

# Reconnecting Opportunity Youth to Work and a Future

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## Key Points

- Opportunity youth are full of potential but disconnected from the two institutions that typically launch a successful life: education and work.
- We need clearer routes from learning to earning: training tied to real demand, paid work-based opportunities that build experience, and practical supports that keep young people connected long enough to build momentum.
- The fix is not a single silver-bullet program but the boring yet essential work of building the on-ramp: coherent pathways, real-world experience, navigators who stay with young people through turbulence, and a civic commitment to reducing friction.

Imagine a 19-year-old—let’s call her Jasmine—who is neither in school nor working. She left high school after a family health crisis and picked up shifts where she could—in a warehouse, food service, and day labor—but nothing stuck.

She hears the same mixed messages everyone hears. College costs too much. Artificial intelligence is coming for entry-level jobs. Employers want experience that no newcomer can have. Meanwhile, rent is due now, not after a pathway finally pays off. She needs a credential that leads to a real profession, not another dead-end training course with a glossy flyer and a thin job pipeline.

Jasmine is fictional, but the situation is not. America has millions of young people like her.

Often called opportunity youth, these young people, age 16–24, are full of potential but disconnected from the two institutions that typically launch a successful life: education and work. A widely cited estimate puts the number of young people who are neither in school nor working at roughly 5.5 million,<sup>1</sup> though this number fails to include young people who are only marginally

attached—working a few hours a week or taking a single class.<sup>2</sup>

A RAND Corporation longitudinal analysis that followed middle and high school students into young adulthood found that those who became disconnected showed signs of struggling socially and academically in middle and high school.<sup>3</sup> They reported more symptoms of depression, experienced higher rates of substance use and delinquency, and had weaker social support structures.

To understand why the school-to-work pipeline feels broken—even to teenagers still in school—we should start with opportunity youth. They are the clearest signal that our systems don’t just have leaks. In too many communities, the on-ramp to good jobs is missing altogether. The response can’t be another scatter of short-term programs or one more credential with an unclear payoff.

We need clearer routes from learning to earning: training tied to real demand, paid work-based opportunities that build experience, and practical supports—

such as coaching, transportation, childcare, and trusted adults—that keep young people connected long enough to build momentum. In short, preventing disconnection requires rebuilding the pathway itself, so the next step is visible, affordable, and worth taking.

## Who Are Opportunity Youth?

To better understand how to help these disconnected young people, it's important to understand exactly who they are. One of the most important insights—often missed in politics and punditry—is that opportunity youth are not monolithic.<sup>4</sup> Some care for family members. Some are recovering from trauma. Some have been pushed out of school. Some are working off the books or cycling through unstable jobs that don't show up as steady employment.

RAND research points to two additional realities to sharpen the picture. First, many disconnected young people have at least a high school diploma, so boosting graduation rates alone will not solve disconnection. Second, place matters. Disconnection rates are higher in communities where fewer adult men are employed, underscoring that the on-ramp to disconnection is partly a neighborhood condition, not only an individual choice.<sup>5</sup>

Notably, early warning signs indicate possible future disconnection for youth.<sup>6</sup> School suspensions for males, early pregnancy for females, and documented special education needs are all risk factors for later disconnection. And such disconnection doesn't fade with time, as an Educational Testing Service cohort study of millennials shows. Rather, in that study, disconnection rose as young adults aged, growing from 1 percent at age 18 to 5 percent at age 20 and 12 percent at age 26. Among those disconnected at 26, about two-thirds were actively job searching, while one-third had dropped out of the labor force.<sup>7</sup>

A Brookings Institution analysis of young adults' employment and earnings pathways at age 18–31 found two groups that provide additional insight into the opportunity youth dilemma, illustrating how early instability can lead to adult hardship. One group, about 22 percent of the study population, was composed of those in extreme economic hardship. At age 30, more than half of them lived in poverty and had very low employment rates. Another group, the working poor,

made up about 36 percent of the study group population. At age 30, their average yearly earnings were \$19,000, with half working less than full-time annually.<sup>8</sup>

So, many young people are not fully disconnected from the workforce. They are precariously connected—working but not building a future. The real challenge is bigger than reducing the disconnection rate. The solution includes rebuilding credible pathways that young people can enter, persist in, and convert into upward mobility.

## What Is a Credible Pathway?

The old bargain was simple: Finish school, get a first job, learn on the job, and climb the career ladder. Today, many young people don't see the map, let alone a clear next step. If opportunity youth were simply missing skills, a single program might solve the issue. But what young people need is typically bigger than what any one organization can provide.

Researchers at the American Institutes for Research and the Brookings Institution interviewed 21 state and local practitioners working with people age 16–24.<sup>9</sup> The researchers argued that there are no low-cost magic bullets for solving the challenges this group faces. Youth have complex needs, requiring developmentally specific services, and successful efforts tend to combine personal supports into an integrated package. The researchers identified four core components of opportunity youth programs:

- 1. Education and Training That Match Real Demand.** Programs should be shaped with employers in mind. They should combine occupational skills with soft skills essential to communicating and working with others. Knowledge about a discipline must be integrated into programming.
- 2. Work-Based Learning That Turns Education into Experience.** Youth need access to internships, pre-apprenticeships, apprenticeships, and other earn-and-learn approaches to learning an occupation. These approaches teach technical and essential skills and make the first yes from an employer more likely.
- 3. Career Navigation and Placement Support.** Even well-positioned youth struggle with completing

applications, doing interviews, and translating their skills into labor-market language. Programs often must replace missing social capital—the referral or assurance from an adult who can credibly say, “This person can do the job.”

- 4. Support for Basic Needs That Makes Participation Possible.** Youth need stipends, paid experiences, childcare, transportation, legal support, and other supports. Without stability, the opportunity cost of training is too high for young people.

This is the uncomfortable truth of the opportunity youth challenge. For many participants, the barrier isn’t motivation. It’s the friction that adds up to death by a thousand small obstacles. A pathway that ignores friction is not a pathway. It’s a shiny brochure.

The American Institutes for Research–Brookings analysis describes the move toward creating regional systems organized around youth needs. It highlights three levers that help communities move from isolated programs to coherent systems: cross-sector partnerships, program alignment, and shared data infrastructure.

This approach is not abstract. It shows up in practical choices of opportunity youth-serving organizations. And it’s where many communities fail, not because they don’t care but because fragmentation is the default setting of much of American social policy. When a young person must fill out five forms to prove the same reality to five different systems, some call it accountability. A young person will call it a reason to quit.

Apprenticeships in particular tackle several of these barriers at once. At their best, apprenticeships are not a detour from education. They’re an earn-and-learn option—a structured bridge between school and work, with wages and adult mentoring relationships built in.<sup>10</sup>

New America’s report *Connected and Thriving: Youth Apprenticeship and Opportunity Youth* frames youth apprenticeship as a favorable option for keeping young people connected to school and work.<sup>11</sup> That matters for opportunity youth because reconnection is not only about remediation. It’s about restoring momentum. Earn-and-learn models can turn “I can’t afford to train” into “I’m paid while I learn” and “I don’t know anyone” into “I have a mentor-supervisor and a reference.”

But an apprenticeship is not self-executing. It depends on whether a community can do the hard work of alignment across schools, employers, workforce boards, and support systems.

## What’s the Goal?

Opportunity youth policy often gets trapped in short-term metrics: enrollments, completions, and placements. Those matter—to an extent. One-and-done metrics and programs for disconnected young people need to be paired with adults who help those young people navigate their career pathways and support them over time.

A better way to frame the goal for programs directed to disconnected youth is not just job placement but job trajectory. This changes the arc of early adulthood from brief episodes of employment in a longer story of churn to career pathway models that emphasize four components:

1. Longer-term career navigation that helps youth move across often fragmented programs and services
2. Mentoring networks as an outcome, not an accessory
3. Support for basic needs as a prerequisite, not as something nice to have
4. Program data capacity that enables learning and improvement, not just compliance

These aren’t soft ideas. They are operational requirements for persistence.

Back to Jasmine.

If her community had a true on-ramp, she wouldn’t need to guess. She’d encounter a “no wrong door” system, which could be accessed through a community college, a youth-serving nonprofit, a workforce board, or a high school reengagement center.

The entry point wouldn’t matter, because partners would share an approach that begins with ensuring Jasmine gets a navigator who can work across systems and problems.

For example, that navigator would assist with education training, childcare, a stipend during the credential phase, and a mentor at the worksite, all of which would lead to a certified credential.

That approach reads like infrastructure. And that's what it is. That kind of package requires coordination. It's not as slogan friendly as "skills, not degrees." But it's how to turn reconnection into mobility.

Opportunity youth like Jasmine are often discussed as a workforce problem, which is true but incomplete. They are also a test of whether a high-income country can build institutions worthy of its rhetoric. If we can't design pathways that a 19-year-old with bills, stress, and limited networks can navigate, then our celebrated opportunity culture is mostly a story for the already connected.

## Notes

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2. Jennie W. Wenger and Stephanie Bonds, *Understanding Disconnection Among American Youth*, RAND Corporation, October 1, 2025, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA4207-1.html>.

3. Jennie W. Wenger and Stephanie Bonds, *What Predicts Disconnection Among American Youth?*, RAND Corporation, October 29, 2025, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA4207-2.html>.

4. Lewis et al., "Young and Adrift."

5. Wenger and Bonds, *Understanding Disconnection Among American Youth*.

6. Wenger and Bonds, *Understanding Disconnection Among American Youth*.

7. Catherine M. Millett and Marisol J. C. Kevelson, *Doesn't Get Better with Age: Predicting Millennials' Disconnection; Executive Summary*, Educational Testing Service, Policy Evaluation and Research Center, 2018, [https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/Executive\\_Summary\\_RR-18-42.pdf](https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/Executive_Summary_RR-18-42.pdf).

8. Martha Ross et al., "Diverging Employment Pathways Among Young Adults: Policy Ideas to Expand Economic Opportunities for Young Adults," Brookings Institution, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/pathways-to-upward-mobility-conclusion/>.

9. Samia Amin et al., *A Blueprint for Developing Economic Opportunity for All Youth*, American Institutes for Research and Brookings Institution, July 2025, <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/A-Blueprint-for-Developing-Economic-Opportunity-for-All-Youth-June-2025.pdf>.

10. Bruno V. Manno, *The Growth of Earn-and-Learn Apprenticeship Degrees: Expanding America's Mobility and Opportunity Structure*, American Enterprise Institute, April 16, 2025, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-growth-of-earn-and-learn-apprenticeship-degrees-expanding-americas-mobility-and-opportunity-structure/>.

11. Sarah Oldmixon, *Connected and Thriving: Youth Apprenticeship and Opportunity Youth*, New America, January 13, 2026, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/connected-thriving/>.

The fix is not a single silver-bullet program or one more disconnected pilot. It is the boring yet essential work of building the on-ramp: coherent pathways, real-world experience, navigators who stay with young people through turbulence, and a civic commitment to reducing friction rather than lecturing young people about resilience.

Jasmine is imaginary. The challenge is not. And the future workforce is watching what we do next.

## About the Author

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