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Preventing Youthful Disconnectedness

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Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, this article examines the characteristics (and later life histories) of 16- to 23-year-olds who, during the 1980s, were “disconnected” from mainstream society, that is, they were not enrolled in school, not gainfully employed, not in the military, and not married to someone who was “connected” in one of these ways. One in three youths were disconnected for at least half of a calendar year. As adults, youths who were disconnected for a short time (in only one or two years) did not differ substantially from those who were never disconnected in terms of educational attainment, work history, family income, reliance on government programs, and marital status. However, those who were disconnected in three or more years experienced significantly greater hardships. This article suggests that school-related interventions (such as career-oriented education, after-school “safe havens,” and targeting individual deficits) might help prevent youthful disconnectedness.

Many American youths become diverted from the path toward becoming productive members of society. Some drop out of high school and are inactive for many years. Others finish school, but do not find gainful employment. Some use drugs, go to jail, or both. Some have babies out of wedlock and spend years on welfare. Despite their differences, all these young people have one thing in common: They spend a crucial period of their lives “disconnected” from the broader society.

Policymakers have long worried about the consequences of youthful disconnection, as evidenced by high-profile efforts to combat drug abuse,

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teen pregnancy, and youth crime. Studies of the prevalence of dysfunctional or high-risk behavior among youths have informed, or in some cases served as the impetus for, many of these projects. Much of this research, however, portrays youth behavior at only one point in time. The Center for Disease Control's 1991 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, for example, highlighted the prevalence of frequent sexual activity, drug use, and other risky behaviors among high school students. But there was little analysis of neither how these individual behaviors might have been related to an underlying problem (like disconnection from mainstream society) nor how they might have dimmed the future life prospects of the youths. Similarly, although many longitudinal studies have detailed the characteristics, behaviors, and later life histories of subsets of youth (such as low-income teen mothers, young unwed fathers, idle youth, and unemployed youth), none, to our knowledge, has followed an entire cohort of youths. This study begins to address both shortcomings.

Methods

In collaboration with Brett Brown and his colleagues at Child Trends, Inc., we analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), one of the most comprehensive data sources for tracking the transition of youths into the labor force. Since 1979, the NLSY has annually tracked a group of about 12,000 males and females, ages 14 to 21, to create a comprehensive, longitudinal record of their activities. Blacks, Hispanics, and poor whites were oversampled to facilitate analysis of these groups. As of 1991, 90 percent of the sample was still being interviewed.

Our study followed 4,000 youths from 1979, when they were 14, 15, and 16 years old, through 1991, when they were in their mid-to-late 20s. Most of our analyses focused on youths ages 16 to 23 because, developmentally, it is a difficult period of transition during which young people struggle to become adults.

To define disconnectedness, we first identified those activities that connect young people to mainstream society: school (secondary and post-secondary), work, and military service. There are, of course, other activities that can connect someone to the broader society, but these behaviors were the most telling and capable of reasonably accurate measurement within the NLSY. After careful consideration, we decided also to include

marriage as a form of connection. Excluding marriage would have had the effect of classifying homemakers married to working men or students as disconnected women. However, as discussed below, including marriage lowered the rates of disconnectedness of white women more than of black women and increased the disparity between the two groups.

The definition also needed a temporal dimension. One possibility was to count youths as disconnected if they were not involved in any of the four specified activities during the NLSY survey week. This yielded the largest number of disconnected youths, but it incorrectly labeled as disconnected young people who worked or were in school for much of the year but who, during that one week, happened to be in between jobs or taking time off after school graduation. Another possibility was to count youths only if they were disconnected for an entire 52-week period. This definition erred in the other direction: It yielded the smallest number of disconnected youth because it excluded youths who were in school or who worked for as little as one week during the entire year.

Clearly, we needed a definition between 1 week and 52 weeks. We chose 26 weeks (or more) out of any calendar year because we hypothesized that young people disconnected for that long were likely to do very poorly in later life—especially as we considered multi-year spells of disconnection.

Hence, we defined disconnectedness as not being enrolled in school (either having dropped out or not continuing after graduation), not employed, not in the military, and not married to someone who met one of the criteria—for 26 weeks or more out of any calendar year. Based on the findings reported below, it appears that this definition successfully distinguished between young people who were actively involved in the broader society (by either working or being engaged in activities that build human capital) and youths who, for extended periods of time, were not.

Some of the questions the study sought to answer included: How prevalent is disconnectedness? Who are the disconnected youths, and do they share certain characteristics? How do disconnected youth fare in later life? And, most importantly: How can we prevent disconnectedness? In examining each issue, we took into account how a different definition would have altered our findings.

Findings¹

Youthful disconnectedness is widespread in American society. Even under our relatively narrow definition, many young people went through a period of disconnectedness as they moved from adolescence to adulthood (from ages 16 to 23). In fact, over one-third (37 percent) of both males and females were disconnected for at least 26 weeks during one calendar year. (See Table 1.)

Such short-term disconnectedness was prevalent among all racial groups, but with important differences. For males, rates were 32 percent for whites, 55 percent for blacks, and 50 percent for Hispanics. Rates for white and Hispanic females were about the same as those for their male counterparts. Black females, however, were 22 percent more likely than black males to have been disconnected (67 percent compared to 55 percent).

Why were the black women, unlike the women in the other two groups, more likely to be disconnected than the black men? Part of the difference was no doubt due to our definition of disconnectedness, which counted as disconnected the unmarried women who were caring for their children while on public assistance. Black teens are almost three times more likely than whites to have a baby out of wedlock. [In 1994, the rates for 15- to 19-year-olds were 100.9 per 1,000 and 36.2 per 1,000, respectively. See (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996)] Other studies indicate that many unwed fathers have children by several women, many of whom are younger than they are. Both factors would reduce the number of men counted as disconnected. Moreover, despite the stereotype, it may be that many unwed fathers do indeed work, and that it is easier for them to get a job performing manual labor, for example, than it is for the mothers of their children. And, as Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson has documented, the lack of informal networks in African-American communities to provide job referrals, transportation, and child care place an additional obstacle to black mothers working. Whatever the explanation is, the difference is large enough to be of concern to policy.

¹All of the results presented are statistically significant at the .01, .05, or .10 levels.

Table 1
Prevalence of Disconnectedness
 (by percent)

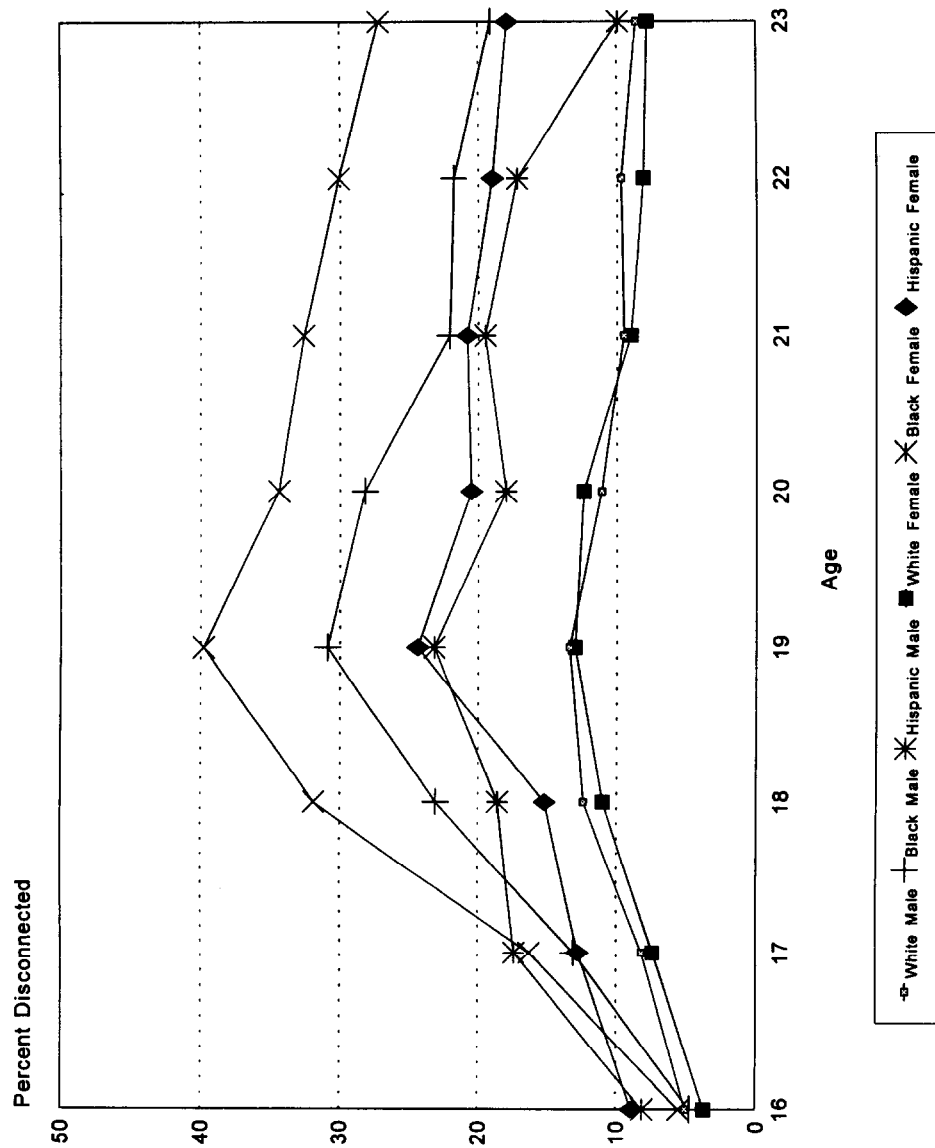
	Never 0 years ²	Short-term 1-2 years	Long-term 3+ years
Males-All	63	24	13
Males-White	67	23	10
Males-Black	45	28	26
Males-Hispanic	50	30	19
Females-All	62	24	16
Females-White	68	23	9
Females-Black	33	30	37
Females-Hispanic	50	29	21

Few youths were disconnected before their third year of high school. At age 16, only 5 percent of males and 4 percent of females were disconnected. But the numbers rise quickly thereafter: By age 17, rates of disconnectedness doubled among whites (from 4 to 8 percent), almost tripled among blacks (5 to 13 percent), and increased two-thirds among Hispanics (9 to 15 percent), a smaller increase because the base was higher. (See Figure 1.) And by age 19, almost 17 percent of both males and females had been disconnected for at least one 26-week period.

Given the importance of these figures to our later recommendations about preventive interventions, we note here that they are consistent with the Department of Education's estimates of high school dropout rates. According to its analysis of the Current Population Survey, only 3.7 percent of 16-year-olds have dropped out. The dropout rate is highest for 18-year-olds (at 12 percent. See U.S. Department of Education, 1993: 16-17).

²A "year" is defined as being disconnected for 26 or more weeks out of any given year.

Figure 1
Rates of Disconnectedness
 (by age)



Source: Child Trends, Inc.

To assess the significance of these high rates of disconnectedness, we also examined whether disconnectedness was associated with the youth's later family income, employment stability, and poverty status.³ As described next, we found that most youths that were disconnected did not suffer severe long-term economic and social problems.

Short-term disconnected youths do not seem to suffer serious social or economic problems. Almost two-thirds of the ever-disconnected males and females were disconnected in only one or two years. For these youths, disconnectedness did not seem to be associated with long-lasting problems. (See Table 2.)

As young adults (ages 25 to 28), 15 percent of short-term disconnected males and 22 percent of their female counterparts were in poverty. The median family income for this group was about \$30,000, the same as the median income of all American households.⁴ The vast majority of short-term disconnected women were not relying on federal programs: Only 10 percent were receiving welfare and only 14 percent were receiving food stamps. (By way of comparison, 11 percent of American families with children under age 18 were on Aid to Families with Dependent Children in 1990; about 9 percent of individuals received food stamps.) Many were married: 40 percent of males and 48 percent of females. Also, most men (61 percent), and almost half of the women (48 percent), were employed full time.

By age 23, most of the short-term disconnected had completed high school or received a General Educational Development (GED) certificate (75 percent of males and 84 percent of females). Of these, a sizable proportion had a GED instead of a diploma (over one-third of males and one-fourth of females). Researchers (Cameron & Heckman, 1993) who study the education of young people have called into question the value of the GED and whether it is an adequate substitute for a high school diploma. The proportion of females who gave birth to a child before age 18 (12 percent) was about the same as the population of females under age 18 as a whole (11 percent).

These surprisingly small differences are partly an artifact of our definition of short-term disconnectedness, which encompasses a broad

³Adult outcomes were measured in 1990 and 1991 when the youths were aged 25-27 or 26-28.

⁴Measured in 1991 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991: xi)

range of youths who do not have serious problems. For example, our definition includes a high school graduate who took six months or more to find a first job, and a college student who took six months off after graduation to travel.

Nevertheless, those who had been disconnected even for a short time as youths did not fare as well in early adulthood as did youths who had never been disconnected. Very few women who had never been disconnected were in poverty (4 percent) and fewer were relying on welfare and food stamps when they were ages 25 to 28 (1 percent and 3 percent, respectively). The median family income of those who had never been disconnected (\$40,000) was above the U.S. average. More men and women worked full time (75 percent and 61 percent) and were married (54 percent and 65 percent). Ninety-four percent of males who had never been disconnected and 96 percent of their female counterparts had a high school diploma or a GED. Moreover, fewer of these were GEDs: 8 percent of males and 9 percent of females. Only 5 percent of the females had had a child by age 18.

Although the short-term disconnected seemed to have experienced more problems in early adulthood than youths who had never been disconnected, future research that controls for family characteristics may explain some of this discrepancy. There is likely a selection effect at work: Those young people who were never disconnected probably had various personal and family characteristics that made them more successful in life.

For example, Linda Lounsbury (1996), an economist at Tufts University, studied children and adolescents who faced similar barriers in life—neighborhood dysfunction, family poverty, poorly educated parents—and what helped some succeed in school. She found that family attitudes and behaviors made a difference in how well children progressed through life. Analyzing the ETS-Head Start Longitudinal Study, Lounsbury found that when mothers read to their children several times a week, attended groups such as the PTA, and had high educational expectations for them, the children, in turn, had higher reading and math test scores.

Using data from the High School and Beyond Sophomore and Senior Cohorts, she also found that youths who had regular contact with community organizations, such as churches, stayed in school longer.

Table 2
Status as Adults
 (by percent)

	Never 0 years	Short-term 1-2 years	Long-term 3+ years
Males	*	*	*
In poverty	3	15	44
Employed full-time	75	61	41
Married	54	39	23
Females	*	*	*
In poverty	4	22	56
Receiving welfare	1	10	34
Employed full-time	62	48	21
Married	65	48	28

In any event, the same somewhat favorable picture of adult life cannot be painted for those youths who were disconnected for longer periods.

Youths disconnected in three or more years suffer long-term social and economic problems. Youths who were disconnected in three or more years experienced significant hardship, even into their mid and late 20s. At ages 25 to 28, median family income was only about \$18,000 for men and \$15,000 for women. Over 44 percent of the long-term disconnected men and 56 percent of the women were in poverty. In addition, many of the long-term disconnected women were still relying on some form of public assistance: 34 percent received AFDC and 48 percent received food stamps.

Adult labor force participation continued to be tenuous for those individuals who were disconnected in three or more years in their youths. At ages 25 to 28, only 41 percent of the men and 21 percent of the women

were employed full-time. Because the vast majority of people have completed their schooling by this age, these very low employment figures are of substantial concern. They indicate that the majority of the long-term disconnected has still not become productive members of mainstream society.

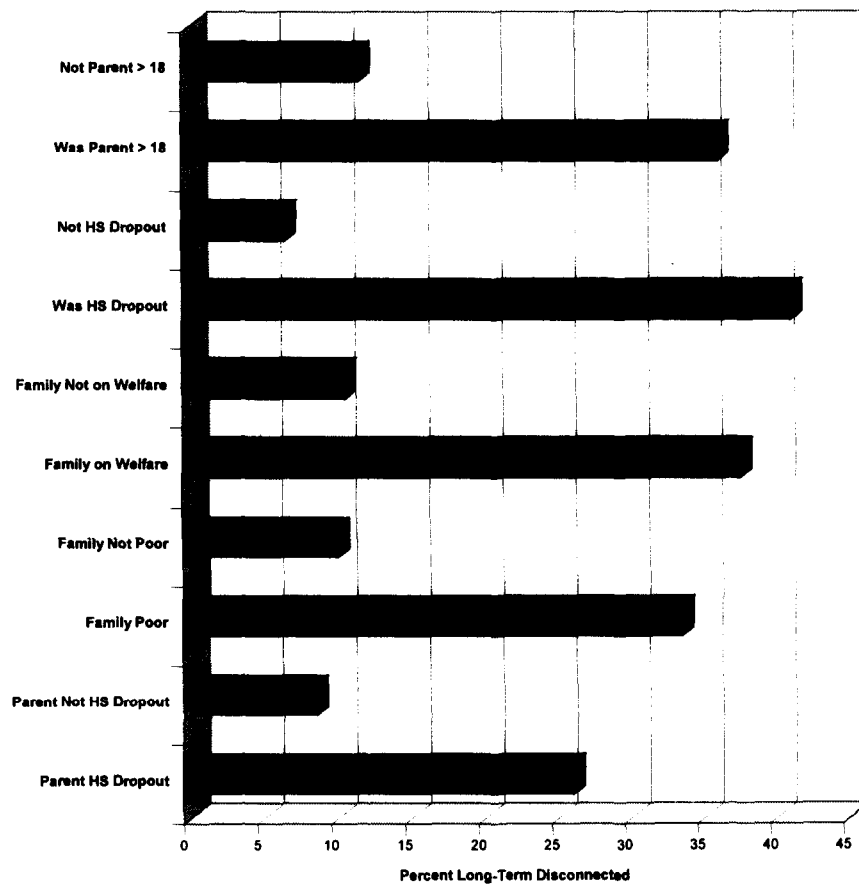
The lower family income of those who had been long-term disconnected youth may also be the result of marital status. They were only about half as likely as connected youths to be married in their late 20s. Less than 30 percent were married at ages 25 to 28. Moreover, the long-term disconnected who did marry were more likely than those who were never disconnected to be divorced or separated (24 percent versus 11 percent for women; 13 percent versus 10 percent for men).

Thus, those who were idle for extended periods of time in their youths experienced substantial social and economic hardship as adults. We cannot say definitively why long-term disconnected youths fared much worse as adults than did their short-term disconnected counterparts. We do know that short-term disconnectedness began, on average, at ages 18 to 19, or after high school. Long-term disconnectedness, however, began around age 16. As a result, youths disconnected for the long term were twice as likely to have dropped out of high school. Of those who did graduate, three-quarters had a GED, almost three times the proportion of short-term disconnected youths. Also, two times as many long-term disconnected females as short-term ones had had a child before age 18 (24 percent versus 12 percent). All these behaviors compromise the development of human capital.

In addition, long-term disconnected males were more likely to spend time in jail, further reducing their eventual earnings capacity. Over 30 percent of men who were disconnected in three or more years spent some time in a jail or youth correctional facility, more than 6 times the rate for the short-term disconnected men (30 percent versus 5 percent). As might be expected, women were much less likely than men to have spent time in jail, with only around 3 percent of even the long-term disconnected women having spent any time in jail as youth.

Again, in interpreting differences between short-term and long-term disconnected youths, one must recognize the probability of a substantial selection effect, as mentioned above. Nevertheless, society should be deeply concerned about the very poor status as adults of the long-term disconnected.

Table 3
Risk Characteristics for Long-term Disconnectedness



Various social and demographic characteristics identify adolescents at high risk of long-term disconnectedness. We did not conduct multivariate analyses, so we cannot identify those factors that cause youthful disconnection. Nevertheless, our bivariate analyses identified factors so

closely associated with later disconnectedness that they may be considered precursors to it. (Later, we argue that these precursors should inform a preventive strategy.)

Specific aspects of family background and measured intellectual ability are strongly related to long-term disconnectedness.⁵ For example, youths whose parents were high school dropouts (compared to those who had at least one parent who graduated from high school) were almost three times more likely to be disconnected in three or more years (25 percent versus 9 percent). Family welfare receipt and poverty status were also strongly associated with long-term disconnectedness. Over 40 percent of the females who came from families that received welfare were disconnected in three or more years, compared to 11 percent of females from families that did not. A similar proportion of females who grew up in poor families, 36 percent, became long-term disconnected, while only about 10 percent of those who were not poor did so. (Male rates were within 5 percentage points of the females.)⁶

Even more than family background, however, intellectual ability or achievement appeared to be related to long-term disconnectedness. Over 30 percent of males and 40 percent of females who scored in the lowest quartile on the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT)⁷ became long-term disconnected, compared to only 2 percent of both males and females who scored in the top quartile. Of those youths who scored in the middle two quartiles, about 10 percent became long-term disconnected.

Dropping out of high school also put youths at risk of long-term disconnection. Four in ten high school dropouts became disconnected for the long term. By way of comparison, only 5 percent of males and 8 percent of females who graduated from high school became long-term disconnected. Moreover, those who were suspended or expelled from school

⁵These characteristics were measured in 1979 when the youths were ages 14 to 16.

⁶The U.S. Department of Education found that low-income students make up a disproportionate share of dropouts: Students with family incomes in the bottom 20 percent of the distribution accounted for 42 percent of all dropouts. Middle-income students (20 percent to 80 percent of all family incomes) represented 53 percent of all dropouts. Thirty-eight percent of all dropouts were from central cities, 40 percent from suburbs, and 21 percent from non-metropolitan areas. (See *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1992*: 16-17.)

⁷Because of the age of the respondent and the nature of the test, the AFQT is a measure of learned knowledge as well as IQ.

were three and a half times more likely to become long-term disconnected than those who were not.⁸

Considered alone, race was associated with long-term disconnectedness. Black youths were found to be two to four times more likely than white youths to become long-term disconnected. (For men, the figures were 26 percent compared to 10 percent; for women, they were 37 percent versus 9 percent).

Racial differences in rates of long-term disconnectedness, however, diminished substantially when family poverty was taken into account. For both black and white males whose families were poor in 1978, 30 percent became long-term disconnected. Among the women, however, there was a large discrepancy between the rates of long-term disconnectedness for poor black and white women: 51 percent versus 23 percent. As indicated earlier, this was largely a product of our definition of disconnectedness, which counted unmarried and unemployed mothers caring for their children (presumably while on public assistance) as disconnected.

Racial differences also decreased when intellectual ability or achievement was considered, especially for men. Of black and white males who scored in the top quartile on the AFQT, only 2 percent became long-term disconnected. For women, there was a greater disparity between the races: About 2 percent of white females who scored in the top quartile became disconnected for the long-term, while 13 percent of their black counterparts did so. Again, this difference is likely due to the black females' higher rates of non-marital births and subsequent welfare recipiency.

Drug use was also related to long-term disconnectedness, but only for males. Over one-fifth of males who had used drugs before age 16 became long-term disconnected, compared to 11 percent of males who did not use drugs. Among females, there was no statistically significant difference in rates of long-term disconnectedness by reported use of drugs.

Early parenthood also seemed to be associated with long-term disconnectedness. Almost 40 percent of females who gave birth before age 18 became long-term disconnected compared to 11 percent of females who did not give birth. For men, 35 percent who fathered a child before age 18 became long-term disconnected, compared to 12 percent of those who did

⁸We recognize the possibility of "right censored" data, since our observation period ends at age 23. However, for the majority of disconnected youths, disconnectedness began before age 20.

not. We cannot tell from our analysis whether the teenagers were married at the time they gave birth. However, the vast majority of births to younger teens are out of wedlock. The National Center for Health Statistics reports that in 1994 (the most recent data available), 86 percent of births to 16-year-olds were out of wedlock, as were 81 percent of births to 17-year-olds.⁹

Combining two risk categories identified youths who were at especially high risk of becoming long-term disconnected. For instance, of the youths who came from welfare families and who scored in the lowest quartile on the AFQT, over 50 percent of men and 68 percent of women became disconnected for the long-term (compared to about 11 percent of youth who had neither of these characteristics). Furthermore, of the women who came from welfare families and had a baby before age 18, 66 percent became long-term disconnected.

All of these traits, of course, are highly related to each other, making it difficult to parse out paths of causation. Moreover, they are generally descriptive of many of the youngsters growing up in inner-city neighborhoods. Nevertheless, we think that the study illuminates a key point for intervention: high school.

School-Related Interventions

Although long-term disconnected youth were more likely to drop out of school than either youths disconnected for the short term or never disconnected, most were still in school through the 11th grade. About 53 percent of long-term disconnected youth were first disconnected at ages 16 or 17, at which time they dropped out. Short-term disconnected youths stayed in school longer: 40 percent became disconnected at ages 18 or 19 and another 40 percent at age 20 or older.

The mere fact that youths at risk of long-term disconnection are in school, of course, does not mean that they are actually learning, or even paying attention. Some may simply be waiting until they are legally eligible to leave school. But we should not ignore the reality that, up to age 16 or 17, high schools still provide a platform for preventive services aimed at the most troubled youths. With this in mind, we suggest three school-

⁹*Monthly vital statistics report*, 1996: 45.

related interventions: career-oriented education, after-school “safe havens,” and targeting individual deficits.

Career-oriented education. Recent ethnographic studies bolster the widely held view that youths will be more responsible about schooling and other personal behaviors if they have something to look forward to, such as a good job. Elijah Anderson (1993) of the University of Pennsylvania, for example, argues that unwed early motherhood and fatherhood—a common route to long-term disconnectedness—is a response to a perceived lack of life opportunities. He studied a low-income neighborhood in Philadelphia and found that youths were involved in a game where young girls were lured into having sex by the older boys’ “vague but convincing” promises of marriage. The girls who went along with this ruse usually ended up “pregnant and abandoned.”

Anderson argues that this male “wantonness” is largely due to the flight from the inner city of many well-paying, blue-collar jobs, and the lack of adequate skills for those jobs that are still available. Because many males perceive that the traditional road to manhood—employment—is closed to them, sexual prowess serves as a substitute, and babies are its proof. Anderson (1993: A21) concludes, “When a sense of future exists, we will see more responsible behavior, sexual and otherwise.” Many middle-class youths, after all, are also sexually active, but they are much less likely to have children because they know that unwed parenthood will compromise their futures.

A host of factors contribute to inner-city youth unemployment, including the absence of jobs (or of networks to inform youths about existing jobs) and racial discrimination by employers. But the lack of an education and work-related skills are as important as any. Youths who see a concrete connection between what they learn in school and a brighter future may be less likely to drop out. A renewed emphasis on career-oriented education, supplemented by enhanced job-counseling and job-finding services, may help establish this link.

One example of such a program is operated by the East San Gabriel Valley School District, outside of Los Angeles. The average drop out rate in the district is 26 percent; some schools have rates over 50 percent. Of the students in the district, two-thirds are minorities and a similar proportion is from single-parent families. Over half have a grade point average under 2.0, and only one in five plans to pursue a four-year college degree.

The district designed the Marketing/Merchandising/Apparel Program for its non-college bound students. To enroll, a student must be "at risk," defined as being below grade level in basic skills, having a history of poor academic achievement, being two or more years older than other students in the same grade, residing in a low-income household, or coming from a family where one or both parents or siblings dropped out of school. Juniors and seniors participate for three hours each day. They have access to academic and vocational assessment, career guidance, individualized academic remediation, and tutoring. Job skills are taught through a combination of classroom-based and business-based instruction. The companies supporting the program include Macy's, American Airlines, K-Mart Corporation, Safeway Stores, Nordstrom, Hallmark Stores, and B. Dalton Books.

The performance of students in the program was compared to that of students with similar academic and socio-economic backgrounds that did not participate. Students in the program were 41 percent more likely to graduate from high school than those in the comparison group (92 percent versus 65 percent). About two-thirds of the program group went on to post-secondary education, compared to 44 percent of the comparison group. After high school, 87 percent of the program group was employed, 36 percent more than the comparison group (64 percent). Finally, Floyd (1995) found that students in the program group were twice as likely to have "upwardly mobile" jobs, defined as jobs with some management responsibility or a pay raise in the past year (15 percent versus 7 percent). Although a selection effect undoubtedly boosted these positive statistics, the magnitude of these differences suggests that the program helped large numbers of young people.

Many inner-city students do not have access to such programs. The U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Vocational Education (1994) found that while 80 percent of suburban school districts provided access to vocational schools, only 68 percent of urban districts and 55 percent of rural ones did so. The report (1994: 82) found, "At least partly because of their greater concentration in suburban areas, [vocational schools] are less accessible to special populations of students [such as single parents], minority students, and—ironically—vocational students." Because these figures are in response to a yes/no question about "access," they do not necessarily reflect the degree of availability within the school districts—or the quality of the programs.

Our impression is that actual availability is even lower in the inner city. According to the NLSY, for example, only 22 percent of long-term disconnected males and 30 percent of females were involved in vocational education clubs through school. In part, this low number reflects the fact that many of the long-term disconnected youths had dropped out of school and therefore could not be involved in any school-related activities. Nevertheless, it also suggests the degree to which career-related education may not be available to those who need it most.

After-school "safe havens." While classes and work experience can engage students during the school day, many disadvantaged youths return to neighborhoods that are teeming with gangs, drugs, and other diversions, and that provide little adult supervision. Many grow up in households where, due to a variety of factors, they receive little academic or emotional support. Long-term disconnected youths were twice as likely as those never disconnected to be reared in a single-parent family, twice as likely to have four or more siblings, and three times as likely to have grown up poor. Long-term disconnected youths were only about half as likely as those never disconnected to have had magazines, newspapers, or library cards in their homes.

According to the Carnegie Council report, *A Matter of Time*, 40 percent of an average adolescent's time is unsupervised, and the peak time for adolescent violence, crime, and sexual activity is during after school hours, 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. The same study also found that young people do not want to be left alone; they want regular contact with adults.

This suggests that many youths might benefit from after-school activities that are school-based, school-linked, or operated through community institutions. School-based activities, such as sports teams, band, and clubs, are one example. Community centers often offer intramural sports and other team projects. Church-based groups, YMCAs, and Boys and Girls Clubs are other settings that enable students to spend time with their peers while under adult supervision. All venues can give youths a sense of belonging, as well as a safe place to go after school.

And yet, our analysis of the NLSY indicates that long-term disconnected youths were only about half as likely to have participated in these activities as were youths that had never been disconnected. About one-quarter of long-term disconnected males had participated in an after school activity compared to 55 percent of males who had never been disconnected. For females, the figures were 20 percent and 46 percent, respec-

tively. Again, the size of these differences may reflect the fact that long-term disconnected youths became disconnected around age 16, and having left school, could not participate in activities.

The Quantum Opportunities Program is one example of a school-related program that seemed to decrease the behaviors that put youths at risk of disconnectedness, and, at the same time, expanded the participants' horizons. The program targeted high school freshmen in families receiving welfare in Philadelphia, Oklahoma City, San Antonio, and Saginaw, Michigan. The premise was that students could make a "quantum leap" up the ladder of opportunity if they were provided, throughout high school, with (1) an intense array of academic and community services and (2) a sustained relationship with both an adult and a peer group. Students attended plays and concerts, visited museums, and "job shadowed" professionals. They also performed community service projects ranging from tutoring elementary school students to neighborhood clean up.

At the beginning of the program, students from families on welfare were randomly assigned to a program group or a control group. Evaluators (Hahn, 1994: 5) found that, compared to the control group, participants were 50 percent more likely to have a high school diploma or a GED (63 percent versus 42 percent), over one and one-half times more likely to be in post-secondary school (42 percent versus 16 percent), half as likely to be high school dropouts (23 percent versus 50 percent), 58 percent less likely to have had children (24 percent versus 38 percent), and 15 percent less likely to be on welfare or food stamps (45 percent versus 52 percent).

While the results of the study are promising, they were largely driven by the enormous success of the Philadelphia site, where program participants performed better than the control group on all of the indicators. The experience of the other three sites was more mixed. As is often the case, implementation may have been as important as inspiration to the program's success.

Targeting individual deficits of youths. The youths described in this study had both academic and emotional deficits that likely contributed to their dropping out of school. Other studies have found a connection between academic problems and high-risk behavior. The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, for example, designed an intervention for teenage mothers who were also high school dropouts. A baseline interview found that the average young woman, despite being 18 years old, read at

the eighth grade level (Quint, et al., 1994: xxvi). Interventions designed to reduce these deficits may help prevent disconnectedness.

As described above, long-term disconnected youths scored poorly on a test of cognitive skill and academic ability in relation to short-term disconnected youth and to those who were never disconnected. The average long-term disconnected male scored in the 24th percentile of the AFQT, while short-term and never-disconnected males scored in the 42nd and 59th percentiles, respectively. (For all three groups, females scores were similar to the males.)

The problems these students face should not be ignored. In some communities, math, english, and science classes are “tracked” thus allowing students who are having difficulty in a certain subject to proceed at a slower pace. Some oppose this kind of special treatment for fear it will diminish student self esteem. For those who need extra assistance, then, schools could have readily available help outside of class. Some examples are tutoring by teachers before and after school, tutoring during set class periods, and resource centers to help students work on academic deficiencies (such as computer labs with programs to improve math or verbal skills). Some schools also utilize peer tutoring.

Long-term disconnected youths were also more likely to suffer from emotional deficits. Psychologists (Benoit, 1996) have found that youths who do not feel good about themselves are more susceptible to the pressure of their peers to engage in risky activities, such as drug use and unprotected sex. The NLSY measured this variable with the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale, which was administered to the youths when they were ages 15 to 17. Only about 40 percent of long-term disconnected males and females scored above the mean, compared to 60 percent of those never disconnected.

Mentoring may help in this regard. Regular contact with a successful adult can give a student sorely needed individual attention. Moreover, a caring adult may help that youth chart a path through adolescence by assisting in decision making and goal setting. Many programs recruit adults from the same neighborhoods as the students so that mentors can serve as powerful examples of overcoming obstacles to become successful, working adults.

One mentoring program that has shown positive results is Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Public/Private Ventures evaluated the program in eight

cities.¹⁰ Adolescents ages 10 to 16 who signed up for the program were randomly assigned to either a mentor or a waiting list. Youths in the program group met with their mentors at least three times each month for approximately four hours. Half of the youths were minorities, over 90 percent lived with only one parent, and most came from low-income families.

Eighteen months after they began the program, the youths were re-interviewed. Evaluators found that the youths with mentors fared better than the control group on a number of indicators: They were 46 percent less likely to initiate drug use (and minority participants were 76 percent less likely to do so), 27 percent less likely to initiate drinking, one-third less likely to report hitting someone, and half as likely to skip school days. However, there were no statistically significant differences in self-concept between the two groups (Tierney, Grossman & Resch, 1995: iii-iv).

As was the case with the Quantum Opportunities Program, however, these promising results should be understood within the context of the evaluation, which was based on self-reports of behaviors. It is possible that youths with mentors gave what they perceived to be the socially correct responses to questions. Moreover, on many of the measured behaviors, the base was small so that a large increase did not represent a major shift in behavior.

Conclusion

As defined by this study, youthful disconnectedness appears to be widespread in our society. About one-third of both males and females who reached adolescence in the 1980s spent at least 26 weeks in one or more calendar years not in school, not working, not in the military, and not married to someone who met one of these criteria. But most of these young people were disconnected in two or fewer years, and, on average, did not suffer severe personal and economic hardship as young adults.

It is the long-term disconnected who had the most severe problems as adults and who pose the most pressing challenge to social policy. Until now, however, remedial programs have not been able to reconnect many

¹⁰Philadelphia, Rochester, Minneapolis, Columbus, Wichita, Kansas City, Houston, San Antonio, and Phoenix were selected for geographical diversity and because their caseloads were sufficiently large.

of these youngsters to the broader society. This is why many researchers and policy makers have been eager to find promising approaches to the prevention of disconnection.

This interest in prevention often translates into support for preschool interventions like Head Start. The significance of this study is that it identifies another opportunity for intervention: high school. The majority of youth who became disconnected were in school as late as the 10th or 11th grade. Targeting preventive measures at high school students, of course, does not preclude working with other age groups. In fact, peer groups, mentors, safe after-school activities, and remediating individual deficits are fitting interventions for children and young adolescents. By focusing on older teens, we are not implying that other young people should be ignored; rather, different interventions are appropriate at various stages in a youth's life.

In this article, we have focused on career-oriented education, after-school "safe havens" and individual targeted services. But there are many other approaches to keeping young people in school and on the path to successful futures. Our larger point is that—even as older adolescents—many of those whose futures seem bleakest are still in school, within the reach of preventive intervention. We need not—and we should not—give up on them.

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