National League of Cities

action kit

for Municipal Leaders

Reengaging
Disconnected Youth

Issue #7

Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

Dear Municipal Leader:

This kit was created not just for you, but for the children, youth, and families in your community. It is based on the latest research and best practices from across the nation and offers a wide-ranging menu of opportunities for municipal leadership to make children, youth, and family issues a community-wide priority. Whether you are ready to launch a major initiative or are just getting started, the ideas in this kit will help you move forward.

NLC's ongoing series of action kits for municipal leaders, published by the new Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, will address each of the Institute's five core program areas: education; youth development; early childhood development; the safety of children and youth; and family economic security. The goal is to give you and other municipal leaders throughout the country the ideas and the tools you need to take action on these all-important issues for the future of our cities and towns.

Mayors and city councilmembers all across America know that our communities' success depends on the health and well-being of the nation's children, youth, and families. Now is the time to act on this knowledge. As a municipal leader, you have the ability to focus the attention of your community on the needs of children, youth, and families. Working with your colleagues in local government, you can strengthen municipal policies, support effective programs, and bring diverse partners to the table in order to make things happen.

NLC and its Institute for Youth, Education, and Families are eager to assist you in these vital efforts. We encourage you to use this action kit to get started, and we hope you will contact us whenever we might be of assistance. Institute staff are readily available to provide additional information about the strategies highlighted in each of the action kits and to help you identify steps that make sense for your community.

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About the National League of Cities:

The National League of Cities (NLC) is the oldest and largest national organization representing municipal governments throughout the United States. NLC serves as a national resource and advocate on behalf of over 1700 member cities and for 49 municipal leagues whose membership totals more than 18,000 cities and towns across the country.

The mission of the National League of Cities is to strengthen and promote cities as centers of opportunity, leadership, and governance.

About NLC's Institute for Youth, Education, and Families:

The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, a special entity within the National League of Cities, helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of the children, youth, and families in their communities. NLC launched the Institute in January 2000 in recognition of the unique and influential roles that mayors, city councilmembers, and other local leaders can play in strengthening families and improving outcomes for children and youth.

As a national resource to cities and towns across America, the Institute provides guidance and assistance to municipal officials, compiles and disseminates information on promising strategies and best practices, builds networks of local officials working on similar issues and concerns, and conducts research on the key challenges facing municipalities. NLC's Council on Youth, Education, and Families guides and oversees the Institute's work.

*F*or most youth, the teenage and young adult years are full of excitement, new challenges, and opportunities for growth. Strong and lasting connections to school, work, and caring adults are key elements of success during this critical period. In contrast, when these connections are weakened or lost – an all too common result for young people who live in poverty stricken neighborhoods, drop out of low-quality schools, and have difficulty staying on a positive path – the road to adulthood can be fraught with disappointment, frustration, and danger.

Municipal leaders in cities and towns across America are taking practical steps to help "disconnected" youth and to keep teens and young adults engaged in school, work, and settings where they can interact with caring adults. This work can be difficult. At the same time, the rewards for their efforts are found in higher rates of school completion, lower rates of risk-taking or anti-social behaviors, and more young residents who become productive and contributing members of the larger community.

Here are three important reasons why mayors and city council-members respond to the challenge of keeping young people connected and on track for future success:

Education and training for young people builds strong communities. Cities that want to strengthen families and develop a skilled workforce can advance these goals by expanding opportunities for disconnected youth to return to school, enroll in training programs, and find paid employment.

Investments now can save money down the road. Reconnecting young people to school, work, and community allows them to develop their talents, serve as leaders, and stay out of trouble, thereby reducing the need for more expensive, future outlays in areas such as public safety. Many of these teenagers and young adults will also end up making positive contributions to the cities in which they live – paying taxes, purchasing goods and services, serving as role models in their neighborhoods, and engaging in civic activities.

A "second chance" for disconnected youth promotes equity. The chance to bounce back and overcome youthful mistakes is a routine part of growing up for most Americans. Disconnected youth who lack the social and financial supports of their more advantaged peers often are not as fortunate, but they deserve the same opportunity to get back on their feet.

*A*n estimated 2.8 million Americans between the ages of 16 and 24 are neither in school nor employed. In many big cities, up to one-fourth of all young adults can be characterized as "disconnected." The problem is also severe in rural communities located in high-poverty areas, a pattern that is vividly illustrated by the disproportionate number of minority youth in the South who fall into this category.

Why are so many of our young people out of school, out of work, and not connected to caring adults or community supports? There is no single answer, as the journey for any individual youth almost always reflects a mix of economic factors, societal influences, and personal decisions. When seeking to understand the problems and needs of disconnected youth as a group, however, municipal leaders should consider the following observations:

Families and neighborhoods matter. Threats to the full and healthy development of youth often begin to accumulate early in life. Children growing up in poor households may go without the basics of adequate nutrition, health care, and housing. Parents preoccupied with economic hardships or personal struggles may also be unable or unwilling to provide the sustained nurturing, guidance, and supervision that children need. These problems are compounded for families living in impoverished or crime-ridden neighborhoods, where children have less access to the social networks or community supports that might prevent them from making poor choices and enable them to compensate for and overcome these disadvantages.

Weaknesses in public systems can exacerbate problems. While good schools can help young people regain lost ground and stay on track, the failing schools that serve many high-poverty neighborhoods simply fuel a sense of futility and alienation among at-risk youth. Psychological conditions that often result from this high stress environment frequently go unrecognized and untreated. In the absence of well-focused efforts to break the cycle, subsequent encounters with law enforcement and juvenile justice agencies or the foster care system then sustain or even accelerate a self-perpetuating process that often leads to tragic or even deadly results.

No one is responsible for reconnecting youth to school, work, or community. Public schools rarely have the resources to reengage and re-enroll those who have left school without a diploma. Youth employment programs typically have sufficient resources to serve only the most motivated and job-ready, and teenagers leave the foster care system at age 18. Law enforcement agencies which have frequent contact with disconnected youth and have the potential to be positive agents, rarely have the resources to do more than arrest and incarcerate. In this environment, disconnected youth easily disappear.

Mayors and city councilmembers are particularly well positioned to set the tone and direction for local efforts to reengage disconnected youth. By articulating key priorities and future directions for change, municipal leaders can provide a much-needed framework for discussions that involve the full range of city officials, community stakeholders, and local residents.

The principles articulated below can help ensure that community initiatives to reconnect young people to school, work, and caring adults are clearly focused and rooted in the best available research on what works for disconnected youth.

❖ *Intervene early.* Prevention is always less costly, in both human and financial terms, than later attempts to reverse bad outcomes. If the community places a priority on early intervention, when the first signs of trouble emerge, far fewer young people are likely to veer off course.

❖ *Don't give up on older youth.* Second chances are also essential. Even young adults who have faced major crises – or made big mistakes – can turn their lives around when offered the chance to learn, work, and contribute to the community in a respectful and supportive environment.

❖ *View youth as resources.* A narrow focus on disconnected youth merely as problems to be fixed may further erode their self-esteem, deepen their sense of alienation, and overlook their potential to be part of the solution to both personal and community problems. Young people should have a voice in planning for their future success at the individual, programmatic, and policy levels.

❖ *Create multiple pathways to success.* No single program or approach will work for every disconnected young person, and not every such youth will be ready to take advantage of the opportunity when first presented with a chance to get back on a path to success. Because life-changing shifts in personal goals and attitudes take time, multiple options for moving forward are essential for older teenagers and young adults.

❖ *Commit to comprehensive approaches.* Although work and education are two keys to helping disconnected youth, an effective citywide strategy must also address issues such as mental health, lack of housing, substance abuse, and child care that may otherwise impede their progress.

❖ *Insist upon accountability.* Interventions for disconnected youth should be built on the premise that young people will be held accountable for their actions, whether positive or negative. Similarly, public systems and community agencies that are leading these efforts should be held accountable for outcomes and be expected to document that they are making progress in reconnecting these youth to school, work, and community.

C rafting a city strategy for reengaging disconnected youth can seem like a daunting challenge. Municipal leaders are likely to be most successful when they pursue a collaborative approach, one that involves both public and private partners in efforts to identify, reach out, and engage those young people who are in need of help. The following steps provide useful starting points that can create a strong foundation for such efforts while generating momentum and building public support for future initiatives.

Convene disconnected youth stakeholders.

One useful way for municipal leaders to get started is to begin a dialogue with the public systems and community agencies that are most likely to see the warning signs when individual youth falter. School personnel often are the first to recognize that students are struggling or becoming disengaged. Community or faith-based agencies may learn of harmful family problems, while police and probation officers often know when youth are in danger or becoming a threat to others. Bringing these disparate stakeholders together is frequently an essential first step toward more effective, comprehensive approaches.

Assess community resources and needs.

Reliable estimates of the number of disconnected youth in the community and accurate information regarding services currently available to them are key inputs in planning and program development. As part of this process, it is important to identify system gaps and points at which youth may "slip between the cracks." For example, although many disconnected youth are between the ages of 18 and 24, most community programs only serve younger teenagers.

Involve disconnected youth in planning and policy discussions.

In many respects, the experts on what works and what does not are young people themselves. City officials can solicit ideas and guidance from vulnerable youth through advisory bodies or small task forces. Focus groups with recent graduates or current participants from local programs already serving disconnected youth can also yield valuable insights.

Start with in-kind or limited resources and build.

Many cities and towns begin their efforts to reengage disconnected youth with very modest resources, but then use this initial investment to create or leverage new opportunities. One option is to redirect funds from less effective, problem-focused programs to more comprehensive initiatives. Restructuring an existing staff position within the mayor's office, or a senior policy position within an appropriate city agency, can also provide the capacity needed to develop a longer-term action plan.

Build public support for change.

An unfortunate reality in many communities is that a large segment of the public perceives disconnected youth as unmotivated, antagonistic, or even threatening. Mayors and city councilmembers can challenge such stereotypes and highlight the social and economic costs incurred, as well as the opportunities missed, when young people are not connected to school, work, and caring adults. Potential strategies include media events that draw attention to successful youth programs and community forums that give residents the chance to hear directly from teenagers or young adults who have overcome obstacles and turned their lives around.

*O*ne out of every four American high school students drops out of school; one in eight young people never earn a high school diploma or a General Equivalency Diploma (GED). In contrast, by some estimates, 80 percent of new jobs require at least some postsecondary education. For municipal leaders who are working to develop strong neighborhoods and a skilled workforce, efforts to promote school completion and college access must be an integral part of their strategy for helping disconnected youth.

Although city officials typically do not control their local school districts, they can work in partnership with public school and community leaders to decrease the dropout rate, increase alternative pathways to high school completion, and encourage post-secondary education.

Work with schools to combat truancy and keep youth in school.

Young people rarely drop out of school before clear warning signs have emerged. School officials and youth workers all have opportunities to identify potential dropouts based on evidence of poor academic performance and high rates of truancy or suspension. Through effective city-school partnerships, local communities can look for underlying problems that are holding students back and target appropriate services to youth and their families. For example, youth workers employed by the City of San Jose (Calif.) work with suspended students and their families to design individualized service plans that respond to academic or behavioral concerns and help students make the transition back to school.

Support alternative learning options.

Mayors and city councilmembers can encourage and support school districts that are modifying their traditional high schools to provide high-quality alternative learning options. City leaders can play particularly important roles in helping to educate the public about the value of smaller, more innovative high schools, and by lending their support to bond or ballot measures for construction or renovation costs when necessary. New schools established by nonprofit and community groups under charters granted by the school district (or, in the case of Indianapolis, Ind., by the mayor himself) can also bring new energy, ideas, and opportunities for experimentation to the search for alternative learning options.

Provide community-based strategies for high school completion.

Many high school dropouts earn their diploma or GED when offered the chance to enroll in nontraditional, community-based programs that combine work and learning. Through city-run programs or collaborations with nonprofit organizations, municipal leaders can create ways for dropouts to resume their education without returning to the regular classroom. The City of Albany (N.Y.) includes GED preparation as a critical component of its employment programs for out-of-school youth. Similarly, the City of Boston has supported alternative, diploma-granting programs at neighborhood community centers, and now is developing new learning options through its small schools initiative.

Expand college access for nontraditional students.

Local elected officials can also work to ensure that a high school diploma becomes a stepping stone to further education for disconnected youth by encouraging area colleges and universities to develop programs for nontraditional students. The mayor of St. Louis recently convened college presidents from the metropolitan region to discuss ways of boosting the proportion of the city's high school graduates that go on to postsecondary institutions. Efforts to create formal linkages between alternative high schools and local colleges can also yield large dividends in increased educational and vocational skills.

*T*he prospect of paid employment is what keeps some youth in school, motivates others to resume their education, and often provides the most durable connections to mainstream society. Teenagers who acquire some work experience early in life are also more likely to gain a secure foothold in the labor market as young adults. Finally, cities benefit directly from a vibrant and effective youth employment system: the dividends can include a more skilled workforce, an improved business climate, lower crime rates among juveniles and young adults, and stronger families and neighborhoods.

Mayors and city councilmembers can build on traditional summer jobs programs and connect youth to the labor market by using a number of proven strategies that combine work and learning.

Offer work opportunities to in-school youth.

For youth who struggle academically, work opportunities that are tied to academic learning can open new avenues for achievement and provide a strong incentive to stay in school. Municipal leaders can expand the range of work opportunities available to in-school youth by offering city government internships, administering summer jobs programs, leveraging business partnerships, working with schools around school-to-career options, and partnering with local organizations to promote service learning. In New Orleans, the Mayor's Team Youth Opportunities Initiative employs more than 1,000 youth during the summer months; in Minneapolis, an alternative high school serving Native American youth collaborates with a local university to prepare students for careers as certified nursing assistants and home health aides.

Create transitional jobs for out-of-school youth.

Many cities have found that one of the best ways to reengage disconnected youth is through transitional programs that prepare young people for permanent employment by combining wage-paying jobs with education and support services. The Town of Guadalupe, Arizona, sponsors a federally-funded YouthBuild program that gives 25 out-of-school youth each year the chance to build low-income housing for seniors and the disabled, while working toward their GED and receiving construction skills and job readiness training, counseling, and opportunities to earn college credits. Similarly, the City of Burlington and the nonprofit Vermont Youth Conservation Corps partnered to enable out-of-school youth to gain skills and work experience by planting trees and maintaining trails in a popular city park.

Expand access to entry-level jobs and career ladders.

Disconnected youth are less likely than their more advantaged peers to have informal, social networks that they can use to find entry-level employment. For this reason, they reap the greatest benefits when municipal leaders "organize the job market" by seeking job pledges from local employers and then setting up a process by which young people can apply for those jobs. City officials can also work with regional workforce officials and community colleges to identify and strengthen career ladders, developing opportunities that enable young workers to advance from entry-level to higher skill positions.

Assume a leadership role in shaping regional workforce policies.

Regional boards composed of business and community leaders play key roles in strengthening workforce connections and allocating federal funds provided under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) for local employment and training programs. Some of the most effective regional workforce investment boards, such as the Tri-County Board in rural Yakima, Washington, think broadly and strategically about the provision of comprehensive services for youth. Mayors and city councilmembers can seek appointment to these regional boards and their corresponding youth councils, advocating on behalf of disconnected youth from a municipal perspective while also forging stronger partnerships with local business leaders.

*F*or teenagers and young adults who are being released from juvenile or adult correctional facilities, and for youth who are leaving foster care at age 18, the risks of long-term disconnection from school, work, and community are extremely high. Both groups are hindered by common challenges of inadequate education and workforce preparation, and many young people in these groups also bear the scars of neglect or abuse while in detention or foster care. Therefore, the point at which young people leave these settings to start over in their communities represents a moment of great vulnerability as well as an important window for effective interventions on their behalf.

Although cities do not usually have direct control over juvenile justice, corrections, or child welfare systems, municipal leaders can develop and promote effective strategies that both minimize harm to young people in these circumstances and reengage them in activities that help them make a successful transition to adulthood.

Develop alternatives to criminal prosecution and incarceration.

Many cities are finding ways, either before formal charges are filed or through alternative sentences, to keep young people out of the courts and corrections system while still holding them accountable for their actions. In Evanston (Ill.) and San Antonio, young people accused of minor offenses can be referred to community-based social services or alternative programs at neighborhood diversion centers, giving such youth the chance to emerge from the process with a "clean record" following successful participation. These alternatives and other innovations such as teen courts, if made available on a fair and consistent basis across racial and ethnic groups, can give youth a chance to make amends and move their lives in a positive direction.

Reconnect young adults with criminal records to education and employment.

Criminal records and lack of work experience can combine to thwart even vigorous attempts by young people to secure employment. In the absence of access to the legitimate job market, such youth often return to high-risk lifestyles and end up back in the corrections system. Municipal leaders – working in concert with regional workforce boards, local business groups, individual employers, and community organizations – can help connect these young people to jobs and necessary support services. For example, Project CRAFT (Community Restitution Apprenticeship-Focused Training) in Nashville uses federal, state, and local resources to provide homebuilding training for young people with criminal records while also expanding the stock of affordable housing in the city.

Promote economic success among youth aging out of foster care.

Although young people leaving foster care need many kinds of support, leading child welfare experts believe that important gains can be made by helping these vulnerable youth complete high school and go on to college, get started in a career, learn how to manage their finances, and build savings and assets over time. A group of national and regional foundations, working together under the umbrella of the Youth Transition Funders Group, recently announced three new community demonstration initiatives – in Indianapolis, Oakland (Calif.), and Tampa (Fla.) – to prepare foster youth and young adults leaving foster care to be economically successful. Municipal leaders can build upon these models, and the concept of an "opportunity passport" now being promoted by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, to mount similar efforts in their own communities.

Analyze local policies for unintended impact.

Some local policies unintentionally increase the number of young people who become entrapped in the juvenile or criminal justice systems. For example, "zero tolerance" policies that seek to keep drugs and weapons out of schools often result in high rates of suspension and expulsion, creating a "school-to-prison pipeline" by putting troubled youth on the street without supervision or support. Some communities have sought to sever the link to crime by establishing youth assessment centers where truant or suspended youth and their families can be connected to community resources. Municipal officials can be the leaders in calling for candid discussions of the unintended impacts of local policies, and they can work with local partners to mitigate their negative effects.

*T*he greatest challenge for any community that hopes to reengage disconnected youth lies in weaving valuable but isolated initiatives into a more coherent and effective system. Even though federal and state programs often target specific groups (e.g., dropouts, unemployed or homeless youth, teen parents, foster care youth, juvenile offenders), there is enormous overlap among these populations. Municipal policies, in order to be successful, must recognize and reflect this reality.

Municipal leaders can move toward a citywide system for disconnected youth by taking steps to ensure that young people get the help they need to access available services, that agencies are working together to address their needs, and that aggressive steps are taken when youth are in danger of "slipping through the cracks."

Develop common points of entry, intake, and assessment.

Because disconnected youth are likely to have multiple needs, a well-designed system will enable those who do seek help to gain access to the full array of opportunities and services available in the community. Whether this is achieved through multiple neighborhood-based centers (in the case of larger cities) or a single youth "one-stop" center, city officials can ensure that staff at each point of entry use a common process to identify youth needs, and then have the capacity to respond quickly through direct enrollment or immediate referrals so that youth receive the help they need. The youth and family assessment center in Austin/Travis County (Tex.) has case managers based in various school and community sites, but they all use a common set of intake, assessment, and referral tools to connect participants to services throughout the county.

Strengthen case planning and case management across agencies.

Young people with multiple needs are also likely to come into contact with a number of different public agencies and institutions. Mayors and city councilmembers can emphasize the need for cross-agency collaboration, both at the city level, and with state, county, and regional workforce officials. This collaboration is critical for joint case planning and case management efforts. In Philadelphia, city police, probation officers, and community-based "street workers" work in teams and meet regularly to focus energies on high-risk youthful offenders, monitoring compliance with probation terms while also providing youth development and employment opportunities.

Assist agencies in planning for youth transitions.

Whether a young person is exiting the juvenile justice system or the foster care system, the date of their emancipation is usually known well in advance. City officials can assist juvenile justice and foster care agencies in creating aftercare or independent living plans to ensure that the youth make safe transitions into adulthood. For example, a city might find its niche by helping to locate suitable housing for young people who are returning to the community, or by recruiting volunteers who will serve as mentors and advocates for youth following their release. Cities such as Oklahoma City and San Francisco are using local resources to ensure that youth exiting foster care have access to affordable housing, thereby preventing teen homelessness.

Create new capacity for reaching out to youth.

When young people struggle or grow more alienated, some simply "disappear" – either by dropping out of school, never contacting agencies to which they are referred for help, or leaving community programs prior to successful completion. In many instances, school personnel or agency staff know the identities of the youth who disappear, but all too often no serious effort is made to reach out to them. Designated local outreach workers, similar to the City of Boston's "street workers," can work with community organizations and public agencies to reengage these young people and help them reconnect to school, work, and community.

Address financial sustainability.

Long-term success depends on the city's ability to maximize local investments and then leverage these funds to attract federal, state, or private resources. Municipal leaders can direct funds away from less effective, remedial programs and toward more comprehensive initiatives. They can also fill gaps and bolster the capacity of community groups by providing relatively small but flexible grants that supplement federal and state funding sources. In addition, collecting and sharing data about the status of youth in the community can help local programs attract outside funding. A citywide youth collaborative in Corpus Christi (Tex.) has leveraged over $14 million in outside funds over four years, in part due to a sophisticated data collection system that was developed in partnership with a state university.

Albany, New York: Service Navigation System for Youth

The Albany Department of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) uses an innovative "Service Navigation System" to connect young people to secondary and post-secondary education, job training and employment, community service, substance abuse counseling, and recreational opportunities. Through a central youth center, young people in search of assistance are assessed by caseworkers and connected to appropriate programs, both inside and outside of DYFS, based on their individual needs. Intensive case management and data tracking technology help to ensure that young people access the correct services and do not slip through the cracks.

Baltimore, Maryland: Community-Based Education Options

In an effort to boost the number of youth graduating from high school, the Baltimore Mayor's Office of Employment Development is facilitating a partnership between the Baltimore Public Schools and local youth-serving organizations. Through this partnership, the school district is re-enrolling high school dropouts in community-based, diploma-granting programs run by private vendors under contract. All parties benefit from this arrangement. The school district gains formerly lost state average daily attendance (ADA) funding when the young dropouts re-enroll; former dropouts get a chance to earn regular high school diplomas in small, community-based learning environments; and the city gains a better educated, more productive citizenry.

Brockton, Massachusetts: Working Across Systems

After recognizing that the needs of local youth were not being adequately met, the City of Brockton partnered with the local Workforce Investment Board to win a federal Youth Opportunities grant. The Brockton Youth Opportunities program, named RISE, provides education, youth development, and employment related activities for vulnerable youth. In addition to offering programming, RISE is working with state agencies and schools to build a system of support for vulnerable youth. RISE agency liaisons help to build strong partnerships between RISE and traditional high schools and charter schools, the courts, child welfare agencies, and mental health agencies, so they can follow-up with and support young people as they move in and out of these systems.

Cheyenne, Wyoming: Office of Youth Alternatives

Since the late 1970s, the Cheyenne Office of Youth Alternatives (OYA) has evolved from a probation office for court-involved youth into a place where all youth can come for help. Through partnerships with community-based organizations, the courts, parks and recreation, and others, OYA offers opportunities for service, leadership, and group therapy to young people from all walks of life. OYA engages the families of its youth by including them in counseling and educational activities. Cheyenne's residents are also active in the work of this municipal agency, by both referring youth to the center and serving as volunteers. In 2001, OYA averaged 112 new youth referrals per month and adult volunteers donated over 12, 246 hours of their time to youth through one-on-one mentoring and group activities.

Corpus Christi, Texas: Youth Opportunities United

Research, data analysis, and planning are at the heart of Corpus Christi's Comprehensive Strategy for Youth, or Youth Opportunities United, which is led by the city and county in partnership with the school district, United Way, and other government and private partners. The long-term strategic plan that has resulted from this collaborative effort uses research and data analysis to reduce the number of youthful offenders and support healthy youth development. The coalition collects data from local programs and works to increase the quality and capacity of services in five key areas: afterschool, early childhood, a juvenile assessment center, a safe communities program, and a mentor network. Through its planning and data collection, the community has successfully leveraged over $14 million in state, federal, and private dollars in four years to fund community youth efforts.

Guadalupe, Arizona: Youth and Young Adult Programs

The City of Guadalupe created the Office of Youth and Young Adult Programs as an independent nonprofit organization to address the community's high dropout and teen pregnancy rates. The office, which began with just one YouthBuild grant and one staff person, now supports five staff people and has hosted several employment, education, and community service programs. The city allows the Office of Youth and Young Adult Programs to use the old city hall as its headquarters, free of charge, and approves the applications it submits. The Office has worked closely with the school district, county, workforce development agency, a local community college, and other city departments to achieve its goals.

Kansas City, Missouri: Sentenced to the Arts

For the past three years, the City Council of Kansas City has passed an ordinance to waive its approximately $300,000 appropriation from the federal Juvenile Justice Accountability Block Grant to the Jackson County Juvenile Justice system. These funds are used to support the "Sentenced to the Arts" programs for youth in the Jackson County system, most of whom reside in Kansas City. Through this program, adjudicated youth living in residential facilities are taught by community artists and create public art projects. The program serves youth who have committed a range of serious offenses, not simply first time or non-violent offenses, and also includes an internship component in which a smaller number of youth work with professional artists. The Sentenced to the Arts model and its collaborative financing have been so successful that other nearby cities have begun to waive their federal funding to expand the program.

Nashville, Tennessee: Providing Support for Foster Youth

With the mayor's office as one of several community partners, Nashville is one of five cities nationwide that are participating in a foundation-sponsored initiative to support youth who are making the critical transition from foster care to independent living situations. The initiative will provide community-based education, employment services, lessons in financial literacy, and help in accessing support services like health care and counseling. Significantly, the foster care youth themselves play a critical role in the planning and implementation of these new policies through the project's Youth Advisory Board.

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: YouthBuild

Oklahoma City's YouthBuild program is administered by the city's Office on Workforce Development. Using a combination of federal funding, and private and municipal donations, the youth have renovated five single-family homes and are close to completing a 14-unit apartment building for foster youth who are moving into independent living situations. Over three years, 19 youth have been successfully placed into the construction industry after completing the program. In addition to learning construction skills, youth receive GED training and counseling, and learn lessons in teamwork and leadership. Youth are directly involved in YouthBuild's governance and decide issues such as how to judge peers who have violated group rules. Partnerships with city's Career Tech Centers, community-based organizations, and the school system make this comprehensive program possible.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Youth Centers

The City of Philadelphia has opened two teen centers that are strategically designed to engage young people who have broken the law. These centers, which also involve young people in operational decisions, are part of the city's strategy to reduce youth violence. The centers have been placed in neighborhoods that are served by the Youth Violence Reduction Partnership, a multi-agency initiative that combines intense supervision with an array of services to youth identified as being at highest risk of killing or being killed. Staff at the centers will track the youth's involvement in center activities and monitor further court involvement. Youth leadership is integral to the operation of the centers; some youth are employed as outreach workers, while others are included in forums and focus groups to improve youth services.

San José, California: Bringing Everyone's Strengths Together (BEST)

San José BEST is a local funding collaborative that emerged from the Mayor's 1991 Gang Prevention Taskforce. The BEST program continues to evolve, and has moved beyond gang prevention, suppression, and intervention to include the improvement of life skills, school/community safety, and educational opportunities. The BEST staff identify needed services, and contract with community-based organizations to provide truancy prevention, education, youth employment, and juvenile aftercare services. In 2002, the collaborative received $3.5 million from city general funds (up from an initial $1 million), and matching funds have increased by eleven-fold.

Sylacauga, Alabama: Sylacauga Alliance for Family Enhancement (SAFE)

SAFE evolved out of a 1995 grassroots effort, led by the mayor, to create a community solution to the challenges facing the city's youth and families. SAFE is a full-service family center that works with all youth and families in need, including those young people who are most difficult to serve. SAFE uses partnerships with county health agencies, educational institutions, and mental health agencies to provide a range of services. For example, SAFE partners with the courts to provide the *Turning Point* program, which permits SAFE to provide counseling and other services to adjudicated youth and their families. Sylacauga's local elected officials continue to support SAFE through both financial contributions and involvement in SAFE activities. In an 18-month period, the program served 124 teens and had a recidivism rate of 17 percent.
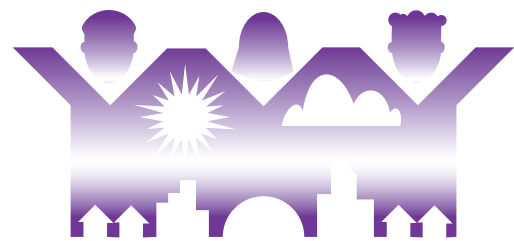
Key Facts About Disconnected Youth

An estimated 2.8 million Americans between the ages of 16 and 24 face major barriers to employment, and are therefore at risk of long-term disconnection from the communities in which they live. This figure includes high school dropouts who are jobless, high school graduates who are unemployed and have stopped looking for work, and youth whose employment prospects are bleak because they are incarcerated, homeless, or exiting foster care.

This group of young people faces many challenges:

❖ *Education:* Between 20 and 25 percent of today's 14-year-olds will drop out of high school; approximately half of them will return to school and earn their diploma or obtain a GED by the time they reach age 25. The median income of a high school dropout is $18,000, compared to $25,000 for a high school graduate.

❖ *Employment:* In 2003, a total of 5.7 million youth between the ages of 16 and 24 (including the 2.8 million disconnected youth described above) were both out of school and out of work. The proportion of all teens (ages 16-19) who held jobs in 2003 was at its lowest level since the end of World War II; only two-thirds of young adults (ages 20-24) were employed during the year.

❖ *Foster Care:* About 20,000 youth ages 16 and older make the transition from foster care to legal emancipation each year. Four years after leaving foster care, 46 percent of young people lack a high school diploma, 25 percent have experienced homelessness, 42 percent have become parents, and fewer than one in five is completely self-supporting.

❖ *Justice System:* Nearly 100,000 young people are incarcerated in the juvenile or adult corrections facilities, and many others in the community are on probation or parole. Sixteen percent of all high school dropouts between the ages of 18 and 24 (and 30 percent of all black dropouts in this age group) are incarcerated or on parole.

❖ *Teen Parenting:* An estimated 18 percent of today's 15-year-old girls will give birth before age 20. In 2002, there were 431,988 births to teens in the United States, a decline of nearly 20 percent since 1990. Approximately one in every three teen mothers is a dropout.

❖ *Mental Heath:* Between 50 and 75 percent of incarcerated youth are estimated to have a diagnosable mental health disorder.

Ten Questions to Ask About Disconnected Youth

❖ How many youth in your community are between the ages of 16 and 24?

❖ What proportion of (a) middle students never make the transition to high school; (b) students who enter the 9th grade graduate from high school four years later; and (c) high school graduates go on to some form of post-secondary education?

❖ How many young people in your city age out of the foster care system every year?

❖ How many teenagers and young adults return to the community each year from juvenile and adult correctional facilities?

❖ Are most of your city's dropouts, court-involved youth, and foster care youth concentrated in specific neighborhoods or high schools?

❖ What opportunities exist in your community for disconnected youth to reconnect to school, work, and caring adults? Are there enough options to meet the current need?

❖ Do agencies working with disconnected youth in your community regularly share information and coordinate their efforts?

❖ What federal, state, or local funding sources can be used to support initiatives that respond to the needs of disconnected youth?

❖ To what extent have key community stakeholders come together to develop a shared vision and plan for helping disconnected youth in your community?

❖ What roles are disconnected youth playing in informing and shaping city policies and practices that seek to address their needs?

National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (IYEF), a special entity within the National League of Cities (NLC), helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of the children, youth, and families in their communities. The Institute offers conferences, technical assistance opportunities, and publications for city officials. Municipal officials, city staff, and those who work with city government may also register to be a part of NLC's "Network on Disconnected Youth." Contact: 202-626-3046 or *iyef@nlc.org*. Website: *www.nlc.org/iyef*.

A number of other national organizations might be useful resources as cities develop a disconnected youth agenda.

Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice (CJCJ) promotes balanced and humane criminal justice policies that reduce incarceration and promote long-term public safety. It pursues this mission through the development of model programs, technical assistance, research/policy analysis, and public education. Contact: 202-737-7270. Website: *www.cjcj.org*.

Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is a national effort to help youth in foster care make successful transitions to adulthood. Working through local communities, the Initiative helps youth make the connections they need to education, employment, health care, housing, and supportive personal and community relationships. Website: *www.jimcaseyyouth.org*.

Jobs for the Future (JFF) is a non-profit research, consulting, and advocacy organization that works to create educational and economic opportunity for those who need it most. JFF engages in research and analysis, local projects, and advocacy around issues of education and workforce development. Through one of their projects, JFF offers policy recommendations and research on ways to provide disconnected young people with the learning and credentials they need to make the transition to productive adulthood. Contact: 617-728-4446 or *info@jff.org*. Website: *www.jff.org*.

Kids Count, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is a national and state-by-state effort to track the status of children using benchmarks of child well-being in the U.S. The Kids Count Data Book, Kids Count Census Data, and City, County and Community Level Information on Kids (CLICKS) are available online through the Kids Count website. Contact: 410-547-6600. Website: *www.kidscount.org*.

National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) offers research, best practices, and legislative information regarding youth workforce development, education reform, juvenile justice, and youth development. NYEC provides self-assessment tools and recognition programs for youth employment and alternative education programs. Contact: 202-659-1064. Website: *www.nyec.org*.

YouthBuild USA is the home of the affiliated network of local YouthBuild programs. In YouthBuild programs, young people divide their time between working toward high school completion and learning construction skills by building affordable housing. Strong emphasis is placed on leadership development and community service. Contact: 617-623-9900 or *ybinfo@youthbuild.org*. Website: *www.youthbuild.org*.

Youth Law Center is a non-profit, public interest law office focused on protecting abused and at-risk children, particularly in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. They can provide research and legal information about youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Contact: 202-637-0377 or *info@youthlawcenter.com*. Website: *www.youthlawcenter.com*.

Focus on Teen Families

Teen parents, particularly unmarried mothers, are a subgroup of disconnected youth who need targeted attention and support at the community level. Although teen parents benefit from programs and structures that serve a broader population of disconnected youth, they also face some unique challenges to obtaining education and employment that must be addressed in the context of local efforts. These obstacles include lack of child care, weak parenting skills, and policies that prevent them from enrolling in their high school of choice.

➤ Half of teen mothers drop out of school *before* becoming pregnant. Less than 40 percent of teen mothers who have a child before age 18 ever complete high school. Teen dads complete less school than young men who wait to become fathers at least until they reach the age of 21.

➤ Four out of ten long-term unemployed young women are already mothers. Of these young mothers, 90 percent gave birth to their first child as a teenager. About one-fourth of teenage mothers have a second child within 24 months of the first birth, further impeding their ability to finish school or keep a job.

➤ Children of teen mothers are 50 percent more likely to repeat a grade, are less likely to complete high school, and have lower performance on standardized tests than those children born to older parents.

➤ The sons of teen mothers are 13 percent more likely to end up in prison than sons of mothers who delay childbearing.

The preceding statistics are excerpted from *Teen Pregnancy: Not Just Another Single Issue*, a publication of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (*www.teenpregnancy.org*) and *Connected by 25*, a working paper by Michael Wald and Tia Martinez (*www.hewlett.org/archives*).