

Disconnected Youth: Preventing Disengagement

Young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in school and not working are commonly described as being “disconnected”. This term means that they have become disengaged from school, community, and society. In New York City alone, there are 163,000 such youth.ⁱ For SCAA’s purposes, we will focus on a smaller subset—the 81,000 disconnected youth between ages 16 and 19 throughout the state.

Youth drift for a variety of reasons—such as difficulties at home and at school, substance abuse and mental health issues, and teen pregnancy. Each year, New York State deals with youth who have already become disconnected. It is time for the state to prevent disconnection from occurring.

In October 2007, after nearly a year of discussions with experts and policymakers, SCAA released a white paper entitled *Disconnected Youth: An Answer to Preventing Disengagement*. The report focused on what the child welfare and children’s mental health systems could do to prevent young people from becoming disconnected. SCAA is currently working on a second paper that will concentrate on what the juvenile justice and education systems can do to prevent disconnection and promote engagement.

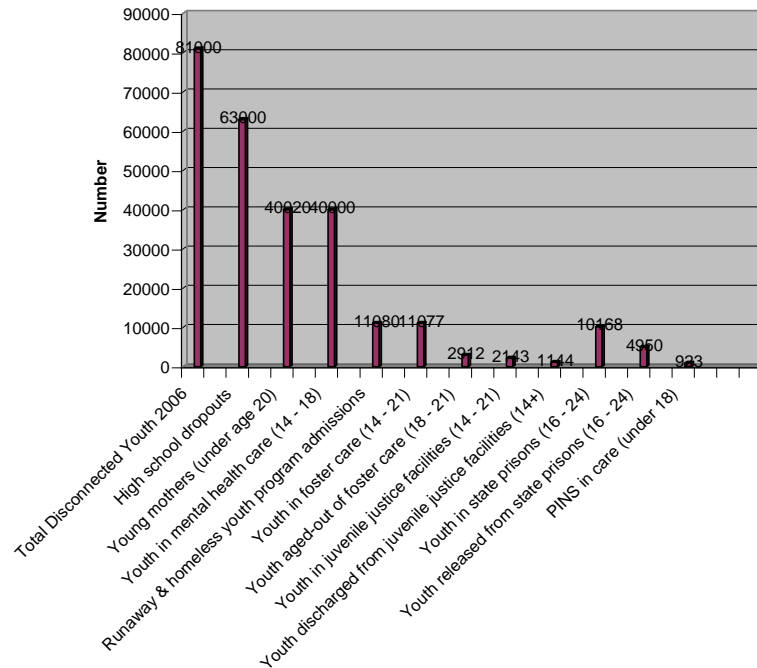
Since the publication of the initial report, New York State has taken action on a number of the paper’s recommendations. First, the Children’s Cabinet and Advisory Board have identified disconnected youth as their next priority area. Second, during the last legislative session the state passed a law extending Medicaid benefits from age 18 to age 21 for former foster youth. Third, the Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services is administering a statewide risk and protection survey in Fall 2008, the results of which will be available in Spring 2009. Finally, the state Assembly Higher Education Committee is considering a bill that would establish a scholarship program for youth in foster care.

Two New York City-based organizations in particular are doing a lot of work on the issue of re-connecting those youth aged 16 – 24 who have already fallen through the cracks. In June 2008, the Community Service Society published *Out of Focus: A Snapshot of Public Funding to Reconnect Youth to Education and Employment*. The paper recommends expanding service capacity (by expanding eligibility to age 24 and investing in comprehensive workforce development programs) and coordinating programs across agencies. The United Neighborhood Foundation, which promotes summer jobs for youth, family engagement, and professional development, is holding its annual benefit on October 29th.

A lot of progress has been made on this issue since SCAA first convened a group of interested parties in January 2007. However, a great deal of work remains to be done to ensure that young people do not end up disconnected from their families (particularly siblings), schools, and communities.

Data:

Disconnected Youth: Who are they and where do they come from?



Recommendationsⁱⁱ:

- **Discontinue the use of out-of-school suspension as punishment.** Instead, ensure that youth who are in trouble (and in danger of disconnection) are in school and continuing to learn.

- **Ensure that responsibility for education is collaborative between state agencies.** The Office of Mental Health and the Office of Children and Family Services currently have responsibility for the education of youth in residential mental health placements, the juvenile justice system, and foster care licensed agencies, respectively. The state should shift responsibility for the education of these young people to a collaborative effort between those agencies and the State Education Department, so that those young people receive high-quality educations and are able to re-enter an appropriate school program with minimal interruptions.

Other recommendations currently under consideration include increasing the utilization by schools and other normative settings of Child and Family Clinic Plus, connecting Child and Family Clinic Plus with Probation, decreasing truancy by dealing with truants differently, decreasing the use of general education development (GED) diplomas, investing in mentoring programs, and supporting and training teachers and school personnel to address students' different needs and possible behavior problems.

SCAA is holding its next disconnected youth roundtable on October 27th and will release its second white paper in late 2008. The state will continue to work on this important and emerging issue.

ⁱ *Out of Focus: A Snapshot of Public Funding to Reconnect Youth to Education and Employment*; Community Service Society; June 2008.

ⁱⁱ *Growing Up in New York: 2008 Update*, SCAA.