



Connecting Opportunity Youth to Postsecondary Credentials and Careers

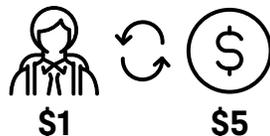
Federal Investments and Scaling Best Practices

Who Are Opportunity Youth?

Today, **4.5 million young adults ages 16 to 24 are out of school and unemployed.**¹ Often referred to as “opportunity youth,” these young adults face significant barriers in the labor market, especially as automation and technological advances reshape the economy. Many factors influence why young adults become disconnected, including poverty, family challenges, unstable housing, and schools that lack the resources and capacity to assist with the complex challenges they face. Opportunity youth often struggle to access quality education and training opportunities that are necessary for attaining good jobs.

The Value of Investing in Opportunity Youth

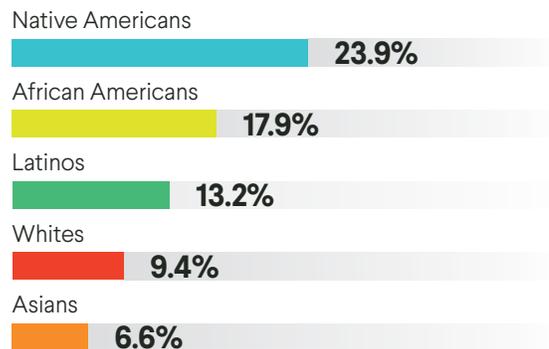
Taxpayers save and communities thrive when opportunity youth are successfully reconnected to education and work. The return on investments in opportunity youth can be significant: Estimates show that each **\$1 we spend to help young people reconnect to education and employment yields a \$5 return.**² On the other hand, young people risk losing out on nearly \$1 million in lifetime earnings if they do not complete high school or obtain a highly valued postsecondary credential.³



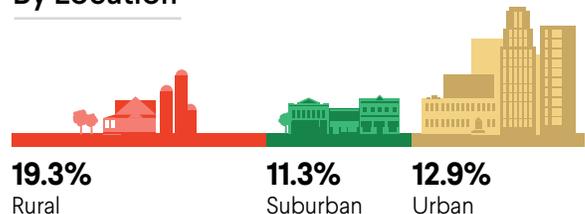
Young People in the US who are Disconnected From School & Work

Source: <http://www.measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive/>

By Racial or Ethnic Group



By Location



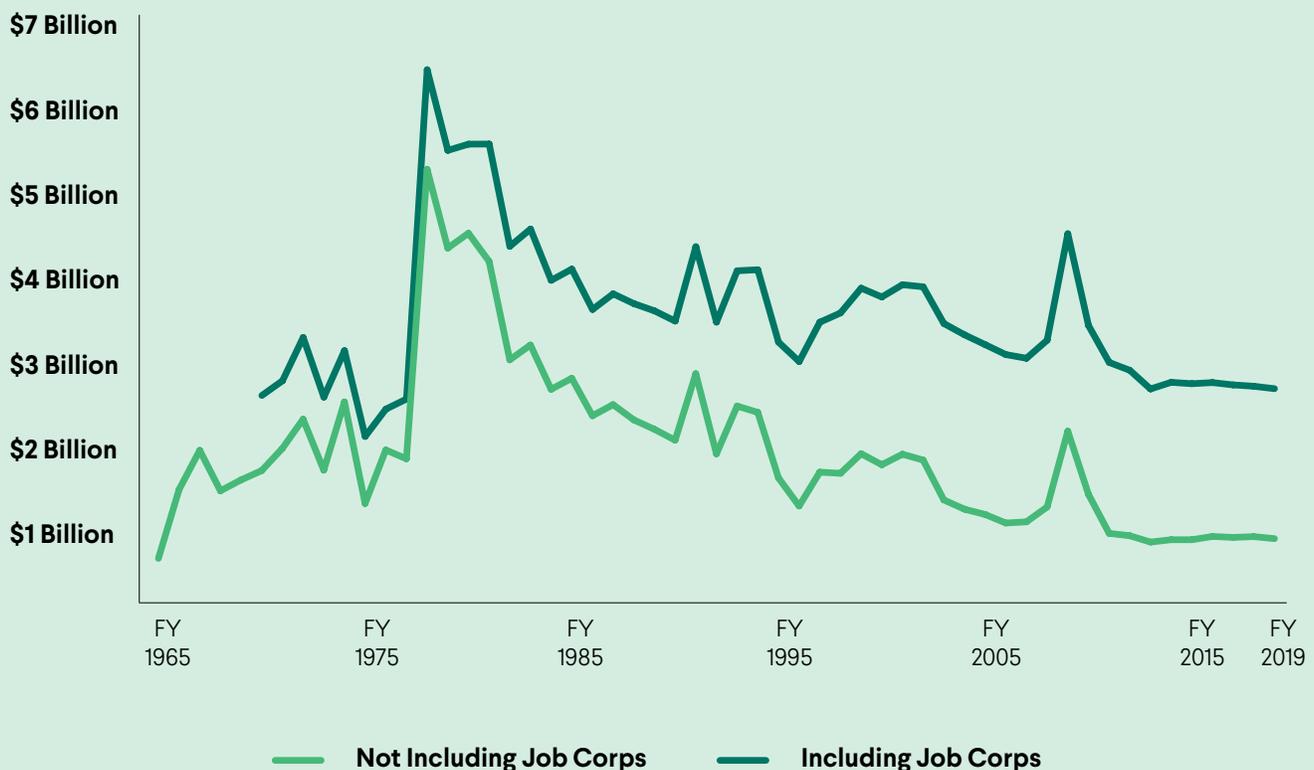
Key Facts

- Disconnected females are nearly **4x more likely to be young mothers** than connected females.
- Disconnected youth are **more likely to live in poverty** than their peers (35.3% compared to 18.9%).
- Disconnected youth are **twice as likely to have no education beyond a high school diploma** than connected youth (50% vs 26.8%).

Federal Support and Funding for Opportunity Youth

Despite the known benefits of investing in opportunity youth, federal funding for programs serving this population has declined precipitously since its peak in the late 1970s. **As a result, only 7 percent of the current 4.5 million opportunity youth across the country are served by federally funded programs.** Even though federal funding for youth-serving programs increased slightly in Fiscal Years 2018 and 2019, millions of opportunity youth throughout the country are still left without places to go.⁴

Funding for U.S. Department of Labor Youth Programs, in 2019 Dollars



Serving just one-quarter of the current opportunity youth population—or roughly 1 million young people—would require an increase of \$4 billion in federal spending on youth programming, which would bring the total to nearly \$6.5 billion.⁵ While significant, even that level of funding would not fully meet the needs of the population. To increase the number of young adults who are re-engaged and put on track to college and careers, the country needs a combination of federal policy investments and actions, along with additional support from state and local governments, and community and private-sector partners.

Evidence-based Models for Connecting Opportunity Youth

To get the most out of public investments in opportunity youth, it is important that policymakers build upon evidence-based college and career pathways programs and other models for helping opportunity youth succeed in education, skills training, and in-demand careers. The most successful models tend to be comprehensive in nature and include the following key strategies:

On-ramps and Clear Pathways to College and Careers. Programs serving opportunity youth should provide tailored on-ramps and clear pathways to help young people successfully transition to postsecondary education, training, and family supporting careers.

Bridging and Integrated Learning. Bridging strategies are critical for helping opportunity youth attain the academic and employability skills necessary for success in postsecondary education and careers. These programs are often provided concurrently or through the integrated delivery of basic skills, English language and postsecondary coursework for underprepared students.

Career Navigation and Guidance. It is essential that career navigation services include information about 1) employment opportunities; 2) the education, skills and credentials required for those jobs; and 3) the quality of programs based on student outcomes. Such services should continue to be made available throughout a young person's education and career path.

Comprehensive Support Services. The most effective programs for opportunity youth include robust wraparound supports, such as mentoring,

personal counseling, child care, transportation, health and nutrition, and mental health services. These supports should be available for at least one year after participants are reconnected to school or work.

Work-based Learning. Successful programs for opportunity youth provide access to high-quality work-based learning opportunities that connect participants with employers and relevant work experiences. In addition to providing vital learning opportunities, on-the-job training enables young people to earn needed wages while gaining valuable work experience and building networks and social capital.

Checklist for Success

Programs for Opportunity Youth Should Provide:

- ✓ Full-time, comprehensive services
- ✓ On-ramps and clear pathways to careers
- ✓ Bridging and integrated learning
- ✓ Effective career navigation and counseling services
- ✓ Comprehensive support services, including mentoring and personal supports
- ✓ Opportunities for paid work-based learning
- ✓ Opportunities for leadership and peer group activities
- ✓ Strong connections with employers

Recommendations for Policymakers

We know that investments in opportunity youth yield solid returns. We also know that funding for this population is woefully inadequate and cannot support programs that meet the complex needs of these young people. And we know what strategies work to help opportunity youth reconnect and succeed in careers and education. Following are recommendations that build upon these insights.



Build on Evidence-Based Models

Policy should emphasize evidence-based strategies for helping opportunity youth keep up with education and workforce demands. Proven models include college and career pathway and bridging strategies that provide coaching and support services, on-ramps for smooth transitions, accelerated learning structures, and programs that focus on in-demand careers.



Improve Career Navigation and Access to Data

Opportunity youth need accurate and timely information about possible career paths and programs that can help them obtain the education and skills they need. Public policy should encourage the expansion of career navigation services that support opportunity youth. Policy should also create data systems that provide easy-to-understand information on the quality of these programs, including metrics on student outcomes.



Expand Access to Work-Based Learning

Policy should expand work-based learning opportunities for all opportunity youth, who often lack connections to employers or workplaces. High-quality, relevant work-based learning programs, including pre-apprenticeships, apprenticeships, and work-study opportunities, can enable opportunity youth to earn paychecks and gain valuable on-the-job experience while building their networks and social capital.



Provide Flexible Financial Aid

Opportunity youth need access to flexible financial aid programs that have simple application and qualification processes. Policy should ensure that opportunity youth are able to attend school all year, access “ability to benefit” programs, attain high-quality credentials, and receive financial support that covers expenses beyond the cost of just tuition, fees, and books.

Recommendations for Policymakers



Increase Public Investment

Current investments in opportunity youth are inadequate, with millions of young people unable to access needed services due to this lack of funding. Estimates suggest that serving just one-quarter of the opportunity youth population—or 1 million young people—would require an increase of nearly \$4 billion in spending on federal youth programs.⁶ Policy should increase public investment in our nation’s workforce and education systems to give opportunity youth the resources they need to prepare for the future of work.



Offer Incentives for Developing New Talent

Employers play a critical role in preparing opportunity youth to succeed in the workforce. Policy should encourage employers to provide work-based learning and employment opportunities for opportunity youth through targeted tax incentives and investments in economically distressed communities with objectives for training and hiring opportunity youth. Policy should also support the establishment of industry sector partnerships and career pathways focused on all vulnerable populations, including opportunity youth.



Promote Employability Skills

All workers need “employability” or foundational skills, such as the ability to think critically, solve problems, work collaboratively, and communicate effectively. These skills are valuable today—and they will be essential as the nature of work evolves—because they can transfer across multiple industries and occupations.⁷ Policy should ensure that all federal laws that affect youth stress the importance of helping young learners develop these critical skills.

Endnotes

1. Measure of America, “Youth Disconnection” (Brooklyn, NY: Social Science Research Council), <http://www.measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive/>.
2. SparkAction, “Reconnecting Youth Campaign: Unleashing Limitless Potential” (Washington, DC: the Forum for Youth Investment), <https://sparkaction.org/reconnecting-youth/solution>.
3. Anthony P. Carnevale, Stephen J. Rose, and Ban Cheah, *The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, Lifetime Earnings* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2011), <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/highered/reg/hearulemaking/2011/collegepayoff.pdf>.
4. Funding levels are in current 2019 dollars using the Gross Domestic Product Chain-Like Price Index available at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis at <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/GDPCTPI>. Funding is for programs specially identified for serving youth. Included are the various youth programs funded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) at different times since 1978, including the Neighborhood Youth Corps, Summer Jobs Programs, Year-Round Youth Programs, the Entitlement Program, Youth Community Improvement and Conservation Projects, the Young Adult Conservation Corps, Youth Fair Chance, School- to-Work, Youth Opportunity Grants, Youth Offender Projects, YouthBuild, and Job Corps.

Funding for 1978 through 1981 are obligations. Funding for 1982 through 2019 are appropriations, except as noted below for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Funding for 1978 through 1981 are from Table 1 of subsequent years of the Employment and Training Report of the President, available at the Library of Congress. Funding for 1983 through 2013 are available at the ETA’s website at <https://www.doleta.gov/budget/legislative.cfm>. Funding for 2014 through 2019 are available at the ETA’s website at <https://www.doleta.gov/budget/>.

Years 1978 through 1982 are scal years beginning on October 1. Years 1984 to the present are program years beginning on July 1.

From 1983 through 1992, DOL appropriations distinguished between the Summer Youth Program and Year-Round Programs, but the year-round adult and youth programs were combined in one appropriation. The authorizing legislation during those years, the Job Training Partnership Act, required that 78 percent of the combined adult and youth year-round funding go to local areas, and that 40 percent of those local funds be spent on youth. The graph reflects that 31.2 percent of the formula funding was for youth (40 percent of 78 percent) during those years.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act signed in February of 2009 included appropriations of \$1,165,482,374 for DOL youth programs. State reports to DOL showed that \$143 million of these funds were obligated in FY 2008, \$795.6 million in FY 2009, and \$226.8 million in FY 2010. The reports are available at the ETA’s website at https://www.doleta.gov/budget/WIA_archive.cfm.

5. John M. Bridgeland, Erin S. Ingram, and Matthew Atwell, *A Bridge to Reconnection: A Plan for Reconnecting One Million Opportunity Youth Each Year Through Federal Funding Streams*, 2016 Update, (Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, July 4, 2016), <https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/report/a-bridge-to-reconnection-2016-update/>.
6. Bridgeland, et al., *A Bridge to Reconnection*.
7. Fran Kennedy and Matthew Poland, *Developing Future Talent: How We Can Prepare for the Future of Work and Business* (Boston, MA: JFF, November 15, 2018), https://jfforg-prod-prime.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/Developing_Future_Talent_-_11-13-2018_-_FINAL.pdf.