



# Patterns of Intermittent and Ongoing Disconnection among Youth of Color

Results from an Analysis of the 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation

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**Disparities in youth employment (including summer employment) and disconnection (not being in school or working) start early and disproportionately affect people of color. Young people who become disconnected from work and education are at higher risk of numerous negative life outcomes and have been particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Inequalities in patterns of disconnection among young parents (ages 16 to 24) of color are also apparent. These disparities in disconnection and youth employment are deeply tied to racial equity. Programs and funders benefit from understanding the characteristics and challenges of youth of color who are experiencing continuous and intermittent disconnection. To that end, this brief examines patterns of work, education, and disconnection among Black youth ages 15 to 23.**

## Background

A robust body of work has shown that disconnection from work and education is associated with numerous negative outcomes (Loprest, Spaulding, and Nightingale 2019). Moreover, decades of oppression and systemic racism have reinforced a reality in which people of color, and Black Americans in particular, are more likely to experience disconnection (Lewis 2020) and more susceptible to the accompanying negative outcomes (Chetty et al. 2019). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has produced unprecedented hardships that have disproportionately impacted people of color.<sup>1</sup> Those hardships include unemployment, food and housing insecurity,<sup>2</sup> lack of child care, education closures, and physical and mental health issues.<sup>3</sup>

Disconnection is sometimes defined as the experience of prolonged periods without work or being in school. However, people’s lived experiences can be more complex: periods of work and education interspersed with gaps can still amount to disconnection. Research on young parents ages 18 to 30 showed that the cumulative experience of disconnection (be it continuous or intermittent) was associated with decreased earnings at age 30 (Sick, Vilter, and Spaulding 2019). By that cumulative metric, Black parents experience greater amounts of disconnection. Understanding continuous and intermittent youth disconnection will help policymakers and program operators decide when and how to engage with youth.

## Data and Analytic Plan

This analysis uses data from the 2014 panel of the US Census Bureau’s Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). The 2014 SIPP was conducted in four waves, covering a four-year period from January 2013 through December 2016. The survey covers a nationally representative sample of 53,070 households; detailed interviews were conducted with people ages 15 and older in each household.<sup>4</sup> Survey respondents were interviewed from January through April of each year and reported on the previous calendar year, with data organized into a monthly “event history calendar.” The 2014 SIPP focuses on income and program participation; it also includes information about demographics, education, wealth, and family characteristics.

Using the 2014 SIPP, we identified 1,267 people who identified as Black and who were between the ages of 15 and 23, representing 3.7 million people.<sup>5</sup> Because respondents were interviewed across all waves it is possible to construct a longitudinal monthly calendar of activities across four years. For example, people who were 15 years old in wave 1 would have data covering 48 months from ages 15 through 18. Those who were 20 in wave 1 would have data through age 23. In order to allow similar amounts of data to accrue for each respondent, new respondents who turned 15 during waves 2 through 4 were not included in the analysis.

Complex patterns of work, education, and disconnection were manifested over the duration of the survey. To visualize those patterns, in each month of the survey we categorized the respondents as in education, working, working and in education, or as neither working nor in education (i.e., “disconnected”).<sup>6</sup> For each month, we calculate mutually exclusive percentages of respondents in each category to visualize the rates of each activity over time. Respondents are grouped by their age at the start of each year and by the actual month of the year (January, February, March, etc.).

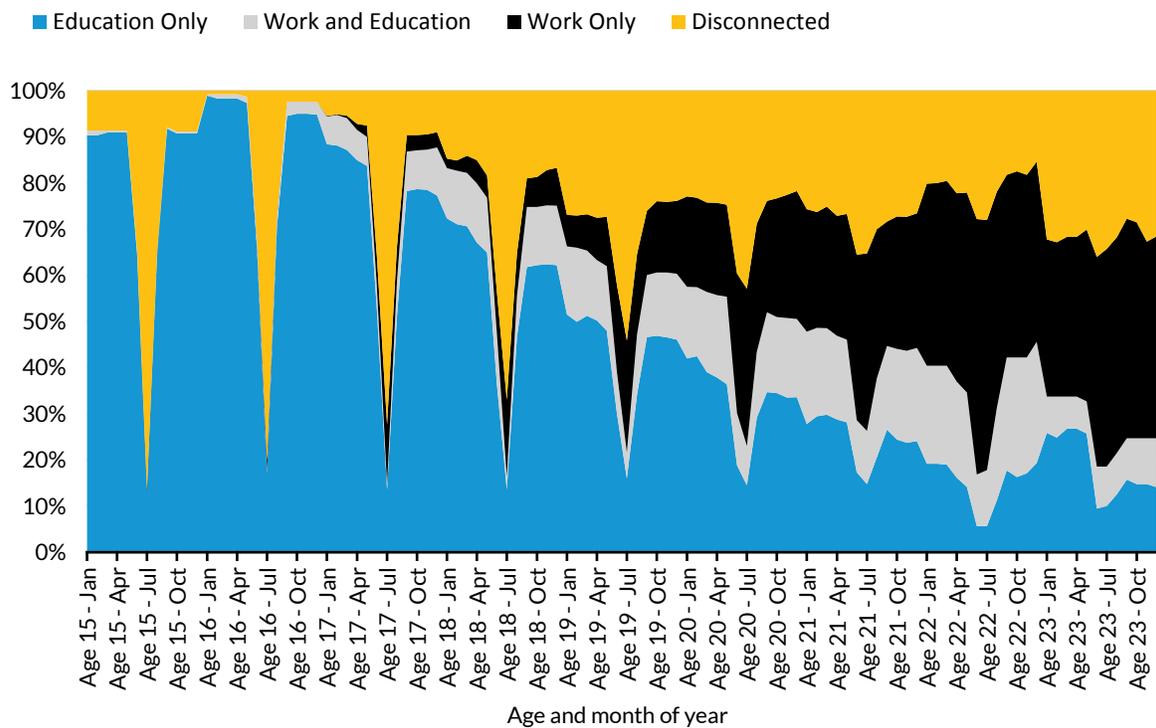
## Findings

### Patterns of Disconnection during the Transition from Youth to Young Adulthood

In this analysis we examine disconnection among Black youth as they transition into adulthood. Figure 1 shows the percentage of Black youths who were in education, who were working and in education, who were working only, and who were neither working nor in education (disconnected) from ages 15

through 23.<sup>7</sup> Early spikes in the summer months correspond to summer breaks, with summer work experience emerging at age 17, when 10 percent of youth were working in July. By the start of the year when youth were 18, roughly 10 to 12 percent of youth were working and enrolled in school. Conversely, during the first five months of their age-18 year, more than 15 percent of youth were disconnected from work and education. That is the first nonsummer increase in disconnection to a rate higher than 10 percent, and through age 23 the rate of disconnection never dropped below 10 percent.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Percentages of Black Youth Who Were Disconnected (Neither Working nor in Education), Enrolled in Education, Working, or Both Working and in Education, by Their Age at the Start of Each Year and by Month of Year**



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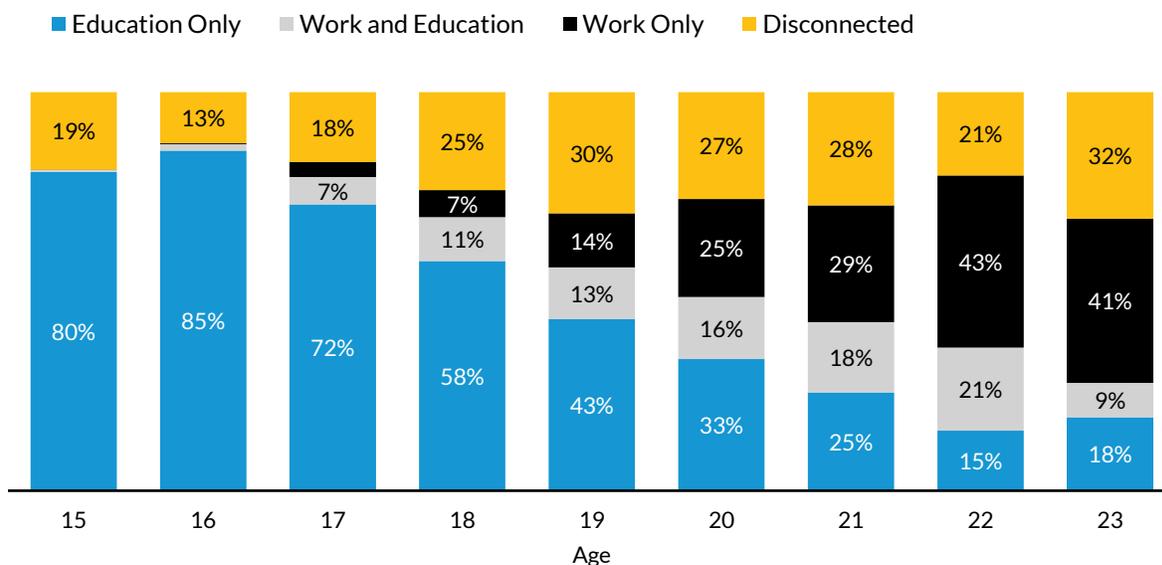
**Source:** Author's calculations from waves 1 through 4 of the US Census Bureau's 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

**Note:** Age is the respondent's age at the start of the survey year, and month is the actual month recorded in survey responses.

Across this span, Black youth spent an average of 24 percent of their time out of work and school. Figure 2 shows that from age 17 the percentage of time spent disconnected rises significantly, from less than 20 percent to 30 percent at age 19, at which point it dips slightly before exceeding 30 percent again by age 23. From ages 17 to 22 the average percentage of time spent working steadily increases while time enrolled in education decreases. At age 23, the percentage of time working and the overall enrollment in education (whether working or not) both decrease while disconnection increases.

FIGURE 2

Percentages of Black Youth Who Were Disconnected (Neither Working nor in Education), Enrolled in Education, Working, or Working and in Education by Age



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Source: Author's calculations from waves 1 through 4 of the US Census Bureau's 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Note: N = 1,267.

While cumulative disconnection over time is associated with lower income later in life (Sick, Vilter, and Spaulding 2019), a prolonged period (at least six consecutive months) of disconnection can be a particularly significant setback. From ages 15 to 23, one-third (34 percent) of Black youth experienced a period of prolonged disconnection. Table 1 shows the cumulative amount of time spent disconnected and the percentage experiencing at least one period of prolonged disconnection among various groups. People identifying as male, people living in nonmetropolitan areas, and people in low-income households all experienced more disconnection than their counterparts. Notably, rates of disconnection do not significantly differ by household wealth (measured as above or below the median net worth).<sup>8</sup>

TABLE 1

**Percentage of Time Spent Disconnected and Percentage of People Who Experienced Persistent Disconnection among Various Subgroups of Black Youth**

Sample	Percentage of youth	Percentage of time disconnected	Percentage with persistent disconnection
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	50	26	37
Female	50	25	33
<i>Metropolitan living status</i>			
Metropolitan	83	24	33
Nonmetropolitan	17	32	44
<i>Household-income-to-poverty ratio</i>			
Not low income	42	20	29
Low income	58	29	40
<i>Household net worth</i>			
Not low wealth	50	24	34
Low wealth	50	27	36

**Source:** Author's calculations from waves 1 through 4 of the US Census Bureau's 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

**Notes:** N = 1,267. Metropolitan status is based on the most frequently reported status over all four waves. A period of persistent disconnection is defined as at least six consecutive months of disconnection. Low-income status is based on whether the average household-income-to-poverty ratio is below 200 percent of the poverty level. Whether a household is considered to have low wealth is calculated by whether that household's wealth is below the sample median of \$11,909.

## Discussion

Disconnection from work and education is deeply intertwined with poverty, opportunity, and racial justice. This brief shows that disconnection can grow, and that on average, Black youths are disconnected for approximately one-third of the time from ages 19 to 23. More than one-third of Black youths (and especially those in low-income households) experience at least one prolonged period of disconnection.

On a large scale, the best policy solutions for addressing disconnection are those that invest heavily in low-income communities of color, providing early interventions and ensuring the “existence of chances” (Spievack et al. 2020). At minimum, this requires an equitable distribution of resources;<sup>9</sup> ideally, it involves concerted, purposeful investment at all levels. Broad societal reforms addressing wealth and income inequality, health care, affordable education, and criminal justice would likely reduce rates of disconnection among youth of color.

That said, many targeted policy interventions at the state, local, and philanthropic levels would likely assist with disconnection among youth of color. Some interventions supported by this analysis include the following:

- Summer youth employment programs and opportunities in underserved and/or low-employment areas provide youth important labor market experience early in life. Summer

youth employment has been declining, and this analysis and others show early disparities between youth of color and white youth regarding summer youth employment (Spieveck and Sick 2019). These disparities start as early as age 16.

- Early interventions to prevent at-risk youth from dropping out of high school, especially around the transition of age 17 to age 18 (which is when we observe the starkest increase in youth disconnection) are promising. Career academy programs have demonstrated promising decreases in dropout rates and increases in positive education and work outcomes among young people (Warner et al. 2016).
- Funding for flexible, affordable postsecondary education opportunities (academic and occupational), both for people with and without high school diplomas, are also promising. This includes college tailored for young parents (especially teen parents), who are more susceptible to becoming disconnected and to the associated negative outcomes (Sick, Spaulding, Vilter 2019).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Margery Austin Turner and Monique King-Viehlend, “Economic Hardships from COVID-19 Are Hitting Black and Latinx People Hardest. Here Are Five Actions Local Leaders Can Take,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, August 12, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/economic-hardships-covid-19-are-hitting-black-and-latinx-people-hardest-here-are-five-actions-local-leaders-can-take>; Steven Brown, “There’s Been A Concerning Lack of Progress for Communities of Color During the Covid-19 Crisis,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, October 26, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/theres-been-concerning-lack-progress-communities-color-during-covid-19-crisis>; Faith Mitchell, “COVID-19’s Disproportionate Effects on Children of Color Will Challenge the Next Generation,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, August 17, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/covid-19s-disproportionate-effects-children-color-will-challenge-next-generation>.
- <sup>2</sup> Michael Neal and Caitlin Young, “Delinquent Homeowners in Neighborhoods of Color are Less Likely to Be Protected by Forbearance,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, December 2, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/delinquent-homeowners-neighborhoods-color-are-less-likely-be-protected-forbearance>.
- <sup>3</sup> Alice Feng, Jonathan Schwabish, and Natalie Spieveck, “Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Food Insufficiency Persist during the Pandemic,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, November 10, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/racial-and-ethnic-disparities-food-insufficiency-persist-during-pandemic>; Gina Adams, “Finding Solutions to Support Child Care during COVID-19,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, September 22, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/finding-solutions-support-child-care-during-covid-19>; Solomon Greene and Alanna McCargo, “New Data Suggest COVID-19 is Widening Housing Disparities by Race and Income,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, May 29, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/new-data-suggest-covid-19-widening-housing-disparities-race-and-income>.
- <sup>4</sup> Fifteen is the youngest age at which detailed respondent interviews are carried out in SIPP, and that age is included in this analysis to show the transition from youth to working-age young adulthood.

- <sup>5</sup> Although the category “people of color” may typically include many groups affected by disconnection—including Native Americans and people identifying as Latinx or as being of Hispanic origin—we focus on data relating to people identifying as Black in the 2014 SIPP.
- <sup>6</sup> Being neither working nor in education may not always equate to disconnection, especially among school-age youth who may simply be on summer break. However, previous work relating to young parents shows that among adults ages 18 to 30, this same metric is a proxy for disconnection (Sick, Vilter, and Spaulding 2019). Maintaining consistent definitions allows us to visualize patterns in disconnection during the transition to young adulthood.
- <sup>7</sup> No single respondent has data captured in the 2014 SIPP from ages 15 to 23. However, we compiled an aggregate picture across a range of respondent ages.
- <sup>8</sup> Not shown is that across all youth in this age range (regardless of race or ethnicity), disconnection rates do show a difference by household wealth (with people in households below the median level of wealth experiencing more disconnection).
- <sup>9</sup> John Sankofa, “Disinvestment in Baltimore’s Black Neighborhoods Is Foreboding but Reversible,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, September 29, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/disinvestment-baltimores-black-neighborhoods-foreboding-reversible>.

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**Nathan Sick** is a research associate in the Income and Benefits Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where he focuses on workforce development research and program evaluation. His work is primarily centered on employment in the health care sector, but he also studies public assistance programs, data management, and services to young parents.

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