

A 'CRISIS' AMONG YOUTH: HOW TO RE-CONNECT?

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Young New Yorkers whose days are absent of education or employment, and whose futures look cloudy at best, are a population on the rise. Called “disconnected youth,” they are teenagers and young adults from 16 to 24 years old who don't attend school and don't go to work. This group contributes to financial and social costs such as a smaller tax base, weaker communities and higher expenditures on public benefits. New York City faces a choice: invest now in re-engaging these young people, or pay later for the consequences of insufficient action. That was the message of a panel discussion held this month to examine a recent report by the Community Service Society, "Out of Focus," which reviews this "civic crisis" and the public funding available to address it. The report says there are over 163,000 disconnected young people ages 16 to 24. Add that to the number of officially "unemployed" (meaning those actively seeking work) and the city has more than 220,000 idle young people – nearly one in five of the total age group.

“It's a tidal wave that is rapidly growing and it's going to explode,” said Evelyn Fernandez-Ketcham, a panelist and the executive director of New Heights Neighborhood Center, a non-profit organization that provides workforce development for disconnected youth.

The study found that existing public education and workforce funding for programs targeted to young people serves no more than seven percent of New York City's disconnected youth. The report cites that disconnected youth often are placed in programs that are designed either for prevention of the problem, or for adults. Funding streams are also fragmented, making coordination difficult for organizations that provide services to young people – and almost impossible for youth trying to reconnect. “There are a low number of programs designed just for young people and these different programs are split across different agencies,” said Lazar Treschan, co-author of the report and director of the Disconnected Youth Campaign at CSSNY.

The CSSNY report presents the first side-by-side comparison of public funding for education and workforce development programs available to re-engage this population. It excludes services for specific subgroups, such as those aging out of the foster care system or developmentally disabled individuals. Several initiatives budgeted in fiscal 2008 but not yet implemented were also excluded from the comparison.

The landscape portrayed shows few places for disconnected youth to turn for help. The city's 311 information service has little information on programs, there is no citywide resource book or Web site for young people looking to start over, and there is no unified strategy on the part of the city to reach out to disconnected youth.

Candice Pierre, a 17-year-old from Brooklyn who has tried to find work, and is now seeking to enter a special school, would like a helping hand to get back on track to the life she wants. “I

don't feel that calling us disconnected is a proper term to use," said Pierre. "When you use the word 'disconnected' it seems like we're not willing to be connected, and that's not true."

Professionals in the field find the current numbers particularly troubling because new trends buck the expected patterns. The number of disconnected youth has grown to unprecedented levels in recent years, reaching its highest level—nearly 16 percent of New Yorkers in the 16-to-24 age group—at the lowest point of the economic downturn, in 2003. After four successive years of job growth and strong efforts at high school reform, however, the numbers have barely changed from 167,781 to 163,304 disconnected youth today. In the past, youth school enrollment ran “counter-cyclical” to the economy. During times of economic growth, school enrollment decreased but more young people entered the work force. During economic downturns, school enrollment increased. But the economic downturn of 2001 did not increase school enrollment, nor did the subsequent four years of economic gains bring young people into the workforce.

”It's different than what it was before, there are far more kids dropping out. We are not talking about kids that can easily go get a GED or a job tomorrow,” said Michael H. Zisser, another panelist and executive director of University Settlement, which oversees The Door, a nonprofit that provides comprehensive youth development services. “The demands of the workplace today require more education; there is a tremendous educational need.”

Approximately 85,000 young people, or half of New York City's disconnected youth, have not completed high school or obtained a GED. Furthermore, of the 16,575 young people in various publicly or privately funded programs who took a GED exam in 2006, only 8,203 passed.

Of the programs and funding streams surveyed in the report, the Department of Education has the largest collection of funds. Most public education funding has a preventive rather than corrective focus for the 70,000 over-age, under-credited youth who are still in high school, however - or else it's targeted for adult literacy and GED programs that are not designed or funded to re-engage youth. The DOE spends more than \$100 million for its programs aimed at disconnected youth, including 15,000 slots in Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs), Transfer High Schools, and District 79 GED programs. In September, the NYC DOE will be opening seven new transfer schools, representing 1,000 new seats in year one and 1,550 new seats at full capacity. “Transfer schools provide a small learning environment and personalized academic programs to meet student's individual needs,” said DOE spokeswoman Debra Wexler. “That kind of attention and personalization allows the students to succeed.”

To Bruce Carmel, deputy executive director of educational services at Turning Point, a community-based organization that serves 500 disconnected youth, city agencies are still playing catch-up, however. “The city has done a great job in the past couple of years of recognizing this need, but they're not really there yet in providing the services, or providing the resources,” said Carmel, another expert on the CSS panel held July 9. “The city has been making some initial steps to try to do more but there needs to be a lot more money to serve this population.”

The DOE does not permit individuals over 21 to obtain diplomas. This leaves all 22- to 24-year-olds ineligible for diploma programs, and disqualifies 20- to 21-year-olds who do not have close to the 44 credits required for a high school diploma. Yet, according to the CSS report, 65 percent of disconnected youth are between the ages of 20 and 24 and therefore unlikely or ineligible to return to school. “A lot of young people end up in the adult education system, which

tends not to work for them and is funded terribly,” said Treschan. “These aren’t just adults who need a job; these are young people making the difficult transition to adulthood.”

As with adult educational services, workforce development programs are mostly intended for adults and are inappropriate to meet the needs of young people with skill shortages and little educational attainment who are trying to enter the labor market. Programs that serve both youth and adults can leave young people feeling out of place.

The Department of Small Business Services (SBS) administers adult workforce programs to New Yorkers over age 18. SBS connects employers to a skilled workforce and provides training and placement services for adults. Though the agency has enjoyed substantial success—rapid job placement, retention and wage gains—the measures of that success do not coincide with the needs of young people who lack basic skills or have little job experience.

“We don’t want to fast-track our young adults to employment,” said Fernandez-Ketcham, of the New Heights center. “It’s more than job readiness. We cannot put our young people at a job without deeply looking at where they’re at in their lives.” A sizable number of disconnected youth come from environments of poverty and failed public systems.

Justin Figueroa, a 19-year-old from Brooklyn, spoke to the challenge of "reconnecting" after a life of hard knocks. "I've been through the foster care system, five group homes and I've been incarcerated as a youth and an adult," said Siguroa, who is trying to get a job on his own. "A job is nothing like you can go whenever you feel like it. I know I have to be on time, respectful, and if I'm getting mad I can't take it out the street way, I got to go and talk to the bigger boss."

Another drawback of the SBS program is that many of its clients cannot access Individual Training Accounts (ITAs), vouchers that are given to SBS workforce clients to purchase focused job training services. ITAs are targeted to unemployed individuals who have a high school diploma or GED, leaving out half of all disconnected youth. “You can get them a job but you also need to increase their education level,” said Zisser. “When you’re working with these kids you have to pursue both.”

There are few comprehensive programs available to disconnected youth that utilize a combined education and workforce development approach, offering basic literacy through GED attainment and workforce readiness and training. Administered by the Department of Youth and Community Development, the Out-of-School Youth program offers the most wide-ranging services of any workforce initiative that serves youth. “Mayor Bloomberg and the city of New York are committed to providing youth who are not working or in school with the hard and soft skills they need to thrive in today’s competitive economy,” said Ryan Dodge, deputy chief of staff at DYCD. The Out-of-School Youth program provides educational support, vocational training, stipends and placement into education or work for approximately 1,000 disconnected youths a year.

According to the report, there are 17 different workforce and education funding streams across eight different public agencies, which report to three different deputy mayors within City Hall. Because many young adults require a range of services, coordination of existing services is a crucial part of addressing the challenge of reconnecting youth. “We need to find a way of bringing it together so that providers don’t have to get multiple contracts and that it’s easy for a young person to figure out what’s right for them,” said Treschan.