

150 State Street, 4th Floor
Albany, NY 12207
phone 518-463-1896
fax 518-463-3364
www.scaany.org



Back on Track: Re-Connecting New York's Disconnected Youth to Education and Employment

Executive Summary



June 2009

Back On Track: Re-Connecting New York's Disconnected Youth to Education and Employment

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Youth want to, and can, take responsibility for their life choices. But our success with these youth will only be complete once we treat them as our own and take responsibility for putting all the resources and supports in place.”¹

Elaine Spaul
Executive Director, Center for Youth, Rochester New York

When we meet an adult whose life has gone wrong—living on the street, serving a term in prison, involved in drugs or petty crime—we often have an intuitive sense that the wrong turn must have happened much earlier.

One leading youth development specialist, Brett Brown, found that teenagers who go off track actually have a great deal in common.² In a 1996 study, Brown argued that youth who never receive an adequate education, fail to get a job and learn the ways of the working world, and lack support from caring adults are likely to disconnect from the workforce. These “disconnected youth” move into their adult years with a history of failure and inadequate preparation for adult responsibilities.

Today, the needs of disconnected youth—and those at risk for disconnection—should be a vital priority in New York State. The state’s intervention can transform a generation of youth now on a path toward prison, homelessness, and dependency on government into a generation of good citizens, taxpayers and parents. And the need is urgent, as youth throughout the state find themselves up against the worst economic crisis in decades.

Until now, good data on disconnected youth has only been available for New York City.³ **Back On Track** provides an in-depth

portrait of disconnected youth at the state level. Outside New York City, too little is being done to respond to the needs of disconnected and at-risk youth. The state urgently needs to support and expand effective programs in upstate New York and the downstate suburbs. **Back On Track** explains who New York State’s disconnected youth are: where they live, the key risk factors for disconnection, and important distinctions between younger and older disconnected youth.

Our key findings include:

- There are approximately 199,000 youth, ages 16-24, who are out of school and have not worked in at least one year. These youth, 8% of all young people ages 16-24, represent the core population of disconnected youth.
- New York City has a higher rate of disconnection: 11% of youth, compared to 5% in the downstate suburbs and 6% in the rest of the state.
- Six in ten disconnected youth are African-American or Hispanic, compared to only one in three non-disconnected youth. Still, 32% of disconnected youth are white, the largest single ethnic group.
- One in six disconnected women is a single mother, more than triple the rate for non-disconnected women.

- ▶ In 2008-09, the unemployment rate of youth ages 16-19 was 20%, triple the 6% unemployment rate of the overall workforce; among youth ages 20-24, the unemployment rate was 11%.

We then turn to one of the most profound questions in youth development: can disconnected youth be reconnected? The answer is yes. We explore what is being done—and what can be done—to steer disconnected youth back to the worlds of education, work and the transition to adult life. We identify organizations and agencies that are achieving this mission every day. Their models can teach policy makers a great deal about replicating innovations in youth development. Each model stresses one or more of the following components: educational attainment, workforce connections, and support for youth in transition. The most promising practices include all three components.

Finally, we outline recommendations for the state to take action. Our key recommendations include:

- I. Make the needs of disconnected youth a top statewide priority.** The state urgently needs to develop a comprehensive and effective response to the needs of disconnected youth. The state should publicly identify the recovery and reconnection of at-risk and disconnected youth as a top priority for legislative, budget and other policy measures. The Governor and leaders of the State Legislature would then task their respective staffs with collaborating on a comprehensive plan that would inform and guide these measures. The state should then follow through, not simply with additional funding, but with a commitment to innovation, integrated services and rigorous outcome measurement.
- II. Direct state agencies to review regulations and policies that affect disconnected youth.** Many regulations and policies now on the books at both the state and local level may fail to take account of the needs of disconnected youth. Agencies need to reach out to providers and affected youth to identify rules that may have unintended consequences, and revise those rules.

- III. Integrate and coordinate the services that assist disconnected youth.** The state must coordinate the activities of multiple agencies providing services to the same (or overlapping) youth populations. In practice, this goal will require aligning information systems to track youth across the services that serve them and exploring the potential for case management of disconnected youth to keep them from slipping through the cracks between services.

- IV. Focus on education, workforce, and housing interventions.** All interventions are not created equal. The most effective strategy, particularly for young adults, is to combine intensive literacy/numeracy training with workforce skills development, and to relentlessly document the outcomes. There are many different ways to approach this model, however. The state should expand support for education/workforce interventions generally and then replicate the most cost-effective. In addition, the state should dedicate funding to help secure independent living and supportive housing arrangements with wraparound services for this population.