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CALIFORNIA OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

DATA REPORT

An Updated Analysis of California's Opportunity Youth

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NEW WAYS TO WORK



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The importance of engaging teens and young adults in education and employment opportunities is well documented and cannot be overstated, yet a significant number of 16-24-year-olds in California are neither in school nor working. The short- and long-term consequences of youth disconnection are varied – ranging from significant personal and social challenges to considerable losses in social capital and economic opportunity. In the years following the Great Recession, impactful efforts around the country lead to steady declines in the number of disconnected youth. According to a recent report by Measure of America (“A Decade Undone”, 2021), however, years of significant progress may have since been erased by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purpose of this brief report is to provide a high-level overview of California's disconnected, or “Opportunity Youth” population. According to the most recent data available, approximately 4.7 million teens and young adults, ages 16-24, were living in California in 2020, and over half a million of them (11.3%) were neither in school nor at work. Many of these individuals lived in one of the larger cities in the state. Males comprised over half of the Opportunity Youth population (53.8%) and were disconnected at a higher rate compared females (11.8% and 10.7%, respectively). Hispanic, Black, and Native American youth were disconnected at significantly higher rates relative to their Asian and White counterparts.

Disconnection may look different for teens (16-19) than it does for young adults (20-24). Whereas high school is likely to be the teens' primary activity until graduation, many young adults in their early twenties are in a different phase of their lives and may engage in a broader array of activities. Teens were far more likely to be unemployed or not in the labor force, relative to their young adult counterparts. And young adults were far more likely to be out of school, relative to their teen counterparts. Importantly though, as of 2020, 13% of teens were not in school and 28% of young adults were out of the labor force altogether.

Our objective in publishing the most recent data available on California's Opportunity Youth population is to draw attention to a problem that requires immediate action, and to create collaborative recommendations for state and local policy. In this way, we hope that the information presented here not only sparks dialog around our disconnected youth population, but also underscores the importance of taking measures to help as many individuals as possible as soon as possible. The over half-million young adults in California who are not connected to education or employment - two core drivers of future success, deserve no less.



INTRODUCTION

The short- and long-term progress towards achieving many of our economic, social, technological, and sustainability goals depends heavily on the active engagement of today's younger generations. An important step in advancing these goals is the creation of better and more opportunities for teens and young adults to build their knowledge and skills through key educational, training, and work-related experiences. Yet, in 2020, approximately 4.8 million 16-24-year-olds in the US were neither in school nor at work (12.8% disconnection rate; American Community Survey, 2020). Despite starting with high hopes and big dreams, many of these disconnected youth left high school without earning a diploma, and others graduated high school and even attended college.

Many, however, still lacked the education, skills, and qualifications necessary for obtaining a decent job in the modern economy. *As a result, these individuals (relative to their connected peers) are significantly more at risk of facing more and greater life challenges, earning less money over their lifetimes, and experiencing long-term emotional, behavioral, and health problems. These harsh realities, however, extend beyond individuals, families, and communities; they also constitute a considerable loss in human capital, resulting in significant social costs, and massive losses of economic opportunity for the country.* For this reason, researchers termed this disconnected population "Opportunity Youth" (Belfield, Levin, & Rosen, 2012).

Youth disconnection has been a topic of concern for decades, but the scale of challenges faced by OY is exceptionally inflated in times of crisis. In the wake of the Great Recession, though, much needed work was done to improve the circumstances of these teens and young adults. As a result of these efforts, the number of disconnected youth in the US decreased from 6.7 million in 2008 to 4.3 million in 2019 (Aspen Institute, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has likely erased much of this progress and has potentially set us back even further. One of the most common data sources used to calculate disconnection rates is the annual American Community Survey (ACS), but the pandemic has greatly disrupted the federal data collection and analysis process.

DATA REPORT

The most recent data available is from 2020, and according to Measure of America – a recognized expert in youth disconnection – these rates are very likely to be underestimates of the actual number of OY. Regardless of the true number, a growing number of newly implemented programs and initiatives in both the public and private sectors indicate that the most recent crisis has brought much-needed attention back to this population.

Except for being disconnected from both work and school, the Opportunity Youth population is very heterogenous. Not only do they differ on many attributes (i.e., age, education, work experience, family circumstances, geography, mental and physical health, etc.), but the factors associated with their disconnection just as different. Given these large intra-group differences, a foundational step in providing support and resources to these teens and young adults is understanding more about them – who they are, why they are disconnected, and as is the focus of this report, where they live.

California is home to the largest Opportunity Youth population in the country – over one in ten disconnected youth in the US lives in California. Yet to our knowledge, no recent reports by CA state agencies examining the state's disconnected youth have been published. Accordingly, we aim to fill this gap by summarizing the most recent data available on California's disconnected youth, and in doing so, equip readers with the at least some of the information they need to initiate discussions at both the strategic and policy levels, and to encourage greater and more immediate action by state and local officials.



CALIFORNIA OPPORTUNITY YOUTH POPULATION

4.7M

Young adults 16-24 living
in California

535K+

16-24-year-olds
neither at school nor
at work

11.3%

2020 disconnection
rate



PURPOSE OF REPORT

New Ways to Work, California Opportunity Youth Network (COYN), and its dedicated members have been and continue to work diligently to expand the opportunities for the state's young adult population and help improve their education, employment, and quality-of-life outcomes. Many of these joint efforts focus on those residents who have been or are connected to the foster, juvenile justice, and homelessness care systems in the state, as well as Opportunity Youth. Recently released 2020 US Census Bureau data collected via the ACS provides key insights and statistics on California's teen and young adult populations, enabling us to better understand them and the many challenges they face. We know that much of the work being conducted across the state to support OY has undoubtedly made a positive impact on many lives in many communities.

Our goal for this report is to emphasize the importance of leveraging data in making informed, evidenced-based decisions on how best to serve the state's OY population. Such data can and often does serve multiple purposes and helps lay the groundwork for making decisions on how best to support disconnected teens and young adults across the state. Below, we offer two general examples of how data can (and has been) used to maximize the impact of efforts supporting this increasingly important population.

1) A thorough cataloging of all organizations, agencies, and institutions serving this diverse population serves to build an inventory of where youth can go for assistance, support, and resources. Developing such an inventory also provides insight into (1) whether (and to what extent) such organizations, institutions, and agencies are optimally located, and (2) whether certain areas are underserved. Collectively, this inventory provides important direction on where to allocate available resources.

2) Disconnected teens and young adults in Europe are referred to as NEETs (not in employment, education, or training). In the wake of 2008 economic crisis, the European Commission has made NEETs a central focus – the Youth on the Move initiative in 2010, the Youth Employment Initiative in 2012, the Youth Guarantee in 2013, Investing in Europe's Youth in 2016, a new ten-year EU Youth Strategy in 2018, and the list goes on. Top-down coordinated action and deployment of resources is very effective and brings about real change – but we need more of it. There are dozens of EU profiles on each country's NEET population. NEETS in Austria are different than those in Bulgaria or Croatia. Such systematic approaches and the development of city, county, and state OY profiles have been instrumental in moving the needle for thousands of NEETs in Europe.

Detailing the effectiveness of large-scale policy change and implementation is certainly outside the scope of this report. But we want to emphasize that the key to establishing and implementing comprehensive OY reform in California (or anywhere else) starts with knowing and understanding the data. As a caveat, this report will not inform readers everything there is to know about our state's OY population, but we hope that the data presented in the following sections serve as a catalyst for action as soon as possible.



CALIFORNIA'S OPPORTUNITY YOUTH POPULATION

California's economy, the largest in the US and fifth largest in the world, is comprised of multiple thriving industries that generate immense value in markets around the world. Despite its economic success, California is home to many residents who struggle to maintain, or all-together fail, to achieve some minimum level of financial, social, and emotional well-being. Recent data indicate that California has approximately 20% of the country's homeless population, and that one in seven residents live at or near the poverty line – many of whom are children and young adults.

One key contributing factor to rising poverty levels is teen and young adult disconnection from both school and work – two of the institutions that significantly facilitate healthy transitions to adulthood and shape life trajectories. In 2020, there were “4,738,943” young adults between the ages of 16-24 (ACS, 2020, 5-Yr Estimate) living in California – *over one in ten of these individuals (11.3%; “535,753”) were neither in school nor at work (i.e., disconnected). That rate (up from 10.3% in 2019) is believed to be an underestimate of the true percentage of California’s disconnected youth.*

Table 1 shows education and employment data for young adults (16-24) in California. The labor force participation rate (i.e., those who were employed and unemployed) was 51% (“2,429,986”) and close to half (46%; “2,186,844”) were not in the labor force at all (i.e., neither employed nor unemployed). With respect to education, over one in three (36%; “1,715,690”) young adults had not attended school in the past three months, while over half (56%; “2,654,970”) attended public school or college, and 8% (“368,283”) attended private school, private college, or were home schooled.

Table 1. Employment and Education Data (16-24-year-olds; 2020)

	No Sch. in Last 3 Mos.	In Public School / College	In Priv Sch / Priv Coll / Home Sch	Total
Employed at Work	1,095,510	884,040	125,179	2,104,729
Has Job, but Not at Work	30,186	26,316	4,935	61,437
Armed Forces	54,241	4,479	1,956	60,076
Unemployed	162,331	144,957	17,969	325,257
Not in Labor Force	373,422	1,595,178	218,244	2,186,844
Total	1,715,690	2,654,970	368,283	4,738,943

DISCONNECTED YOUTH BY ETHNICITY

In 2020, just under half of all young adults ages 16-24 identified as Hispanic/Latino (49%), and 13% of them were disconnected. In contrast, only 10% of their non-Hispanic/Latino counterparts were disconnected. This differential indicates that *Hispanic/Latino youth were 1.28 times more likely to be disconnected than non-Hispanic/Latino youth*. Young adults who identified as White, Asian, or Black comprised 84.2% of the 16-24-year-old population. *Although only 8% of all young adults were Black, 17% of them were disconnected*. White youth were less likely to be disconnected (11%) but comprised 61% of the young adult population.

Asian youth were far less likely to be disconnected relative to their Black and White counterparts. Finally, those youth who identified as Native American/Alaskan Native comprised only a small proportion of all 16-24-year-olds, but their disconnection was relatively high (13%). As is true in states, counties, and cities around the country, young adults who are Black and/or Hispanic/Latino are far more likely to be disconnected relative to their White counterparts.

Table 2. Disconnection by Race and Ethnicity (16-24-year-olds; 2020)

Ethnicity	Total	% of Total	Disconnected	% Disconnected
Hispanic/Latino	2,330,648	49.2%	296,545	12.7%
Non-Hispanic/Latino	2,408,295	50.8%	239,208	9.9%
Race	Total	% of Total	Disconnected	% Disconnected
Black (only)	379,210	8.0%	64,911	17.1%
White (only)	2,872,685	60.6%	314,589	11.0%
Asian (only)	736,234	15.5%	47,961	6.5%
Nat. Amer./Alaska Nat.	107,122	2.3%	13,827	12.9%



Table 3 below shows the number of OY in the 12 most populous counties in California as well as their rates of disconnection. Collectively, these counties are home to three quarters (76%) of the state's young adults (16-24), and 62% of the OY population (16-24).

Table 3. Opportunity Youth in California's 12 Most Populous Counties (16-24-year-olds; 2020)

#	County	Total OY	Disconnected	% Disconnected
1	Los Angeles	1,203,583	135,375	11.2%
2	San Diego	418,565	37,737	9.0%
3	Orange	373,967	28,762	7.7%
4	Riverside	308,922	40,331	13.1%
5	San Bernardino	287,747	44,666	15.5%
6	Santa Clara	207,857	14,001	6.7%
7	Alameda	174,142	14,528	8.3%
8	Sacramento	171,462	21,294	12.4%
9	Contra Costa	123,722	11,995	9.7%
10	Fresno	127,783	20,229	15.8%
11	Kern	117,706	22,588	19.2%
12	San Francisco	72,098	4,730	6.6%

Figures 1 through 4 show employment, educational enrollment, and disconnection data for young adults in California between 2010 and 2020. Importantly, disconnection may look different for teens aged 16-19 than it does for young adults aged 20-24. High school, for example, is likely to be the teens' primary activity until graduation, whereas many young adults are in a different phase of their lives and may engage in a broader array of activities. Examining disconnection for each sub-group separately then may reveal important trends that would otherwise be concealed. In Figures 1 and 2, for example, the unemployment rates and labor force participation of teens and young adults were quite different from each other between 2010 and 2020.

Teens were far more likely to be unemployed or not in the labor force, relative to their young adult counterparts. The situation is switched in Figure 3, wherein young adults are far more likely to be out of school, relative to their teen counterparts. These trends, as mentioned above are to be expected though – primary activities of the sub-groups differ (i.e., school and work).

EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION

Figure 1. Teen and Young Adult Unemployment Rates (2010-2020)

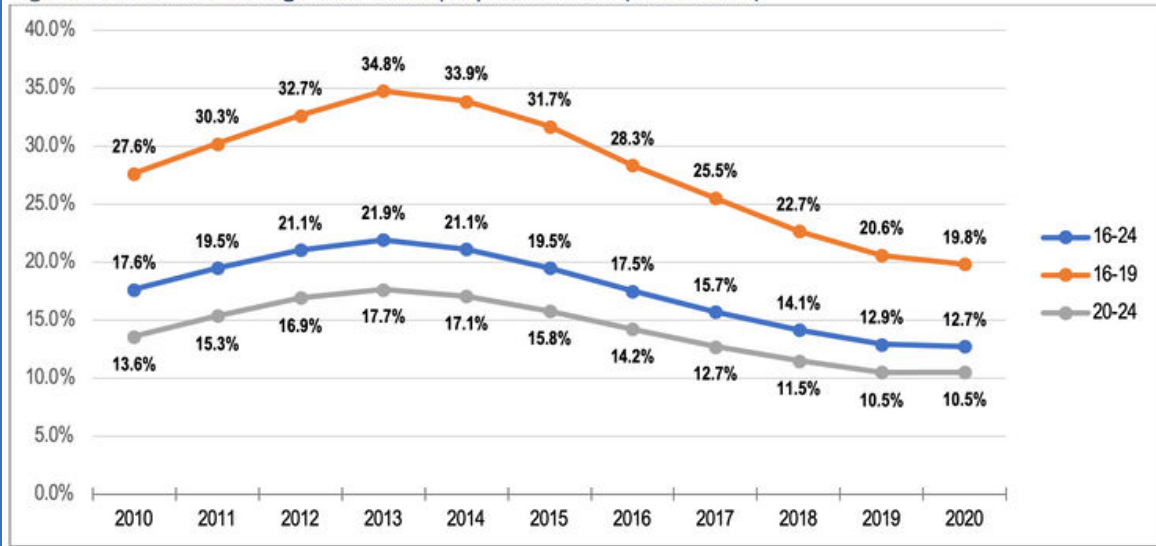
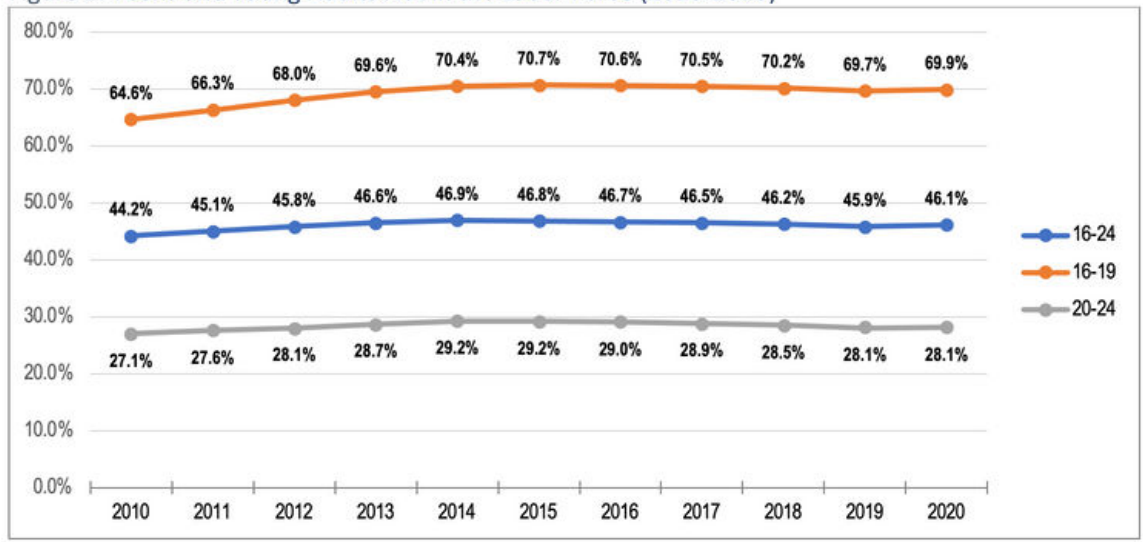
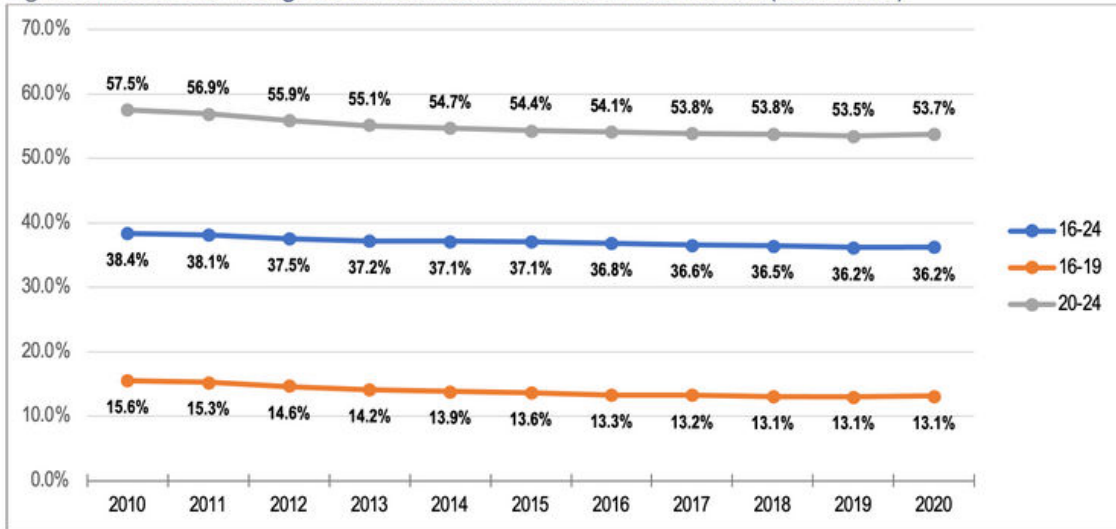


Figure 2. Teens and Young Adults Not in the Labor Force (2010-2020)



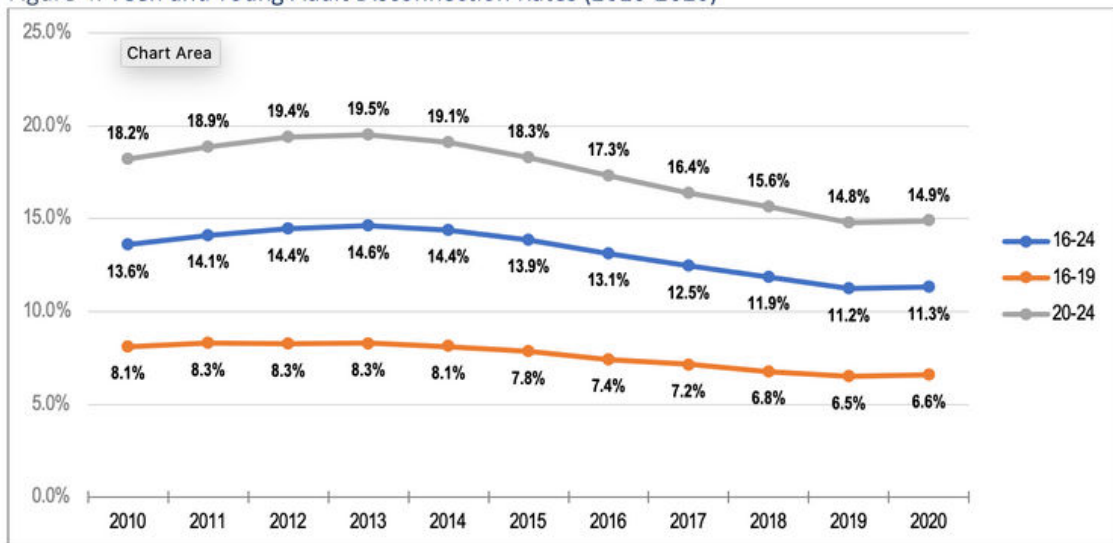
EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION

Figure 3. Teens and Young Adults Not in School in Last Three Months (2010-2020)



Results shown in Figures 1 through 3 above help to explain the disconnection rates shown in Figure 4. Part of the reason young adults (i.e., 20-24-year-olds) are disconnected at a higher rate is because of so many of them are either unemployed or not in the labor force and are out of school. While many teens are also unemployed or not in the labor force, there far are fewer who are not in school. Therefore, the overall disconnection rates of 16-24-year-olds is disproportionately comprised of disconnected 20-24-year-olds. The fact that so of these young adults are unemployed or out of the labor force contributes to their high disconnection rates. To help lower disconnection rates, attention should be focused on connecting more 20-24-year-olds to the labor market and more 16-19-year-olds to school. The good news is that between 2010 and 2020, disconnection rates have decreased significantly after spiking in 2013.

Figure 4. Teen and Young Adult Disconnection Rates (2010-2020)



HARSH REALITIES OF DISCONNECTED YOUTH

It is well-known that young adults, ages 16-24, who are neither in school nor working tend to be significantly disadvantaged relative to their connected counterparts. In Figure 5, we compare and contrast disconnected and connected teens (ages 16-19) on a number of situational variables.

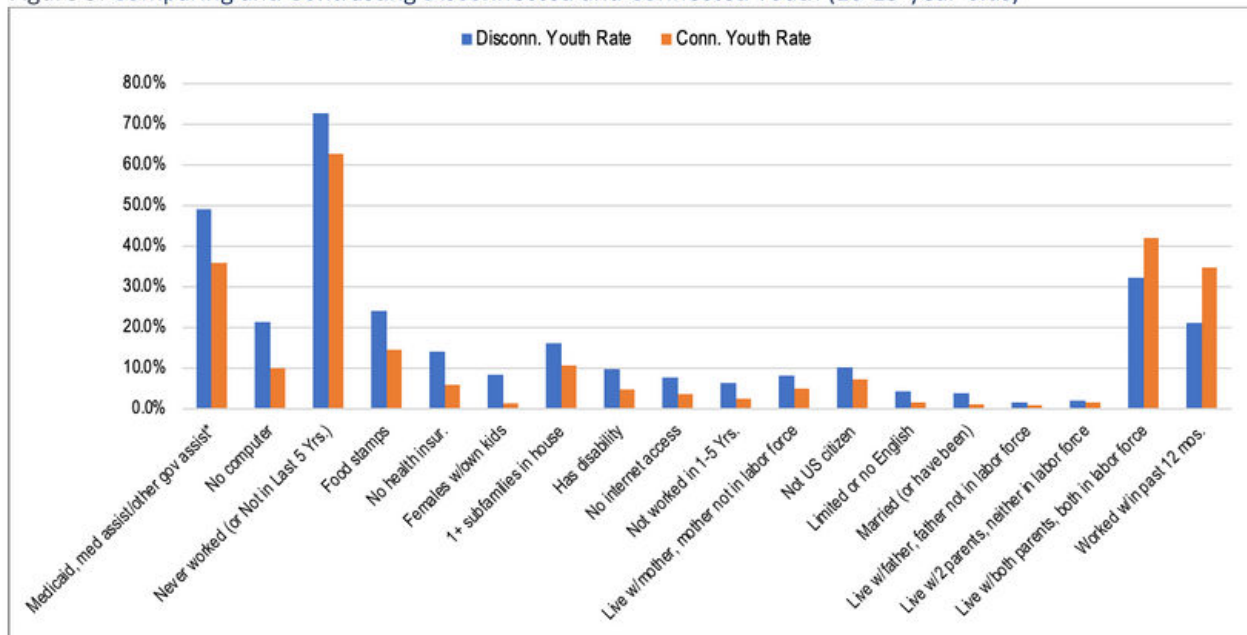
As shown below, disconnected teens are significantly more likely to:

- Receive government assistance for those with low incomes or disabilities
- Receive food stamps
- Have kids of their own

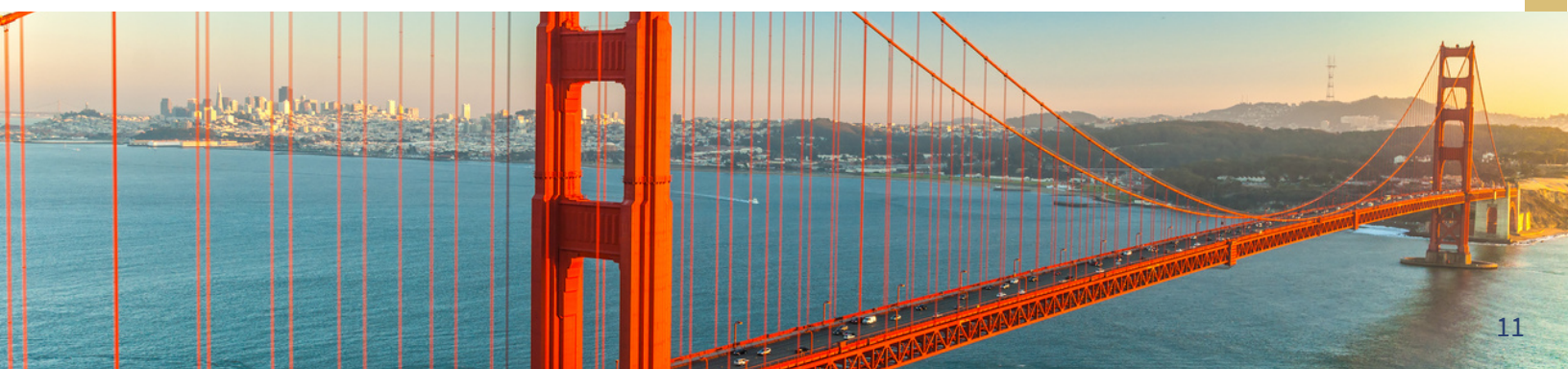
Disconnected teens are significantly less likely to:

- Have a computer
- Have health insurance
- Live with both parents, with both in the workforce

Figure 5. Comparing and Contrasting Disconnected and Connected Youth (16-19-year-olds)



*Note: For those who are low income or have a disability



HARSH REALITIES OF DISCONNECTED YOUTH

In Figure 6, we compare and contrast disconnected and connected young adults (ages 20-24) on a number of situational variables.

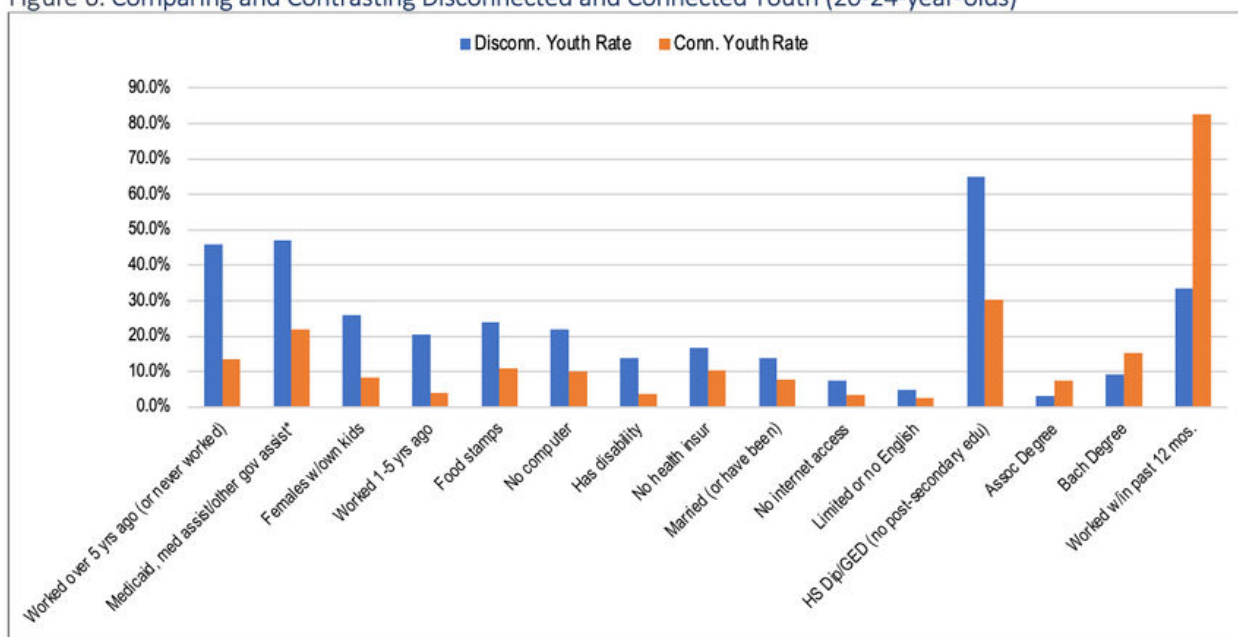
As shown below, disconnected young adults are significantly more likely to:

- Have worked only five years ago (or never worked)
- Receive government assistance for those with low incomes or disabilities
- Have kids of their own
- Receive food stamps
- Have a disability

Disconnected young adults are significantly less likely to:

- Have a computer
- Have health insurance
- Have any post-secondary education
- Have worked within the past 12 months

Figure 6. Comparing and Contrasting Disconnected and Connected Youth (20-24-year-olds)



*Note: For those who are low income or have a disability

In the remainder of this report, we provide summary data on California's population as a whole, and then focus indicators of where resources are needed to improve not just the lives of OY but other residents across the state.

PROFILE OF CALIFORNIA

Covering 155,812.8 square miles, California is the third largest state by area. And, with an overall population of 39,538,223, it is the most populous state in the country (US Census Bureau, 2020).

The data in Figure 7 below provide a snapshot of California in 2020.



39, 538, 223

Total Population



\$78,672

Median Household Income



34.7%

Bachelor's Degree or Higher



59.4%

Employment Rate



14,392,140

Number of Total Housing Units



7.2%

Without Healthcare Coverage



966,224

Number of Employer Establishments



13,103,114

Total Households

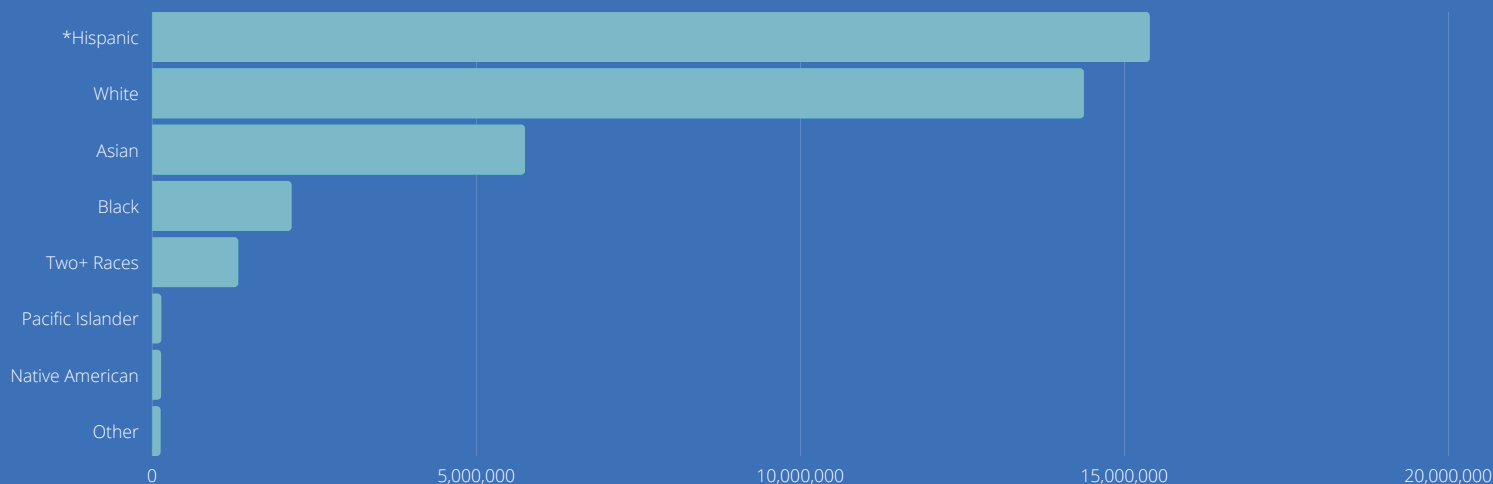


15,579,652

Hispanic or Latino (Of Any Race)

CALIFORNIA RACE & ETHNICITY DATA

Figure 8: California Race and Ethnicity Data (2020, ACS 2016-20 5 Yr. Estimate)



Despite minor source differences in race/ethnicity data, according to the American Community Survey (ACS, 2016-2020, 5 Yr. Estimates) nearly 40% of all California residents (39%, “15,380,929”) were Hispanic or Latino (of any race). As further shown below, a substantial portion of residents were either White (37%) or Asian (15%), and a smaller percentage were Black (5%) or two or more races. Significantly smaller percentages identified as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Native American/Alaska Native, or some other race. According to state data, for the first time in a long time, the population of California is expected to stop growing at the high rate it’s been growing over the past two decades. In fact, by 2060, data models suggest that the population will likely be around 45 million (only about 5 million more than it is now).



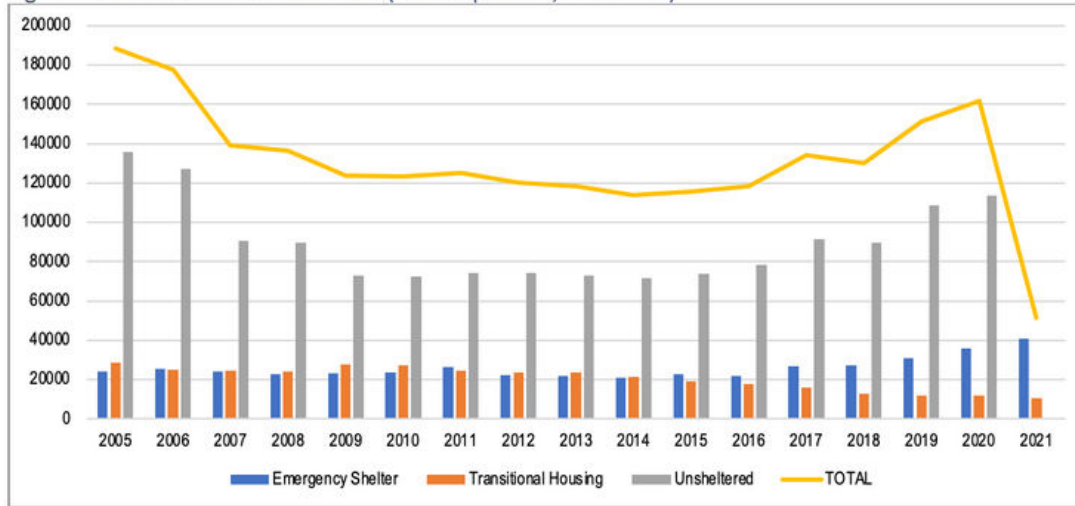
POVERTY IN CALIFORNIA

In 2019, prior to the pandemic, close to 7 million Californians lived below the poverty level, which was about 17% of the state's population (or about one in six individuals; US Census Bureau Supplemental Poverty Measure, 2019). At that rate, California had the highest poverty rate in the country – more than Louisiana and Mississippi. According to the California Poverty Measure (CPM), another indicator which considers regional differences in housing prices and the impact of government transfer programs (e.g., CalWORKS and CalFresh), approximately 35% of the state's population lived at or near the poverty level.

The federal stimulus packages were credited with reversing poverty rates – instead of increasing, poverty decreased in California from 2019 to 2020 (Public Policy Institute of California). Safety net programs in general have served to reduce the number of Californians living in poverty, but their effect varies across the state. Additionally, poverty continues to remain high among children, senior citizens, Latinos, less-educated adults, and immigrants.

HOMELESSNESS

Figure 9. California Homelessness Data (Total Population; 2005-2021)



California has the highest homeless population than any other state and unfortunately the situation is getting worse. In 2020, for example California had 113,660 unsheltered people, which accounted for more than half of the entire US unsheltered population (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020). According to California's Department of Education, there were 171,714 homeless K-12 students in 2021-22 year, the vast majority of whom were Hispanic/Latino. Figure 9 above shows the homelessness population in California from 2005 to 2021 (data from 2021 is incomplete). Despite improvements in the earlier part of the century, homelessness numbers have been on the rise 2014.

Figure 10. Homelessness Data for 18-24-year-olds (2013-2021)

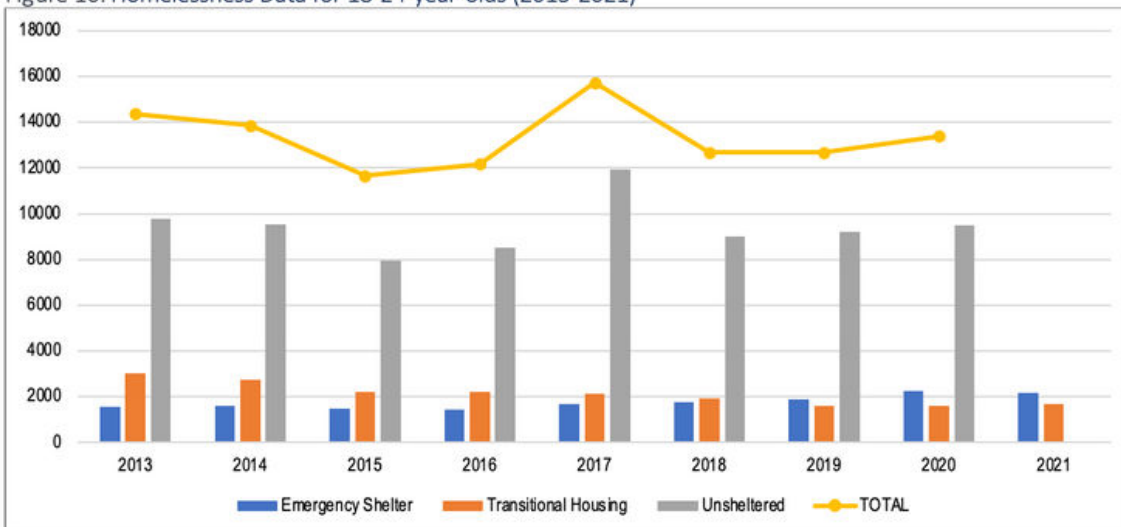


Figure 10 above shows homelessness data for 18-24-year-olds from 2013 to 2021 (incomplete data). Since 2013, the number of homeless young adults has fluctuated between 12,000 and 16,000 and has recently been on the rise. The vast majority of this population is unsheltered, which significantly increases their chances of negative outcomes. Figure 10 below shows homelessness data for 18-24-year-olds from 2013 to 2021 (incomplete data). Since 2013, the number of homeless young adults has fluctuated between 12,000 and 16,000 and has recently been on the rise. The vast majority of this population is unsheltered, which significantly increases their chances of negative outcomes.

FOOD INSECURITY IN CALIFORNIA

According to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), food insecurity refers to a lack of “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life”. Feeding America conducts its annual Map the Meal Gap study to better understand food insecurity and the costs at the local level. In 2019, the latest published data indicated that, in the overall population, 4,011,960 people in California were food insecure (10% insecurity rate). In the same year, 1,205,260 children were food insecure (14% insecurity rate). Furthermore, a surprising 32% of the food insecure children were likely income ineligible for federal nutritional programs. The average meal cost in 2019 was \$3.26, and the annual budget shortfall was \$2,233,636,000.

These data indicate progress relative to the previous two years, wherein both the number of food insecure people and the insecurity rate were higher. Food insecurity data for 2020 and 2021 has not yet been collected and Feeding America has stated that their projections for 2020 and 2021 are no longer considered current and have removed this information from their site.

Table 4. Food Insecurity in California

Year	# Food Insecure People		Food Insecurity Rate		Average Meal Cost	Annual Budget Shortfall*
	Overall	Children	Overall	Children		
2019	4,011,960	1,205,260	10.2%	13.6%	\$3.26	\$2,233,636,000
2018	4,291,830	1,362,340	10.8%	15.2%	\$3.28	\$2,385,968,000
2017	4,354,400	1,638,430	11.0%	18.1%	\$3.20	\$2,381,146,000

*Note: Indicates the total annualized additional dollar amount food-insecure individuals reported needing, on average, to buy just enough food to meet their needs.



CONCLUSION

The overall purpose of this report is to describe, at a high level, the OY population in California. Realities on the ground are harsh, but not just for disconnected youth. Underserved populations often face multiple challenges, such as poverty, homelessness, and food insecurity. For this reason, we included relevant data on groups of individuals across the state who are in dire need of resources and support.

Given this data, we know there needs to be change on how we address Opportunity Youth populations throughout the state. There are many local examples of integrated publicly and privately funded programs, services, and resources focused on preventing disconnection and/or facilitating re-connection have been established and implemented – albeit with varying levels of success.

Every local community needs a robust and coordinated network comprised of the right public and community agencies, organizations, and institutions that work together and are intentional in their efforts and actions.

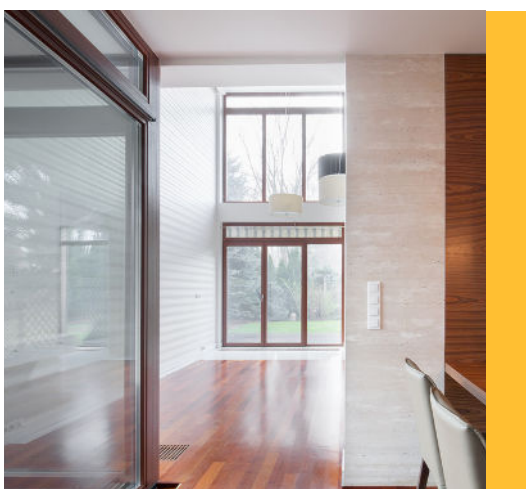
Coordinated and collaborative action, supported by the state and implemented at the local level, will almost certainly increase the educational, workforce, and well-being outcomes for California's disconnected youth populations. We emphasize that any organized effort to remove barriers and increase opportunities requires an understanding of who these teens and young adults are, their geographical distribution, and the factors that have contributed to their disconnection.



We also know that much more can and should be done to support the state's disconnected youth. It is our hope that the data shared in this report will not only increase the awareness and discussion, but also facilitate an exchange of ideas. This initial report serves as an urgent call for actions be taken as soon as possible to support the state's disconnected youth in being reconnected to educational institutions, career opportunities, and health and mental health supports.



New Ways to Work, California Opportunity Youth Network (COYN), and their network of partners will be developing concrete policy recommendations for the state and local policy makers through continuous outreach and collaborative discussions. These recommendations will aim to help establish more coherent educational, labor market, and social policies to help more young people get back on track and live more meaningful and enriching lives.



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New Ways to Work and California Opportunity Youth Network believe in the capacity and capability of all young people in this state to achieve their potential. We also believe that the teens and young adults who are neither in school nor at work should be viewed as reservoir of untapped potential on which all our futures depend. We also thank the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, Tipping Point Community, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, and the Stuart Foundation in supporting the work of New Ways, COYN and our partners working so hard to connect or reconnect young people to school and work.