

# Larkin Street Youth Services

# ... IN BRIEF

## Disconnected Youth

In previous generations adulthood began at age 18, usually paired with graduation from high school.<sup>1</sup> Now the period of time between the ages of 16 and 24 has become known as the transition from adolescence into adulthood, and youth in that age range have become known as transition aged youth. By the time youth reach the age of 25 the expectation is that they will have the knowledge and skills needed to live independently and self-sufficiently.

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is complicated for all youth but becomes even more so for youth who do not have the support of caring adults or who are cut off from their community. It is estimated that 5 -7% of youth in the United States will not successfully make the transition into adulthood by the time they have turned 25.<sup>2</sup> In San Francisco an estimated 5,000-8,000 youth have trouble transitioning into adulthood every year.<sup>3</sup> Disconnected youth are at high risk of becoming homeless youth, and without intervention, homeless adults.

### Who Are Disconnected Youth?

Disconnected youth face numerous challenges in becoming independent adults. Many are youth who have been part of the children's systems of care – foster care, juvenile justice, and mental health. They are characterized by their disconnection from education, the workforce, and networks of social support. They face multiple obstacles to becoming self-sufficient by the age of 25 and without intervention will fail to do so.

**Education:** Disconnected youth have limited educational attainment and histories of school failure. Many had disrupted educational experiences due to placement in the foster care or juvenile justice system. Others left school completely, either due to expulsion or drop-

out. Nationally, 75% of transition age youth have a high school diploma or equivalency.<sup>4</sup> Among transition age youth without a high school diploma 80% were unemployed for at least a year, and half were unemployed for three or more years.<sup>5</sup> Not completing high school limits a youth's employment options and earning potential and decreases their chances for successful transition.

### Snapshot - Disconnected Youth

Larkin Street Youth Services provides a comprehensive continuum of care to disconnected youth in San Francisco. Disconnected transition age youth in San Francisco are a diverse group, as reflected by those served at Larkin Street. The majority are male (63%) and youth of color (64%). Breakdown by ethnicity is 36% White/Caucasian, 29% African American, 18% Latino/a, and 11% Multiracial/Other. Thirty percent of youth report they are lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, or transgender.

Almost half (47%) of youth were in an out-of-home placement with most having multiple placements. Fifty-seven percent have been arrested previously and 38% have spent time in jail.

Fifty-two percent of Larkin Street youth do not have a high school diploma or GED. Seventy-eight percent of youth are not working at intake, although 89% of these youth are actively seeking employment. Only 6% of youth report being employed full-time.

**Employment:** Disconnected youth face higher than average unemployment rates and a higher poverty rate than any other age group.<sup>6</sup> This is due largely to their limited work experience and job skills. In the past 30 years most of the workforce growth has been in fields that require at least a college degree.<sup>7</sup> Therefore even entry level jobs are difficult to obtain since most disconnected youth do not have a college degree or a high school diploma.

March 2009

Even for youth who manage to secure a job, a lack of education limits opportunities for advancement and has implications for future earnings. On average, an individual with a high school diploma earns at least \$6,000 more a year than an individual without a diploma, and those with a college degree earn more than twice as much annually than those with only a high school diploma.<sup>8</sup> Limited education and employment experience greatly impacts disconnected youth's ability to become financially stable.

**Support Networks:** Disconnected youth lack the familial support that assists youth in successfully making the transition into adulthood. Families provide both emotional and tangible support for youth during adolescence and into early adulthood. Parents teach young people the skills needed to live on their own and maintain a household through informal mechanisms. Children see their parents paying bills, making grocery lists, balancing checkbooks. Many disconnected youth have not been part of family systems where they receive that type of ongoing guidance and therefore do not develop the skills needed for independent living.

Transition age youth also depend on the financial support of family or relatives. This monetary assistance is used for educational costs, housing, basic living expenses, or some combination. On average parents spend \$9,300 – \$15,300 a year to support their child at a 4-year institution, including tuition.<sup>9</sup> This financial support often extends beyond the college years. Approximately 40% of youth return to their parental home after initially leaving to live independently, often post-college.<sup>10</sup> Most disconnected youth do not have the same safety net.

### **How Do We Reconnect These Youth?**

In order to reconnect these youth we need to reengage them in education, increase employability, build support networks, and develop independent living skills. Transition age youth often fall through the cracks when it comes to social services, too old for children's systems of care and yet adult programs, that are designed to serve 18-55 year olds, are not developmentally appropriate for them. It is important to have programs that specifically address the needs of this group.

While adult services are often designed as a temporary safety net or focused on addressing one deficit area, transition age youth need a multifaceted approach that will build skills and enable them to learn to live independently. Adult programs operate from the framework that their clients have already

developed a core skill set. Therefore the goal is to either intervene in response to a setback or to develop specific skills that may be lacking. Disconnected youth have not developed a core skill set. Although they have the capacity they have not had the opportunity. Therefore youth services need to be broad enough to address these basic needs while also addressing specific skills development. Services should focus on developing independent living skills, connecting youth to education and employment opportunities, and strengthening their support networks.

**Independent Living Skills:** Disconnected youth have not had the opportunity to develop the life skills needed to live on their own. These types of skills are often taken for granted as things people learn growing up, but without them youth will never be able to live independently. Many disconnected youth have never rented an apartment, opened a bank account, been responsible for utilities, or made a doctor's appointment. They also need to develop basic skills used in everyday life such as grocery shopping, cooking, and maintaining a household. Development of independent living skills is crucial to self-sufficiency.

**Housing:** Many disconnected youth struggle to maintain stable housing. Many "couch surf" from one friend or relative's home to another, staying for a few days and then needing to move on. Housing is a major concern for 85% of low-income youth in San Francisco.<sup>11</sup> Providing stable housing to disconnected youth increases the chances that they will engage in additional support services including education and employment.

**Educational Support:** One of the first things to keep in mind is that most disconnected youth have not had positive experiences in educational settings. Some may even have undiagnosed learning disabilities. It is crucial to make the learning experience positive and offer numerous opportunities for success. Non-traditional teaching methods should be incorporated into programs since so many of these youth feel traditional methods have failed them. Educational programs for disconnected youth should include a full range of options. A large number will not have their high school diploma or GED and will want to work toward completion. For those who do have a diploma or equivalency, presenting the option of pursuing post-secondary education is important. Others may seek vocational training or a certificate program. Educational services should include tutoring, GED assistance, adult basic education, and college counseling.

Services should be designed with the lives and specific needs of disconnected youth in mind. Most disconnected youth will not have the luxury of attending school without simultaneously being employed as they are living independently and some may be supporting a family. These varying needs require flexibility in program design and structure to address the wide range of circumstances among the group.

**Workforce Development:** Employment services should provide a variety of progressive options to match the diverse backgrounds of disconnected youth. For youth with minimal experience in the workforce development of basic job skills is important. This includes basic expectations in the workforce as well as how to create a résumé and interview techniques. To assist youth in developing a career, providing formal work experiences to build their resume may be necessary. This may take the form of supported employment or internships. At a minimum youth workforce development services should include job readiness services, workforce placement, and career development services.

It is also important to recognize the diverse range of circumstances within this group. Disconnected youth are more likely to have been involved with children's systems of care, including mental health and juvenile justice. Involvement in either of these systems presents additional challenges in terms of employment. Youth with mental health issues will need additional assistance beyond employment services in order to maintain employment. Youth with juvenile justice involvement will encounter additional barriers to employment based on their status. Workforce development programs serving disconnected youth will be most successful if they offer multiple options for youth, are flexible in their service delivery, and are equipped to assist youth in addressing these potential barriers.

**Support Networks:** In the short term, programs serving disconnected youth can act as the safety net many of these youth lack but it is crucial that they develop their own support system. An essential component of programs should be mechanisms to assist youth in building healthy relationships. Youth should be given the tools to develop positive peer relationships and build support networks. In addition, providing opportunities for youth to engage positively with an adult role model is beneficial.

## Conclusion

Disconnected youth impact the larger community as they are more likely than other youth to rely on

public systems of support.<sup>12</sup> One study estimated approximately 3½ years after emancipation a former foster care youth cost society an average of \$4,464 in public assistance, \$7,143 in prison costs, and \$16,518 in lost wages.<sup>13</sup> Early intervention in the lives of these youth will reduce the long-term financial cost to the community.

Disconnected transition age youth present a unique set of needs and it is important to provide a range of services to address these multiple needs. This includes housing, case management, education, and employment services. Given the appropriate support and safety net, disconnected youth can be reconnected and successfully make the transition to independent, self-sufficient adulthood.

## References

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Since 1984, Larkin Street Youth Services has been committed to helping San Francisco's most vulnerable youth ages 12-24 move beyond street life. This commitment has fueled the development of a comprehensive continuum of services that is nationally recognized as a model of innovative and effective care. We offer stability, safety and the opportunity for a better life.

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