

Vulnerable Youth and the Transition to Adulthood



LOW-INCOME AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH

The transition to adulthood could present challenges for African American youth from low-income families. This fact sheet uses data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 to explore racial differences in adolescent risk behavior, education, employment, and earnings among low income youth age 18 to 24.¹ Differences discussed below are significant at the 95 percent confidence level or above.

- **Adolescent Risk Behaviors.**² Low-income African American youth engage in fewer risk behaviors during adolescence (3.1 cumulative risks) than low-income white youth (3.9 cumulative risks).³ Low-income African American youth are less likely to use alcohol by age 13, sell drugs, steal less than \$50, destroy property, or run away than low-income white youth. Low-income African American youth, however, are more likely than low-income white youth to report having had sex by age 16.
- **Education.** Low-income African American and white youth do not differ significantly in the percent who graduate from high school.
- **Employment and Earnings.** By age 24, around half (57 percent) of low-income African American youth are employed, compared with nearly three quarters (74 percent) of white youth. The median annual earnings of low-income African American youth are consistently lower than the median annual earnings of low-income white youth. At age 23, the median earnings for low-income African American youth who are working is just over \$16,500, compared with almost \$22,500 for white youth.
- **Connection to School or Work.** About a third (32 percent) of low-income African American youth consistently connect to work or school between ages 18 and 24, compared with almost half (48 percent) of low income white youth.⁴ A quarter of low-income African American youth never connect (making extremely short or no connections to school and/or the labor market between ages 18 and 24), while only 16 percent of white low-income youth fall into this category.

ABOUT THIS FACT SHEET

This fact sheet was prepared by Daniel Kuehn and Marla McDaniel of the Urban Institute as part of the Urban Institute's Low-Income Working Families project supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

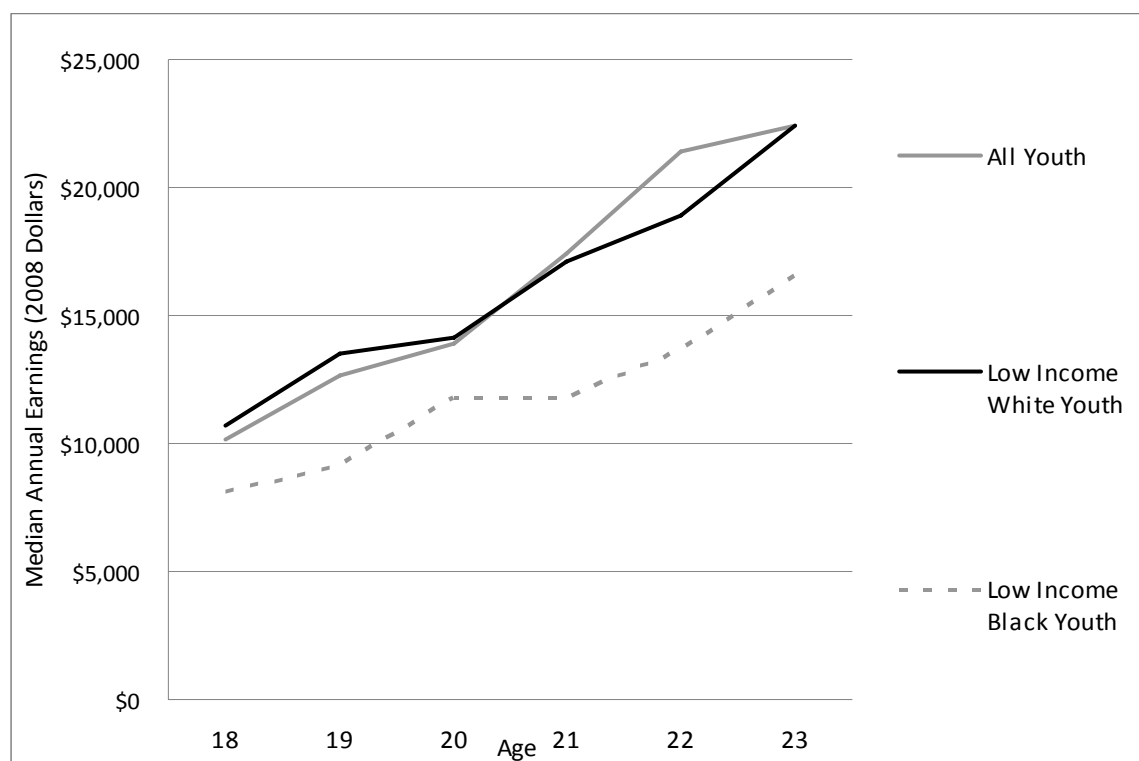
The fact sheet was prepared as part of a series on vulnerable youth and the transition to adulthood. The project examined the role of different aspects of youth vulnerability and risk-taking behaviors on several outcomes for young adults. The data come from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 cohort. This survey, funded by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, follows a sample of adolescents in 1997 into young adulthood with annual interviews that capture their education, employment, family formation, and other behaviors. The analyses in this series use the subset of youth born in 1980–81, who were 15–17 years old when first interviewed in 1997. Outcomes are obtained by using the annual data through 2005 when these young adults were 23–25 years old.

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FIGURE 1. Median Annual Earnings of Working Youth, Age 18–24



Source: Urban Institute estimates of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997.

Notes: Sample sizes: Low-income African American youth, $n = 331$; low-income white youth, $n = 299$; all youth, $n = 2,041$. Median earnings exclude youth who did not work and therefore had zero earnings. Differences between African American youth from low-income families and white youth from low-income families are significant at all ages except age 20.

¹ Low income is defined as total annual family earnings less than 200% of the federal poverty level.

² Risk behavior is self-reported and does not reflect the frequency of behaviors.

³ Cumulative risky behaviors include consuming alcohol before age 13, using marijuana before age 16, using other drugs before age 18, selling illegal drugs before age 18, engaging in sex before age 16, stealing something worth less than \$50 before age 18, stealing something worth more than \$50 before age 18, destroying property before age 18, committing other property crime before age 18, being a member of a gang before age 18, getting into a fight before age 18, carrying a gun before age 18, and running away from home before age 18.

⁴ Results of a trajectory analysis conducted using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 identify four pathways for youth connectedness to employment or school between ages 18 and 24: consistently-connected, initially-connected, later-connected, and never-connected. For more information see Kuehn, D., Pergamit, M., Macomber, J., and Vericker, T. (2009). *Multiple Pathways Connecting to School and Work*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

TABLE 1. Selected Characteristics of Low-Income African American and White Youth

	Low-income African American youth n = 331	Low-income white youth n = 299	All youth n = 2,041
Background Characteristics			
Percent female	54%	49%	49%
Household of origin			
Two biological parents	17%*	40%	53%
Single biological parent	60%*	38%	28%
Adolescent Risk Behaviors			
Cumulative risky behaviors (mean)	3.1*	3.9	3.3
Alcohol by age 13	9%*	19%	15%
Marijuana by age 13	3%	5%	4%
Used other drugs	15%*	30%	27%
Sex by age 16	69%*	59%	51%
Attack someone/get in a fight	38%	33%	28%
Member of a gang	14%	10%	9%
Sell drugs	14%*	22%	19%
Destroy property	28%*	41%	36%
Steal less than \$50	34%*	54%	46%
Steal more than \$50	14%	20%	15%
Other property crime	13%	17%	14%
Carry a gun	17%	19%	16%
Ever run away	17%*	24%	18%
Adolescent Child Birth (females)			
Birth before 18th birthday	12%*	5%	4%
Not Completing High School			
No high school diploma	33%	27%	17%
Median Annual Earnings			
Age 18	\$8,116*	\$10,714	\$10,139
Age 19	\$9,105*	\$13,549	\$12,637
Age 20	\$11,781	\$14,112	\$13,876
Age 21	\$11,796*	\$17,136	\$17,384
Age 22	\$13,707*	\$18,915	\$21,430
Age 23	\$16,550*	\$22,422	\$22,411
Employment			
Employed on 24th birthday	57%*	74%	77%
Connectedness to School or Work between Ages 18–24			
Consistently-connected	32%*	48%	60%
Initially-connected	18%	16%	15%
Later-connected	26%	19%	15%
Never-connected	24%*	16%	10%
Charged with a Crime			
Charged with a crime by age 24	22%	21%	21%
Health Insurance Coverage			
Health insurance on 24th birthday	59%	61%	71%

Source: Urban Institute estimates of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997.

Notes: Some youth who did not complete high school may have earned a general equivalency diploma. Median earnings exclude youth who did not work and therefore had zero earnings. The cumulative risky behavior score is based on the 13 risk behaviors listed beneath it. Adolescent risk behaviors are measured up to age 18, except where otherwise noted. Never-connected youth may make extremely short connections to school or the labor market.

* Estimates for low-income African American youth and low-income white youth are significant at the 95% confidence level or above.