

Disconnected Young People in New York City:

Crisis and Opportunity

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This paper is the first in a series relating to disconnected young adults commissioned by JobsFirst NYC.

JobsFirst NYC was created in the summer of 2006, with lead funding from the Clark and Tiger foundations, to serve as a neutral intermediary championing the workforce needs of disconnected young adults. Our mission is to improve the system for these young people by bringing—effectively and efficiently—all available community, corporate, private and public resources to accelerate the connecting of out-of-school and out-of-work young adults with the economic life of New York City. **JobsFirst** works by convening the myriad players involved in providing and funding services to this young adult population, coordinating and rationalizing the existing system, planning for the development of the system capacity to meet the real needs of these young adults, and raising resources for specific large-scale initiatives that provide better outcomes to more young people. **JobsFirst** seeks a future where disconnected young people are better served through continuum of comprehensive services, increased investment in workforce programs, greater employer engagement and improved program quality. For more information on **JobsFirst NYC**, go to www.jobsfirstnyc.org or call (646) 723-0756.

Through the generous support of the Achelis Foundation, **JobsFirst** was pleased to commission this work as part of its effort to increase awareness among stakeholders of the population and compelling strategies for service.

Introduction

New York City is facing a crisis. Approximately 223,000 16- to 24-year-olds are “disconnected” in the city—not working and not in school. More than 160,000 of these young people are not looking for work, with another 60,000 unemployed but actively seeking jobs.¹ As adults, many, if not most, of these disconnected young people will experience sporadic employment, work in low-wage jobs, live in poverty and rely periodically on public welfare, food stamps and Medicaid throughout their lives.²

Even beyond this litany of likely negative outcomes, there is another reason to think seriously about reengaging disconnected youth: The city’s future economic well-being will depend on the availability of skilled, employable young people to replace retiring baby boomers. Industries such as health care, construction and transportation will be heavily affected by the retirement of baby boomers in the years to come, and many of these future job openings do not require four-year college degrees.³ For example, the average age of workers in New York’s construction industry is 50; this figure translates to an estimated 20,000 construction openings in 2011.⁴ The health care industry, already suffering from a shortage of qualified job applicants, will fall further into crisis as current nurses and health aides, one third of whom were over the age of 50 in 2000, retire.⁵ The city will also need licensed drivers, automotive technicians and air transportation workers.⁶ It is clear that in spite of the current economic downturn, New York’s employers still need workers, and they will need them in the future.

The city’s disconnected young people comprise a local, untapped resource—if their potential is recognized, they could have a tremendous positive effect on the city’s economic health. If they continue to languish at the margins, however, they will go on draining city resources. For this reason, concerted action is required to reclaim disconnected young people to help them become engaged city residents, taxpayers and independent, responsible adults who can support themselves and their families.

In New York City, youth employment rates have been consistently low when compared with those of other large urban areas. But employment prospects for young people, both in New York City and nationally, continue to deteriorate, due, in part, to a lack of attention to the issue of disconnected youth. Several experiments in the 1980s and 1990s, including evaluations of the National Supported Work Demonstration and the JobStart and Job Training and Partnership Act, produced disappointing findings.⁷ This helped create a widespread consensus that “nothing works” and ultimately a shortage of funding for programming and research on disconnected youth as a whole.

Recently, however, there has been a modest surge of interest in finding solutions to the problems associated with disconnected youth. Private funders in New York, and elsewhere, have made several key investments to this end, including the creation of JobsFirstNYC, an intermediary whose mission is to improve the system for disconnected young people by bringing available resources to help “connect (them)... with the economic life of New York City.” Also as a result of this renewed focus, several recent reports have been published on disconnected youth.⁸ In this report, commissioned by JobsFirstNYC, we review what is known about disconnected young people⁹ and youth who are at risk of becoming disconnected (e.g., high school dropouts)—particularly in New York City; we also summarize a number of strategies that may help to reconnect disconnected young people with solid employment and career prospects, and highlight what remains unknown—both about these young people and about the strategies that have been promoted to support them. Our aim is to provide this information in a succinct and accessible format to encourage program developers, funders and government officials in New York City to support the creation of more effective and better coordinated solutions for successfully reengaging disconnected youth.

The Roots of Disconnection

The two main contributors to disconnection among New York City's young people are school dropout and the lack of available living-wage and career-ladder jobs. Both of these problems are much more common in poor communities. Many of the city's unemployed young people and school dropouts come from poor families and high-poverty communities—including inner-city housing projects.¹⁰ In these neighborhoods, both youth and adults are likely to be unemployed or working in low-paying positions.¹¹ Even when young people from these communities graduate, they often have few opportunities to network with employed adults or to meet potential employers.¹² Young people in these surroundings lack accurate information about what it takes to become employed; as a result, they see little advantage in pursuing the education, training or other activities that could lead them to well-paying jobs with opportunities for advancement.

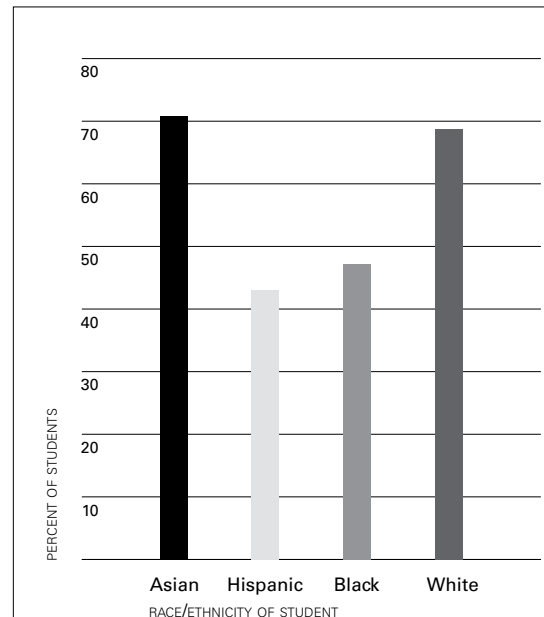
School Dropout

In New York, individuals in the labor force without a high school degree are consistently less likely to hold jobs than are those with more education.¹³ Overall, New York City's public school system has a dismal 52.2 percent graduation rate, although in recent years, graduation rates have been on the rise.¹⁴

Hispanic and African American males were the demographic groups least likely to earn their diplomas in 2000 (the most recent year for which such data is available); both of these groups had a graduation rate lower than 50 percent. Less than half of young male African American and Hispanic dropouts held jobs in 2000, while around 70 percent of Asian and white male dropouts gained employment.¹⁶ When high school dropouts find employment, they often work sporadically or in low-paying positions that lack benefits, job security or advancement opportunities.¹⁷

Figure 1:

New York City Department of Education
Graduation Rates for the Class of 2007,
by Race/Ethnicity¹⁵



Lack of Available Jobs

In today's economy, attaining a high school diploma is sometimes not enough. According to the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy (MacArthur Network), "The country has witnessed a silent 30-year reversal in employment prospects for youth aged 16–24."¹⁸ Jobs in the current market are clustered into high-wage, high-skill careers and low-wage, low-skill, service-sector jobs. Advances in technology, automation and globalization have undercut the manufacturing base in the United States, leaving in its place this "hourglass" economy.¹⁹ High-wage jobs increasingly demand higher levels of literacy and technical proficiency. Low-skill, service-sector jobs offer little opportunity for advancement, and the proliferation of immigrant workers forces young people to compete with adults for these positions.²⁰ Young people with limited education and skills have narrow opportunities for success in such a job market.

Interestingly, the overall economic upturn evident in New York City in 2006 did not help bolster the employment prospects of young people. While overall employment increased, the employment rate of youth ages 16 to 24 did not.²¹ In fact, youth employment rates declined during that period—while over 44 percent of the city’s young people were employed in 2000, less than 35 percent were employed in 2006. Although this decline may be due in part to higher rates of school attendance, it is not entirely explained by this increase.²²

Five Priority Populations

Nationwide, five (overlapping) groups of young people are at high risk of dropping out of school, failing to continue their education and ending up unemployed: older immigrant youth, young people with learning disabilities or emotional or behavioral issues, young people involved in the justice system, youth who are aging out of the foster care system and young women who give birth before age 18.²³ In New York City, immigrants and young people with learning disabilities or emotional or behavioral issues are at particular risk of not graduating from high school.

Older Immigrant Youth

In New York City—a city of almost three million foreign-born residents—over 13 percent of all public school students in 2007 were classified as English Language Learners.²⁴ Of these, older immigrant youth—those with limited time to learn English and earn the credits required for high school graduation—are particularly likely to drop out.²⁵ National data suggest that some school administrators have begun encouraging older students who do not meet standards quickly enough to leave school so that they may focus their limited resources on students who need less help.²⁶ This practice—aimed at creating the perception that schools are raising student achievement levels—disenfranchises entire portions of the city’s high-school-age population, including immigrants. Furthermore, discrimination, geographic and social isolation from potential employers, and low levels of English proficiency make it harder for immigrant youth to find employment.²⁷ In addition, because young immigrants are less likely than the native-born to work during their adolescent years, they often have little or no experience to offer employers.²⁸

Young People with Learning Disabilities or Emotional or Behavioral Issues

The city’s disabled young people—including those with learning disabilities or emotional or behavioral issues, which are often less obvious than physical impairments—are disproportionately likely to leave high school when compared with the general population.²⁹ New York City has a particularly poor record with regard to its special-education students. Each year, 12,000 to 15,000 of the city’s 50,000 disabled 14- to 21-year-olds leave school without a recognized diploma.³⁰ Indeed, between the 1996–1997 and 2003–2004 school years, a full 88 percent of students in special education failed to graduate.³¹ These young people are also unlikely to secure a GED, and those who graduate with an Individual Education Plan diploma, which can be achieved by young people with a “special education” designation in New York’s public schools, are not considered job-ready by many employers.³² A real or perceived lack of education may not be the only barrier to employment for young disabled job seekers; employers may also believe that these young people will miss work frequently or that special accommodations made on their behalf will create resentment among nondisabled coworkers.³³

Young People Involved in the Justice System

Unsurprisingly, young people involved in the criminal justice system are at risk of failing to graduate and find employment.³⁴ According to the New York City Council, more than 2,000 juveniles³⁵ are detained in city facilities every day, and each year, 1,200 juveniles return to the city from correctional facilities in other parts of the state.³⁶ These youth face a multitude of barriers when trying to secure employment or reenroll in school. Many formerly incarcerated youth suffer because credits from courses taken while in custody do not get transferred to their home schools—these undercredited youth are very likely to drop out of school. Other youth are not permitted

to reenroll at their former schools.³⁷ All told, two thirds of juveniles returning from correctional facilities never go back to school.³⁸

An even greater number of adults, particularly young adults, are involved in the criminal justice system and leaving prison or jail; they too face multiple barriers to employment. These young people often have low educational or skills levels, and many face difficulties finding services to meet basic needs such as stable and affordable housing, medical care, and substance abuse or mental health treatment.³⁹ Without a place to receive calls, a shower, interview attire and/or needed medications, these ex-inmates are unlikely to have the ability to focus on a job search. Even the most motivated ex-inmates may encounter resistance from employers who are skeptical about employing those with criminal backgrounds. Furthermore, many skilled ex-prisoners are unable to practice their professions after their release from custody because cities and states often impose licensing bans that prevent ex-prisoners from working in certain industries. While some of these bans are understandable and sensible—such as those that prevent violent offenders from working with firearms or in the child-care industry—there are many statutory and regulatory disqualifications that cover forms of employment bearing no relationship to the types of crimes committed.⁴⁰

Young People Aging Out of the Foster Care System

Also at risk are young people who age out of the foster care system on their 18th birthday (or at the end of the school year immediately following). In 2005, 1,300 foster care youth were released by New York City's Administration for Children's Services, many of whom had experienced the instability of multiple foster care placements as well as physical and sexual abuse, neglect, mental illness, criminality and/or substance abuse in their families.⁴¹ Often purged from the system without ongoing transitional supports and lacking financial, emotional and social support, foster

care youth face considerable obstacles during their young adulthood—precisely the time when they should be completing their high school education and preparing to join the labor force or pursue higher education.⁴²

Young Mothers

In 2006, almost 1 in 10 New York City female residents between the ages of 15 and 19 became pregnant.⁴³ The city has a higher rate of teenage pregnancy than does the nation as a whole—a potent statistic given that the United States has the highest level of teenage pregnancy of all westernized countries.⁴⁴ Nationwide, only 42 percent of young women who become pregnant before age 18 finish high school.⁴⁵ Because young mothers, especially those who are unmarried, usually do not resume their education, their employment opportunities as adults are limited. Their frequent lack of access to secure child care further limits those options. According to a recent report, only 2 percent of women who gave birth as teenagers graduate from college by age 30.⁴⁶

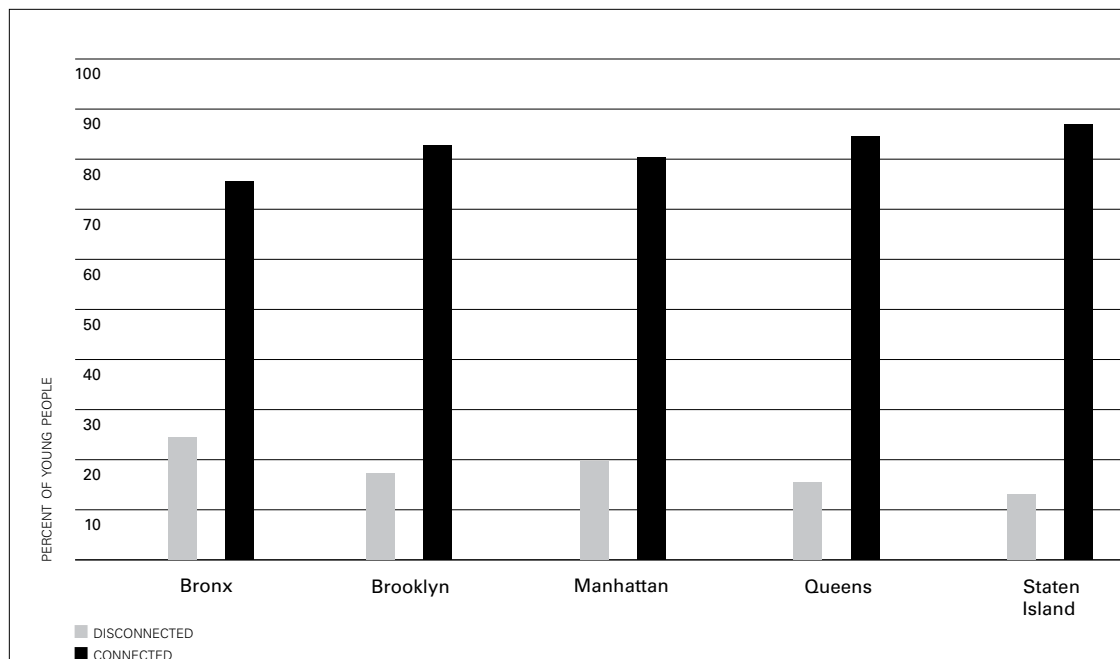
These five groups of young people are severely at risk—of leaving school, of being unemployed or of being confined to sporadic, low-quality employment. New York City can reclaim their potential and develop skilled individuals for its labor force by making it a priority to understand and offer assistance to these high-need populations. Knowing where to find them is critical for planners, educators, program operators and potential employers if they are to reengage the city's disconnected young people.

Targeting High-Need Communities

There are 223,000 disconnected young people in living in New York City. But where are they concentrated? Data from June 2006 to June 2008 show that the borough with largest percentage of New York's disconnected young people is the Bronx (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

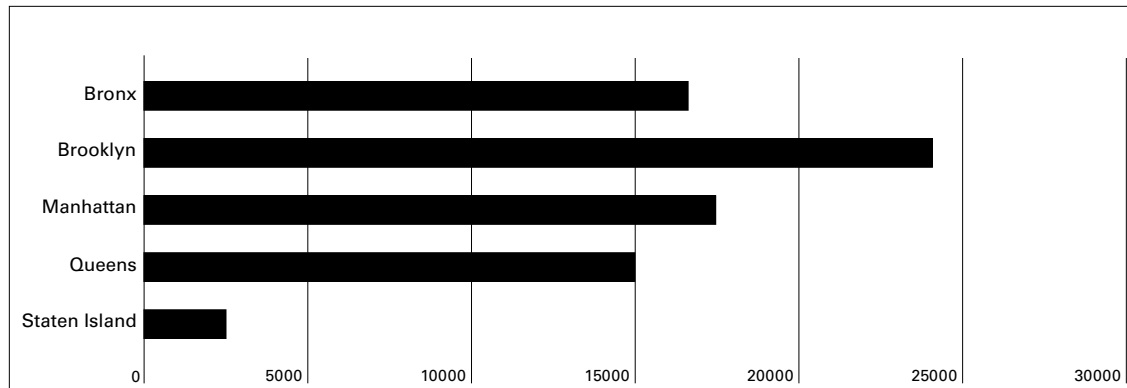
Percentage of New York City Youth 16 To 24 Years Old Who Are Connected (in School, Not in School but Employed) or Disconnected (Not in School and Unemployed, not in School and Not in the Labor Market) in Each Borough⁴⁷



What about young people who are most at risk—those without a high school diploma? The figures below indicate how many young people in each New York City borough are without a high school diploma, not in school and out of the labor force or unemployed.⁴⁸ Although young people from all five high-risk groups live in every borough of the city, the largest number of New York City's high school dropouts ages 16 to 24 who are not in school and not employed reside in Brooklyn (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

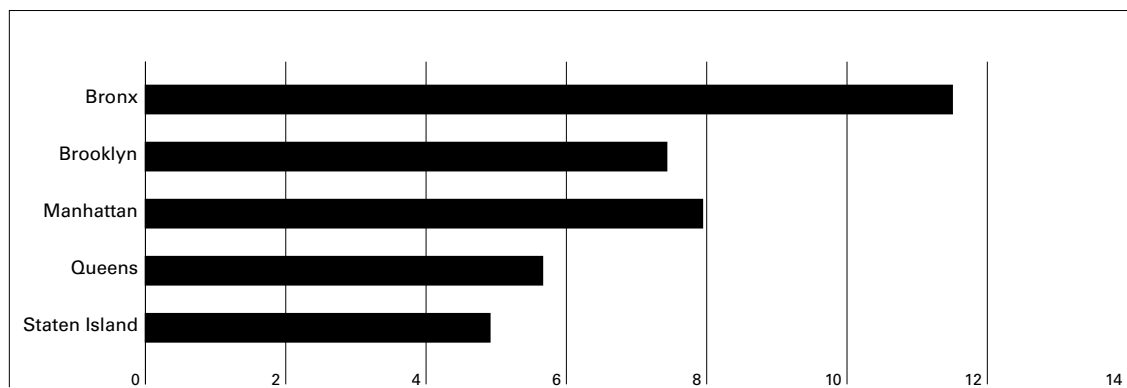
Number of New York City Youth 16 to 24 Years Old Who Are Not in School, Have No High School Diploma and Are Not Working, by Borough⁴⁹



Although Brooklyn has the highest number of these disconnected young people, it is also helpful to consider these data in terms of proportion. The borough with the highest percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who dropped or aged out of high school without a diploma and were not in school, not in the labor market or not able to find employment is the Bronx (see Figure 4).

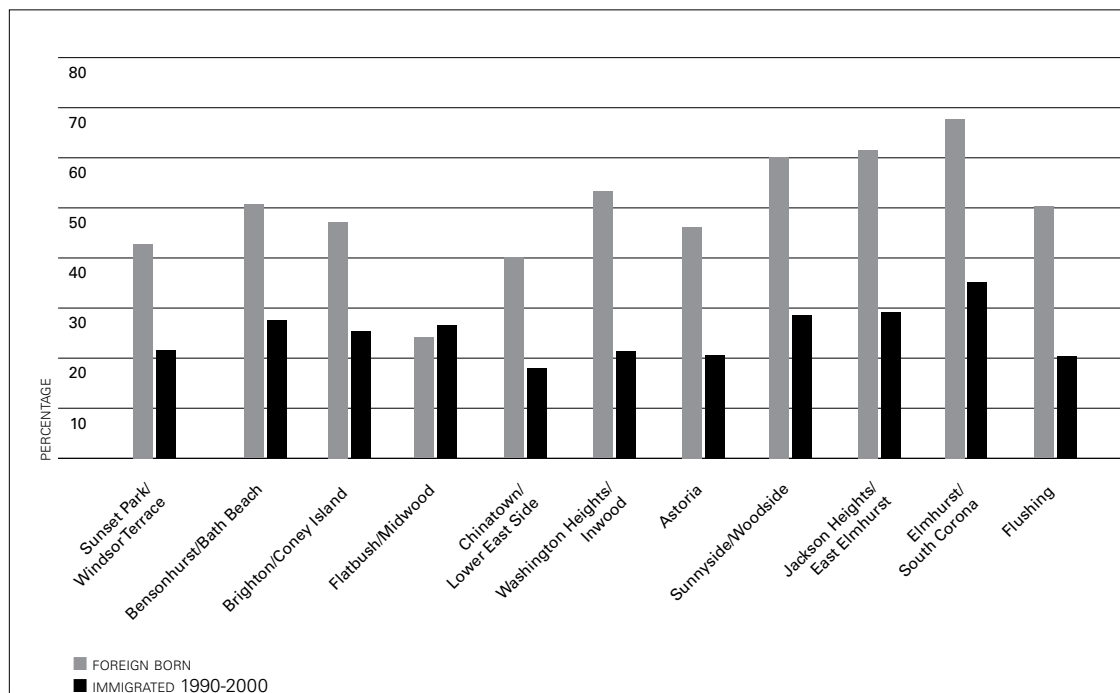
Figure 4

Percentage of New York City Youth 16 to 24 Years Old Not in School and without a High School Diploma Who Are Not Working, by Borough⁵⁰



While the Bronx also has the highest proportion of English Language Learners enrolled in public school, the greatest number of English Language Learners can be found in Queens, where the most foreign-born immigrants live. Figure 5 shows the 11 New York City neighborhoods with the highest proportion of foreign-born residents; it is in these neighborhoods where large numbers of mid- and late-adolescent immigrant youth are likely to be found.

Figure 5
New York City Neighborhoods with the Highest Proportions of Foreign-Born Residents⁵¹



Data from New York City’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene can help us locate another group of young people at risk of dropping out of school: young mothers. Three geographic areas have consistently high teen-pregnancy rates—the South Bronx, north and central Brooklyn, and east and central Harlem.⁵² The city also tracks the proportion of live births that result from reported “unintended” pregnancies. Of the five boroughs, the Bronx has the highest proportion of these births, followed by Queens. Table 1 offers more information on teen pregnancies in the city.

Table 1

Numbers of Pregnancies and Live Births^a Among Youth Under 15 Years Old and 15 to 19 Years Old, by Borough of New York City⁵³

	Under 15 Years Old	15 to 19 Years Old
Manhattan	66 (9)	3,345 (1,157)
Bronx	170 (29)	6,416 (2,485)
Brooklyn	181 (41)	7,628 (2,768)
Queens	105 (18)	4,623 (1,665)
Staten Island	20 (5)	895 (343)

^a Live births shown in parentheses.

It is also important to consider where the bulk of young people in the criminal justice system are located. The neighborhoods of East New York, South Jamaica, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brownsville, Soundview, Morris Heights, Saint George, Harlem, East Harlem and the South Bronx have the highest juvenile detention rates.⁵⁴

Reclaiming New York's Disconnected Young People:

What Can Be Done

For young people in New York City's poorest neighborhoods, poverty sets the stage for dropping out, and in today's high-tech economy with its demand for highly skilled workers, dropping out often leads to unemployment. Unemployment in turn results in continued poverty. This cycle has persisted through economic upswings and despite attempts to intervene.

Educational reform is one option that has met with mixed success. But what about young people who are not going back to school—those who are too old, who are undercredited or who find little to interest or motivate them in traditional academic settings? We cannot assume that school-based solutions will solve the plight of all disconnected young people. While efforts to serve youth while they are still able to connect to mainstream educational institutions are critical, the focus of this report is on potential solutions that will help support those young people who are not going back to our public schools.

Focusing on solutions beyond traditional education is not a new approach; indeed, a number of programs and initiatives already exist to guide New York City's out-of-school youth into alternative education and successful jobs. But plenty of work remains to be done. Existing programming is insufficient for a number of reasons. First, too often these programs are narrowly focused and work in isolation. No mechanisms exist to help young people transition smoothly from one set of services to the next. For example, there is no pipeline from pre-GED to GED programs or from entry-level jobs to ongoing training and educational options. For young people who do not succeed in their initial programs, the path is even less clear. Second, many programs are short-term, either by design due to funding restrictions or by default because they are unable to retain young people over time. Third, in the past these programs have worked with specific target populations (e.g., juvenile offenders, foster care youth, teen mothers), a situation

that has limited their ability to organize, to rally for additional funding or to share other resources. This fragmentation in funding and focus has prevented the emergence of any unified or organized set of programmatic benchmarks or desired participant outcomes. Fortunately, their combined voice is beginning to emerge around the broader issue of disconnected youth, but it will take time for that voice to gain strength. The fourth reason there is insufficient programming is that there are simply not enough resources to fund programs for the disconnected young people who need them.⁵⁵

So what needs to be done? The economic upturn the city witnessed in 2006 was short-lived; the economy is once again on the decline. Because of this downturn, the plight of the city's hundreds of thousands of out-of-school, unemployed young people and the negative effect they have on the city are likely to intensify. In the section that follows, we summarize promising strategies, both old and new, that have been developed by experts in the field. Although many of these strategies require further research to firmly establish their effectiveness, there is good reason to think that these approaches may be valuable in helping young people reconnect to the labor market. Given the economic and human consequences of allowing the city's disconnected youth to languish, using, testing and refining these promising approaches is well justified.

Strategy 1: Fund Strong Program Practice.

Effective programming lies at the heart of any attempt to support disconnected young people. As noted above, more research is needed to understand which specific programs create lasting change in the lives of disconnected young people; despite this limitation, we have learned a lot about how to work with, attract and retain these youth in programs. Below we highlight promising program strategies that funders should consider supporting.

- **Link education with real-world experience.** A “*learn-practice-do-reflect on what you did*” cycle is critically important for young people who have failed in traditional educational settings.⁵⁶ For example, for the large number of English Language Learners in New York City schools, providing language instruction in the context of working—by using job applications, résumés and instruction manuals as “textbooks,” teaching vocabulary related to specific jobs, practicing responses to customers’ questions—could help young people discover the value of their developing skills.
- **Employ talented and dynamic program personnel willing and able to connect young people to necessary resources.** Many studies cite the positive effects that the attention, support and guidance of caring adults can have on young people.⁵⁷ For young people with inconsistent adult support in their lives, relationships with adult program staff members are especially important, providing both emotional support and instrumental support, such as identifying job leads or helping a young person get to a job interview. Hiring and retaining staff members drawn from the same community as the young people they will serve can jump-start trusting relationships that bond youth to their programs.⁵⁸ The most effective youth workers have a talent for connecting with young people, can help youth identify and act on their strengths and interests, and offer a wide-ranging knowledge of the resources—such as housing assistance, child care and employment networks—that disconnected young people need to stabilize their lives.
- **Create opportunities to learn about and experience a wide variety of jobs.** Although many factors limit the viable career choices for low-income, less educated youth—e.g., which sectors offer career entry points, what jobs are currently available—it is important that young people have options. Acknowledging and building on the strengths, preferences and goals and addressing the needs and weaknesses of young people are critical components of effective youth programming.⁵⁹ For example, the lessons that young people have learned on the streets and through off-the-books employment can translate into valuable career skills such as networking or understanding the laws of supply and demand.⁶⁰ Job shadowing, informational interviews, service learning projects, internships and apprenticeships can help young people make informed, personal choices by giving them a sense of the many jobs that exist along with a taste of the work and an understanding of the work environment.
- **Form cohorts of peers working toward similar goals, provide incentives for participation and prioritize case management.** Short-term programs rarely produce long-term outcomes, but retaining disconnected young people in programs can be challenging.⁶¹ Positive peer support is especially important in attracting and then retaining young people. Successful program models capitalize on the desire of young people to experience the support—and camaraderie—of their peers. For instance, in a cohort model, groups of young people begin their program together, learn and work alongside one another, and, after months of training, celebrate together as graduates. Young people also respond to monetary and other incentives. Some successful youth-employment programs provide their participants with stipends to cover transportation and other basic needs during the programming period, while others offer incentives for regular attendance, satisfactory performance or the achievement of short-term goals.⁶² Finally, comprehensive case management can also help reduce program attrition.⁶³
- **Address the fundamental needs of low-income youth.** Low educational attainment and job skills are not the only factors that affect the ability of low-income young

people to find employment—their frequent lack of transportation, health care, child care, living expenses and self-confidence also play an important role. Effective programs take a comprehensive approach, not only addressing job training and employment but also attending to other factors that keep young people out of the workforce. Programs that provide services especially relevant to low-income young people—transportation stipends, child care, legal assistance for those involved in the justice system—can help batter down obstacles that young people are unable to overcome on their own.

Strategy 2: Build a System.

All young people need support during the important transition from adolescence to responsible adulthood.⁶⁴ For low-income youth who rely on public programs, the underfunded, disjointed patchwork of current services can seem like an impenetrable labyrinth. A pipeline or network of effective, accessible services spanning the period of adolescence to adulthood is more likely to be utilized by the vast numbers of low-income young people who lack adequate education or jobs.⁶⁵ This comprehensive system would include alternative educational options for young people who are not going to return to school, skills training that can lead to well-paying careers, connections to employers, continued support for the newly employed and a myriad of ancillary services. Through extensive community planning, ongoing coordination and participation from the city's business leaders and local employers, it is possible to create a network that aligns existing resources to ensure that the particular challenges facing disconnected young people are addressed. Current information, further research, lessons from the past and common sense should guide such an effort. This network of diverse but related systems, including health care, juvenile justice, social services and workforce

development, would require not only dynamic leadership but also a host of intermediaries—objective experts experienced at maximizing resources, convening diverse groups, managing relationships and measuring progress—to design, implement, maintain and assure its effectiveness.⁶⁶

Strategy 3: Firmly Connect Training and Employment with Opportunities to Advance.

While many of New York City's young people have abandoned education, they have not necessarily rejected work. Many see day-to-day schemes for generating income—for example, street vending, temporary off-the-books jobs or selling drugs—as more exciting, lucrative and flexible than what they perceive as the delayed, uncertain payoff of attending school day in and day out.⁶⁷ To build an effective system, the pathway to employment should be straightforward, transparent and focused on satisfying and lucrative jobs.⁶⁸ To this end, policymakers and program planners should consider career path strategies and link training to real jobs rather than utilize shotgun approaches that provide preemployment training and job search activities only to quickly place young job seekers with whoever is willing to employ them. Furthermore, a strong system of postemployment supports, programs and resources could provide young people with the support they need once they are working and assist them in moving up, or over, to better jobs.⁶⁹

By closely examining labor market trends and focusing on the city's growth industries, a strong service network aimed at disconnected young people can identify points at which less-educated workers can enter targeted sectors with identifiable advancement paths to increasingly well-paying jobs.⁷⁰ Involving employers is crucial, as they are more likely to work with employment programs if they are included in program design.⁷¹

Strategy 4: Take a Neighborhood Approach.

A system aimed at keeping young people in school or reconnecting them to education or training will be most effective if it concentrates resources in areas where large numbers of dropouts or potential dropouts reside. Focusing on key neighborhoods and specific groups of young people creates opportunities to put into practice methods that have proven effective with target communities—e.g., English Language Learners or young mothers. In addition, community-based organizations that are familiar, effective and trusted in the neighborhoods they serve—especially those with staff members and volunteers who have similar backgrounds to the targeted populations—will be valued partners in recruiting, reengaging, training and supporting local young people.⁷²

Strategy 5: Give Young People Time to Learn.

Many young people leave high school because they fall behind, become discouraged and literally run out of time. This is often the case for mid- or late-adolescent immigrants who must gain language proficiency before tackling the many subject areas required for graduation, for young people with learning disabilities and for youth involved with the justice system—especially those who have been incarcerated and failed to accumulate transferable credits or develop marketable skills.⁷³ A system designed to address the employability of these young people must allow them ample time to master the skills they need. Publicly funded skills-training programs often demonstrate a quick-fix mentality by attempting to develop basic skills and job readiness in a few weeks. For young people who cannot achieve graduation standards within the time allowed or have little work experience and few skills or employment connections, offering both a longer initial training period and extending program involvement after employment can yield better results.⁷⁴ Several nationally recognized programs whose disconnected youth participants have had positive outcomes provide

training that lasts for at least a year and then do extended follow-up designed to help participants as they gain additional skills, work through setbacks and become valued employees.⁷⁵

Strategy 6: Develop Partnerships Among Community Colleges and Community-Based Organizations.

Many of the community resources that can serve disconnected young people already exist but have, so far, been untapped. The existing community college and vocational-education systems, for example, not only offer relevant and accessible training but also set the standards and bestow the certifications that industries and employers recognize and expect. Formal partnerships between community-based organizations—e.g., those providing GED instruction—and community colleges is one such opportunity. Community colleges could benefit from partnering with community-based organizations that offer key supports to students who are at risk of dropping out. Such partnerships could create a pipeline from community-based skills training and remedial education directly to local community colleges—an especially powerful path when sectoral employment strategies are also utilized.⁷⁶

Strategy 7: Invest in Research.

Future research must guide efforts to develop effective programming aimed at reengaging disconnected young people. In our review, we have identified several pressing questions for the field:

1. Which segments of disconnected young people can benefit most from programming over the long term?
2. What strengths of out-of-school and out-of-work young people might constitute skill sets that could be enhanced and legitimized by education and training?

3. What interests of out-of-school and out-of-work young people might help guide effective marketing for programs and enhance program retention?
4. What are the characteristics of specific populations of young people and their unique barriers to success?
5. Where exactly do disengaged young people reside (critical information for better allocating funding and locating programs)?
6. What program models create lasting impacts in the lives of disconnected young people?

A Call to Action

Reengaging almost a quarter of a million young people is a daunting task; it requires a significant commitment on the part of program leaders, policymakers and, especially, funders. Currently, there is not enough funding to support programmatic interventions for all, or even most, of New York City's disconnected young people.⁷⁷ Implementing the strategies outlined in this report and doing so on a large scale will cost the city money—and finding resources will be challenging in a time of tightening public spending. But the cost of not doing anything will be higher. Young people who remain disengaged present a significant cost to society—consider the expenses of incarceration, housing and public assistance, for example—and there are additional costs to the city in terms of diminished workforce and economic strength. As this report demonstrates, information and promising strategies are available and can serve as the basis for making financial commitments to the disconnected youth population. What is now required is the leadership of New York's decision makers—those in government, business, education, community-based organizations and elsewhere—to commit to solutions and move forward.

Endnotes

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