).

*Communities report that federal policies prevent them from using federal funding to provide the following essential services to all youth who need them:*

Educational and Vocational Services

– **Afterschool and summer learning programs.**

Communities report that they are not allowed to combine funding from multiple sources (e.g., 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Workforce Investment Act, federal school turn-around funding, Medicaid funding, substance abuse, violence and prevention funding) to implement a comprehensive afterschool, summer learning and summer youth employment program.

If policies were aligned and flexibility was allowed, communities could combine support for summer jobs with strong focus on year-round jobs for opportunity youth who have returned to a diploma/GED granting program, with those jobs made conditional on staying in school. Moreover, there could be requirements to tie summer jobs to education enrichment and life-skills programming, designed to address achievement gaps and prevent or reduce summer learning losses. Localities that do not fully spend the summer component during the summer should be able to productively use the funds in the rest of the year.

– **Academic training.** Communities report that it is not clear who schools should use as the point of contact for youth in out-of-home placements. They also report that the No Child Left Behind teacher certification requirements prevent some juvenile justice centers from providing educational services.

– **Vocational training.** Communities report that the Perkins Act prohibits them from using federal funding to provide young people in the juvenile justice system opportunities to learn vocational skills, and that juveniles that have been adjudicated delinquent for a nonviolent felony are ineligible to enroll in Job Corps.

– **Higher Education.** Communities report that they cannot secure federal student education aid for young people who have been arrested and are trying to turn their lives around.

– **School Lunch Funds:** Programs report that older low-income youth attending full-time GED/job training programs arrive hungry, and should be eligible to receive school lunch funds up through age 24.

Heath, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse Services

– **Health services.** Communities report not being able to provide services to opportunity youth who don't meet Medicaid's narrow definition of "medically necessary," such as those lacking family supports because their parents are dead or in prison.

– **School health services.** Communities report that county health departments have been prohibited from contracting Title XXI to school districts due to an apparent conflict with school district Medicaid Administrative Claiming. Although the school district may be the main provider of school health services, the health department is forced to hire the staff funded by Title XXI, and in some cases let the school district school health coordinator provide clinical supervision to the CHD Title XXI funded school health staff.

– **Mental health services.** Communities report not being able to provide services for all young people who have an "emotional disturbance" because Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Social Security Act (SSA), and Medicaid all define the term differently. They also report that incarcerated youth cannot receive services funded by Medicaid.

– **Housing services.** Communities report that, even though 72 percent of all homeless youth that are enrolled in public schools spend their nights bouncing between motels and/or "couch surfing" with friends, they are not currently eligible for housing services funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

– **Substance abuse and mental health services.** Communities report that it is not clear to what extent states and localities are allowed to use funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (including Strategic Prevention Framework State Incentive Grants, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Medicaid, Mental Health Block Grant, IV-E, Medicaid) and juvenile justice funding (including grants to prevent underage drinking) to support hybrid programs that address mental health needs and substance abuse needs together. Typically a community has treatment services for people with mental illness in one agency and treatment for substance abuse in another. Clients are referred back and forth between them in what some have called "ping-pong" therapy.

## Residential Services

- **Services to prevent out-of-home placement.** Communities report not being allowed to use federal Title IV-E and IV-B funds to prevent imminent out of home placement, even though such prevention is more cost-effective than paying for out of home placement.
- **Respite care.** Communities report that, if a young person does not have a parent's permission slip with them, federal Title IV-E and IV-B funds cannot be used to provide them respite care (short-term, temporary relief to those who are caring for family members who might otherwise require permanent placement in a facility outside the home).
- **Short-term foster care/emergency shelter.** Communities report that federal Title IV-E funds can pay for room and board but not services; Medicaid can pay for services, but not room and board. Rather than having to qualify for two separate programs, young people who qualify for either should receive needed room, board and services.
- **Intensive temporary residential treatment.** Communities report that Medicaid, Title IV-E, and Title IV-B, only allow for intensive temporary residential treatment service to be provided to kids who need out-of-home placements and who have a level of mental illness that would warrant inpatient hospitalization. Young people who need to be out of their homes because of risk issues (theirs or their parents') usually do not meet those criteria and fall through the cracks – often ending up in detention.
- **Multiple services under one roof.** Communities report that inconsistent federal definitions and regulations prevent them from creating residential treatment centers that house youth from multiple systems.

This is not a complete list of services that opportunity youth need. As the survey results made clear, other services such as transportation and childcare (for the children of opportunity youth) are critical as well, and need to be part of the set of policies that need to be better aligned.

## 6. Incentivize Employers to Train and Hire Opportunity Youth

Employers play an essential role in helping create career pathways for opportunity youth. But incentives are needed to get employers to the table as a partner in this critical role. The federal government took a small step in that direction by authorizing the Disconnected Youth Opportunity Tax Credit (DYOTC) in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2010. The DYOTC provides a tax credit to employers who hire an opportunity youth, as defined by the law. This approach needs to become permanent and, rather than just reward employers for hiring opportunity youth, it should include the provision of training and internship opportunities for opportunity youth provided by an employer in partnership with a community-based program.



Given the higher unemployment and lower lifetime earnings among high school dropouts, we need alternative pathways to high school diplomas, GEDs, career credentials, and postsecondary degrees that align with the workforce skills of today and tomorrow. Businesses have a role to play in preparing the workforce of tomorrow and in helping more students 'earn and learn' in a meaningful way. We propose to amend the DYOTC to require employers to demonstrate they are providing career pathway training and support for high school completion or postsecondary degree or credential attainment to be eligible for the credit. This amendment benefits young adults by allowing them to earn a living

while gaining valuable work experience and on the job training with an employer that is also committed to education and supports classroom time towards the completion of a GED or postsecondary credential program.



Another tool for employers is the youth employment toolkit being developed by the White House Council for Community Solutions. The toolkit is a resource that helps companies build an engagement program for opportunity youth or expand on an existing program. The toolkit focuses on activities that can provide opportunity youth with work-related skills, exposure to workplace experiences, and employment. It was created by studying successful corporate youth employment programs, and by listening to ideas and observations from youth, nonprofit leaders, educators, and corporate executives across the country. The toolkit begins with a self-assessment, which helps determine a company's resources and readiness, and then guides the user through three program options that offer distinct ways for businesses to engage with opportunity youth. It is designed as a workbook that guides the user through building a base plan for their company's efforts. There are also helpful tips, examples and best practices along with links to websites with additional resources. It includes suggestions on how to measure and track the business value of engaging with or employing opportunity youth. This toolkit is not meant to be prescriptive, but is a guide to developing a program that smartly leverages a company's resources and readiness to provide youth with a pathway to employment.

In addition, we should commit a portion of national infrastructure spending to hiring and training opportunity youth. Federal contracts should require that a portion of low and middle-skilled jobs within energy and infrastructure industries be allocated to the disadvantaged and that some training opportunities in a sector that frequently suffers from skill shortages (over the longer-term) be available for those who need them most, as well as development of apprenticeships in connection with a portion of the set-aside slots, to ensure a structured training opportunity in connection within a portion of the set-aside slots.

We also should create one million service jobs and training slots for out-of-school youth concentrated in sectors such as health care, early childhood services, public lands protection, and affordable housing production and weatherization. Funding should allow for skill-building, academic training, leadership development and productive employment. Existing infrastructure such as YouthBuild and the Environmental Protection Agency's Service and Conservation Corps should be used. In addition, competitive funding should be delivered through a dual track that includes on the one hand, funding to state and local entities, including mayors, community colleges, community-based organizations; and on the other hand, funding to national multi-state non-profit sponsors with multiple affiliates.

#### **7. Listen to the Consumer: Bring Opportunity Youth to the Table as Policies are Made that Affect their Lives<sup>34</sup>**

As Jason Warren, a 17-year-old participant in Youth Force in New York City said, "If you had a problem in the black community, and you brought in a group of white people to discuss how to solve it, almost nobody would take that panel seriously. In fact, there'd probably be a public outcry. It would be the same for women's issues or gay issues. But every day, in local arenas all the way to the White House, adults sit around and decide what problems youth have and what youth need, without ever consulting us."<sup>35</sup>

The statement is poignant and powerful but hardly new: Jason spoke those words more than ten years ago. But as our survey results demonstrate, it is just as true today. Our survey showed that opportunity youth are more

likely to respond to reconnection strategies that provide strong, integrated supports and treat them as part of the solution rather than the problem. It is important to recognize their responsibility and their voice in reconnecting to school or career training. The programs that service them should likewise offer a place at the table for opportunity youth and successfully reconnected youth to incorporate their feedback and evaluation in refining programs that serve youth.

The federal government could help by establishing a Presidential Youth Council to empower opportunity youth across the country, and to ensure that scarce federal resources for youth programs are directed toward where they can bring the most benefit. Young people are unencumbered by special interest groups and lobbyists, and can share what needs to be done to ensure federal youth programs are both efficient and effective. Such an institutional structure is necessary to ensure detailed and consistent attention to youth engagement, provide training to young people to maximize their ability to contribute to policy deliberations, and allow sufficient time for productive working relationships to form between young people and senior administration officials. The Council would also reduce duplicative efforts (numerous federal initiatives reinvent the wheel every time they solicit input and ideas from youth).

The federal government should also encourage funded programs to include a youth council at the program level. Federal agencies should provide leadership in identifying and disseminating effective program approaches to creating positive cultures and youth participation through, for example, technical assistance to states and local grantees and professional development curriculum development. This should be built into each authorization as an eligible cost up. Agencies should also consider what policy flexibilities can be put in place to remove obstacles to youth participation.

#### **8. Create a Federal Child and Youth Cabinet to Set Goals and Targets and to Oversee Work Across Agency Lines; Support Similar Efforts at the State and Local Levels**

In 2003, a White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth examined the wide range of federal programs that have been created to help disadvantaged youth.

The Federal government runs hundreds of programs to serve children and youth ages 0-24, spread across at least 12 departments and agencies. The vast majority of these efforts are essential and effective; however, they are not part of an integrated, strategic plan to help opportunity youth achieve successful adulthood. Overall, the federal government's efforts for children and youth are scattershot and these fragmented efforts, contained within narrow silos, are creating challenges for community efforts to support young people.

By creating a Federal Child and Youth Cabinet and publishing a cohesive national youth policy strategy, government could provide leadership that transcends silos, provides a clear vision for success for all efforts supporting children and youth, and helps communities implement holistic solutions that work.

Such an approach has proven effective at the state and local levels. According to the *Ready by 21 State Policy Survey: Child and Youth Policy Coordinating Bodies in the U.S.*<sup>36</sup>, 29 states plus the District of Columbia, American Samoa and the U.S. Virgin Islands have a child and youth policy coordinating body which works across agency lines to coordinate services and foster the well-being of children and youth. By creating a parallel federal body, and by partnering with existing state and local child and youth cabinets, all levels of government could work together to help communities forge the types of youth opportunity pathways that help opportunity youth become productive members of society.



## CONCLUSION

For millions of America's youth, the pathways of success have become overgrown and unmarked. But helping opportunity youth complete their degrees and connect to the labor market is not just about their success, it is also crucial for America's success in the global economy of the next century. Our economy is changing and the share of jobs requiring at least some postsecondary education has increased substantially over the last four decades. In 1973, 72 percent of the nation's 91 million workers had a high school education or less. By 2007, despite the workforce swelling to 154 million workers, those with a high school education or less had shrunk to 41 percent. Put another way, despite the total number of jobs in America increasing by 63 million, the number of jobs for those with a high school education or less actually fell by 2 million. And this decline will continue: by 2018 the share of jobs for workers with a high school education or less will be just 36 percent.<sup>37</sup>

The number of opportunity youth are large—6.7 million or 17 percent of the total youth population—with huge costs to our nation.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, we can no longer afford to watch from the stands as more and more of our players are benched or out of the game. America will not be able to compete while a significant share of the next generation is left behind.

The good news, as our survey shows, is that opportunity youth are down, but they are not down for the count: many remain quite hopeful for the future. Despite having temporarily lost their way, they have a clear understanding of the path to success and value education, a good job, and a strong family and civic life. They have goals and confidence in achieving their goals. They are eager to give back to their communities. Where they have gotten off track is usually by tackling these goals on their own, or giving up on them, due to lacking the support of family, friends, educators and mentors so many of us take for granted in our own lives.

Youth want to be mentored by others like them who have been successful and can show them the way. This simple request reminds us that any of us can help if we are willing and all of us have a role to play in shaping the future for tomorrow's youth. It's time to help them return to the road of opportunity.

## METHODOLOGY

On behalf of Civic Enterprises, Peter D. Hart Research Associates undertook a comprehensive survey of opportunity youth to learn about common elements in their personal histories and their lives today, and to explore opportunities to reconnect them to work and school. The survey was conducted among a nationally representative cross section of 613 people from age 16 to 24. In accordance with the conventional definition of opportunity youth, respondents were neither enrolled in school nor working, and none of the respondents had completed a college degree. To reach this highly mobile group, Hart Research conducted in-person interviews at 23 diverse locations in four regions across the United States. Respondents completed the survey from August 12 to 29, 2011.

In addition, Hart Research Associates moderated two focus groups of opportunity youth. The first was conducted August 12, 2011 in Washington, DC among Latino and African American graduates of YouthBuild. The second was conducted October 4, 2011 among inmates at New Beginnings Youth Development Center in Laurel, MD. New Beginnings is a 60-bed secure detention and rehabilitation facility for committed youth offenders. Quotes from the first focus group appear throughout this report. In accordance with a confidentiality agreement with New Beginnings, quotable transcripts were not available from the second focus group.

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