
Opportunity youth are defined as out-of-school and unemployed youth between the ages of 16-to-24. Often these youth are referred to as disconnected youth. However, the authors highlight that these youth are in fact connected to friends, families, and community-based organizations. But the institutions, organizations and public systems intended to help these youth are themselves disconnected from each other. Hence, taking this reality into consideration, this group of individuals are now referred to as opportunity youth instead of disconnected youth. In this 2014 review, using the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF) as an example, the authors discuss the importance of data collection from across public systems to achieve collective impact for opportunity youth. OYIF has three goals: to reconnect opportunity youth to education and employment; to catalyze the adoption of effective approaches in education and career attainment; and to promote local, state and national policy changes to increase the replication and scaling up of these approaches. Europe has a system to track their youth aged 16 to 24, unlike the United States, which has no single system to keep track of this population. Thus, opportunity youth are invisible in many data systems, making it difficult to understand their challenges and progress toward adulthood, i.e., educational attainment and workforce readiness. OYIF sites, supported by technical assistance from the Aspen Institute, are looking into gathering data on opportunity youth by building on existing public data systems such as community colleges, adult education programs, child welfare programs, homeless services, and the justice system. Further, the authors shed light on other challenges in serving the needs of opportunity youth such as limited financial resources and programs that are small and scattered. In response to these funding challenges, the authors recommend multi-funder as well as dual-customer approaches, i.e., partnering with employers to provide work-based learning and employment opportunities to opportunity youth approaches.

Low-income and minority youth, especially more vulnerable groups such as youth transitioning from foster care or the correctional system, have high chances of becoming opportunity youth. Jobs for the Future developed the Back on Track Through College Model to aid dropout recovery and reconnection programming for these young people. This model has three phases: enriched preparation to focus on college- and career-readiness skills; postsecondary bridging to focus on developing the mindsets, academic and metacognitive skills, and study and work habits needed for postsecondary success; and first-year postsecondary support to focus on helping opportunity youth overcome obstacles to persistence and complete a postsecondary credential. The authors discuss three programs - College, Career and Technology Academy, LifeLink, and College Initiative - selected by Jobs for the Future to strengthen their postsecondary bridging component, build data capacity, and improve evaluation readiness. The College, Career and Technology Academy serves former dropouts and off-track students, LifeLink serves students graduating from alternative transfer schools or high school equivalency programs who are looking to better prepare for postsecondary education, and the College Initiative serves older youth who have been involved in the criminal justice system. Although these programs serve different populations of opportunity youth, they share the core theory of the Back on Track Through College model, which states that providing older disconnected youth with intensive and coherent academic and social support, developing their self-advocacy skills, and engaging them in supported opportunities will increase their postsecondary success.


Opportunity youth are not a homogenous group. They have unique reasons for being disconnected, and, despite the challenges they face, they are optimistic about their future, including education and better jobs. The authors argue that opportunity youth remain the untapped potential the US economy needs and include a seven-step roadmap for action to serve opportunity youth and address their challenges: 1) Increase pathways to secondary and postsecondary success for out of school youth by investing in re-enrollment models; 2) Meaningfully engage employers as a part of the solution by encouraging businesses, non-profits, and government agencies to hire and train opportunity youth; 3) Enhance community collaboration and collective impact opportunities; 4) Strengthen connections to community by ensuring that pathways to reconnect opportunity youth to education and employment include connections to civic engagement, community and mentorship; 5) Invest in successful federal programs for opportunity youth by increasing funding for education and workforce training; 6) Reauthorize and reform critical education and workforce legislation; 7) Improve data collection to track opportunity youth.

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Men of color between the ages of 16 and 24 are disproportionately likely to be disconnected from school and work because of the disparities driven by the interplay of gender, age, race, and inequalities among the communities where they grow up. This playbook serves as a unique resource as it specifically includes practices, strategies, and resources to serve opportunity youth who are men of color. The playbook discusses several strategies for action to serve this group of opportunity youth, including: 1) taking a holistic approach to serving disconnected youth by helping them in multiple aspects of their lives; 2) using a two-generation approach to help disconnected fathers and their children break the intergenerational cycle of poverty; and 3) preventing intergenerational disconnection by ensuring that boys of color enter school ready to learn and read at grade level by third grade. The authors also highlight the importance of the link between educational attainment and future life outcomes, including employment. Strikingly, the unemployment rate for young men of color between the ages 16 to 24 is double the national average. Strategies to ensure disconnected young men of color successfully transition into the workforce are critical.


Previous research indicates that self-control and persistence may predict employment outcomes for individuals. The authors of this study wanted to examine the stability of this relationship after accounting for structural factors and differences in lived experiences. The authors examine whether self-control and persistence relate to differences in employment outcomes among youth who have no credential, a GED, or a high school diploma after accounting for structural attributes such as supportive social relationships and variations in employers’ valuation of different educational credentials, as well as experiences of dropping out of school. The authors found differences on measures of self-control and persistence between those with no credential and those with a high school diploma, but no notable difference between those with a GED and those with a high school diploma. They also found self-control, persistence, and some forms of social relationships may impact employment outcomes, but these effects are small in comparison to the impact of ultimate educational attainment. These findings align with the sociocultural self model, which states that changes in individual characteristics are insufficient to create changes in individuals’ outcomes if there are no changes in structural conditions. The author also found that even students who initially drop out of school can still have positive employment outcomes if they ultimately complete a credential.