RECONNECTING OPPORTUNITY YOUTH: A PUBLIC HEALTH PRIORITY
Opportunity youth, or those 16–24 years of age who are disengaged from school and work, deserve to be a population of focus for the public health community. Youth disconnection and the myriad factors behind it — including insufficient public supports, misaligned structures, and systemic racism — negatively impact physical and mental health and lead to long-term socioeconomic consequences at both the individual and societal levels. Recent data indicate that there are more than 4.11 million opportunity youth in the United States, with disproportionate representation among Native, Black, and Latinx youth, and the expectation is that the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic downturn will increase both overall numbers and existing disparities.

Developed within the context of this crisis, the following policy recommendations aim to address multifaceted risk factors behind youth disconnection and propose better alignment of key systems, agencies, and data to support existing opportunity youth — a group named in recognition of the benefits made possible by a return to school or work and the tremendous potential they hold. Ultimately, preventing youth disconnection and reengaging opportunity youth will help build healthier, more equitable, and thriving communities, and the public health community stands to play a significant role in this work as leaders and conveners.
Universal Access to Quality Early Education

Opportunity youth are nine times more likely to drop out of school than their peers, but evidence shows that early childhood education is one of the earliest and most effective interventions to increase the likelihood of high school graduation. Unfortunately, the prohibitive cost of private preschool programs makes them inaccessible to many low-income families — disproportionately Black, Latinx, and Native — and publicly funded options such as Head Start receive insufficient funding to meet the resulting need.

The federal government can commit to making quality early childhood education universally accessible and strengthen access to two-generation programs supporting full families.

Comprehensive Sex Education and Reproductive Care Access for All Youth

Access to comprehensive and confidential sex education and reproductive care is imperative to keep young people safe, healthy, and engaged in school and work. Despite this, the federal government continues to invest millions of taxpayer dollars in abstinence-only programming based on incomplete and medically inaccurate information that is often used to create a hostile learning environment for LGBTQ+ students.

Congress and the Department of Health and Human Services can increase funding for confidential, comprehensive, affirming, and evidence-based sex education and work to reduce barriers to the full scope of reproductive health care and contraceptive access.

Equitable and Restorative Approaches to Justice in and Out of School

Research on exclusionary school discipline is clear: every year, millions of students who are disproportionately Black, Latinx, disabled, or LGBTQ+ are suspended or expelled from school in response to minor infractions that pose no threat to students and staff, and each subsequent exclusion increases the odds that these students will disconnect. These same disparities can be seen outside of schools in the prison system, which continues to detain a significant number of Black, Latinx, and Native youth despite an overall drop in youth incarceration.

The executive and legislative branches can work in tandem to replace exclusionary approaches to discipline and justice with those focused on restorative outcomes, harm reduction, and reentry.
Policies, Systems, and Structures Supporting Youth Transitions

While there are an array of policies, systems, and structures that aim to reduce youth disconnection, these services are often poorly aligned with each other, outdated, or lacking sufficient investment to meet the needs of priority populations.

The federal government can prioritize investment in programs aimed at critical transition points and work to fine-tune these supports to increase the opportunities available to youth.

Consistent—and Expanded—Access to Comprehensive Support Services

Stronger support services are needed to ensure healthy, supportive, and stable environments for youth who have been historically underserved by all levels of government and are, as a result, at heightened risk of disconnection.

To fully engage opportunity youth in reconnection efforts and lessen the risk of disconnection for future generations, the federal government can ensure access to comprehensive health services and work to meet the social needs of disconnected youth.

Data Collection Around the Pathways to and Predictors of Disconnect

The disconnected status of opportunity youth inherently means that institutional tracking systems miss them, but this challenge should not impede efforts to collect meaningful data.

To help public health advocates, professionals, and legislators identify programs and policies most responsive to the unique needs of opportunity youth, federal agencies can cooperate on making complete demographic data available in real time.

MOVING FORWARD

Highly effective programs and essential supports for opportunity youth have already been created, authorized, and proven to make an enormous difference in their ability to return to school and become productively employed citizens for the rest of their lives. The cycle of generational poverty can be broken for millions of youth with comprehensive cross-sector reform centered on youth disconnection.
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