



College Educated Yet Disconnected:

Exploring Disconnection from Education and Employment in OECD Countries, with a Comparative Focus on the U.S.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Introduction

A critical issue around the world is the substantial proportion of young adults who are not engaged in education, employment or training. Referred to as Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) internationally, these individuals being disconnected from education and the labor market is problematic for several reasons:

- It costs countries large amounts of money due to reduced economic productivity,
- It has drastic consequences for NEETs and their families that may persist for generations, and
- NEETs may be less engaged in their communities and have lower civic participation rates and poorer health outcomes.

Surprisingly, even college-educated young adults may be at risk of disconnection. Despite the potential protectiveness of college degrees, approximately 12% of young adults with at least a two-year college degree were considered NEETs in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development® (OECD®) nations, including the United States. Within the United States, this rate was 7% during a period of relatively low unemployment.

Our Study

In our study, *College Educated Yet Disconnected: Exploring Disconnection from Education and Employment in OECD Countries, with a Comparative Focus on the U.S.*, we explored:

- Factors predictive of disconnection (i.e., being a NEET) among young adults with at least a two-year college degree (college-educated NEETs) and those without a college degree, and
- How much disconnection may influence community engagement, belief in civic participation and health among NEETs relative to non-NEETs with and without college degrees.

Because disconnection is a global issue, we used data on young adults in 29 OECD countries (including the United States) and economies that were drawn from the Survey of Adult Skills from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). We also used data on a cohort of U.S. youth and young adults that were collected for the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002).

We focused on young adults in their 20s who were or would be new labor force entrants and had completed at least a two-year college degree. The OECD dataset included young adults ages 20–29 in 2012 and 2015, while the U.S. dataset included young adults who were approximately age 26 in 2012. Our analyses included logistic regressions designed to identify which demographic factors predict the greatest odds of ending up as NEET. We also looked at whether college-educated NEETs would be more or less likely than non-college-educated NEETs to be socially and civically engaged and in good or poor health.

Five Key Study Findings

The first three findings are similar across the OECD countries and the United States, while the fourth and fifth findings differ between the OECD countries and the United States.

Finding #1: Low Parental Education Has Far-reaching Consequences Even for College Graduates

Even college graduates may struggle to overcome the disadvantages related to their background (see Figure 1). In the United States, factors other than low-parent educational levels — including economic conditions where you live, your gender and whether you have children — may have a greater influence on NEET status (see Table 9 in the report). In fact, paradoxically, in the United States college-educated individuals with college-educated parents are more likely to be NEET, after accounting for other factors in our models.

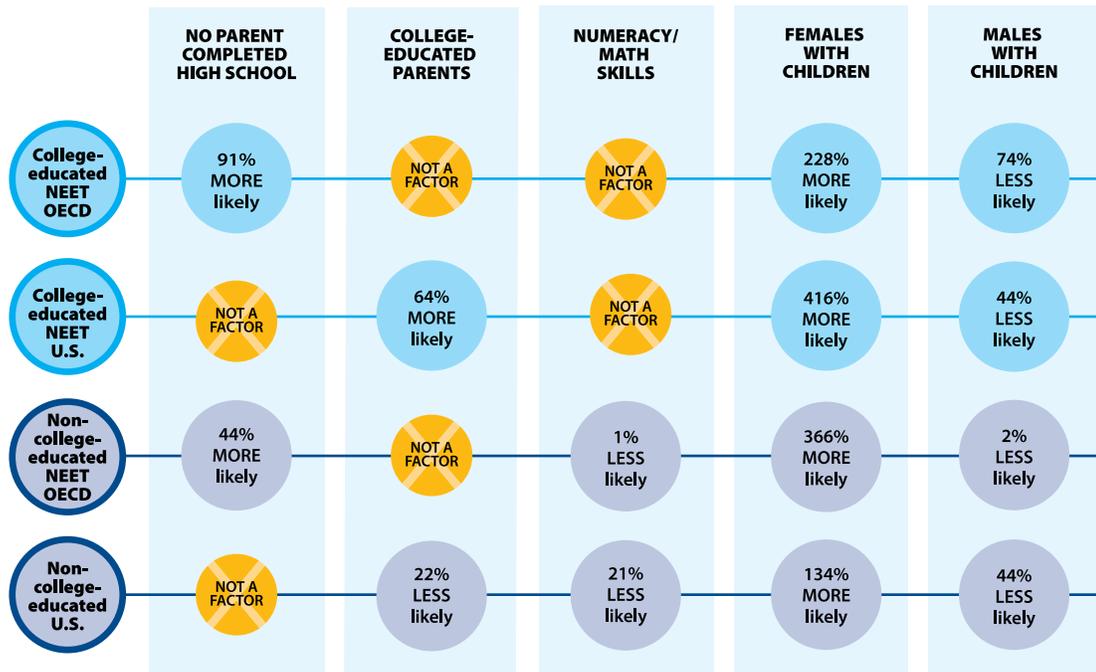
Finding #2: For College Graduates, Numeracy and Mathematics Skills Don't Matter as Much as Might Be Expected

Our study results showed a weak association between adult numeracy skills (across OECD countries) or high school mathematics skills (in the United States) and being NEET (see Figure 1). We posit that college graduates tend to have good foundational skills in general, and above that level, numeracy may not be a differentiating factor. Moreover, within the U.S. sample, mathematics skills ceased to be significant once college major was added to the analysis. In addition, among those without college degrees, mathematics skills continued to be linked to the odds of being NEET — further highlighting that there may simply be less variation in mathematics skills among college graduates.

Finding #3: Mothers Are More Often NEET; Which Mothers Are NEET Differs Between the United States and the 29 OECD Countries in the Study

Within the OECD countries overall and in the United States, two findings stand out. First, mothers are more likely than fathers to be NEET (see Figure 1). In fact, even women without children are more likely to be NEET than men without children — perhaps due to women being the caretakers in most cases. And men with children are less likely to be NEET than men without children. Second, in the United States, college-educated mothers are more likely to be NEET, whereas in the 29 OECD countries non-college-educated mothers are more likely to be NEET.

Figure 1. Demographics & Skills Predicting Odds of NEET/Disconnection Among College-Educated & Non-College-Educated Young Adults in the OECD (Ages 20–29) & the United States (Age 26)*



* Age and being a second-generation immigrant or a woman without children was not significantly associated with odds of disconnection, regardless of education.

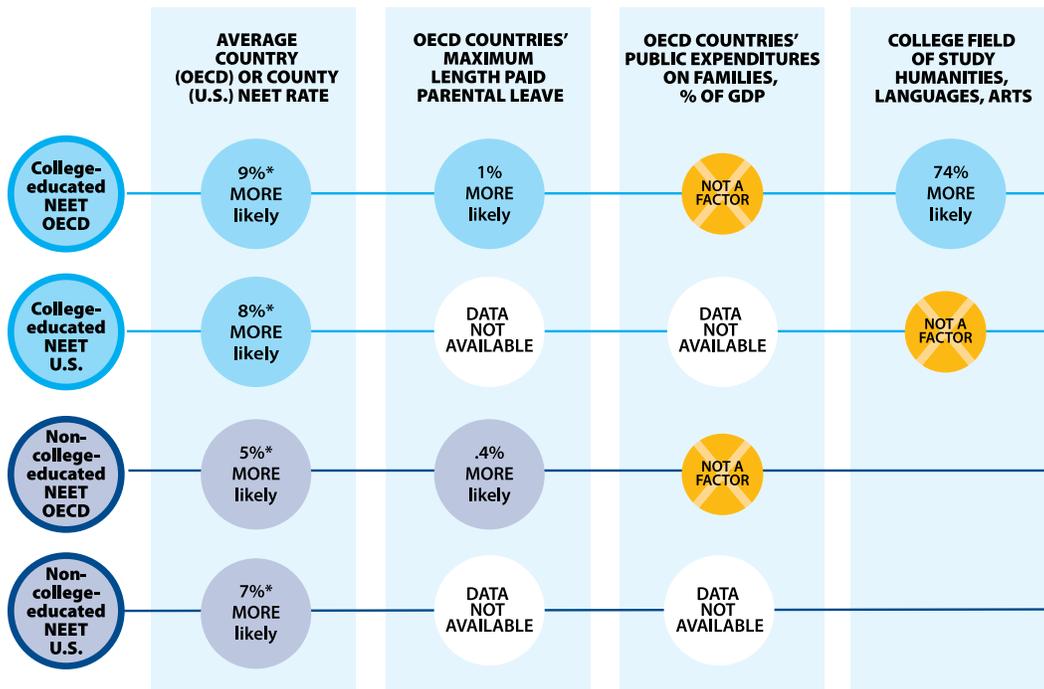
Finding #4: College Majors May Influence NEET Status Across the OECD, But Not in the United States

Our findings on the influence of college major are mixed (see Figure 2). Although the U.S. data do not show evidence of college major influencing disconnection among college-educated 26-year-olds, within the broader range of OECD countries in the study sample, graduates in the humanities, languages, arts, general programs, agriculture and veterinary sciences, and services/hospitality are more likely to be NEET compared to graduates in the social sciences, business and law.

Finding #5: NEETs With College Degrees Are More Socially Engaged and Healthy Than NEETs Without College Degrees Across the OECD, But Not in the United States

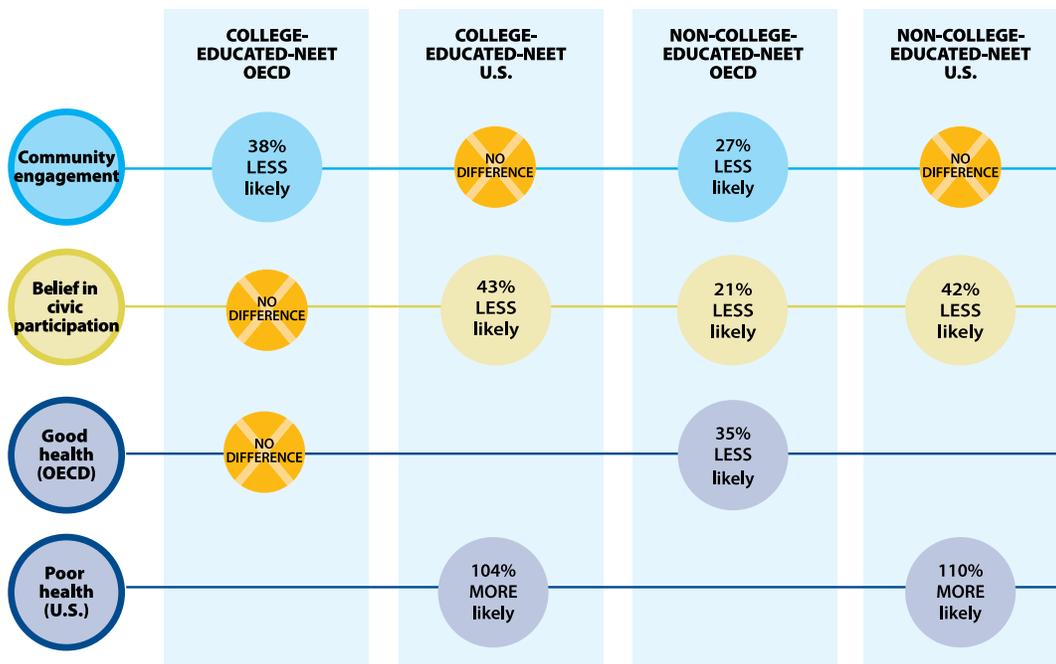
While having a college degree appears to increase the likelihood of a belief in the importance of civic participation and good health among NEETs in the OECD, it does not have the same influence in the United States. NEETs in the United States are less likely than non-NEETs to believe in civic participation and more likely to report poor health — regardless of educational attainment (see Figure 3). We theorize that this distinction, at least the findings on health, is influenced by differences in health policies in the United States relative to the broader OECD nations where government-sponsored health care, not tied to a specific job, is more prevalent.

Figure 2. Economic Context, National Policies & College Field of Study Predicting Odds of NEET/Disconnection Among College-Educated & Non-College-Educated Young Adults in the OECD (Ages 20–29) & the United States (Age 26)



* An increase of one percentage in the NEET rate in a country or county leads to this increase in the odds of being NEET.

Figure 3. NEET Status Predicting Odds of Community Engagement, Belief in Civic Participation & Health Among College-Educated & Non-College-Educated Young Adults in the OECD (Age 29) and the United States (Age 26)



Moving Our Findings Forward in the Practice and Research Communities

Given that NEET rates will undoubtedly rise — among young adults with and without college degrees — as a result of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, we hope that our research will inform interventions to reduce NEET rates among the college educated and prevent those currently in college from becoming NEET. Our prior report on U.S. NEETs, [*Doesn't Get Better With Age: Predicting Millennials' Disconnection*](#), suggests interventions for NEETs of all education levels.

Recommendations for Practitioners

The study findings highlight the need for programs to support first-generation college students, others from families with low-educational levels during college and these same students even after they earn a degree. For example, supports may be needed for career planning, completing job applications and interviews, or completing undergraduate or graduate education applications — both during college and beyond. Given the value of social networks for the career opportunities of more affluent students, mentoring and networking opportunities may be critical in order for those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds to have a chance at moving from a low-income to a middle- or high-income career and life trajectory.

Recommendations for Policymakers

Given the potential challenges of labor force reentry for mothers opting to stay home with young children and the lack of choice in the matter due to child care costs in some nations, there is a need for policies and practices that support families with young children and young adults returning to work or school after taking time off to care for a family member or loved one. Moreover, given the pandemic-related career interruptions plaguing women at higher rates than men, there is also a need for flexibility, supports and job security for working mothers.

Recommendations for Researchers

The study findings also highlight a need for further research on the needs of college-educated NEETs. It would be helpful to know how a period of disconnection may affect longer-term career prospects and success, earnings and savings, and decisions around when to start a family. We recommend a mixed-method study to gather quantitative outcomes data and qualitative contextual data to provide an understanding of the impact of disconnection and choices made by those who end up as NEET after earning a college degree.

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