

Doesn't Get Better with Age: Predicting Millennials' Disconnection

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Recent research has highlighted the critical problem of high rates of “disconnected youth” — youth and young adults who are neither employed nor in school. Practitioners, scholars, policymakers, and a range of stakeholders express mounting concern that disconnected youth are a societal burden costing our nation trillions of dollars.

In our examination of a cohort of millennials who were high school sophomores (10th graders) in 2002, we concluded that rates of youth and young adult disconnection did not improve as individuals grew older. **Rather, disconnection rates increased as the cohort aged.**

Moreover, a greater number of background factors predict disconnection as individuals age, highlighting the fact that disconnection is influenced by a complex interplay of factors and experiences.

Moving forward, reconnecting our disconnected youth to society should be the aim when examining intervention best practices. Based on our findings, we suggest researchers and practitioners continue to build knowledge of the most effective supports for disconnected youth and those at risk for disconnection, focusing specifically on:

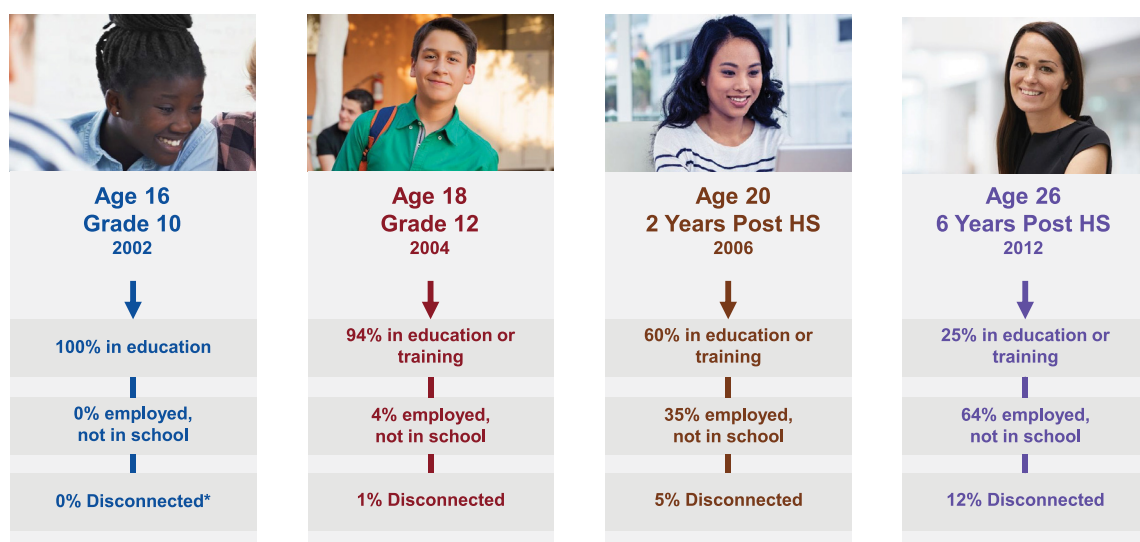
- **Reconnecting mothers** who are actively seeking employment;
- **Supporting engagement in schooling** and fostering students’ beliefs in their abilities to succeed in high school (among at-risk students in particular);
- **Identifying effective supports** for students with disabilities, particularly as they age out of programs for high school and college-aged young people; and
- **Strengthening workforce development** programs.

Understanding the Critical Problem of High Rates of Disconnected Youth

In our report, *Doesn’t Get Better with Age: Predicting Millennials’ Disconnection*, we used a nationally representative sample representing nearly three million young people to examine:

- Disconnection rates at ages 18, 20, and 26;
- Pathways to education, employment, and disconnection at age 26; and
- The reasons that young adults become disconnected from society.

Figure 1. Education, Employment, and Disconnection Rates at Ages of 16, 18, 20, and 26.



*Note that all ELS sample members were in school when the first wave of data were collected in 2002; the sample may exclude those who were already disconnected.
Source: Millet & Keverson analyses of longitudinal data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS2002), sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).
Note: Numbers may not add up to 100 percent, due to rounding.

Our findings revealed that:

- The disconnection rate grows substantially by age 20, and again from ages 20 to 26, as young adults make their way out into the world and attempt to earn credentials or a living. The disconnection rate grew from only 1 percent at age 18 (the end of high school), to 5 percent at age 20, to 12 percent at age 26.
- Among disconnected young adults, nearly 66 percent are actively job searching at age 26, while 34 percent have dropped out of the labor force and are not seeking employment (see Table 1 in the report).

Our findings clarify that disconnection is a bigger problem at age 26 than at ages 18 and 20, when young adults may still be connected to schools. We need more interventions for these older, completely disconnected young adults.

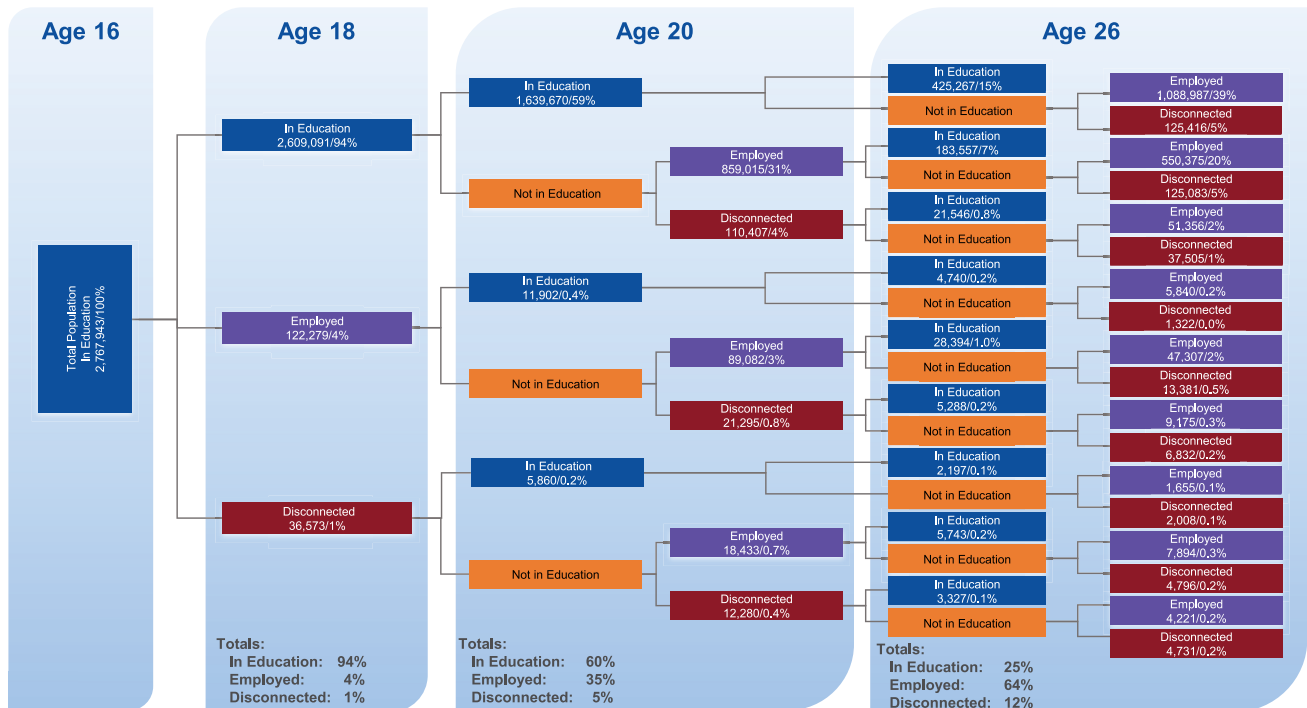
Prior Work or Schooling May Reduce the Likelihood of Disconnection, But Not Prevent It Entirely

Our examination of the pathways of high school sophomores into and out of education,¹ employment, and disconnection at the approximate ages of 18, 20, and 26 revealed that:

- Those who were once disconnected may go back to school or join the labor force at a later point; and
- Individuals who were once in school or employed may well end up disconnected (see Figure 2).

In fact, the majority of high school sophomores who were disconnected at age 26 had previously been employed, in school, or both. Less than 1 percent of the complete longitudinal sample, and around 3 percent of those that left high school early, were disconnected at ages 18, 20, *and* 26 (i.e., they were unemployed and not in school at all three ages).

Figure 2. Pathways to Education, Employment, and Disconnection at Age 26.

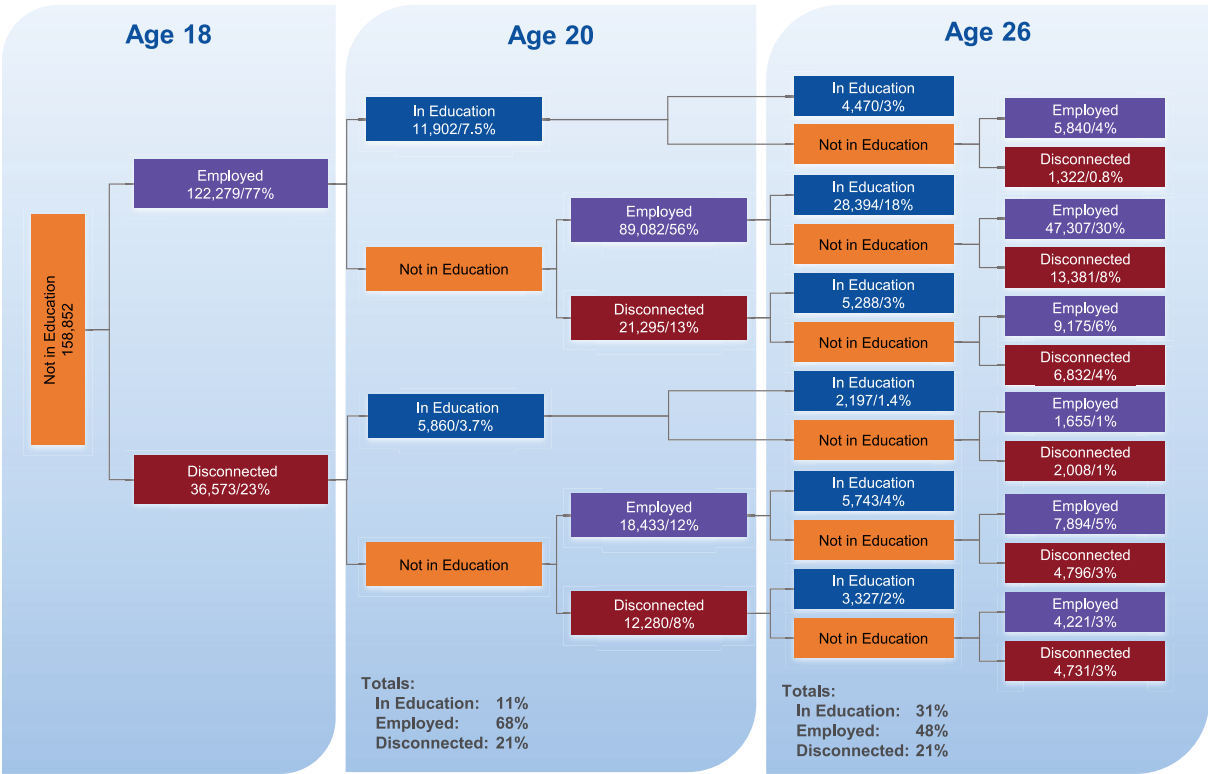


Source: Millett & Kevelson analyses of longitudinal data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS2002), sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).
 Note: Numbers may not add up to 100 percent, due to rounding.

¹ Education also includes training programs that may result in certificates rather than a postsecondary degree.

Twenty-one percent of young adults who left high school early were disconnected at ages 20 and 26, far more than their peers who were still in school at age 18. Those who left school early were generally working at ages 20 and 26; only a minority of them were in school (see Figure 3).

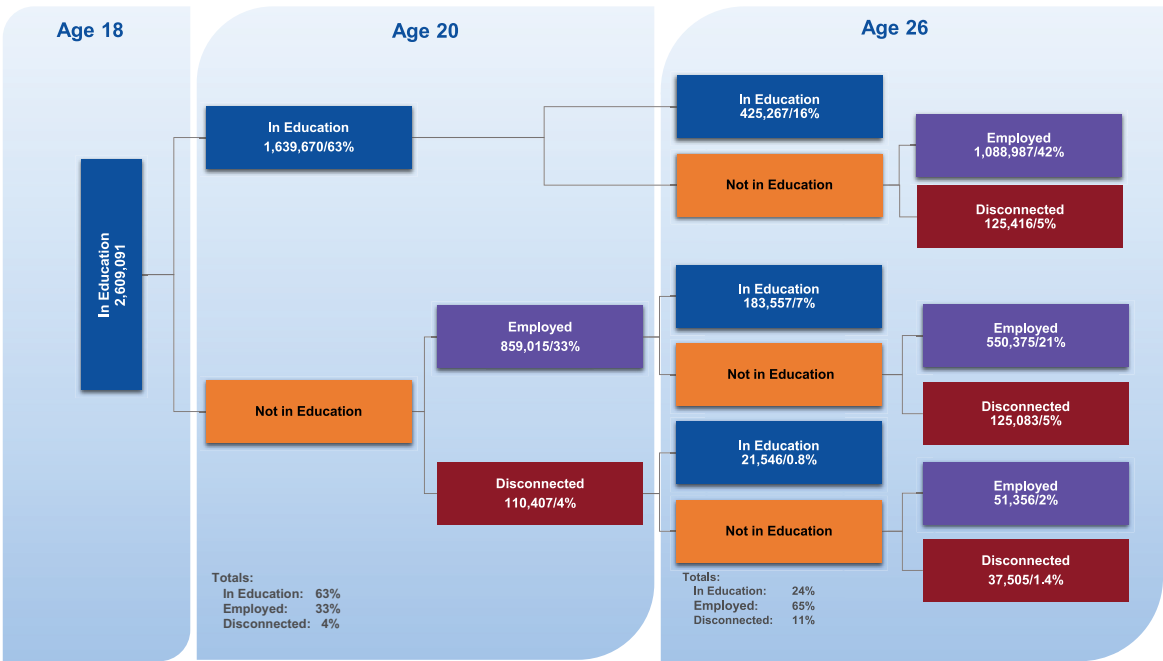
Figure 3. Pathways of Youth Not in School at Age 18.



Source: Millett & Kelson analyses of longitudinal data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS2002), sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).
Note: Numbers may not sum to exactly 100 percent, due to rounding.

Whereas only 11 percent of early high school leavers were in school at age 20 (see Figure 3), 63 percent of those who remained in high school through the end of their senior year were in school at age 20 (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Pathways of Youth Still in School at Age 18.



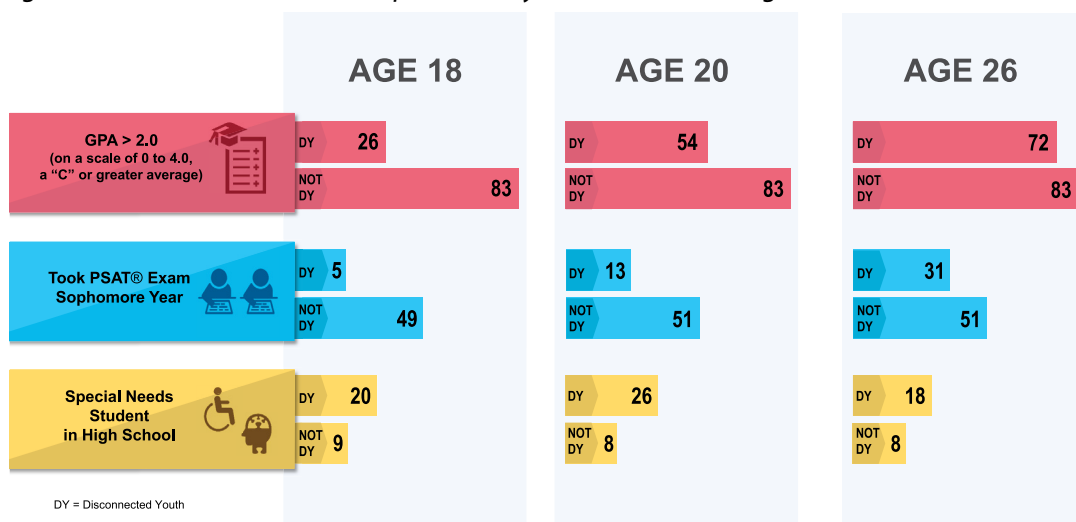
Source: Millett & Kelson analyses of longitudinal data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS2002), sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).
Note: Numbers may not sum to exactly 100 percent, due to rounding.

Disconnected Youth and Young Adults Faced Greater Disadvantages In and Out of School

Comparisons of disconnected and connected youth and young adults at ages 18, 20, and 26 revealed that disconnected individuals at all three ages tended to be from lower socioeconomic status (SES) households. Black, Hispanic, Native American, and multiracial youth and young adults were disconnected more often than Asian and White youth and young adults² and more females than males were disconnected.

Those who were disconnected at ages 18, 20, and 26 scored lower, on average, than their peers on 10th-grade reading and mathematics tests. They also had weaker beliefs in their own ability to succeed in reading and math courses (i.e., their academic self-efficacy), and they more often skipped classes, arrived late to school, or engaged in other behaviors that resulted in disciplinary suspensions (see Figure 5 and Table 2 in the report).

Figure 5. 10th-Grade Academic Experiences by Disconnection at Ages 18, 20, and 26.



Youth and young adults who were disconnected at ages 18, 20, and 26 had lower levels of academic engagement and more often had special educational needs (see Figure 5). In addition:

- Fewer disconnected youth had a high school grade point average (GPA) higher than 2.0 (a "C" average on a 4.0 scale);
- Fewer had taken the PSAT examination in 10th grade, an indicator of being on a college preparatory track; and
- More had documented special educational needs in high school.

In fact, while differences in academic engagement between disconnected and connected youth diminished with age, similar proportions of high school special needs students were disconnected at ages 18, 20, and 26 (see Figure 5).

High school academic engagement may matter more than family socioeconomic status when it comes to the likelihood of disconnection. At the same time, high school experiences and family socioeconomic status matter less as participants age. The exception is special needs students, who remain consistently more likely than their peers to be disconnected at ages 18, 20, and 26.

² Asian includes Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders; Black includes African Americans; and Hispanic includes Latinos. All race categories except Hispanic exclude Hispanic or Latino ethnicity. Native American and multiracial individuals were combined into an "other race" group because longitudinal sample sizes were insufficient to produce reliable regression estimates.

Identifying the Strongest Predictors of Disconnection

We measured the influence of student background characteristics and high school academic experiences on the likelihood of disconnection at ages 18, 20, and 26. We found that SES, high school academic abilities and experiences, race, gender, and having dependent children were salient factors predicting disconnection (see Figures 6 and 7 and Table 3 in the report).

SES:

- While family SES was related to disconnection at ages 18, 20, and 26, this association diminished as individuals aged. That is, coming from a high- or low-SES background mattered less for disconnection at age 26 than at age 18.
- SES may matter less than being on a college preparatory track in high school, as evidenced by taking the PSAT in 10th grade.

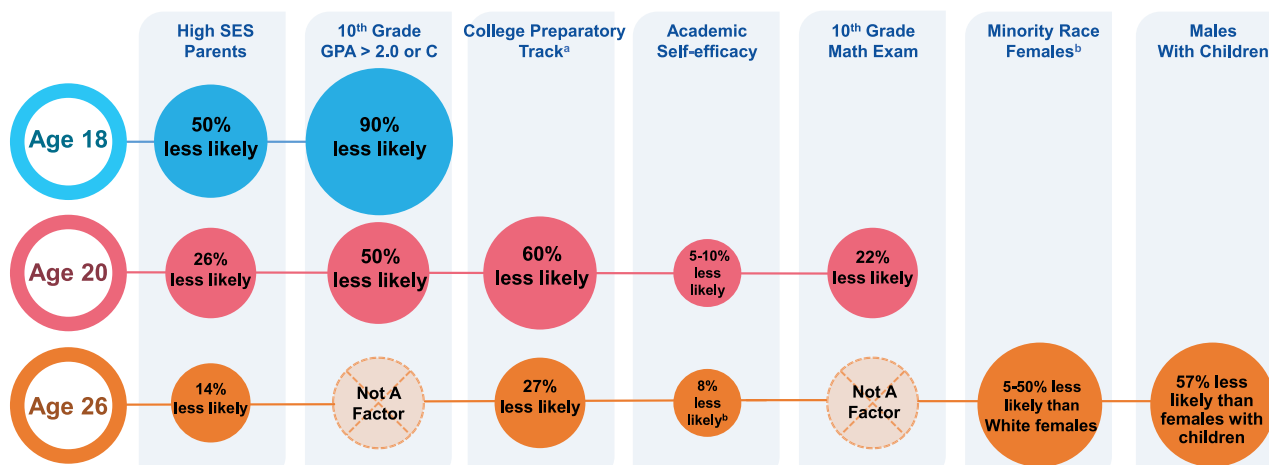
High School Academic Abilities and Experiences:

- The influence of high school academic abilities and being on a college preparatory track in 10th grade on disconnectedness diminished between the ages of 18 and 26. That is, academic performance or school track was less of a predictor of disconnection at age 26 than at age 18.
- However, one risk factor — status as a special needs student in high school — was still a strong predictor of disconnection at age 26. Individuals who had special educational needs in high school were twice as likely to be disconnected at age 26 than their peers.
- Prior disconnection was also one of the strongest predictors of disconnection at ages 20 and 26.

Childrearing:

- Being a parent also plays a clear role. Individuals with children were more likely to be disconnected at age 26 (see Table 3 in the report).
- Young women with children were nearly twice as likely to be disconnected as their childless peers (see Figure 7). However, young fathers were less likely to be disconnected than young mothers (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Protective Factors That Make Students Less Likely to Be Disconnected at the Approximate Ages of 18, 20, and 26.

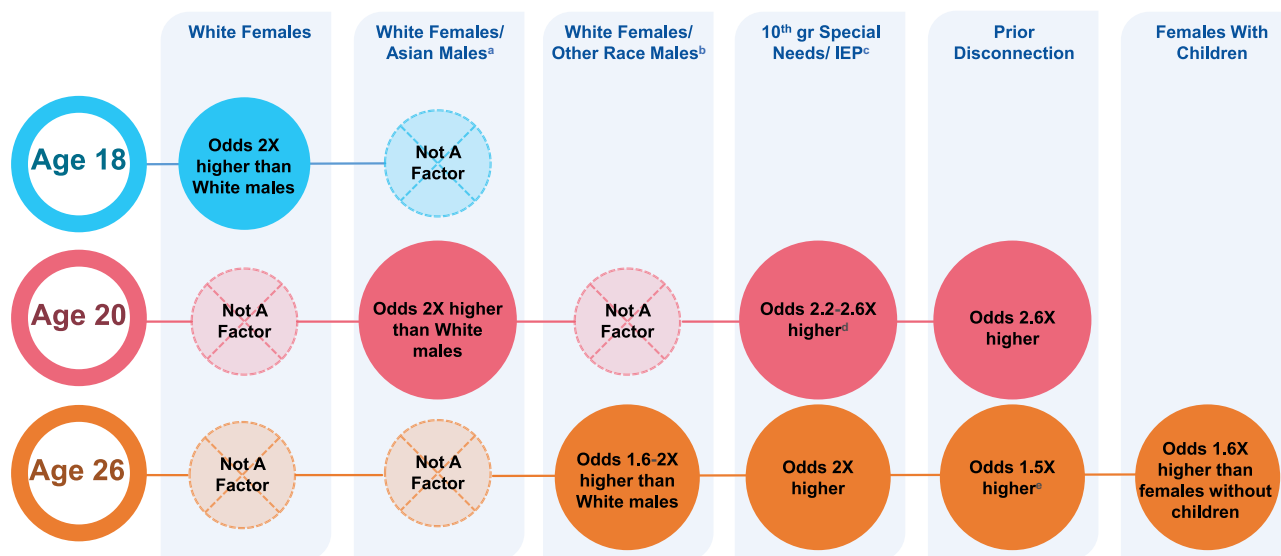


^a We used a measure of taking the PSAT in tenth grade as an indicator of being on a college preparatory track.

^b Minority race females includes Hispanic, Black, Asian, and "other race" females; Hispanic females are 30% less likely, Black females are 50% less likely, Asian females are 36% less likely, and other race females are 5% less likely to become disconnected, compared to White females. Other race includes Native American and multi-racial individuals.

^c When controlling for literacy, but not math, 10th grade exam scores.

Figure 7. Risk Factors That Make Students More Likely to Be Disconnected at the Approximate Ages of 18, 20, and 26.



^a White females and Asian males were separately compared to White males in statistical models.

^b White females and "other race" males were separately compared to White males in statistical models; other race includes Native American and multiracial individuals.

^c IEP=individualized education plan.

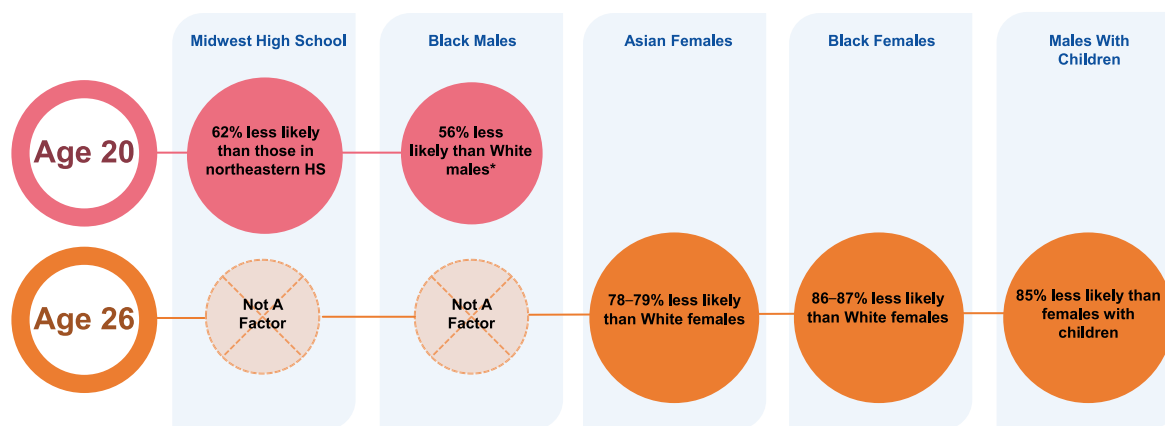
^d Odds were 2.2 times higher in the model with mathematics test scores and 2.6 times higher in the model including reading test scores.

^e When controlling for literacy, but not math, 10th grade test scores.

Student Background Factors and Geographic Region Influence Decisions to Continue Seeking Jobs

Within the population of disconnected young adults, being female or having dependent children increased the odds of dropping out of the labor force altogether, rather than continuing to seek employment, at age 26. Race, high school region, and whether the high school was located in a city, suburb, or rural area also influenced the likelihood of dropping out of the labor force (see Figures 8 and 9 and Table 4 in the report).

Figure 8. Protective Factors That Make Disconnected Youth Less Likely to Drop Out of the Labor Force at the Approximate Ages of 18, 20, and 26.

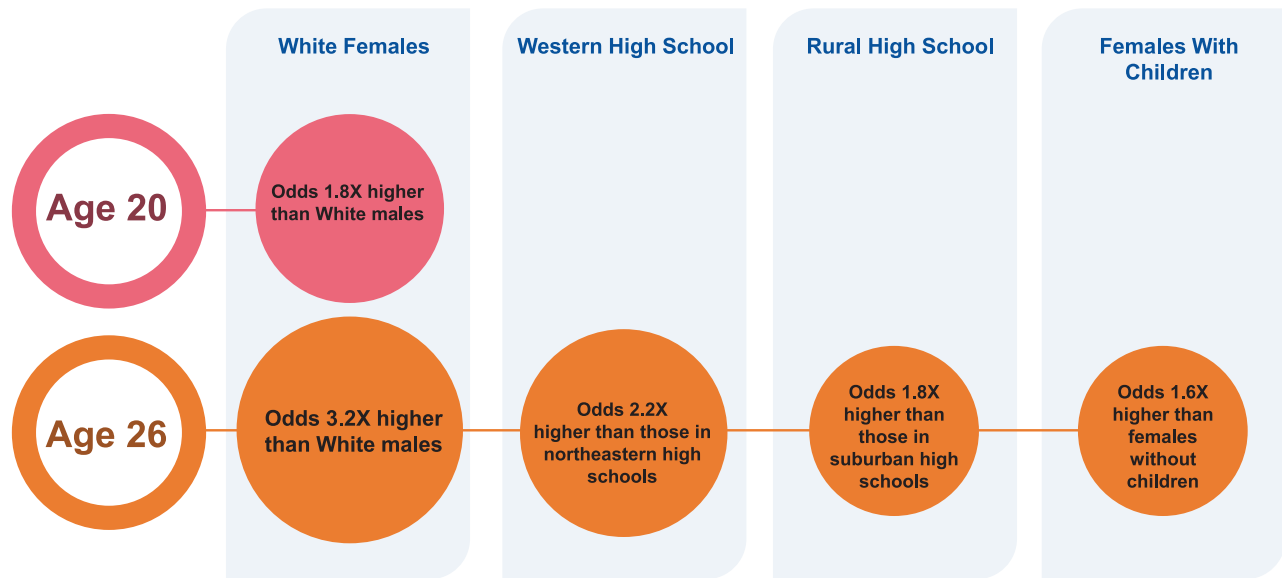


Note: Data not available for age 18.

*When controlling for literacy, but not math, 10th-grade exam scores.

Twenty-year-old disconnected Black men are more likely than their disconnected White counterparts to continue searching for jobs, rather than dropping out of the labor force. Disconnected Black women and Asian women are more likely than White women to continue seeking employment at age 26, even after accounting for SES and childrearing.

Figure 9. Risk Factors That Make Disconnected Youth More Likely to Drop Out of the Labor Force at the Approximate Ages of 18, 20, and 26.



Note: Data not available for age 18.

For access to the full report, visit
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