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Youth

LONGITUDINAL STUDY SHOWS MANY DROPOUTS NOT EVEN TRYING AT 20

More than a third of the young people who have dropped out of high school and are not enrolled in another education or training program are not just jobless. They are not participating in the labor force at all, according to a new government report that has quietly surfaced in the midst of an election season and on the brink of the next federal appropriations process.

The latest published findings of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 show that only 79 percent of young men who turned 20 during the first half of this decade had graduated high school or earned an equivalency certificate by that point, and 42 percent of them were neither employed nor in training.

This may not be terribly surprising to those on the front lines of workforce development or those who follow the numbers. But it comes from a source of data on the condition of young people in America that is highly respected by researchers for offering a real, representative picture of what is happening in schools, the economy and the lives of young people across the country.

The NLSY 97 is an ongoing survey of about 9,000 men and women born between 1980 and 1984. They are now beginning their working lives.

55 Percent Employed

But many are not working. Of those who dropped out of high school and were not in school, only 55 percent were employed. While almost 11 percent

were actually unemployed by the standard definition of looking for work, more than 33 percent simply were not participating in the labor force. This lack of labor force participation might, to some extent, be explained by pregnancy or the onset of disability, but looking at high school graduates who did not go on to postsecondary education, only about 15 percent were out of the labor force altogether. The picture is much grimmer for blacks and Hispanics, particularly men.

The data were released without fanfare on Jan. 23 in the Bureau of Labor Statistics report *America's Youth at 20: School Enrollment, Training and Employment Transitions Between Ages 19 and 20*.

There was no news conference touting the statistics, nor did interest groups or politicians reach out with commentary. The BLS simply presented an array of statistics about educational and employment outcomes of these young people. The narrative of the report doesn't even address labor force participation among out-of-school youth.

Those statistics are buried in a table in the back. That aside, a number of experts in workforce and youth development policy who reviewed the report at the request of MII said its findings should still be a cause of public concern.

John Twomey, executive director of the New York Association of Training and Employment Professionals, called the statistics a sign of an "invisible crisis," a problem that is known to exist but that policymakers fail to address because there is no urgency to it, unlike a flu outbreak or natural disaster. All the same, the report shows that a significant number of young people are way off track at a time when pressures of technology, immigration and globalization make unskilled jobs hard to come by and the retirement of the baby boomers is creating workforce demand in skilled occupations, he said.

Incalculable Waste

"In New York City, we have 200,000 young people who don't have jobs and aren't in school. This waste of human talent is almost incalculable," Twomey said.

The report shows that among 20-year-olds who

had dropped out of high school, almost 92 percent had not dropped in to some type of programming meant to get them back on track, whether traditional high school, youth development or occupational training.

Fewer than 4 percent were being served by training or apprenticeships.

This had some observers contemplating the decline in national investment in different types of “second-chance” youth development programs. “Certainly, the effort we’ve made hasn’t been up to the magnitude of the problem,” said Harry Holzer, a public policy professor at Georgetown University who studies workforce development and poverty issues.

“This should challenge the incoming administration to show as much support for youth in inner-city America as we do for people in inner-city Baghdad,” said Donald Mathis, president of the Community Action Partnership, an association of community action agencies.

Both Mathis and Twomey said they think the statistics point to the need for programs that connect off-track youth to the labor market and provide them with counseling—programs such as summer youth employment initiatives, which have disappeared or dwindled in some parts of the country since the federal government stopped explicitly funding them.

“Maybe the outcomes aren’t as positive as people like them to be, but every time a kid goes that way [into work experience], as opposed to incarceration, that’s a good thing,” Mathis said.

Others, however, said they feel that putting the funding question aside, practitioners can strive to improve their youth development programs, linking them to further education and higher paying jobs.

While capacity is likely an important issue, the 4 percent participation rate of dropouts in training programs is probably also partly explained by the failure of youth development programs to engage large portions of their target populations, according to Holzer.

Connection Needed

Julian Alssid, executive director of the Workforce Strategy Center, who comes from an on-the-ground background in workforce development in New York City, said programs for off-track young people might be more relevant and attractive to them if the programs offered more than employability skills and placement in entry-level jobs.

“Youth development in this country needs to be much more connected to postsecondary education and to high-growth sectors of the economy,” he said. “I think this speaks to capacity, but it also speaks to the notion that youth development programs can’t go it alone. They really need to work more in concert with education and economic development agencies.”

“We need to redouble our efforts,” said Holzer. “We need to evaluate and identify what works and invest in it.”

—Ryan Hess