

Study shows rise in US youth population neither in workforce nor school

Nick Barrickman
18 September 2012

“One in Seven,” a study produced by the nonpartisan think-tank *Measure of America* (MoA), released details earlier this month showing the increase in “disconnect”—meaning being neither employed or going to school—among young adults during and after the 2007-2008 financial collapse.

Focusing on youth between the ages of 16 and 24, the study states that “the combination of new legal and social independence, adult rights [often] make emerging adulthood a time rich in potential for joy and peril.” The paper’s stated aim is to detail the conditions facing families of youth who often lack “resources, skills, social networks, and level of public investment” vital to making an effective transition from childhood.

As the title suggests, the study found that nearly one in seven young adults, or 14.7 percent, fit the description of being socially “disconnected,” or being neither employed nor receiving an education. According to the MoA report, youth disconnection can result in “limited education, social exclusion [...] coming to affect everything from earnings and self-sufficiency to physical and mental health and marital prospects” throughout life. The study did not count youth who had only part-time employment.

Measuring by race, the study found that 22.5 percent of African-American youth fell into this category, whereas Latino youth gave up 18.5 percent, respectively. These groups fell significantly higher than the US average. Whites and Asians were measured at 11.7 and 8 percent, respectively.

Younger women facing disconnect, though a minority, are more likely to be mothers than their employed/educated counterparts, with 35 percent to 10 percent likelihood, respectively.

Basing itself on census data, the report found the biggest factors behind such instances to be poverty and

levels of adult employment, as well as adult education levels in the area. One in five youth residing in a high-poverty area are considered to be disconnected. The report stated, “Adults with college degrees are better able to contribute to their own children’s academic and labor market success” and that “their presence in a community also contributes to the range of opportunities open to young people outside their immediate families.” In accordance with this, communities with a gainfully employed adult population tend to impart practices conducive to employability for younger generations as well.

The city with the largest levels of youth disconnect was Phoenix, Arizona, where 1 in 5 youth are counted as neither holding a job nor going to school. The number of African-American youth in this group stands at nearly 30 percent, and the instances of young motherhood for women stand at twice the level of the country’s least-affected metropolitan area, Boston, Massachusetts.

Unsurprisingly, the differences between metro areas, and sometimes even between neighborhoods, often followed other indicators of social inequality. For instance, Washington D.C., though overall having lower levels of youth disconnection, differed widely between sections of the city. Northwest D.C., known for having one of the highest levels of household income in the country, contrasted greatly against the southeastern sections of the city, where youth disconnect among the population is as high as one in three. The District itself possesses one of the nation’s highest levels of poverty, standing at nearly 20 percent, significantly higher than the national average of 15 percent.

The report cites the effects of the “Great Recession,” which has further harmed those without high levels of

education. Saying that though the average income for all layers of the population fell during this period, the amount this income fell for those without a high school diploma dropped 3 times as much as those with a professional degree—a decline of 9.8 percent compared to 2.8 percent. Likewise, the report states that since 1970, incomes at the 90th percentile have more than doubled, from 5.2 to 10.6 *times* the average income of families in the lowest 10 percent of the income distribution.

In response to the findings, the report brings up in conclusion the need for “building shared national responsibility and accountability,” “evaluating program effectiveness, and scaling up proven programs.” These vague prescriptions only speak to the ruling class’s inability to solve the circumstances which its own policies only exacerbate.

Impoverished areas most likely to be effected by youth disconnection are most often the first to feel the brunt of the ruling class’s drive for budget cuts and attacks on wages and benefits.

The report criticizes the practice of “tracking” in today’s school system, a technique in which a student’s aptitude is measured early in life, allowing educators to assign courses which are perceived to be “suitable” for him or her. This tool allows schools to be transformed in to low-level labor institutions, fitting students for a life of low-paying jobs. This practice is also a prominent feature of the Obama administration’s “Race to the Top” program, which seeks to cut costs in public schools through intensified mandatory testing in order to award funding to schools that test the best, and closing those that do not.

A report released by the National Employment Law Project found that jobs averaging pay between \$7.69 and \$13.83 made up the majority of those added back during the so-called “recovery,” while jobs paying significantly higher made up the majority of jobs lost during the recession.

The report makes note that of the so-called developed world only Italy and Spain, countries saddled with massive austerity programs, have worse youth disconnection rates.

The cost to society is high; youth trapped inside conditions of social neglect can easily turn to harming themselves and others. The study notes the “high costs of crime, incarceration, and poor physical and mental

health; and a heightened risk that the next generation will be caught in the same cycle.”

Internationally, instances of suicide have increased. Greece, ravaged by austerity, has seen its suicide rate grow by 22 percent since 2009. The social conditions which gave birth to the uprisings that swept the Arab world in 2010-11—when Mohamed Bouazizi, an unemployed Tunisian youth set himself on fire in protest—are increasingly confronting a significant portion of young people all over the world.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact