

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.^{1,2}

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.¹⁻³

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.^{1,4} 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.^{4,5}

Between 2020 and 2024, an estimated 2,416 (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, 70% were male and 30% were female. Sixty-nine percent of these youth were high school graduates, and 31% had not graduated from high school.⁶

Teens Not in School and Not Working	
	2024
RI	5%
US	7%
National Rank*	<i>6th</i>
New England Rank**	<i>3rd</i>

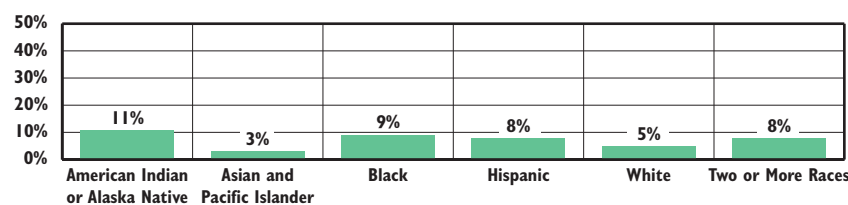
*1st is best; 50th is worst

**1st is best; 6th is worst

Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center, datacenter.kidscount.org



Percentage of U.S. Youth Ages 16 to 19, Not in School and Not Working, by Race and Ethnicity, 2024



Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center, 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.⁷ In 2024, 11% 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 5% of white youth and 3% of Asian and Pacific Islander youth.⁸

◆ Rhode Island has a low overall youth disconnection rate (5%). The 2024 data on the youth disconnection rate by race and ethnicity is not available.⁸

◆ 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 Island saw one of the largest declines during this period, with the state's youth disconnection rate falling from 10.8% to 7.3%.⁹



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.¹⁰

◆ As of 2025, one state has compulsory attendance to age 19, 24 states (including Rhode Island) have compulsory attendance to age 18, nine states to age 17, and 16 states to age 16.¹¹

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Connecting Youth to School and Work

- ◆ Education has a positive impact on the likelihood of finding and maintaining employment. Between 2020 and 2024, the unemployment rate for Rhode Island adults ages 25 to 64 with a bachelor's degree or higher was 2.8%, compared with 7.2% for high school graduates and 9.3% for those with less than a high school diploma.¹²
- ◆ 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.^{3,4,13}
- ◆ 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.¹⁴

References

¹ Burd-Sharps, S., & Lewis, K. (2018). *More than a million reasons for hope: Youth disconnection in America today*. Measure of America.

² Fernandes-Alcantara, A. L. (2012). *Vulnerable youth: Background and policies*.

³ Lewis, K. (2022). A decade undone: Understanding youth disconnection in the age of Coronavirus. In *Community Quality-of-Life and Well-Being* (pp. 105–123). Springer International Publishing.

⁴ Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. (2024). *Opportunity youth in Rhode Island: Recommendations and resources for reconnection*. https://rikidscount.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/2fm6818_opportunity_we_b_with-edit.pdf

⁵ Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. (2024). *Opportunity youth in Rhode Island: Recommendations and resources for reconnection*. https://rikidscount.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/2fm6818_opportunity_we_b_with-edit.pdf

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey. (2020-2024). *Table B14005*.

⁷ Lewis, K. (2023). *Ensuring an equitable recovery: Addressing COVID-19's impact on education*. Measure of America, Social Science Research Council.

⁸ The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2024). *KIDS COUNT Data Center*. datacenter.kidscount.org

⁹ Lewis, K., Powers, A., Wohnsigal, C., Harvey, K., & Shawa, T. (2024). *Broad recovering, persistent inequity: Youth disconnection in America*. Measure of America, Social Science Research Council.

¹⁰ Rhode Island General Law, 16-19-1.

¹¹ Education Commission of the States. (2025). *50-state comparison: Free and compulsory school age requirements*. <https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/free-and-compulsory-school-age-requirements-2025>



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.⁴ 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.¹⁵
- ◆ Summer work programs may increase college aspirations and preparation for future employment and help reduce youth violence and crime.¹⁶
- ◆ 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.¹⁷

¹² U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey. (2020-2024). *Table S2301*.

¹³ Ross, M. & Bateman, N. (2020). *National service can connect America's young people to opportunity and community—and promote work of real social value*. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/national-service-can-connect-americas-young-people-to-opportunity-and-community-and-promote-work-of-real-social-value/>

¹⁴ Jerald, C., Campbell, N. & Roth, E. (2017). *High schools of the future: How states can accelerate high school redesign*. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/high-schools-future-states-can-accelerate-high-school-redesign/>

¹⁵ 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.

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¹⁷ Rhode Island Governor's Workforce Board. (2018). *Workforce guidance*. 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