

# Teens Not in School and Not Working

## DEFINITION

*Teens not in school and not working* is the percentage of teens ages 16 to 19 who are not enrolled in school, not in the Armed Forces, and not employed. Teens who are recent high school graduates and who are unemployed and teens who have dropped out of high school and are unemployed are included.

## SIGNIFICANCE

School and work help teens acquire the skills, knowledge, experience, and supports they need to become productive adults. Youth who drop out of school and do not become a part of the workforce are at risk of experiencing negative outcomes as they transition from adolescence to adulthood. Teens in low-income families, teens who drop out of school, young mothers, and youth with disabilities have high rates of disconnection from both school and work.<sup>1,2</sup>

Disconnected youth are more likely to live in intergenerational poverty, experience poor physical and mental health, have a disability, be involved with the child welfare system, experience difficulties finding and maintaining employment, earn low wages, and need public benefits to make ends meet. Young people disconnected from both work and school are disproportionately People of

Color and face institutional racism as an entrenched barrier to success.<sup>3,4,5</sup>

Programs that offer work-based learning opportunities; provide meaningful, early, paid work experiences; and incorporate adult mentoring with youth development opportunities address the root causes of inequity and decrease the likelihood of youth disconnection.<sup>6,7</sup> There is both an individual and societal cost to youth disconnection. The disconnection of youth ages 16 to 24 results in over \$93 billion in lost earnings, tax revenues, and government spending annually and over \$1.6 trillion over their lifetimes.<sup>8,9</sup>

Between 2019 and 2023, an estimated 2,187 (4%) youth ages 16 to 19 in Rhode Island were not in school and not working. Of the youth who were not in school and not working, 65% were male and 35% were female. Sixty-two percent of these youth were high school graduates, and 38% had not graduated from high school.<sup>10</sup>

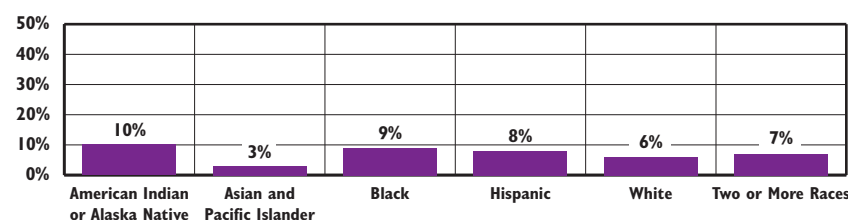
Teens Not in School and Not Working	
	2023
RI	4%
US	7%
National Rank*	2nd
New England Rank**	2nd

\*1st is best; 50th is worst

\*\*1st is best; 6th is worst

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center, [datacenter.kidscount.org](https://datacenter.kidscount.org)

  
**Percentage of U.S. Youth Ages 16 to 19, Not in School and Not Working, by Race and Ethnicity, 2023**



Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center, [datacenter.kidscount.org](https://datacenter.kidscount.org)

◆ In the U.S., Youth of Color (with the exception of Asian youth) are more likely to be disconnected from school and work than white youth.<sup>11</sup> In 2023, 10% of American Indian or Alaska Native youth, 9% of Black youth, and 8% of Hispanic or Latino youth were not in school and not working, compared to 6% of white and 3% of Asian and Pacific Islander youth.<sup>12</sup>

◆ Rhode Island has a low overall youth disconnection rate. In 2023, 3% of Hispanic or Latino youth and 5% of white youth ages 16 to 19 were not in school and not working.<sup>13</sup>

◆ From 2012 to 2022, the national youth disconnection rate (i.e., percentage of youth ages 16 to 24 who were not working and not in school) fell by 22.6%. Rhode saw one of the largest declines during this period, with the state's youth disconnection rate falling from 10.8% to 7.3%.<sup>14</sup>

## Compulsory School Attendance

◆ Rhode Island requires school attendance until age 18. Rhode Island students over age 16 may obtain a waiver from the attendance requirement if they have an alternative learning plan for obtaining a high school diploma or equivalent. Plans can include independent study, private instruction, community service, or online coursework and must be developed in consultation with the student, school counselor, school principal, and at least one parent or guardian. Alternative learning plans must be approved by the district superintendent.<sup>15</sup>

◆ As of 2020, one state has compulsory attendance to age 19, 24 states (including Rhode Island) have compulsory attendance to age 18, eight states to age 17, and 17 states to age 16.<sup>16</sup>

# Teens Not in School and Not Working



## Connecting Youth to School and Work

- ◆ Education has a positive impact on the likelihood of finding and maintaining employment. Between 2019 and 2023, the unemployment rate for Rhode Island adults ages 25 to 64 with a bachelor's degree or higher was 2.8%, compared with 6.4% for high school graduates and 10.6% for those with less than a high school diploma.<sup>17</sup>
- ◆ Successful strategies to prevent youth disconnection must be comprehensive and equitable and include high-quality child care and public schooling, a focus on healthy youth development, equity-based opportunities and recruitment, and multiple pathways to employment. Given the effects of the pandemic on young adults, national service opportunities should be explored as a strategy for increasing youth connection while meeting community needs.<sup>18,19,20</sup>
- ◆ Programs and schools that enable students to acquire work-based skills and/or college credits while working toward their high school degrees can improve high school graduation rates and better prepare students for college completion and careers.<sup>21</sup>

### References

- <sup>14,6</sup> Burd-Sharps, S & Lewis, K. (2018). *More than a million reasons for hope: Youth disconnection in America today*. Measure of America.
- <sup>23</sup> Fernandes-Alcantara, A. L. (2020). *Vulnerable youth: Background and policies*. Congressional Research Service. Retrieved March 24, 2025, from <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33975>
- <sup>3,19</sup> Lewis, K. (2020). *A decade undone: Youth disconnection in the age of coronavirus*. Measure of America.
- <sup>7,9,18,22</sup> Urban Alliance. (2020). *More than just pocket money: Why the surge in youth unemployment should concern us all*.
- <sup>8</sup> Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. (2024). Opportunity youth in Rhode Island: Recommendations and resources for reconnection. Retrieved March 24, 2025, from [https://rikidscount.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/2fm6818\\_opportunity\\_we\\_b\\_with-edit.pdf](https://rikidscount.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/2fm6818_opportunity_we_b_with-edit.pdf)
- <sup>10</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2019-2023. Table B14005.
- <sup>11</sup> Lewis, K. (2023). Ensuring an Equitable Recovery: Addressing Covid-19's Impact on Education. Measure of America, Social Science Research Council.
- <sup>12,13</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center, [datacenter.kidscount.org](https://datacenter.kidscount.org)
- <sup>14</sup> Lewis, K., Powers, A., Wohnsigal, C., Harvey, K., and Shawa, T. (2024). *Broad recovering, persistent inequity: Youth disconnection in America*. New York: Measure of America, Social Science Research Council.
- <sup>15</sup> Rhode Island General Law 16-19-1.
- <sup>16</sup> Education Commission of the States. (2020). *50-state comparison: Free and compulsory school age requirements*. Retrieved March 24, 2025, from <https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-free-and-compulsory-school-age-requirements/>
- <sup>17</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2019-2023. Table S2301.



## Youth Work Experience

- ◆ Work experience during the teen years improves youth mental health, well-being, and school attendance and increases productivity, employability, and wages into adulthood.<sup>22</sup> Workforce development programs that outline career pathways that prepare youth for the job market beyond immediate lower wage positions not only improve their sense of self-security, self-sufficiency, and belonging, but also contribute to the growth of our economy.<sup>23</sup>
  - ◆ Summer work programs may increase college aspirations and preparation for future employment and help reduce youth violence and crime.<sup>24</sup>
  - ◆ Expanding work-based learning opportunities can help more youth in Rhode Island successfully transition into college and careers. These types of programs can help to motivate students, teach them critical skills, connect them with mentors and positive adult role models, and help them to make informed decisions about their future. Many work-based learning programs allow youth to receive school credit and/or earn money while gaining important workplace experience. In Rhode Island, the Governor's Workforce Board promotes work-based learning opportunities including internships, service-learning programs, school-based enterprise opportunities, industry projects, and apprenticeships.<sup>25</sup>
- <sup>20</sup> Ross, M. & Bateman, N. (2020). *National service can connect America's young people to opportunity and community—and promote work of real social value*. Retrieved March 24, 2025, from <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/national-service-can-connect-americas-young-people-to-opportunity-and-community-and-promote-work-of-real-social-value/>
- <sup>24</sup> Li, Y., Jackson-Spieker, K., Modestino, A.S., Kessler, J.B., & Heller, S.B. (2022). *The promise of summer youth employment programs: Lessons from randomized evaluations*. Retrieved March 24, 2025, from <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/publication/promises-summer-youth-employment-programs-lessons-randomized-evaluations>
- <sup>25</sup> Rhode Island Governor's Workforce Board. (2018) *Workforce Guidance*. Retrieved March 24, 2025, from [https://ride.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur806/files/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/CTE/Website-materials-2021/GWB-WBL-Guidance\\_COMBINED.pdf?ver=2021-10-01-114755-647](https://ride.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur806/files/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/CTE/Website-materials-2021/GWB-WBL-Guidance_COMBINED.pdf?ver=2021-10-01-114755-647)
- <sup>23</sup> Mendoza, M.J. (2022). *After the storm policy recommendations to reconnect opportunity youth during and after the COVID-19 pandemic*. Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions.