Acknowledgments

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Amy Barad, The Cowen Institute: Earn & Learn Career Pathways
Kiana Calloway, Roots of Renewal
Lana Charles, Louisiana Center for Children’s Rights
Reginald Coleman, Liberty’s Kitchen
Emily Ferris, Youth Force NOLA
LaRita Francois, Take the Lead Foundation NOLA
Rashida Govan, New Orleans Youth Alliance
Tanya Jones, Thrive 9th Ward Community Center
Davante Lewis, Louisiana Budget Project
Kathy Litchfield Grote, New Orleans Youth Alliance
Karen Marshall, Rethink
Monique Robinson, Café Reconcile
Lauren Stendahl, Junior Achievement of Greater New Orleans

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Julio Bermudez  Nia Gates  Tyrone Landry
Katlyn Bray  Re’kal Hooker  Kearra Mitchell
Nessa Carter  Jonshell Johnson  Yaa Mitchell
Sereniti Childs  Jalen Kyle  Isaiah Williams

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Kristen
INTRODUCTION

The youth disconnection rate—the share of young people ages 16 to 24 who are not in school or working—is a strong indicator of a community’s collective assets and a telling gauge of its residents’ access to opportunity. Emerging adulthood—the late teens and early twenties—is when people develop many of the capabilities required to live a good life: knowledge and credentials, social skills and networks, a sense of mastery and agency, an understanding of one’s strengths and preferences, and the ability to handle stressful events and regulate one’s emotions, to name just a few. At school and on the job, connected young people set goals and lay the groundwork to realize them. Out-of-school, out-of-work youth also have dreams and aspirations but have far less support to make them a reality.

Disconnected youth are young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither working nor in school. Here in the United States, organizations that work with this population began to use the term “opportunity youth” as a more optimistic phrase “that calls attention to the opportunities these young people seek and that should be opened up for them.”1 Internationally, the most commonly used term to describe this population is “NEETs,” an acronym that stands for “not in employment, education, or training.”

As the New Orleans metro area transitions out of the worst of the Covid era, new opportunities are opening up, and unprecedented resources from the American Rescue Act are available for meaningful investments in education, social services, and infrastructure. The pandemic underscored that both physical infrastructure like broadband internet and social infrastructure like affordable childcare, health benefits, and medical leave are essential to the functioning of modern life, helping to make the case and generate support for long overdue investments in these necessities. New Orleans has a once-in-a-lifetime chance to build an infrastructure of opportunity for all its young people.

At the same time, the harmful and potentially persistent effects of Covid-19 on young people in New Orleans cannot be underestimated (see BOX 1). And the consequences of youth disconnection can be
serious and enduring. Using data from a large longitudinal study that has run for more than 50 years, Measure of America determined that by the time they reach their thirties, people who worked or were in school throughout their teens and early twenties earn $35,000 more per year and are 45 percent more likely to own a home, 42 percent more likely to be employed, and 52 percent more likely to report excellent or good health than those who had been disconnected as young people. Research shows that youth disconnection is associated with lower levels of educational attainment, higher rates of substance use, worse health, less stable relationships, and more criminal activity. For young people who are already parents, the chances that their children will grow up in poverty increase with disconnection. Early successes, caring mentors, and lucky breaks can set a young person on the path to a flourishing adulthood; closed doors, adverse events, and limited connections can block off a host of rewarding and joyful paths, leading to a future of limited horizons and unrealized potential.
Employment plummeted in the early days of Covid-19, and the sectors most likely to employ young people—young women without college degrees in particular—such as the food service, hospitality, leisure, and retail industries, were hardest hit. Recovery lagged in these sectors, as vacationers stayed home and conventions moved online. The closure of schools and day-care providers pulled girls and young women into caretaking for siblings and other younger relatives, particularly in families where adults worked in front-line occupations and other jobs where going virtual wasn’t an option. In fact, less-educated young women were harmed from all sides—they were concentrated in the hardest-hit industries, they were less likely to be able to work from home or to live in a household with parents eligible for remote work, and many found themselves on their own to care for their own children or siblings.4

The pandemic’s impacts on education were as severe and arguably longer lasting. For high schoolers in 2020 and 2021, both the grounding rituals of daily life as students and rites of passage like homecoming and prom disappeared, leaving isolation and anxiety. Mental health challenges spiked nationwide, and young people felt Covid’s effects on their psychological health far more keenly than any other older age group. Even before Covid hit, young adults in Louisiana and New Orleans bore a disproportionate mental health burden. About 17 percent of young women in Louisiana high schools attempted suicide in 2019, compared to 13 percent of young men. For both genders, the suicide attempt rate is notably above the national rates of 11 percent of young women and 7 percent of young men in high school.5 In 2021, 29 percent of Louisianans ages 18–24 had been told by a medical professional that they had a form of depression.6 This is likely an underestimate of the true rate of depression in young adults, given the difficulty of accessing mental health resources.

Youth with disabilities that are typically addressed in school as well as those who depend on school for basic necessities like meals saw these vital lifelines severed. For many young people already at risk of dropping out, remote learning broke the bonds—relationships with caring adults, in-person friendships, enjoyable clubs or sports—that had kept them connected. The highest costs were borne by the least-advantaged students, who were less likely to have computers, broadband access, quiet places to study, and adults who could help them with schoolwork. These students were also more likely to need to contribute to their households by working or—particularly for girls and young women—caring for siblings or elderly relatives and taking on domestic tasks. Young New Orleanians who were low-income, Black, or Latino were disproportionately likely to have lost a loved one to Covid-19; Louisiana is 33 percent Black, but by October 2020, Black people accounted for 50 percent of Covid-19 deaths in the state.7

Young New Orleanians who were low-income, Black, or Latino were disproportionately likely to have lost a loved one to Covid-19.

College enrollment in 2020 dropped sharply, particularly in two-year community colleges, which are the most likely to admit low-income and nonwhite students.8
In Louisiana, enrollment in the state’s community and technical colleges fell by an average of 12 percent in the fall of 2020. Prior to Covid-19, a large gap already existed between poor and nonpoor young people in terms of the rate of high school graduates who go directly from high school to college, and that gap increased due to Covid. Nationally, the enrollment gap between high-poverty and low-poverty high schools widened from 22 percentage points in 2019 to 28 percentage points in 2020.

Recent research suggests that Covid-19 could continue to fuel youth disconnection in years to come. Nationwide testing data reveal a disturbing pattern: low-income, Black, and Latino students disproportionately remain behind where they would have been were it not for the pandemic. Middle school students have struggled the most, which is particularly worrisome given that difficulties with core academic classes during middle school represent a risk factor for dropping out of high school. The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that 9-year-olds’ test scores declined five points in reading and nine points in math, the largest drop in three decades; that students who were already struggling saw the greatest declines; and that the Black-white test score gap grew from 25 points in 2020 to 33 points in 2022. Without a strong foundation in reading by age 9, subsequent years become increasingly difficult as classroom instruction shifts from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.”
YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN GREATER NEW ORLEANS

This report provides the latest youth disconnection rate for the New Orleans metro area using 2016–2020 data, unless noted otherwise. Using five years’ worth of data rather than data just from one year, 2020, allows us to present youth disconnection estimates for young women and men from different racial and ethnic groups as well as for different neighborhoods. In addition, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 severely disrupted the federal statistical collection and curation processes, resulting in lower American Community Survey response rates not only from the very groups most likely to be out of school and work, such as low-income, Black, and Latino households, but also...

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**BOX 2 What Is the Source of the Data and Who Is Included?**

Measure of America’s data come from the [American Community Survey (ACS)](https://www.census.gov/acs). The survey’s main advantage over other sources is that its sample size is extremely large, making it possible to calculate youth disconnection rates nationally and by state, as well as for counties, metro areas, and even smaller geographic areas. The ACS also allows for disaggregation by race and ethnicity and by gender for geographies with sufficiently large populations.

### AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (ACS) DEFINITION

| IN SCHOOL | Part-time or full-time students who have attended school or college in the past three months. |
| WORKING | Those who had any full- or part-time work in the previous week. |
| NOT WORKING | Unemployed in previous week or not in labor force and not looking for a job. |
| LIVING IN “GROUP QUARTERS” | People in non-household living arrangements such as correctional facilities, residential health facilities, dorms, etc. If enrolled in educational programs, they are considered connected. |
| MEMBERS OF ARMED FORCES (Group Quarters) | Counted as employed and thus as connected. |
| HOMELESS (Group Quarters) | Surveyed but likely to be undercounted; surveying the homeless is difficult. |
during the initial months of the pandemic, when the economy shed literally millions of jobs and greater New Orleans was hit particularly hard. The five-year estimates thus allow us to present data that are both more granular and more reliable.

The New Orleans metro area, which we also refer to as greater New Orleans, includes eight parishes: Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. James, St. John the Baptist, and St. Tammany. (The City of New Orleans and Orleans Parish are one and the same; see TABLE 14 for data on Orleans Parish.)

The youth disconnection rate in greater New Orleans is 15.2 percent, or 20,100 young people. The New Orleans metro area has a lower disconnection rate than Louisiana as a whole, which has the third-highest disconnection rate among US states and in 2020 has a disconnection rate of 16.7 percent (see BOX 6). Among the country’s 100 most populous metro areas, New Orleans ranks eighty-first in youth disconnection in 2020; 19 metropolitan areas have higher youth disconnection rates.\textsuperscript{14}
**BOX 3 What Are the Limitations of the Data?**

Collecting and presenting data using traditional statistical methods has come under criticism of late. Some argue that statistical methods make certain groups and their concerns invisible to policymakers, which perpetuates their marginalization; this critique is well founded. In this report, for instance, we are not able to provide youth disconnection rates for Asian or Native American young people in New Orleans because their populations fall below the number required for reliable calculations, we are not able to provide rates for LGBTQ young people because survey respondents don’t have a chance to identify themselves this way on Census Bureau surveys, and we can’t provide rates for nonbinary people because male and female are the only categories offered. Others argue that this kind of exercise is an example of data colonialism, which is when data are taken from a group for research or other purposes, and then that group does not have access to or control over the results; a good example of this is medical researchers traveling to the site of an epidemic outbreak, taking samples from people, and then inventing and patenting a medicine that results from research done on those samples or people, without them benefiting. Measure of America uses publicly available data and makes the results of our research freely available to all. In addition, we convene a diverse group of local advisors to guide us for each and every place-based report we publish to ensure that community members themselves are involved in the process. Still others argue that presenting data on inequality harms disadvantaged groups by reinforcing negative stereotypes. We ourselves find the disparities our research reveals to be profoundly unjust and distressing; this injustice is what motivates us to work in this area.

Given the risk that presenting these data has the potential to cause pain, what’s the point? Simply put, we believe that understanding today’s reality is necessary to create a better tomorrow. Data on specific groups of young people help stakeholders, among them policymakers, philanthropists, community leaders, and opportunity youth themselves, understand the nature and scope of challenges, tailor programs to specific needs, target resources, and track change over time. Further, local indicators and highly visible rankings can help create local accountability and support collective impact efforts. These data points are also essential to determining the degree to which efforts are achieving their goals: young people staying in school, getting and retaining jobs, enjoying physical and mental health, participating in their communities, and laying the groundwork for a flourishing, freely chosen adulthood. Nevertheless, data cannot paint the full picture of the range of struggles and opportunities of any given community. That is why Measure of America takes a both/and approach, both using large datasets and seeking to fill in the gaps with locally collected data, qualitative research, and storytelling.
Youth Disconnection over Time in Greater New Orleans

Measure of America has been tracking youth disconnection in the New Orleans metro area since 2013. Across the nation, a steady increase in youth employment in the years following the Great Recession caused a reduction in youth disconnection rates. This same phenomenon occurred in New Orleans. Promisingly, the gap between Black and white disconnection rates has significantly narrowed over time. In 2013, the Black disconnection rate was 27.5 percent, and the white rate was 10.5 percent (a gap of 17.0 percentage points). In recent years, that gap is closer to 10 percentage points.

It is deeply concerning that the youth disconnection rate for girls and young women in New Orleans has been increasing since 2016. While the gap between disconnection rates for young women and young men in New Orleans has narrowed, this is attributable to both improved connection of young men and worsened disconnection for young women.

Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.
*The 2019 youth disconnection data for racial and ethnic groups were less reliable. Additionally, Measure of America did not conduct a national study using 2014 data.
Source: Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.
On the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic, the share of teens and young adults disconnected from both work and school in the United States was lower than it had been in over a decade, 10.7 percent. Between 2010 and 2019, the youth disconnection rate fell 27 percent, driven largely by the steady increase in youth employment in the years following the Great Recession. The 2020 national youth disconnection rate is 12.6 percent, or 4,830,700 disconnected youth—a Covid-fueled upward spike that reversed a decade-long decline in the share of the country’s young people neither working nor in school.

Youth Disconnection by Gender and by Race and Ethnicity

Girls and young women in greater New Orleans are less likely to be disconnected than boys and young men, 13.3 percent versus 17.3 percent. The gender gap varies by race and ethnicity, however, with Latina and Black young women having the second- and third-highest rates, after Black men.

**Black** teens and young adults have the highest disconnection rate, 20.1 percent, or 10,800 young people. Black young people have the largest gender gap in the youth disconnection rate of any racial or ethnic group—15.1 percent for Black girls and young women, compared to 25.3 percent for their male counterparts. Forty-one percent of Black young people living with a disability are disconnected, compared to 30 percent of all disabled New Orleans youth and 23 percent of disabled white youth. Labor market and institutional discrimination against Black young people, particularly boys and young men, drives their high rate of disconnection.15

The **Latino** youth disconnection rate stands at 15.6 percent, or 1,900 young people. Latina girls and young women are more likely than their male counterparts to be disconnected and have the second-highest rate of any race/gender combination.

### FIGURE 7 YOUTH DISCONNECTION BY RACE AND ETHNICITY AND BY GENDER (%)
YOUTH DISCONNECTION BY GENDER AND BY RACE AND ETHNICITY

The US Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS), the source of some of the data for our youth disconnection research, does not currently ask questions about either sexual orientation or gender identity. Male and female are the only gender options available on the ACS, leaving no option for those who identify as nonbinary. For these reasons, Measure of America cannot provide youth disconnection rates for LGBTQ young people. Such data would be very useful for those working to understand and address youth disconnection, as research suggests that LGBTQ youth disproportionately experience harassment and discrimination in schools and workplaces and are more likely than straight, cisgender young people to experience mental health challenges. In addition, in this report we refer to girls and women, boys and men; this is because we are talking about the data the government provides, which, as noted above, sort people into only two categories, male and female. Starting in July 2021, the Census has included questions on sexual orientation and gender identity on its Household Pulse Survey. Measure of America has asked the Census to extend these questions to the ACS and its Decennial Census. This would greatly enhance youth disconnection research.

The disconnection rate for white teens and young adults is 11.0 percent, or 6,500 people. White boys and young men are more likely than their female counterparts to be disconnected, 11.3 percent compared to 10.7 percent.

Nationally, Asian teens and young adults have the lowest disconnection rate, and Native American young people have the highest rate. Our data suggest that this is also the case in greater New Orleans. But because the Asian and Native American youth populations in this region are relatively small—under 4,000 for Asian youth and only a few hundred for Native American youth—we cannot say with complete confidence that this is the case. Our calculations suggest that approximately 9 percent of Asian youth and 27 percent of Native American youth are disconnected, but both estimates have an unacceptably high margin of error and thus neither is reliable. We include these figures here only to suggest that it is likely that Asian young people have the lowest and Native American young people the highest disconnection rate in greater New Orleans, following the trend of the country as a whole as well as in other localities for which we were able to calculate reliable estimates.
Characteristics of Connected and Disconnected Youth in Greater New Orleans

Connected and disconnected young people living in greater New Orleans differ in many ways that go beyond their current employment and educational status.

**Poverty**
One in three disconnected young people—33 percent—live below the poverty line, compared to 19 percent of connected youth.

**Disability**
Disconnected youth in greater New Orleans are more than twice as likely to have one or more disabilities than connected youth—16.6 percent as compared to 7.0 percent.

**Motherhood and marriage**
Disconnected young women in greater New Orleans are more than three times as likely to be mothers as connected young women—23 percent of disconnected young women are mothers living with their own child or children, compared to 7 percent of connected young women. Disconnected girls and young women are also more likely to be married than their connected counterparts, 5.9 percent compared to 3.2 percent, respectively.

**Institutionalization**
Disconnected youth are nearly forty times as likely as their connected peers to be living in institutionalized group quarters such as prisons, jails, juvenile detention centers, or residential health facilities: 7.9 percent compared to just 0.2 percent. Black young
people who are disconnected are disproportionately likely to be living in an institution of some kind; 11.7 percent do.

Educational degree attainment

About one in four disconnected young people have less than a high school diploma (24.4 percent), 51 percent have graduated high school, 19 percent have attended some college classes but don’t have a college degree, and 4.7 percent have a college degree. It may seem confusing that 36.2 percent of connected youth have less than a high school diploma, half again as high as the share of disconnected young people. This is because the vast majority of connected youth under age 18 are still enrolled in high school and will remain so until they graduate. Similarly, more than twice as many disconnected as connected young people have completed high school as their highest degree; this is because more connected youth have continued their educations beyond high school, and so show up in the “some college,” “associate degree,” or “bachelor’s degree” categories (see FIGURE 9).

Age

Young people 20 to 24 years old are more likely than teenagers 16 to 19 years old to be disconnected. The rate for 16- to 19-year-olds is 8.6 percent, and the rate for 20- to 24-year-olds is 20.4 percent. In Louisiana, young people must attend high school until they either graduate or turn 18, a policy that keeps 16- and 17-year-olds connected to school and contributes to a lower disconnection rate for this age group than for people in their early twenties.

Health insurance

Disconnected youth are nearly three times as likely to be uninsured as connected youth, 24.5 percent compared to 8.5 percent. People without health insurance often fail to receive the health care they need.

Forty-five percent of disconnected youth receive Medicaid, compared to 27 percent of connected youth.
Nativity

Young New Orleanians who were born in the United States and those who were born in other countries have similar disconnection rates; 15.9 percent of foreign-born youth and 15.2 percent of US-born youth are disconnected.

English proficiency

Disconnected young people are more likely than connected young people to speak English “less than very well,” 5 percent as compared to 3 percent. That said, very few young people in either group in greater New Orleans report limited English proficiency.
FIGURE 10  CHARACTERISTICS OF CONNECTED AND DISCONNECTED YOUTH IN NEW ORLEANS

YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN GREATER NEW ORLEANS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Connected</th>
<th>Disconnected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FEMALE</strong></td>
<td>65,900</td>
<td>8,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MALE</strong></td>
<td>66,200</td>
<td>11,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>POVERTY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.7% live in a poor household</td>
<td>20.7% live in a poor household</td>
<td>30.5% live in a poor household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EDUCATION</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2% have an associate degree or higher</td>
<td>13.9% have an associate degree or higher</td>
<td>3.1% have an associate degree or higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>YOUNG MOTHERHOOD</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.0% women with children</td>
<td>6.9% women with children</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DISABILITY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.4% with a disability</td>
<td>6.3% with a disability</td>
<td>19.9% with a disability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Youth Disconnection by Place

NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTERS
To present disconnection rates by neighborhood cluster, Measure of America uses geographic units called public use microdata areas (PUMAs). The Census Bureau defines the boundaries of PUMAs; they nest within states, comprise census tracts and counties, are almost always geographically contiguous, contain at least 100,000 people, and together cover the entirety of the United States. In urban areas, counties comprise one or more PUMAs; in rural areas, PUMAs generally comprise several contiguous counties. Greater New Orleans comprises ten PUMAs.

The highest youth disconnection rate, 22.1 percent, is found in the central area of the City of New Orleans, home to communities such as Mid-City, Leonidas, Broadmoor, and the Seventh Ward. The lowest youth
YOUTH DISCONNECTION BY PLACE

**TABLE 12 YOUTH DISCONNECTION BY NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTER**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Youth Disconnection (%)</th>
<th>Youth Disconnection (#)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>New Orleans City (South)</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jefferson Parish (Central)</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Jefferson Parish (North)</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>St. Tammany Parish (Southeast)</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>1,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>St. Bernard, Jefferson (South) &amp; Plaquemines Parishes</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>2,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>St. Tammany Parish (Northwest)</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>2,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Jefferson Parish (West Bank)</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>2,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>New Orleans City (Northeast)</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>2,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>River Parishes</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>2,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>New Orleans City (Central)</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>2,700</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


YOUTH DISCONNECTION By Place

Disconnection rate is also in the City of New Orleans, a southern, mostly riverside part of the city that includes the neighborhoods of Aurora Gardens and Algiers as well as Tulane University.

PARISHES

Among the eight parishes that make up the New Orleans metro area, St. Tammany Parish has the lowest youth disconnection rate, 13.4 percent, and Plaquemines Parish has the highest youth disconnection rate, 22.4 percent.
TABLE 14 YOUTH DISCONNECTION BY PARISH

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Youth Disconnection (%)</th>
<th>Youth Disconnection (###)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>St. Tammany</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>3,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jefferson</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>5,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>St. John the Baptist</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Orleans</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>6,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>St. Bernard</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>St. Charles</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>1,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>St. James</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Plaquemines</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

About a decade ago, the White House Council for Community Solutions put the issues of out-of-school, out-of-work young people in the national spotlight. Its 2012 report, Community Solutions for Opportunity Youth, which coined the term “opportunity youth,” laid out an ambitious agenda for creating robust pathways to rewarding adulthoods for disadvantaged young people. Although the report itself did not prioritize any particular group in its recommendations—it was silent on gender, and didn’t even contain the words “girls,” “boys,” “women,” or “men”—the reaction to the report was a different story. My Brother’s Keeper, the Executives’ Alliance for Boys and Young Men of Color, and dozens of initiatives supported by foundations and community-based organizations large and small across the country sprang up in response, focusing their attention almost entirely on the needs of boys and young men of color.

Programs that address the needs of boys and men of color were, and continue to be, both necessary and overdue. Young men of color, especially young Black men, disproportionately face harsh discipline in schools and aggressive policing in their communities; are vastly overrepresented in juvenile detention centers, jails, and prisons; face job discrimination and high rates of unemployment; and suffer America’s highest homicide rates. At that time, at the national level, Black boys and young men had the highest rates of youth disconnection (Native American men do now).

The puzzling thing, however, was the comparative lack of attention to the needs of disconnected girls and young women, which persists to this day. At the time of the report’s publication in 2012, the female disconnection rate had long been higher for girls and young women than for boys and young men and had only recently switched, and the rates for Asian and Latina young women were, at that time, higher than the rates for their male counterparts (this is still true in many places, including New Orleans). Although there was some outcry over the anemic response to girls’ and women’s needs—and, in response, in 2014, the White House established a task force looking at the needs and priorities of girls and young women of color—commensurate foundation, community organization, and government focus and investment never materialized.

Though their situation is not as dire as that of their brothers in some important respects, such as homicide and incarceration, Black, Latina, and Native American young women face their own outsized challenges.
challenges. Among them are early motherhood and single parenthood; gender norms and stereotypes that result in unequal domestic responsibilities in the home, fewer academic and vocational routes to well-paying jobs, concentration in low-paying occupation fields, and wage discrimination, all of which make employment less rewarding; disproportionate experience of violence, including sexual violence and trafficking; and trauma. In addition, girls of color are far more likely than white girls to experience severe school discipline, and women of color are more likely to be incarcerated than white women.

**Early motherhood.** A notable exception to the lack of tailored programs for girls and young women in the opportunity youth space are programs that seek to reduce teen pregnancy, support pregnant girls and young women, and address the needs of young mothers and their small children. The best of these understand the needs and aspirations of young mothers, treating them as human beings with inherent rights and value, supporting their agency, and walking with them along the road to flourishing, freely chosen adulthoods. Unfortunately, some programs that target this population are rooted in sexist stereotypes about the proper role of women (mothers and caretakers); others take an instrumentalist approach to young mothers, seeing them chiefly as vehicles to improve the outcomes of their young children; and still others spring from the desire to control young women’s sexuality, particularly that of young women of color.

Motherhood can be among life’s most joyous and rewarding experiences. It is also a common one; by their early forties, 86 percent of women have at least one child. What varies among different groups of women is timing. Young women who have a wide range of desirable options tend to delay motherhood to focus on other goals, such as developing a strong relationship with their partner, continuing their educations, getting some years of work experience under their belts, or enjoying their young adulthoods unfettered by the demands of parenthood. For young women without a range of appealing options, motherhood can provide an attainable route to adulthood and a source of happiness and fulfillment they might not be able to find elsewhere.

Like mothers of every age, young mothers want the best for their children and often see parenting as the best, most meaningful, and most joyous part of their lives. Research finds that many young mothers credit their commitment to their children as motivating them to make positive changes, such as continuing their education. But motherhood, which is demanding for anyone, can be particularly challenging for young mothers.
Pregnancy alone can put young women's health at risk; the maternal mortality rate in Louisiana is more than three times the national average,²² and Black mothers are four times as likely to die due to pregnancy-related causes as white mothers in the state.²³ Access to reproductive health care for the state’s youth is poor, as evidenced by the high rate of sexually transmitted infections. Louisiana ranks first in the nation in adolescent syphilis diagnoses, second in gonorrhea and chlamydia diagnoses, and third in HIV diagnoses.²⁴ Louisiana has a higher share of unintended pregnancies than the country as a whole, 40 percent versus 30 percent;²⁵ unplanned pregnancies are associated with delays in prenatal care.

Compared to mothers in their 20s, teen mothers are more likely to experience domestic violence, poor birth outcomes, and postpartum depression. They also have higher rates of high school dropout, higher rates of poverty, and lower incomes and levels of educational attainment. Children born to teenage mothers perform less well in school, are less likely to complete high school, and are more likely to be incarcerated, become teen parents themselves, be unemployed, and have health problems than children born to older mothers. Once a young woman has a baby, some form of childcare is necessary for her to continue her education or get a job; in Louisiana, childcare for an infant costs about $7,500 per year, on par with college tuition in the state.²⁶ Married parents at the poverty line spend nearly half their incomes on childcare costs, and single parents much more.

Two things are essential in developing programs that address the needs of young mothers. First, we must honor and respect the choices of young mothers and support them to have healthy pregnancies, safe births, and opportunities to continue their own development while being the parents they want to be to their much-loved children. Making mothers’ lives better is important, and pathologizing young motherhood is counterproductive and wrong. Second, we must do more to ensure that motherhood is not a young woman’s only or easiest-to-imagine route to adulthood and fulfillment. That requires offering young women appealing career and educational opportunities—appealing enough to delay motherhood for—alongside reliable, affordable birth control and the full range of reproductive health care, including abortion. In August 2022, abortion became illegal in Louisiana, robbing girls and young women of their basic human right to bodily autonomy. The ability to decide if and when to have children is fundamental to a freely chosen life, and the state’s young women now lack that ability. This new burden will fall heaviest on girls and young women living in poverty, who can’t easily afford to travel to another state.
Domestic responsibilities. Around the world, girls tend to take on more household tasks than boys—this includes cooking, cleaning, and caretaking. This gender division of labor grows more pronounced as children get older, with girls taking on larger shares of housework and childcare as they enter their teens, laying the groundwork for unequal domestic responsibilities in adulthood and, in some cases, reducing the time available to girls for education and employment. When girls and young women shoulder more of the cleaning, cooking, and caretaking work, what they and their brothers learn is that this kind of work is for women, a socialized belief that is also reflected in the wider economy. American girls ages 6 to 17 spend more time doing housework than they do playing, while boys spend twice as much time playing as they do on housework.

When children in the United States are paid an allowance for doing chores, boys not only are paid about double, $7 for girls per week and $14 for boys—the gender pay gap starts early—but they are also paid for basic hygiene like taking showers and brushing their teeth; girls are more likely to be paid for cleaning. Girls ages 15 to 17 spend nearly half again as much time on housework than boys, while boys get an extra hour per day of leisure. While pre-pandemic research found that the gender gap in household chores between boys and girls was narrowing somewhat, early evidence suggests that Covid-19 knocked that trend off course. During the pandemic, the domestic and caretaking burdens grew both heavier and more lopsided; a UK study found that girls and young women ages 14 to 24 had taken on the majority of household tasks during the pandemic, leaving them less time for school.

Families—especially low-income families who cannot afford to outsource domestic work—often need their children’s help in running their households, and young people can gain valuable skills and a sense of accomplishment and belonging by contributing to their families’ well-being. When girls and young women shoulder more of the cleaning, cooking, and caretaking work, however, what they and their brothers learn is that this kind of work is for women, a socialized belief that is also reflected in the wider economy. It also means that girls have less time for school and extracurricular activities and may receive less encouragement to pursue their educations or seek paying jobs. Given that girls and young women from low-income families do more housework not just than boys but also than girls from high-income families, young women living in poverty or near-poverty are particularly affected.

Occupational segregation. Some occupations are made up almost entirely of women of color. These careers, among them childcare providers, home health aides who assist the elderly, health aides in
rehabilitation facilities, housekeepers, cleaners, maids, and nursing assistants, are among America’s lowest-paying occupations. Not coincidentally, the caring, cleaning, and cooking tasks that represent the lion’s share of this type of work mirror the gendered household division of labor described above. These careers are not low-paying because they are not essential—to the contrary, those who care for the most vulnerable among us are performing society’s most valuable work—nor because workers in these fields are “unskilled” or lack educational credentials. They are low-paying because the workers are mostly women, doing what society still thinks of as “women’s work.”

Wage inequality. Wage discrimination against women is widespread in the United States and in New Orleans. It isn’t limited to any one industry sector, educational qualification, or income level. While the gender pay gap has narrowed over time, it persists at the national, local, and individual level. Female-dominated fields pay less than male-dominated fields that require equivalent skill and educational levels; mothers are less likely to be hired and promoted (in contrast to fathers); and even when men and women work the same job (or, as recent research shows, have the same exact degree from the same exact school), women earn less.

In Greater New Orleans, the median salary for all women over 24 years of age is $35,200, 71 percent of what the median man earns, $49,500. The gulf is wider for women without a high school diploma, who earn $19,000 annually—60 percent of what men without a high school diploma earn ($31,700). This discrimination also weighs heavily on the next generation of New Orleanians. Thirty-six percent of all children in Greater New Orleans live with a single mother (or grandmother); households headed by a single woman have a median income of $26,000, compared to households headed by a single man ($50,100) or those headed by a married couple ($104,100). Thirty-two percent of single women with children own their homes, compared to 52 percent of single men with children.

Data on occupation earnings can illustrate the low value society places on what is viewed as “women’s work.” In the New Orleans metro area, childcare providers (nannies, daycare workers) are paid a median of $10.20 per hour—far less than landscaping and groundskeeping workers, who earn a median of $14.40 per hour. Preschool teachers earn $14.80 per hour, compared to pest-control workers, who are paid $18.10 per hour. That translates to an annual premium of $6,900 for pest-control workers and $8,600 for landscapers. Around 95 percent
of pest-control workers and landscaping workers nationwide are men. Conversely, about 95 percent of preschool teachers and childcare workers are women.36

**Gender-based violence.** Anyone can be a victim of gender-based violence, including boys and men. Transgender women and men are particularly at risk; they are four times as likely to experience violence, including rape, sexual assault, and aggravated assault, as cisgender individuals.37 In terms of absolute numbers, however, girls and women account for the vast majority of those who experience gender-based violence, and those in the 16- to 24-year-old age bracket are at the highest risk. Experiencing violence as a teen or young adult is traumatic when it occurs and has lasting effects throughout people’s lives, particularly for women. A study that followed women and men who had been victims of violence during the transition to adulthood, interviewing them nine, nineteen, and twenty-six years after their exposure to violence, found that women who had been exposed to violence were more likely to experience a heavy illness burden and bad self-reported health as adults than women who had not been exposed to violence; this long-term effect was not found in men.38

Louisiana ranks fifth in the nation for the rate of women killed by men, and national statistics show that Black women are nearly three times as likely to be killed by men as white women. Nine in ten murdered women were killed by their spouse, an intimate partner, or a family member, usually with a gun and typically during the course of an argument.39

Murder is the most extreme manifestation of violence against girls and women, but violence and the threat of violence are present in numerous forms in all the spaces where girls and women exist, from homes to schools to workplaces to streets and now into cyberspace. For girls, sexual harassment continues to be part and parcel of life in middle and high school; 56 percent of girls in grades 7 to 12 report experiencing harassment, including physical groping and threats of rape.40 Experiencing or witnessing sexual harassment in school creates a hostile environment, erodes girls’ sense of safety and belonging, and normalizes objectification and coercion. Girls are more likely than boys to report that sexual harassment made it difficult to sleep, made them not want to go to school, and caused them to alter their route to school. These effects contribute to lost productivity and increased absenteeism,41 a risk factor for school dropout.

Women age 24 and younger are the most likely of all groups to
experience rape, and women ages 20 to 24 face the highest rates of nonfatal intimate partner violence. The young women most likely to be out of school and work, particularly low-income women and Black women, are disproportionately victims of domestic violence and rape. Research has found that young people who left school before graduating tended to experience their home, neighborhood, or school as toxic, and sexual harassment and violence contribute to such toxicity, especially for girls and young women.42

Louisiana’s legislature has mandated tracking data on human trafficking within the state since 2015 and in 2021 created the Governor’s Office of Human Trafficking Prevention to coordinate antitrafficking efforts. This office’s June 2022 report states that 932 survivors of human trafficking received assistance from Louisiana service providers in 2021. The majority of these survivors (714 of the 932) were girls and women who had been trafficked for sex; 472 were girls age 17 and younger.43 These numbers represent only the people who were able to reach service providers; the true extent of trafficking crimes in Louisiana is far greater than what is captured in these data.

School discipline and incarceration. Boys and young men of color are more likely than other groups of young people to experience harsh discipline in schools, and ending the school-to-prison pipeline has justifiably captured the attention of activists and policymakers. While girls and young women of color are less likely than their male counterparts to experience harsh discipline and incarceration, they are far more likely to than white girls. In the 2017–2018 school year, Black girls were four times as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension or to be expelled from school as white girls. They were also more than three times as likely to be arrested at school, more than twice as likely to be restrained, and more than five times as likely to be transferred to another school for disciplinary reasons.44 Harsh discipline is associated with isolation and disengagement from school, academic difficulties, stress, and contact with the juvenile justice system, all of which increase the likelihood of disconnection.45

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In the 2017–2018 school year, Black girls were four times as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension or to be expelled from school as white girls.
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
CONCLUSIONS

About These Recommendations

The New Orleans Youth Master Plan is a ten-year plan designed to improve the lives of children and youth in New Orleans; it presents a “roadmap for breaking cycles of disinvestment and disrupting the false narratives that reinforce them,” and envisions a New Orleans “where the full self-expression, leadership, creativity, and culture of all children and youth comes together to create a true community where everyone succeeds.” Required reading for anyone who cares about New Orleans’ young people, it outlines thirty solutions to implement over the next decade. The recommendations below draw on this important document as well as the ideas and experiences of our New Orleans advisory committee (whose members are listed on PAGE 2) and social science research on youth disconnection.46

Young people in greater New Orleans are working to rebuild their lives and looking toward the future after the profound disruptions of Covid-19. In this recovery period, several interventions are particularly important.

Address learning loss at all levels.

On average, students lost ground academically during 2020 and 2021, the years when the pandemic was at its height. Those who were already struggling saw the greatest declines, and the test-score gap between Black and white students grew. Students with disabilities were cut off from vital supports during the pandemic, and helping them get back on track is critical. Urgent steps are required to prevent the inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic from affecting the academic trajectories of thousands of children in greater New Orleans. High-quality tutoring and more instructional time are important strategies, as are more opportunities for professional development for teachers and concrete steps to address funding inequalities between schools. Evidence shows that tutoring is most effective when tutors are trained educators (including retired teachers and education students), when tutoring takes place during the school day at least three times per week, and when tutoring sessions are aligned with the core curriculum.47 The national teacher shortage could both exacerbate learning loss and limit the availability of tutors, however. The American Rescue Plan has many

Urgent steps are required to prevent the inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic from affecting the academic trajectories of thousands of children in greater New Orleans.
provisions to address learning loss, outlined in the US Department of Education’s report Strategies for Using American Rescue Plan Funding to Address the Impact of Lost Instructional Time.48

Address the mental health challenges many young people face.

The fear, loss, uncertainty, and isolation Covid-19 engendered among people of all ages hit young people with particular force. Managing the demands of high school and college and navigating important transitions, such as moving from middle to high school, high school to postsecondary education, and school to work, can be difficult for anyone, but a young person experiencing anxiety or depression, recovering from a traumatic experience, or grieving a loved one is particularly likely to struggle. The New Orleans Youth Master Plan calls for all people engaged in youth-serving programs to receive training on how to best support young people experiencing mental health challenges. These service providers may also be struggling in the aftermath of Covid-19 and need and deserve support as well. Louisiana, like the country as a whole, suffers a shortage of mental health care providers, which requires short-term strategies like expanding access to support groups alongside a long-term strategy for expanding the mental health care labor force.

Don’t let young people who fell through the cracks over the last two years lose their chance at an education.

Covid-19 disrupted the educational trajectories of thousands of young people in greater New Orleans. Teens and young adults who did everything right and were enrolled in, poised to begin, or on track to apply to degree, certificate, or training programs found the rug pulled out from under them. Many of these young people—especially first-generation and low-income students—are finding themselves unable to reconstruct and resume their plans. Postsecondary educational institutions should be as creative and flexible as possible with a view to bringing students back, allowing previously accepted students another chance to start, adjusting entrance requirements to account for two lost Covid years, and strengthening bridges from high school to postsecondary education for vulnerable youth. Greater flexibility and expanded support will require additional funding, and legislators should prioritize increased investment in community colleges and universities. High schools must cultivate welcoming environments and develop holistic approaches that respond not just to learning loss but also to the trauma, isolation, and disengagement so many young people
experienced during Covid. Fostering a sense of belonging and focusing on social-emotional learning as well as academic skills is critical. A generation of young people is at risk of being permanently scarred by lost educational opportunities: this is a tragedy we must work to avert.

**Direct resources to areas with the highest rates of youth disconnection.**

The young people struggling and off track prior to the pandemic are having the hardest time reconnecting to jobs and schools. These young people and their communities should receive the lion’s share of attention and resources available to address this pressing issue. These hardest-hit youth tend to live in low-income communities of color, particularly Black communities. Pockets of high youth disconnection did not appear out of nowhere with the onset of the pandemic; they are the product of years of neglect and underinvestment.

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Covid-19 swelled the ranks of out-of-school, out-of-work young people and exacerbated the challenges facing them, but it did not create these challenges; the greater New Orleans youth disconnection rate in 2019, prior to Covid-19, was 14.5 percent, with large racial and ethnic disparities. Ensuring that all young people are ready to flourish in school, remain engaged in their educations during middle and high school, successfully navigate the journey from high school to postsecondary career and technical education or college, and transition to thriving adulthoods depends on them having, in the words of the New Orleans Youth Master Plan, “lives filled with positive experiences and healthy relationships.” For that to happen, the following areas are key.

**Help young children and their families thrive.**

Children are born into families, so ensuring that parents are supported to be the moms and dads they want to be is critical for child well-being. Helping young parents, parents living in poverty, parents who are themselves opportunity youth or former foster youth, and parents under stress to ensure that their children get a good start is key. Grandparents, aunts, and others who step in to care for their young family members also require our support. Proven approaches like home-visiting programs, parent support groups, and educational programs on early childhood brain development should be expanded. Just as parents on
airplanes are instructed to put their own oxygen masks on first before helping a child, so, too, do parents need support for their own wellness and mental health if their children are to flourish. Caregivers need access to mental health care services as well as support to understand how to foster wellness in their own lives and those of their families. And families with infants and toddlers need access to safe, enriching, affordable early care, something in short supply in New Orleans. In addition, parents, especially single parents, need career pathways that allow them to achieve economic mobility while also caring for their children. Supports for working adult parents, currently few and far between, can interrupt cycles of generational poverty.

**Provide access to free or affordable high-quality preschool education.**
The expert consensus is that quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds, particularly for at-risk children, is a valuable, cost-effective intervention. It is not learning to count or recite the alphabet that makes the difference. The social and emotional skills taught in these early years—learning to delay gratification while you wait your turn, for instance, or becoming used to asking an adult for help—are critical ingredients for success throughout life. High-quality preschool taught by loving, skilled teachers creates a joyous, safe place for young children to learn about the world, a valuable end in itself. Attending a high-quality preschool is also associated with fewer behavioral problems, higher high school graduation rates, less crime, fewer teen births, and higher wages and rates of homeownership.

**Invest in high-quality K–12 schooling.**
Children growing up in disadvantaged circumstances need schools with the expertise and resources to provide high-quality academic instruction; a safe, healthy, respectful, and nonpunitive environment; and support, both during and out of normal school hours, for at-risk children and children exhibiting dropout warning signs. Some New Orleans schools already exceed standards in all of these areas, but others, particularly those in high-disconnection communities, come up woefully short. Exclusionary and other forms of harsh discipline fall hardest on Black students, an injustice that needs to change.

**Support diverse pathways to meaningful careers.**
Measures like apprenticeship and mentoring programs, specialized high schools, and bridge-year programs can help young people successfully
navigate the school-to-work transition by providing support, relevant instruction, and a clear end goal. Countries with low disconnection rates like Germany, the Netherlands, and the Nordics create youth-friendly economies with multiple well-structured pathways leading from school to career. Workforce development systems in these countries rely on apprenticeship programs (often funded at least in part by industry), worker training programs, and specialized high schools to help people develop the skills they need for long-term, sustainable careers, not just in manufacturing and skilled trades but also in sectors like tourism and renewable energy. Wraparound supports, individualized coaching, and transportation can help marginalized young people thrive in such programs.

**Recognize that one size does not fit all.**

Data in this report show that disconnected young people share many challenges but also differ in important ways. School enrollment for the population ages 3 to 24 declined dramatically in 2020—the largest drop since records began in 1964—a shift that will likely reverberate well into the future. Efforts to reconnect youth need to take this broad backdrop into account, but it is important to keep in mind that different young people may face different obstacles. Tailoring interventions to the specific needs of communities and individuals experiencing disconnection should be front of mind for policymakers, philanthropists, advocates, and researchers.

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Finally, while boys and young men clearly face disproportionate challenges in many areas—a topic that has been recognized for over a decade and has received renewed attention of late—girls and young women, particularly low-income girls of color, deserve our attention as well. A few areas stand out.

**Ensure that young women have appealing choices.**

The days when girls and young women were far less likely than their brothers to attend college and the careers realistically open to them were mostly limited to being secretaries, nurses, and teachers are behind us. Girls outpace boys in high school graduation and in college attendance and completion. But some girls and young women, disproportionately those who are Black or Latina and living in low-income communities, have not benefited from the general trend of expanding choices and opportunities.

Some girls and young women, disproportionately those who are Black or Latina and living in low-income communities, have not benefited from the general trend of expanding choices and opportunities.
of expanding choices and opportunities. To ensure that motherhood is not one of the only attainable routes to adulthood and sources of joy, girls and young women from disadvantaged communities need exposure to a range of career options, support for their dreams and aspirations, contact with women from their own communities who have rewarding careers, and access to both college and technical training for well-paying, often male-dominated fields like computer science, green construction, and renewable energy. Technical training and apprenticeship programs in such fields in New Orleans often have difficulties recruiting young women, at least in part because of what people believe about “women’s work” and “men’s work” as well as from an understandable concern that the culture of such fields is not welcoming to women. Finally, to chart the course of their own lives, young women need the same rights to bodily integrity that men have long enjoyed, and exercising those rights requires access to reliable birth control and abortion services.

**Support young women who are mothers.**

Young mothers need support in three ways: first, to experience healthy pregnancies and safe births; second, to envision and realize their own dreams and ambitions; and third, to be the mothers they want to be to their much-loved children. Pregnancy-related complications are the sixth leading cause of death for women ages 16 to 24 in Louisiana, and Louisianans die from these complications at a rate nearly twice that of the United States as a whole. Access to caring, comprehensive reproductive health care, which includes prenatal care, protects the health of young women as well as transgender men and nonbinary people during and after pregnancy. Young mothers disproportionately live in poverty, and the accompanying stress and lack of material resources join forces to hinder healthy child development and erode young mothers’ health and well-being. Free or subsidized childcare, some form of basic income, and subsidized housing and transportation for vulnerable families would alleviate poverty’s negative impacts and open space for greater joy and well-being. Mental health and parenting supports are likewise vital in helping young families thrive. Young mothers can still pursue their educations, improve their skills, and build rewarding careers, as long as these paths are designed with their needs and schedules at the center. Competency-based postsecondary pathways—which allow for credentials based on concrete skills rather than hours in the classroom—can provide the flexibility that parents and other caretakers need and deserve.
Address gender norms and stereotypes around caretaking and household labor.

Although men in heterosexual relationships today on average do more caretaking, cooking, and cleaning than their fathers did, their efforts still fall far short of their partners’, even when both work outside the home. In single-mother households, which account for more than one in four households with children in greater New Orleans, women tend to carry the entire burden. And research shows that Black girls assume caretaking roles for small children and elderly family members early in life, a responsibility that affects their ability to take part in extracurricular activities, enrichment programs, and a host of services that could set them on a variety of promising pathways. This gender division of labor was exacerbated by the pandemic, when women disproportionately left their jobs or reduced their hours to care for children and the elderly, and teenage girls more often than boys stepped in to pick up the slack. The advent of flexible work is no panacea: in some cases, it has also reinforced traditional gender roles. Research has shown that working from home increases parent-child interaction, but mainly for mothers; that women are more likely to multitask housework and childcare with paid work compared to men; and that any increased childcare by work-from-home fathers is offset by an even larger increase in time spent on housework by work-from-home mothers. The unpaid labor imbalance at home is also reflected in the concentration of women in caring professions like childcare provider and home health aide as well as in the low pay and status associated with these careers. Clear policy solutions exist to ameliorate these problems. First is free or subsidized high-quality childcare, which allows women and men alike to work with the knowledge that their children are well cared for and lifts the burden from older siblings, particularly sisters. Second is mandatory paid parental leave for fathers as well as mothers. Evidence from countries with paid parental leave shows that hands-on responsibility for a newborn has lasting effects, resulting in fathers who continue to take on caretaking labor even after returning to work.

Improve pay equity and working conditions for girls and young women.

Louisiana has the second-worst gender pay gap in the nation after Utah: women’s median earnings are 63 percent of men’s, compared to 76 percent nationwide. Pay equity matters to women, but it also matters to Louisiana’s children. The gender pay gap means that a

Free or subsidized high-quality childcare allows women and men alike to work with the knowledge that their children are well cared for and lifts the burden from older siblings, particularly sisters.

Childcare is big. It’s a daily struggle for single parents.

Nessa, a New Orleans opportunity youth.
high proportion of women-led Black families live in poverty, forced to choose among necessities week-in, week-out. Part of this inequity is due to the types of jobs women and men tend to hold: for instance, female-dominated fields such as childcare and health-care support are not paid nearly as well as male-dominated fields such as construction and oil extraction. As mentioned earlier, building pathways to more technical, remunerative fields for women is crucial. Another part of the gender wage gap is attributable to the precarity of part-time, typically low-paid work: one in five women in New Orleans work part time compared to one in nine men.\(^58\) While practices that fall under the umbrella of "flexible work" are sometimes billed as inherently beneficial to women, especially mothers or those with family care responsibilities, this is not necessarily the case. The logistical, financial, and emotional burden of just-in-time scheduling—a common practice in the retail and hospitality industries, which together account for about one in five jobs nationwide—falls especially acutely on young parents and mothers with fewer educational credentials.\(^59\) Unstable scheduling makes it more difficult to arrange for childcare and transportation or get a second job, constraining the options of those without many in the first place. Workers of color, especially women of color, are exposed to the most unstable and unpredictable work scheduling practices.\(^60\) For blue-collar employees, having a predictable schedule is six times more important for predicting employee retention than having a flexible schedule.\(^61\) Additionally, many safety-net programs are incompatible with volatile or unpredictable work hours, compounding the burden. Fair scheduling laws, which have been passed in several states and municipalities across the nation,\(^62\) would help a large proportion of workers build stable, secure lives—and can improve employee retention and on-the-job performance.\(^63\)

**Work to eradicate violence against girls and young women.**

Intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and trafficking can affect anyone, and all people deserve to feel and be safe in their families, communities, and relationships. Young women have long made up the majority of those who experience these types of violence, however, and the disproportionate harm domestic violence, dating violence, intimate partner violence, gender-based violence (GBV), sexual abuse, trafficking, and sexual harassment cause them deserves a robust response. This is particularly true in Louisiana: girls and young women ages 16 to 24 in the state die from homicide at more than twice the national rate for that cohort.\(^64\) Primary prevention efforts that focus
on changing “underlying attitudes, norms, and behaviors that support GBV” delivered through schools can be effective; for instance, social and emotional learning programs in elementary schools that teach self-awareness, self-management, healthy relationships, and emotional awareness can address some of the risk factors for gender-based violence. Effective programs for adolescents rest on the idea that, much like athletic or academic skills, relationship skills can be taught. Programs that target boys and young men are particularly important, as most gender-based violence is perpetrated by men. Successful interventions help students understand the differences between healthy and abusive dating relationships, challenge gender norms around sexually aggressive behavior, change attitudes about consent and sexual violence, build empathy around the effect of sexual violence on women, and teach men to intervene as bystanders. The lion’s share of these programs take place in school settings, however; the question of how to best reach out-of-school young people is under-researched.

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In addition to the steps outlined above, more than anything, at-risk youth need the kind of support from communities and institutions that other young people take for granted: safe places to live and food on the table; caring adults to help them navigate the often-bewildering transition from child to adult; opportunities to try new things, to fail, and to try again; and experiences that build self-knowledge, agency, and confidence as well as hard and soft skills. They need encouragement, trust, kindness, and love—not harsh discipline and not zero-tolerance. They need society to give them what it gives more fortunate young people, not just “a” chance, but many chances.
As it did for most areas of life, the pandemic disrupted the normal methods and workflows of the US Census Bureau’s American Community Survey in many ways. Due to stay-at-home orders, census workers were not able to mail paper surveys, staffing at Census Bureau call centers available to conduct phone interviews was limited, and in-person follow-up interviews were suspended from March through July (and in some areas, until September). These disruptions resulted in lower survey response rates, particularly from April to June, the very months that disconnection rates reached their peak.

More importantly, nonresponse was not distributed randomly throughout the population; some groups were less likely to respond to the survey than others. The Census Bureau observed large differences between 2020 and previous years in terms of respondents’ key demographic characteristics. Respondents in 2020 were disproportionately likely to live in single-family homes (rather than apartments), to be married, to have bachelor’s degrees, to be US citizens, and to have higher-than-average incomes. They were also less likely to be enrolled in Medicaid, a means-tested health insurance program for people with low incomes. The process of obtaining survey responses from people living in group quarters like juvenile detention centers was particularly disrupted, and these groups had an especially low response rate as a result. In addition, those whom the Census Bureau describes as underrepresented populations, such as Black and Latino households, were less likely than white households to respond to the 2020 survey.

Living in a single-family home, being married, being a college graduate, having a higher income, and not being enrolled in Medicaid are all signs of higher socioeconomic status. Because higher-socioeconomic-status households became less likely to respond, the survey results were biased in favor of wealthier households with more-educated adults. Disconnected young people hail disproportionately from low-income households, from families and neighborhoods where adults have limited formal education, and from single-parent households; as a result, they and their families were more likely to have been missed by the survey or less likely to have completed it. Similarly, out-of-school and out-of-work young people are disproportionately Black or Latino, groups that were less likely than whites to respond to the 2020 survey. All this means that even with the Census Bureau adjustments described below, the 2020 ACS data likely result in underestimates of youth disconnection.

To address these biases, the Census Bureau used other data sources, such as administrative data, to adjust the ACS survey weights. This approach improved the quality of the data but did not remove bias entirely. Particularly relevant to youth disconnection, the Census Bureau noted that even with the adjusted weights, the 2020 unemployment rate at the national level is still lower than expected when considering the relationship between the ACS and BLS unemployment rates over past years. As a result of these many concerns, the Census Bureau released the 2020 data with caution and advised against comparing these 2020 data to those of previous years.

Nonetheless, the upshot is that the 2020 ACS is still the best data source for estimating youth disconnection at the national level and the best and only source for calculating comparable rates for smaller geographies and racial and ethnic groups. In addition, data biases mean that it is likely that the youth disconnection rates in this report are underestimates; in other words, the actual rates are at least this high and likely higher.
WHO ARE CONSIDERED “DISCONNECTED YOUTH”?
Youth disconnection rates in this report are calculated by Measure of America using employment and enrollment data from the 2020 American Community Survey (ACS) of the US Census Bureau. Disconnected youth, also referred to as opportunity youth, are teenagers and young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor working. Young people in this age range who are working or in school part-time or who are in the military are not considered disconnected. Youth who are actively looking for work are considered disconnected.

Several data sources exist that can be used for calculating youth disconnection. As a result, researchers working with different datasets—or using different definitions of what constitutes disconnection—can arrive at different numbers for this indicator. A good summary of these various definitions can be found here at a piece we wrote for the Huffington Post in September 2016.

Measure of America uses the Census Bureau’s ACS for four reasons: (1) it is reliable and updated annually; (2) it allows for calculations by state and metro area as well as by more granular census-defined neighborhood clusters within metro areas; (3) it includes young people who are in group quarters, such as juvenile or adult correctional facilities, supervised medical facilities, and college dorms; and (4) it counts students on summer break as being enrolled in school.

Calculating Metro Area Youth Disconnection
The employment and enrollment data needed to calculate youth disconnection for metro areas are not available directly by metro area from the ACS. Metro areas were aggregated by Measure of America from the Census Bureau’s Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs) that make up metro areas. In cases where a PUMA falls partially within two or more metro areas, it is included in the metro area where it has the largest population. If the PUMA falls partly inside and partly outside a metro area, it is included in the metro area.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

In order to arrive at the percentage of disconnected youth, the total number of disconnected young people and the total number of young people overall are calculated for each geographic area from the ACS Public Use Microdata Sample. Not in school means that a young person has not attended any educational institution and has also not been homeschooled at any time in the three months prior to the survey date. Not working means that a young person is either unemployed or not in the labor force at the time they responded to the survey. Disconnected youth are young people who are simultaneously not in school and not working. This population cannot be estimated by simply adding the number of young people not enrolled in school to the number of young people not working because many students in this age range do not work and many young workers are not in school.

Methods
The ACS is an annual survey conducted by the Census Bureau that samples a subset of the overall population. As with any data drawn from surveys, there is some degree of sampling and nonsampling error inherent in the data. Thus, comparisons between similar values on any indicator should be made with caution since these differences may not be statistically significant.
DEFINITIONS

Disability – Disability status in this report refers to any enduring emotional, physical, or mental condition that makes everyday activities like walking, dressing, or remembering things difficult and restricts an individual’s ability to work or to perform basic required tasks without assistance. This is self-reported; individuals who report having such a condition in the ACS are counted as having a disability. Those who do not are counted as not having a disability.

Group Quarters – The US Census Bureau refers to people who live in any kind of nonhousehold living arrangement as living in “group quarters.” These can be institutional group quarters such as correctional or supervised medical facilities or noninstitutional group quarters such as college or university dormitories, military bases, or group homes. One of the primary advantages of using the ACS as the data source for this research is that the survey includes young people living in group quarters.

Metro Area – Metro areas used in this report are formally known as Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs), geographic areas defined by the Office of Management and Budget and used by the US Census Bureau and other government entities. MSAs constitute counties grouped around an urban center and include outlying suburban and exurban counties from which a substantial percentage of the population commutes to the urban center for work.

PUMA – Public Use Microdata Areas, or PUMAs, are the smallest geographic unit of the Public Use Microdata Sample. They are defined by the US Census Bureau, are built out of census tracts and counties, and have populations of at least 100,000 people.

Racial and Ethnic Groups – Racial and ethnic groups in this report are based on definitions established by the OMB and used by the Census Bureau and other government entities. Since 1997, this office has recognized five racial groups and two ethnic categories. The racial groups are Asian, Black, Native American, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and white. The ethnic categories are Latino and not Latino. People of Latino ethnicity may be of any race. In this report, members of each of these racial groups include only non-Latino members of these groups. All references to Asians, Blacks, Native Americans, and whites include only those who are non-Latino.

Unreliable – Estimates with a coefficient of variance of greater than 0.2 are considered unreliable and are omitted from the report. In addition, due to the 2020 ACS data quality, an additional factor was considered to determine reliability. Estimates in which the total youth population for a group was based on fewer than ten survey responses were omitted.
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