North Dakota KIDS COUNT!

Inform

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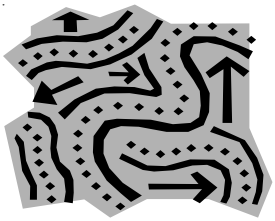
Moving Youth From Risk to Opportunity

The 2004 *KIDS COUNT Data Book* focuses attention on "moving youth from risk to opportunity." For all young people, "the most powerful predictor of future success is a connection to a caring and supportive family." When that connection is missing, the result can be "disconnected" youth.[1]

It's about "connecting" kids.

Transitioning to adulthood is not an automatic or uncomplicated process - it is much like "hiking" down a "developmental road" carrying a sign saying "I need to belong." The developmental journey is a mix of economic factors, personal decisions, and societal influences. For many youth, the community (e.g., family, coaches, counselors, ministers, teachers) stands at the fork in the road to welcome them and assist them over bumps. While they still may engage in risky behaviors, many youth have support and resources available to guide their way. For youth who lack these resources, wrong turns and detours in the road bring new challenges they are unprepared to handle alone. Their coping skills are left to chance. A detour in the road can lead to a "dead end" sign such as juvenile detention, foster care, or even suicide. For young adults, the detour can lead to unemployment, incarceration, welfare, and a complex combination of negative life events.



Disconnected youth are especially unprepared "to graduate, find employment, learn to handle new independence and make responsible decisions."[1] The problem is that responsibility for reconnecting youth to school, work, or community is not centralized. In addition, schools, youth employment programs, and law enforcement agencies rarely have enough resources to address the needs of disconnected youth.[2]

Disconnected young adults are persons ages 18-24 who:
are not enrolled in school,
are not working, and
have no degree beyond high school.

Number of disconnected young adults, 2002:	Percent of disconnected young adults, 2002:
United States = 3,843,000	United States = 15%
North Dakota = 6,000	North Dakota = 10%

Source: 2004 KIDS COUNT Data Book, *The Annie E. Casey Foundation*

Consider the Costs

In 2002, North Dakota had 6,000 disconnected youth ages 18-24. They often lack the life skills, knowledge, relationships, support and confidence they need to transition into adulthood. They may have aged out of foster care, have been involved in the juvenile justice system, have never finished high school, or have children themselves.[1]

Nationally, approximately 15% (an estimated 3.8 million) of youth ages 18-24 are disconnected. At 10%, North Dakota may be below the national average, but we cannot afford to ignore disconnected youth.[1] Consider some of the costs to:

Employers
- Special instruction and training for those lacking knowledge and skills

Government
- Unemployment; juvenile justice system

Society
- Repeated crime continues the cycle of irresponsible adults

Communities
- Lost sense of neighborhoods, leaders of tomorrow, and the spirit of volunteerism

Individuals
- Lost values

"Economic development without youth development is incomplete."
- National Governors Association

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Youth Development

Research shows that youth development programs for pre-teens and adolescents can reduce the number of disconnected youth by reducing "delinquency, drug and alcohol use, and school dropout numbers while improving mental health, self-efficacy and educational performance." Youth development programs are "far more cost-effective than the juvenile justice system." Programs include:[3]

Risk Reduction Programs

- Pregnancy prevention
- Youth violence prevention
- Substance abuse prevention and treatment

Programs Designed to Strengthen Youth's Existing Assets

- Mentoring
- Before/after school activities
- Engagement in arts and community projects
- Service learning
- Workforce readiness

How to Help

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has outlined strategies for reducing the number of disconnected youth, including:[4]

- system reform,
- investing in schools and school-to-career programs,
- addressing impediments to employment, and
- meeting needs for nurturing, guidance, and protection.

More information about these strategies is available on the North Dakota KIDS COUNT! website.

Key principles for reconnecting youth,[2] as well as ways employers, lawmakers, communities, and individuals can get involved, are also available at: www.ndkidscount.org/youth/disconnectedyouth.htm.

Why Are Youth Disconnected?

Understanding why so many young people are not working or in school, and not connected to caring adults or community supports, is a complex issue. Many children experience economic instability, have less adult supervision, lack proper nutrition, have poor mental and physical health, face peer pressure, and are subject to other domino effects that put them at risk for becoming disconnected. Other contributing factors include:

- ***Fragmented Support*** - Parents, preoccupied with economic hardships or personal struggles, may be unable or unwilling to provide the consistent nurturing, guidance, and supervision that children need.[2] These problems are magnified for families living in poverty or in rural areas where access to social networks or community supports may otherwise compensate for disadvantages of the family.

- ***Unstable Resources*** - Family, community support, and resources are not available to many young people. Without school or work, negative outcomes are likely to be perpetuated. Lack of preparation makes it more difficult for young people to get good paying jobs with a future. As they become parents, disconnected youth may be unable to provide a stable home environment for their own kids.

- ***Family Composition*** - Dramatic changes have reshaped America's families over the past several decades, including: blended families resulting from divorce and remarriage; an increase in children being raised by single parents or by their grandparents; both parents working full-time or sometimes multiple jobs.

- ***Abuse and Neglect*** - Young people are at greater risk of becoming disconnected youth when home life is unstable and they are exposed to violence in the home or experience abuse and neglect.

- ***Changing Expectations*** - The standards are higher than ever for teens and young adults. Having opportunities to make connections between the classroom and the real world could expand learning, problem solving, communication skills, and analytical thinking. "More than nine out of 10 Americans say that young people need different skills today than they did 10 to 12 years ago ... especially 21st century literacy skills."[5]

References

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