# What's a Youngster to Do? The Education and Labor Market Plight of Youth in High-Poverty Communities

By Linda Harris

*Our economy, national security, and social cohesion face a precarious future if our nation fails to develop now the comprehensive policies and programs needed to help all youth. In developing these policies and programs, it is crucial to recognize the growing gap between more fortunate youth and those with far fewer advantages.…Unless we are motivated, at least in part, by our belief in young people and our sense of obligation to them, we risk losing more than we can ever hope to win."*[1]

—William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship, 1988

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Almost two decades ago, researchers and economists warned about an impending crisis for the young and the unskilled in the labor market. Those tracking the demographic trends, the labor market shifts, the immigration patterns, and the global influences predicted that, absent substantial intervention, youth, especially youth in the urban core, would face perilous times coming into the twenty-first century. Economists in the 1987 publication *Workforce 2000* noted that most new jobs created in the nineties and beyond would require some level of postsecondary education. They cautioned that, without substantial adjustment in policies and without investments being made in education and training, the problems of minority unemployment, crime, and dependency would be worse in 2000.[2] The National Center on Education and the Economy in its 1990 report, *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages*, noted that one in five young people in this country grew up in third-world surroundings and started out with severe learning disadvantages from which they never recovered. The report recommended investment in a dropout recovery system that would build the connection between education and work for youth without high school certification.[3] Despite these admonitions, federal investment in employment, training, and second-chance programs decreased precipitously over the ensuing fifteen years.

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[1] William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship, The Forgotten Half: Pathways to Success for America's Youth and Young Families (1988).

[2] William Johnston & Arnold Packer, Workforce 2000: Work and Workers for the 21st Century (Hudson Institute 1987).

[3] National Center on Education and the Economy, America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages! 44 (1990).

The future that these studies predicted is upon us, with the attending consequences. While the national graduation rate for youth in public school is an appalling 68 percent, the rate for youth in high-poverty urban districts is below 50 percent. The lack of attention and public will around this issue is attributable in part to the fact that the aggregate statistics on graduation rates and employment rates for the nation's youth masks the stark reality of the problem for youth in poor urban, rural, or minority communities. This situation goes largely unattended because minority youth is an invisible constituency. When young people drop out, or disconnect, or stop looking for work, they are no longer counted in any system or any statistic unless they find their way to the public welfare system or the criminal justice system as many of them do. No public institution or system is called upon to account for the preparation and transition of youth to the labor market.

Prevailing sentiment would rest that responsibility with the parent and student. To blame parents would be quite appropriate if we were talking about a small minority of students falling by the wayside. However, when more than half of the young people attending public school in a community leave school before graduating, the problem is beyond that of parental and personal responsibility. It is evidence of the breakdown of the education, community, and economic infrastructure that in healthy communities prepares and supports youth as they make the transition to adulthood. In economically distressed communities these institutions are overburdened, underresourced, broken, or simply incapable of providing the level of support needed to prepare young people for a successful transition to adulthood and the labor market.

In this article I focus on the situation for youth in selected large cities with poverty rates above 30 percent and with school districts that have more than 60 percent of their students eligible for free or reduced lunches. Twelve cities were selected to amplify the challenges faced by young people growing up in these urban areas: Atlanta, Baltimore, Buffalo, Cleveland,

**Table 1.—Profile of High-Poverty Cities**

| City | School Enrollment[1] | % Minority[1] | % Below Poverty Line[2] | | | Violent Crime Rate[3] | Juvenile Arrest Rate (100,000)[4] | Teen Births[5] | Graduation Rate[1] | % Teens Employed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | *Total* | *Black* | *Hispanic* | | | | | |
| Atlanta | 58,320 | 93.2 | 39.3 | 47.0 | 29.0 | 2,289 | 607 | 100 | 39.6 | 30.9 |
| Baltimore | 99,859 | 89.2 | 31.0 | 35.8 | 22.9 | 2,054 | 1,281 | 86 | 47.9 | 28.4 |
| Buffalo | 45,721 | 71.5 | 38.7 | 45.0 | 56.7 | 1,271 | 327 | 72 | 47.3 | 34.2 |
| Cleveland | 75,684 | 80.7 | 38.0 | 45.6 | 40.6 | 1,322 | NA | 99 | 30.0 | 32.4 |
| Detroit | 162,194 | 96.3 | 34.8 | 35.2 | 31.9 | 2,072 | 200 | 78 | 57.0 | 28.8 |
| Fresno | 79,007 | 79.8 | 36.8 | 44.6 | 40.5 | 853 | 423 | 86 | 55.8 | 28.3 |
| Los Angeles | 721,346 | 90.1 | 30.7 | 38.5 | 36.6 | 1,349 | 304 | 61 | 46.4 | 27.2 |
| Miami[6] | 368,265 | 88.7 | 38.5 | 52.4 | 34.6 | 1,906 | NA | 174 | 52.1 | 26.0 |
| Milwaukee | 97,985 | 81.3 | 32.0 | 43.7 | 33.2 | 956 | 892 | 88 | 45.8 | 39.2 |
| New York | 1,066,515 | 84.7 | 30.3 | 33.9 | 39.9 | 955 | 332 | 41 | 38.2 | 19.7 |
| Philadelphia | 201,190 | 83.3 | 31.6 | 37.2 | 50.4 | 1,524 | 1,008 | 64 | 41.9 | 25.8 |
| Washington | 68,925 | 95.5 | 31.7 | 37.6 | 25.6 | 1,596 | NA | 53 | 65.2 | 23.9 |
| **Average for High-Poverty Cities** | Total 3,045,011 | 86.2 | 34.4 | 41.38 | 36.8 | 1,512 | 537.4 | 83.5 | 47.3 | 28.7 |
| **For U.S.** | | | 16.6 | 33.1 | 27.8 | 495 | 276 | 48 | 68 | 41.2 |
| **Ratio of High-Poverty Cities to U.S.** | | | 2.08 | 1.25 | 1.32 | 3.06 | 1.95 | 1.74 | .695 | 59.9 |

[1]G. Orfield et al., The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth Are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis (2004). Statistics are for the public school district.

[2]Kids Count, Census Data Online, 2000 Census—Income and Poverty, http://aecf.org/kidscount/census.

[3]U.S. Department of Justice Crime in the United States: 2003, Uniform Crime Reports tbl. 8.

[4]H. Snyder et al., Easy Access to FBI Arrest Statistics 1994–2002 , http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstatbb/ezaucr/. Arrest statistics are for the county in which the city is located. Births per thousand females 15–19 from Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count, Teen Births in America's Largest Cities 1990 and 2000 (2000).

[5]Extracted from the 2000 Census Public Use Microdata Samples 5% File.

[6]Enrollment and graduation rates are for the Miami-Dade County district.

Detroit, Fresno, Los Angeles, Miami, Milwaukee, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. Just over three million students were enrolled in these districts, 86.1 percent of them minority. Table 1 displays the general profile of distress in these communities.

Consider the prospects for the youth here. One in three resides in a household that is below the poverty level, twice the national average. They live in communities where the rate of violent crime is three times the national average. They are twice as likely to be arrested and almost twice as likely to be a teen parent. Only one in two entering high school will graduate, and only 14 percent of minority youth will complete four years of college (compared to 49.7 percent of white youth). This environment of low achievement, low expectations, early exposure to violent and illicit activity, and lack of exposure to positive pathways out constrains the life options for young people. It is a daunting landscape for an adolescent to navigate. There are adolescents who will graduate and go on to postsecondary success. They will do so against considerable odds.

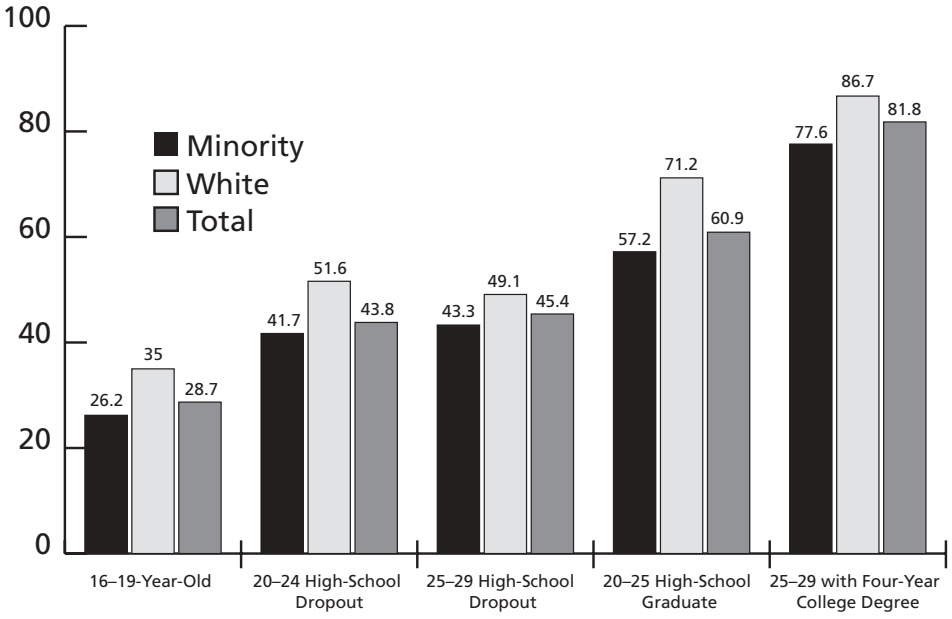
Equally bleak are the labor market prospects for adolescents who do not complete high school in these communities. Figure 1 presents a few labor market statistics from the 2000 decennial census. While this profile is as of the last census, recent analysis by the Center for

Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University shows a worsening situation for teens in the labor market with teen employment being at its lowest level in fifty-seven years.[4]

According to the decennial census, just over a quarter of adolescents 16 to 19 in these communities were working. That compares to 41 percent nationally for the same age group. Young people in high-poverty cities do not have the same early access to the labor market. Transportation poses a barrier to access to employment in the suburban hubs, and in the central city labor market the young are competing with immigrants and a growing number of older workers who are taking the jobs traditionally held by teen workers. Studies show a direct benefit of early work experience for teens. Work experience in the junior or senior year of high school adds to wages in the later teen years and to increased annual earnings through age 26 especially for those not attending four-year colleges.[5] Youngsters in high-poverty communities are disadvantaged by their lack of early work exposure during the critical years when they should be building their labor market attachment, their workplace skills, and a portfolio of experiences that would allow them to progress.

Among these high-poverty cities, there are districts that fail to graduate 60 percent to 70 percent of their students. These students without access to quality "second chance" options are destined to remain without academic credentials. Census statistics for various age categories showed that those without a high school diploma were intermittently employed throughout their early and late 20s. The employment rate for dropouts in their early twenties was only 44 percent compared to 60.9 percent for those with a high school diploma. The attachment to the labor market for dropouts in their early 20s was tenuous with only 50 percent having worked more than three

**Figure 1.—Percent Working by Age and Race in Selected High-Poverty Cities (2000 Decennial Census)**




Source: 2000 Census Public Use Microdata Samples 5% File. Working includes those in the military.

[4]Andrew Sum et al., Center For Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, The Paradox of Rising Teen Joblessness in an Expanding Labor Market: The Absence of Teen Employment Growth in the National Jobs Recovery of 2003–2004 (2005).

[5]Andrew Sum & Iswar Khatiwada, Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, The Summer Job Market for U.S. Teens 2000– 2003 and the Projected Job Outlook for the Summer of 2004 (presentation to the U.S. Conference of Mayors, June 2004).

months during the entire year of 1999.[6] Among people in their late 20s without a high school diploma, those working remained below 50 percent.

Figure 1 also highlights the disparity in employment between white and minority youth. "Minority" in Figure 1 refers to black and Hispanic youth. In general minority youth working at the time of the census in these communities constituted approximately 78 percent of that for white youth. The disparity gap narrows for youth with bachelor's degrees. However, only 14 percent of minority youth in these cities had graduated from a four-year college compared to 49 percent of white youth. Clearly, if the employment gap among the races is to be closed, effort and resources must be directed at improving the participation in postsecondary education and career training for minority youth.

The question "What's a youngster to do?" is more than rhetorical. In communities with large minority population groups, where fewer than 50 percent of the youth graduate, where only 42 percent of minority 20- to 24-year-old dropouts find employment, and where resources for safety-net and second-chance programs have been dramatically reduced, how will they survive economically, form families, and participate constructively in civic life? The simple answer is that too many will be unsuccessful. Unless the education and labor market status of these young persons improve, they will spend their adult years on the fringes of the labor market marginalized in their ability to provide for their economic well-being or that of their families. More young people will find avenues for economic survival through illicit activity, thus reinforcing the pipeline to prison and the accompanying stigma that will exacerbate their labor market situation upon reentry.

In 2004 the Center for Law and Social Policy surveyed nearly 200 young people from fifteen high-poverty cities who had dropped out of school and who were eventually reconnected to supportive alternative programs. They were asked, among other questions, what they did with their time after dropping out of school and before engaging in the alternative program. Most young persons were idle, unemployed, or simply hanging out. Twenty-eight percent were engaged in criminal or gang activity. Only 24 percent reported working most of the time. Fortunately they found their way to comprehensive alternative programs. They responded that what they found most valuable was the caring adult support and guidance and the ability to reconnect to education. Once reconnected, 47 percent responded that they had postsecondary ambitions, most with very specific majors in mind. Many of those who fall by the wayside have hopes and aspirations and their paths can be positively redirected with the appropriate guidance and support.[7] However, sustaining the funding streams to improve the delivery of youth services in economically distressed communities has proven challenging for those communities engaging in such improvement. U.S. Department of Labor investment in youth programming declined from $15 billion (in current dollars) in 1979 to just over $2.6 billion today.[8] The most recent federal Youth Opportunity Grant funding to high-poverty urban and rural communities is being discontinued.

So what's a nation to do? For almost two decades, the alarmingly high dropout rates have persisted for poor and minority youth in high-poverty urban communities. The community-based alternative, GED (General Educational Development or general equivalency diploma), and training programs of the loosely knit second-chance

[6]All references in this document to census statistics not otherwise cited are from extracts from the 2000 Public Use Microdata Samples 5 percent file from the Decennial Census, U.S. Bureau of the Census.

[7]The Center for Law and Social Policy conducted a survey of 196 dropouts enrolled in the Youth Opportunity Program in thirteen cities. The report is forthcoming in summer 2005.

[8]Estimate provided by David E. Brown, National Youth Employment Coalition.

system have been unloosed further by the continual retrenchment in funding. Relying solely on the slow pace of systemic education reform will almost certainly guarantee that a decade hence we will be facing greater challenges of social isolation and disparate labor market outcomes, and we will be posing the same questions. To make a difference for youth in these communities several events must happen:

1. Systemic education reform and aggressive youth recovery efforts must occur in tandem. These efforts must draw from the strength and resources of the broader community to provide rich alternative learning environments, advocacy and mentoring support, and horizon-extending exposure to careers and experiences that will heighten aspirations. Many communities have discovered that state and local education dollars can be deployed to reengage dropouts and struggling students in smaller, more supportive community-based learning environments. Communities must engage with their local districts to spark innovation in developing multiple high-quality options that will keep struggling students engaged and provide "on ramps" for those who have dropped out.

2. All youth-serving systems should be mandated to collaborate on the solution set and put in place accountability systems and supports such that no youth falls through the cracks. The public must demand better accountability for outcomes from youth-serving systems. In communities with high levels of youth distress, the education, workforce, child welfare, juvenile justice, and mental health systems should be required to collaborate on a transition support system that tracks and supports the movement of youth through the various systems and prepares them for postsecondary success. Youth aging out of foster care and youth reentering from incarceration should have transition plans that connect them with the services from all relevant systems. Youth councils, such as those currently mandated in the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, should serve to keep the focus on the problem and solutions and to engage stakeholders in the process. [9]

3. Federal and state resources must flow in support of such scaled efforts creating a policy, legislative, and regulatory environment that affirms a commitment not to leave these young persons behind and provides the incentives and resources, at scale, to stand behind the commitment. Efforts such as the Youth Opportunity Grant which substantially funded high-poverty communities in building capacity and engaging thousands of in-school and out-of-school youth in sustained activity should be extended, not ended.

4. The realities of the job market, the workplace, and the twenty-first-century-skill set needed to be competitive must be factored heavily in the redesign of high schools and alternative programming. Business must play a prominent role in this redesign and in opening up the workplace for rich career exposure. Jobs today and in the near future are more knowledge- and technology-based. Success in the workplace will require the ability to analyze, quickly adapt, continually upgrade, and develop transferable skills. A shift in the secondary or postsecondary education paradigm will be required from 50 percent dropping out to 100 percent graduating with such skills. Actively engaging business, secondary, postsecondary, and alternative education leaders in school reform can draw out the impetus and support for such change.

5. Work experience, internships, and community service or service-learning opportunities must be expanded in these communities to give youth the same level of exposure to work environments and civic opportunities as experienced by youth in more advantaged jurisdictions. Up until the passage of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, which eliminated the summer youth program, thousands of 14- and

[9] Workforce Investment Act of 1998, Pub. L. No. 105-220, 112 Stat. 936.

15-year-olds received their first exposure to work and community service through this federal funding. Over the years the summer jobs program provided communities with a vehicle for imparting work skills, college and career exposure, leadership skills, and work ethic in the early teen years. With the elimination of the summer jobs program and the constricting opportunities in the job market, young people are not developing the skills and work ethic that will be essential for labor market success in later years.

6. A national youth policy that has among its principles the reconnection of the approximately five million who are out of school and out of work and out of the labor market and societal mainstream must be advanced.[10] There is no overarching national youth policy that embraces all youth including those who have been "disconnected". Nor is there a policy that frames our values, beliefs, promises, and actions to be taken on behalf of all youth. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 directs attention to reform and accountability of the public education system, but its provisions have been slow to reach high schools and do not address the education needs of the millions of young people who have been left behind educationally and in the labor market.[11] National attention tends to focus on specific pieces of legislation or special target groups—gang prevention, foster care, young offenders. While this attention is much needed, these problems are vestiges of continued neglect of the larger disconnected youth problem. A more comprehensive national youth policy is needed to move the country from silo-ed fragmented interventions to more systemic, integrated solutions.

What's a community to do? What is happening to young people in high-poverty communities, many of which are also predominantly minority communities, should be unacceptable to all segments of the community. When the situation is viewed simply as a failure of public schools, one can easily point the finger and disengage from the solution. However, when viewed as a failure of the collective community to provide for the future of its youth, it should serve as a call to action. Those working in the youth field are well aware of the amazing transformations that take place when young people are reconnected to supportive alternative environments. There is a growing body of evidence about effective practice and what works to restore the education and labor market pathways. Caring adult support, integrated learning environments, high-quality work experience and civic engagement, in combination, have been demonstrated effective in restoring the pathways to success for youth.[12] The technology and experience exist, but the delivery infrastructure is fragmented and fragile after years of funding decline.

High-school reform and the growing pressure for accountability should serve as the impetus to community activism around these unacceptable educational and labor market outcomes in high-poverty communities. The growing exposure of the educational and labor market disparities for youth of color should also sound the alarm. The community has an important role to play in creating the public will to elevate the much-neglected plight of youth in poverty communities for priority attention. Community leaders and parents will need to be informed and vigilant as the high-school reform efforts unfold. Reform efforts that cater to the letter of the law, instead of the intent and spirit of leaving no youth behind, may in fact exacerbate the dropout problem. Attempts to comply with high standards, high-stakes testing,

[10] Andrew Sum et al., Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, Left Behind in the Labor Market: Labor Market Problems of the Nation's Out-of-School, Young Adult Populations (2003).

[11] No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425.

[12] Press release, American Youth Policy Forum, Some Things Do Make a Difference for Youth: A Compendium of Evaluations of Youth Programs and Practices (Washington, DC, 1997).

and making average yearly progress can easily lead to the less able and more difficult youth being pushed out or tracked to less desirable alternatives.[13] The challenge is to deliver *all* young people to graduation with a skill set that allows them to compete on equal footing for the opportunities in the labor market. Communities, if they are to thrive, cannot continue to allow the loss of young talent, potential, and energy.

What is needed is a vision for youth—anchored in the belief that all youth should have equitable access to the promise and prosperity that America has to offer. This belief should guide our priorities, our policies, and our actions as individuals in a caring community and as a nation. It should resonate across all levels of government and at the grassroots of community service delivery. There must be a commitment to actualize that vision by making the investments at the scale needed until the education and labor market disparities for poor and minority youth dissipate. Commitment to the vision is not just about funding. The commitment is about rethinking systems, policies, relationships, and collective responsibility. Leadership on this issue begins with the acknowledgment that the situation for youth in high-poverty communities is unacceptable and that solutions must be bold, systemic and collaborative. Every sector of the community and every youth-serving system should coalesce to be part of the solution—a solution that is two decades overdue!

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[13] *Summary: Leland Ware,* Brown*'s Uncertain Legacy: High Stakes Testing and the Continuing Achievement Gap*, 38 CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW 697 (Jan.–Feb. 2005); Daniel J. Losen, *The Color of Inadequate School Resources: Challenging Racial Inequities that Contribute to Low Graduation Rates and High Risk for Incarceration*, *id.* at 616.

## Working with Teens

I love working with adolescent clients because, unlike most adults, they are open to new approaches to the problems they face. Often, when I meet with a client, I'll see the wheels turning in an adolescent's head as she thinks: maybe I don't have to get a GED (General Educational Development or general equivalency diploma)—maybe I can go back to high school. Maybe I don't have to live in a home full of drugs and violence—maybe I could find someone else to take proper care of me. Maybe I can be a better parent. Maybe it's OK to get help.

Like children, teens are growing, developing, and figuring out who they are. But like adults, teens are able to set and express goals for their representation. Most of my clients are desperate for an adult they can trust. Earning that trust is straightforward, if not easy: my clients trust me because I take them seriously, respect their right to confidentiality, spend time listening to their problems, elicit their preferences, and work to further their goals.

I love to watch my clients grow up and learn to use what I've taught them. When they first come to me, they don't understand that I have other clients. They arrive late and expect me to see them immediately. They get upset when they can't reach me but refuse to leave messages. So I teach them how, making them pick up the phone and repeat after me: "Hi, Eve, this is Tracy, I'm at my grandmother's, you can call me here, the number is …." I teach them how to make—and keep—appointments; I hand out blank date books and discuss how to use them. Although many still miss their appointments, I regard it as a triumph if they call afterward and leave a message apologizing.

Most of my clients have never been taught to advocate themselves. They get discouraged easily and feel powerless in the face of adult authority. Knowing that New York City welfare workers routinely, and illegally, turn my clients away based solely on their age, I carefully prepare my clients who want to apply for public assistance. I explain the law and regulations to them and teach them how to work up the chain of command until they find someone who will correctly process their case. When the frontline worker tells them that they are too young to apply, they ask to speak with a supervisor. When they're told that the supervisor isn't available, they say that they'll wait. When the supervisor is rude and misstates the law, they ask to speak to the supervisor's supervisor. They get their welfare benefits, and I tell them how proud I am of what they've accomplished.

My clients think it's funny when I swear, and I've learned to use that humor strategically. I was representing a client in foster care in an effort to reunite her with her son. After a bad day in court, the client told me that if the girls at her group home picked on her that evening, she was going to get ugly. I looked her in the eye and told her, "That's not going to happen because I'm not going to let you $%^*& up this case." We both laughed, and she went back to her group home—and did not get into any fights.

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