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Finding a New Path to the World of Work

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SOCIAL scientists call them “disconnected” young people — older teenagers and people in their early 20s who are not in school, not employed and not seeking work.

Nearly 170,000 New York City residents ages 16 to 24 were said to be in this category in a report in 2005 by a leading social services group, the **Community Service Society of New York**.

Tens of thousands of other people in this age group are not in school and not working but do continue to seek jobs, only to be repeatedly rejected. Social science and labor experts differ on whether they, too, should be considered disconnected, given that they are still in the labor market.

Earl O’Brien, 21, a high school dropout from Brooklyn, spent two years in the ranks of the rejected. Despite the disagreement among the experts over what he should be called, Mr. O’Brien clearly felt disconnected from the mainstream. “Everyone I knew was getting somewhere,” he said recently. “I felt discouraged and disappointed.”

Then there are the others who are not in school and do work, but only in minimum-wage jobs, sometimes with long spells of unemployment in between. Such people are marginally connected to the work force, the experts say. Tamara Parson, 21, from the Bronx, was in this situation for three years and, the experts’ nuances aside, “I felt I was not with the working world,” she said.

Ms. Parson, who similarly lacks a high school diploma, and Mr. O’Brien described their dead-end days in recent interviews at the Manhattan headquarters of an organization that since March has been offering them a new path. This nonprofit

group, Vocational Foundation Inc., has been helping young New York City residents move into the world of work since it was established in 1936.

The group initially provided employment assistance to males 16 to 25. By the mid-1940s the group's free services had been extended to young women, who in recent years have been about 60 percent of the clients. The age range of those served has also varied over the years, and is now 17 to 21.

The group's current program combines job training, job placement and continued counseling for two years to try to ensure that graduates remain employed. Two 17-week training cycles are held annually, starting in September and March, with about 150 people enrolled in each. They are prepared for jobs as bank tellers, computer technologists, security guards, administrative assistants in medical offices (the track Ms. Parson is on) or general office workers (Mr. O'Brien's track).

The course also includes instruction in material on the test for the high school equivalency diploma; 89 percent of the clients in one recent cycle did not have a school or equivalency diploma.

The proportion of clients completing the cycles has varied in the last few years, from 65 percent to 82 percent, said Hector Batista, the foundation's chief executive. About 85 percent of recent graduates have been placed in jobs, at an average starting wage of \$9 an hour, his group says, and about 60 percent of recent graduates are still at work, for the same or another employer, two years after graduation.

The Community Service Society said that disconnected young people were at risk because they were more likely "to engage in activities that are destructive to themselves and their communities."

It acknowledged that its definition might be overly broad because it included all stay-at-home mothers, even those with degrees and stable circumstances, but said that this was offset by other elements in the definition.

Some Vocational Foundation clients were not considered in the disconnected or marginalized ranks but seemed headed for them. They include Christian Ruiz, 17,

of Brooklyn, who began the current cycle shortly after dropping out of high school.

“I was cutting, playing hooky,” he said. “I didn’t have motivation.” But as he was quitting school, a counselor there told him about the foundation, where he is on the computer technology track.

Ms. Parson said a newspaper advertisement for the foundation prompted her to seek its help.

After her senior year in high school, she recalled, she still lacked 15 credits needed for a diploma, and she decided to leave school, “where I felt I’d be too old for the crowd.” She hoped to earn an equivalency diploma but never did.

Mr. O’Brien said that he had dropped out in the 11th grade and that his only work in the two years since was the occasional low-paying job as a drummer with a rock group. He learned about the foundation from a recruitment card he received in the mail. Getting an office job “would help for now,” he said, but his ultimate goal is to become a music producer.

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