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OPPORTUNITY YOUTH IN THE CITY OF LONG BEACH A HIGH-LEVEL OVERVIEW



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The Long Beach community comprises of passionate supporters of young people where leaders, practitioners, partners, and young people have shaped the planning, coordination, and most importantly the implementation of programs and policies that expand opportunity for the next generation of Long Beach youth. We hope this report can further strengthen and galvanize change young people and the city at large.

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Sincerely,
Ari & Melanie



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Executive Summary

All young people deserve connection to resources, supportive relationships, and meaningful opportunities that promote their long-term well-being. Opportunity Youth—young people ages 16 to 24 who are neither in school nor working—face significant gaps in these essential supports. In 2023, an estimated 6,189 youth in Long Beach experienced disconnection, representing 9.8% of the city's youth population. While this reflects substantial progress over the last decade, a 20% spike in disconnection between 2022 and 2023 signals emerging challenges that demand urgent, sustained action.

This moment presents an important opportunity for Long Beach to deepen its focus on data-driven, equity-centered strategies that expand economic mobility, educational access, and the need for holistic stability, a combination of academic, economic, relational, and emotional security that enables young people to thrive.

Key Findings

Employment and School Enrollment: Among Opportunity Youth ages 19–24 not enrolled in school, 5,174 were disconnected: 3,236 were not in the labor force and 1,938 were unemployed.

Age Disparities: Disconnection is concentrated among young adult, youth ages 20–24 account for 75% of all Opportunity Youth in Long Beach, with a disconnection rate far higher than that of teens (16–19). This underscores the need for stronger postsecondary, employment, and transition-age supports.

Racial and Ethnic Disparities: Black and Latino youth bear a disproportionate share of disconnection. In 2023, Black youth experienced a 21% disconnection rate, and Latino youth accounted for 61% of all Opportunity Youth, reflecting longstanding systemic inequities across education, employment, and access to opportunity.

Educational Attainment: Opportunity Youth in Long Beach have significantly lower levels of educational attainment, with 77% holding only a high school diploma or less. Among 23-year-old OY, nearly 98% had no education beyond high school, and almost one in five did not complete high school at all. By age 24, the pattern persists, with over 85% still having at most a high school diploma, underscoring a critical need for stronger postsecondary and skills-training pathways.

Geographic Disparities: Neighborhoods in Long Beach are experiencing vastly uneven outcomes. The Southwest/Port area had the highest disconnection rate at 24.3%, accounting for 41% of all Opportunity Youth in the city. North Long Beach also held a large share (30.5% of all Opportunity Youth) but showed measurable progress compared to 2019.

Key Definitions

To maintain clarity and consistency, this report includes key definitions for frequently used terms:

- **Development Programs:** Initiatives designed to improve the employability of individuals, particularly young people. These programs typically include job training, career counseling, internships, apprenticeships, and other forms of support aimed at helping youth transition into the workforce.
- **Disconnection Rate:** The percentage of youth within a specific sub-group who were disconnected (i.e., neither in school nor employed). This metric is used to gauge the prevalence of youth disconnection in a population.
- **Employed:** Individuals who worked for pay or profit during the reference period, including those temporarily absent from work.
- **Not in the Labor Force:** Individuals who are neither employed nor actively looking for work, such as students, caregivers, or retirees.
- **Opportunity Youth (OY):** Young Adults between the ages of 16-24 who are neither in school nor employed (i.e., disconnected). While the term generally refers to those outside the education system and workforce, locally it also includes youth who experience homelessness/ housing insecurity, child welfare involvement, and/or juvenile justice systems. These specific experiences, however, cannot be identified in American Community Survey (ACS) data--yet we know these populations are predictive indicators of disconnection. In this report, OY and disconnected youth refer to 16-24-year-olds who are neither in school nor working.
- **Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs):** All data in this report comes from the American Community Survey (ACS), which provides estimates at the county, city, and PUMA levels. PUMAs – non-overlapping statistical geographic units defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, each containing at least 100,000 residents – are smaller than counties but larger than census tracts, allowing for localized demographic, economic, and housing analysis while maintaining respondent confidentiality.

- **Unemployed:** Individuals without a job who are actively seeking work and available to start.
- **Youth Engagement:** The involvement of young people in meaningful activities such as education, employment, or community service, which contribute to their personal development and societal integration.

Introduction

Long Beach's youth population reflects the city's broader demographic complexity. As one of the most racially and ethnically diverse cities in the country – with large Latino (45%) and Black (12%) populations, and significant Cambodian and Filipino communities – Long Beach is shaped by its cultural diversity, economic disparities, and linguistic variety. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, over 66,000 residents (approximately 15%) live in poverty, and nearly one in five speak English “less than very well,” underscoring the importance of culturally responsive education and workforce systems.

Opportunity Youth – young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor employed – represent both a challenge and an opportunity for Long Beach. In 2023, an estimated 6,189 youth (Figure 1) met this definition, accounting for 9.8% of the city's youth population. While this is a substantial decrease from the 23.1% recorded in 2014, disconnection remains highly concentrated among older youth, youth of color, and those with lower levels of educational attainment.

This brief provides a data-driven snapshot of the current landscape for Opportunity Youth (OY) in Long Beach. **Drawing on recent American Community Survey estimates, it examines disconnection trends over time, the intersection of education and employment, demographic and socioeconomic disparities, and geographic concentrations of disconnection.** The findings are intended to inform and support implementation of the Long Beach Youth Strategic Plan, which calls for coordinated, cross-sector action to expand equitable opportunities and improve outcomes for all young people. The goal is to support a system of education, workforce, and wraparound services that is more inclusive and responsive to youth needs.

Long Beach Opportunity Youth (2014-2023)

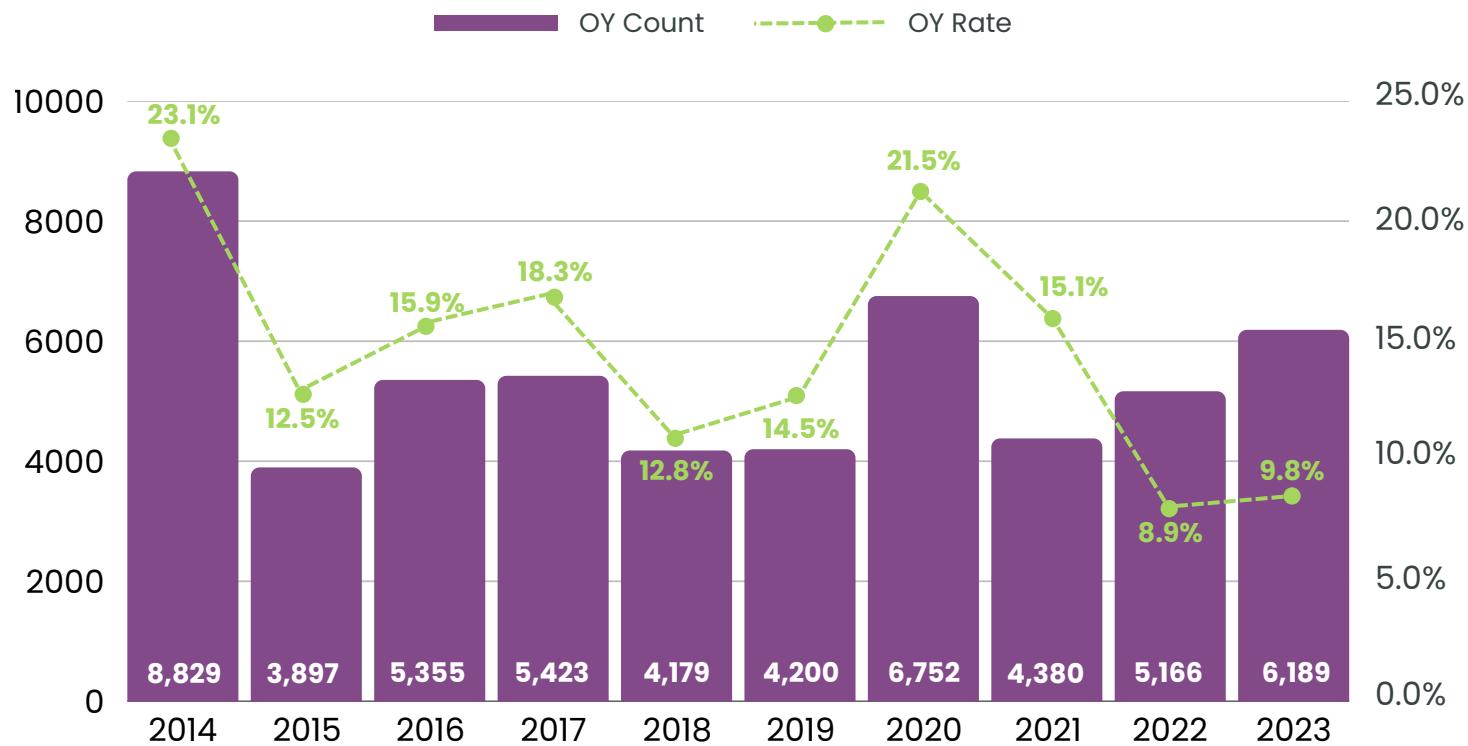
Over the past decade, the City of Long Beach has made significant progress in reducing the number and rate of young people disconnected from school and work. **As shown in Figure 1 below, in 2014, more than 8,800 youth ages 16 to 24 – over 23% of the total age group – were classified as OY.** This unusually high figure likely reflects a combination of factors, including persistently elevated youth unemployment following the Great Recession, rising housing and living costs that strained many families, and gaps in education and workforce pathways for young adults during that period. In addition, sampling variability inherent in survey-based estimates can contribute to noticeable year-to-year shifts, particularly in smaller populations. In the years that followed, the disconnection rate declined steadily as the economy recovered, local graduation rates improved, and more pathways to employment and training became available. **By 2023, the number of OY fell to just over 6,100, representing 9.8% of the city's youth population.**



While the overall decline in disconnection over the past decade reflects meaningful progress, the trend has been uneven. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a sharp rise in disconnection, with rates increasing from 14.5% in 2019 to 21.5% in 2020. Though rates declined post-pandemic, the recent increase from 2022 to 2023 – when the number of Opportunity Youth rose by more than 1,000, a nearly 20% increase – highlights the need for sustained engagement efforts.

Since the peak in 2020, disconnection has declined overall but remains above pre-pandemic levels in raw numbers. The growth in disconnected youth between 2022 and 2023 suggests that economic recovery may have been uneven and that ongoing structural barriers to education and employment continue to affect many young people. This trend underscores the importance of sustained investment in youth engagement strategies, especially those that target young adults transitioning out of high school and into work or postsecondary pathways.

Figure 1. OY Counts and Rates in Long Beach (2014–2023)



***Note:** According to Measure of America, 2020 data is likely to underestimate the number of OY.
Source: Authors' compilation based on IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Teen & Young Adult Employment & School Enrollment



A closer look at employment and education reveals important differences between teens (ages 16-18) and young adults (ages 19-24) in Long Beach. As shown in Table 1 below, nearly all teens (92%) were enrolled in school – most of whom were not employed, suggesting they were still in high school and not yet participating in the labor market. Those not in school made up a small share of teens but were far more likely to be unemployed or out of the labor force, placing them at higher risk of disconnection.

Among young adults, the picture was more mixed. **In 2023, 27,857 young adults (ages 19-24) were enrolled in school, while 15,995 were not. Among those not enrolled, 3,236 were not in the labor force and 1,938 were unemployed, totaling 5,174 disconnected youth.** This group accounts for the majority of OY in Long Beach.

These patterns underscore the importance of reaching young adults who are out of school and not connected to work – many of whom may have completed high school but face barriers to further education, stable employment, or training opportunities.

Given Long Beach's role as a major public sector employer – including the Port, city departments, and local institutions – expanding early career pipelines into public service represents a significant opportunity. Investing in internships, apprenticeships, and training partnerships with the public sector could create high-quality, stable employment pathways for Opportunity Youth.

For reference, this analysis defines “unemployed” as individuals who are not currently working but are actively seeking work. “Not in the labor force” includes individuals who are neither working nor looking for work – such as youth who may be caregiving, managing a disability, or otherwise disengaged from the labor market.

Table 1. Teen and Young Adult Employment and Enrollment Status (All 16-24-year-olds)

	16-18			19-24			16-24		
	In Sch	Not in Sch	Total	In Sch	Not in Sch	Total	In Sch	Not in Sch	Total
Employed	1,646	541	2,187	14,084	10,821	24,905	15,730	11,362	27,092
Not in Labor Force	16,038	691	16,729	12,283	3,236	15,519	28,321	3,927	32,248
Unemployed	171	324	495	1,490	1,938	3,428	1,661	2,262	3,923
Total	17,855	1,556	19,411	27,857	15,995	43,852	45,712	17,551	63,263
OY Count (Rate)	1,015 (5.2%)			5,174 (11.8%)			6,189 (9.8%)		

Note: Figures in yellow refer to raw OY count

Source: Authors' compilation based on IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Disconnection by Age (2023)



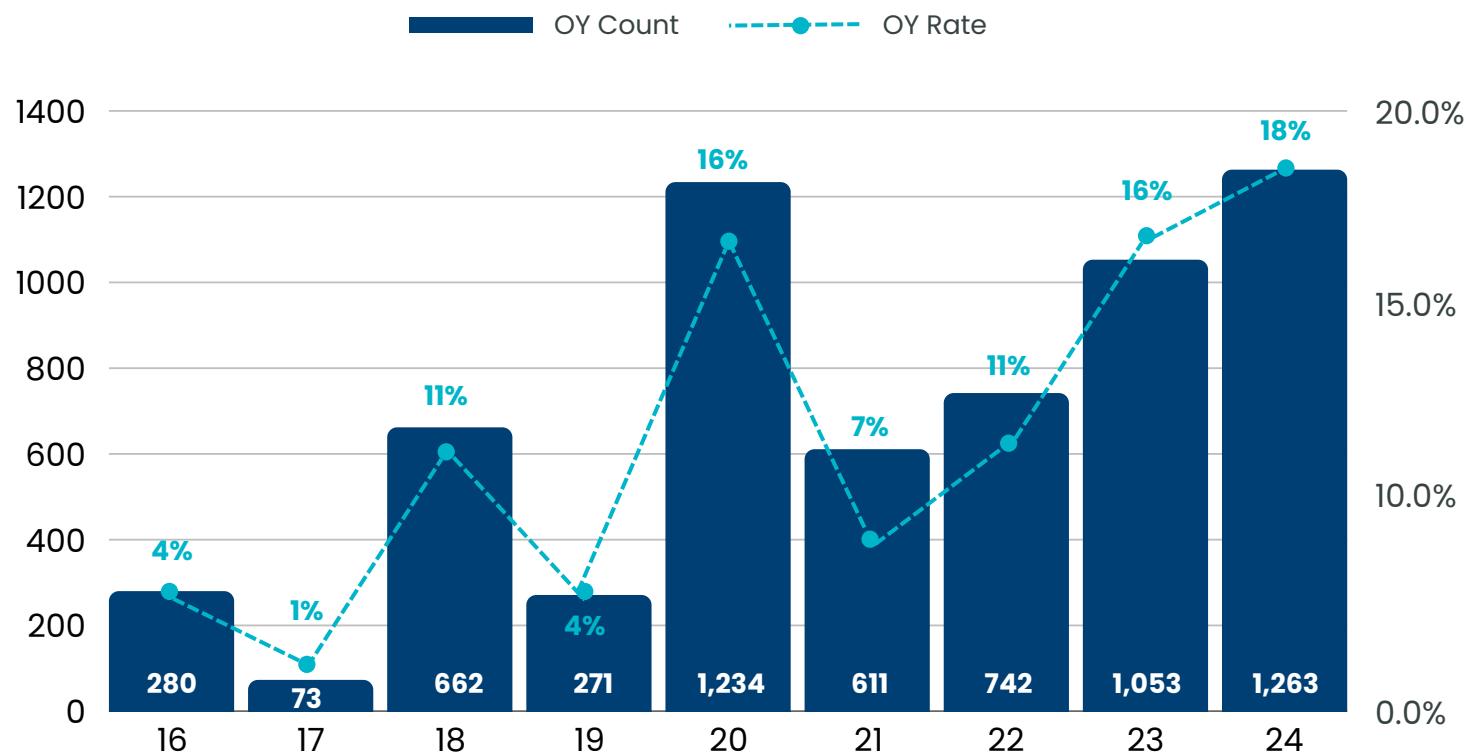
Age-specific data, shown in Figure 2, revealed sharp increases in disconnection beginning at age 18 and continuing through the early twenties. In 2023, just 1%-4% of 16- and 17-year-olds were disconnected – largely because nearly all were still enrolled in school. By age 18, however, disconnection increased to 11%, and by age 24, it climbed to 18%. **The most significant concentration of OY occurred between ages 20 and 24, which together accounted for more than 75% of the city's OY population.**

Notably, the data show a brief decline in the disconnection rate between ages 18 and 19, dropping from 11% to 4%. While this may appear counterintuitive, it likely reflects sampling variability in the underlying data rather than a meaningful change in youth engagement. Year-to-year and age-specific fluctuations are common in survey-based estimates, particularly when working with smaller subpopulations. The broader trend remains clear: disconnection tends to rise steadily through early adulthood, and rates between ages 20 and 24 underscore this pattern.

This age-based trajectory illustrates a critical window of vulnerability. While many young people remain engaged in high school during their teen years, they often face steep challenges after graduation – especially if they do not pursue or complete college. Employment instability, caregiving responsibilities, lack of career direction, and systemic inequities all contribute to the risk of disconnection during this transitional period.

Addressing these challenges requires focused strategies that support young adults during and after the high school-to-postsecondary transition, including paid work-based learning, career navigation, and wraparound support services.

Figure 2. Disconnection by Age (2023)



Source: Authors' compilation based on IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Disconnection by Race & Ethnicity



To provide a clear view of structural disparities unaffected by the temporary disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, this analysis illustrated in Figure 3, compares current disconnection rates to 2019 as a pre-pandemic baseline. Opportunity Youth in Long Beach were not evenly distributed across racial and ethnic groups, reflecting longstanding disparities in education and employment.

In 2023, Black youth experienced the highest disconnection rate at 21%, an increase from 16% in 2019.

Although Black youth represent a smaller share of the city's overall youth population, they accounted for roughly one in five OY. Specifically, Black teens and young adults comprised approximately 9.4% of all 16-24-year-olds in Long Beach but accounted for 20% of the OY population, highlighting a significant overrepresentation.

Latino youth (Hispanic/Latino of any race) comprised the largest share of OY in absolute terms, with 3,804 disconnected individuals in 2023 – 61% of all OY in the city – and a disconnection rate that remained steady at 11% in both 2019 and 2023.

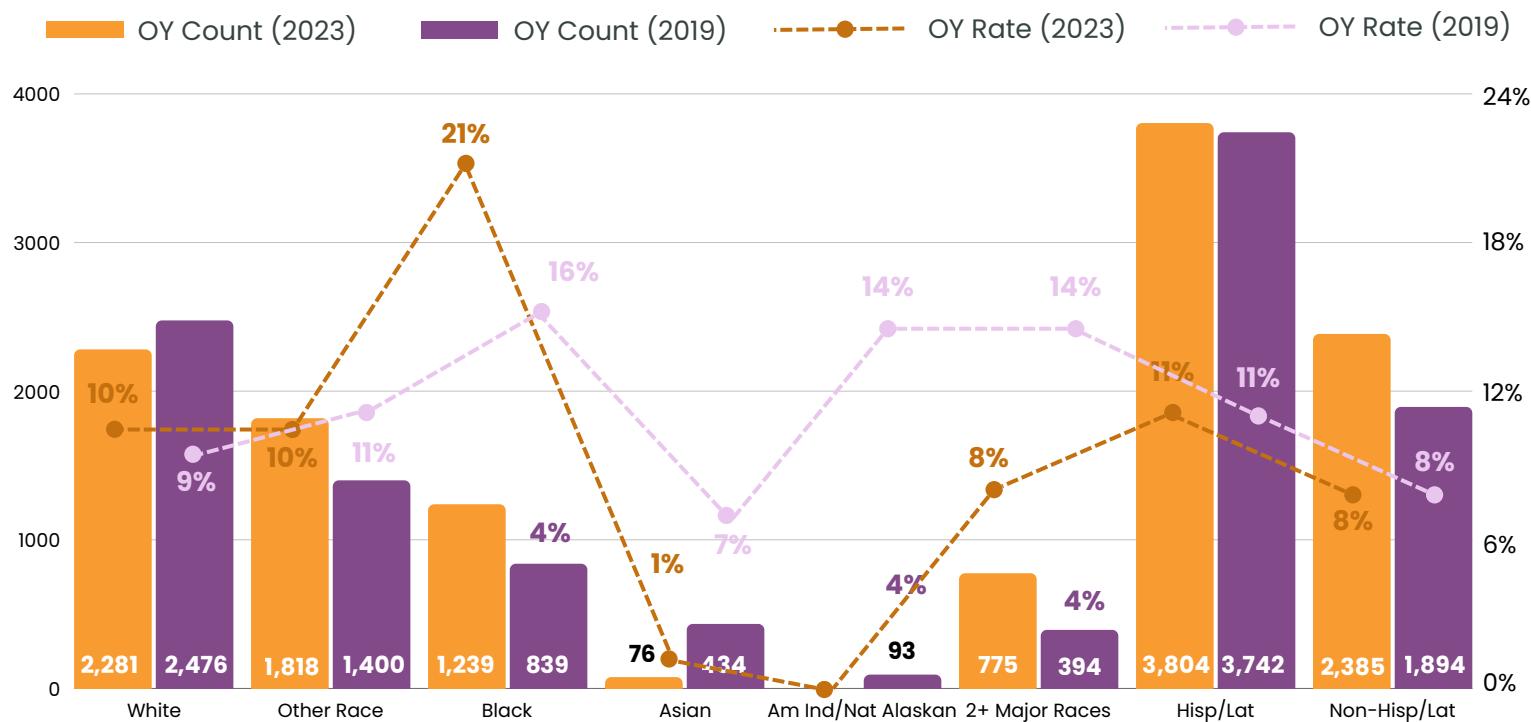
In contrast, White youth had a disconnection rate of 10%, comparable to youth classified as Other Race (10%), though White youth made up a larger numerical share of the total disconnected population.

Youth identifying as two or more races saw their disconnection rate decline from 14% in 2019 to 8% in 2023, but this group still represented 775 disconnected individuals. Asian youth experienced the lowest disconnection rate in 2023, at just 1%, a sharp drop from 7% in 2019. No American Indian or Alaska Native youth were identified as disconnected, though the small sample size means this figure should be interpreted with caution.

Looking across ethnicity, Hispanic/Latino youth had a higher disconnection rate (11%) than non-Hispanic youth (8%) in 2023. While this gap has fluctuated over time – with each group at times experiencing the higher rate – it underscores persistent inequities tied to language access, educational opportunity, and economic barriers. **Given that nearly one in five Long Beach residents speak English less than “very well,” programs must ensure full access for immigrant, refugee, and mixed-status youth.** Language access, culturally rooted supports, and trusted messengers are essential for outreach that is inclusive and responsive to the city’s diverse communities.

Together, these patterns highlight the need for targeted outreach and culturally responsive engagement strategies, particularly for Black and Latino youth, who continue to face disproportionately high rates of disconnection.

Figure 3. Disconnection by Race and Ethnicity



Source: Authors’ compilation based on IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Disconnection and Educational Attainment (19–24 Yr. Olds)



As shown in Figure 4, the data reveal stark contrasts in educational attainment between young adults disconnected from school and work and their engaged peers. Among OY, just over three out of four (77%) had at most a high school diploma or less:

-> **20.5%** did not complete high school (12th grade or less, no diploma)
-> **56.6%** held a high school diploma or GED as their highest level of education

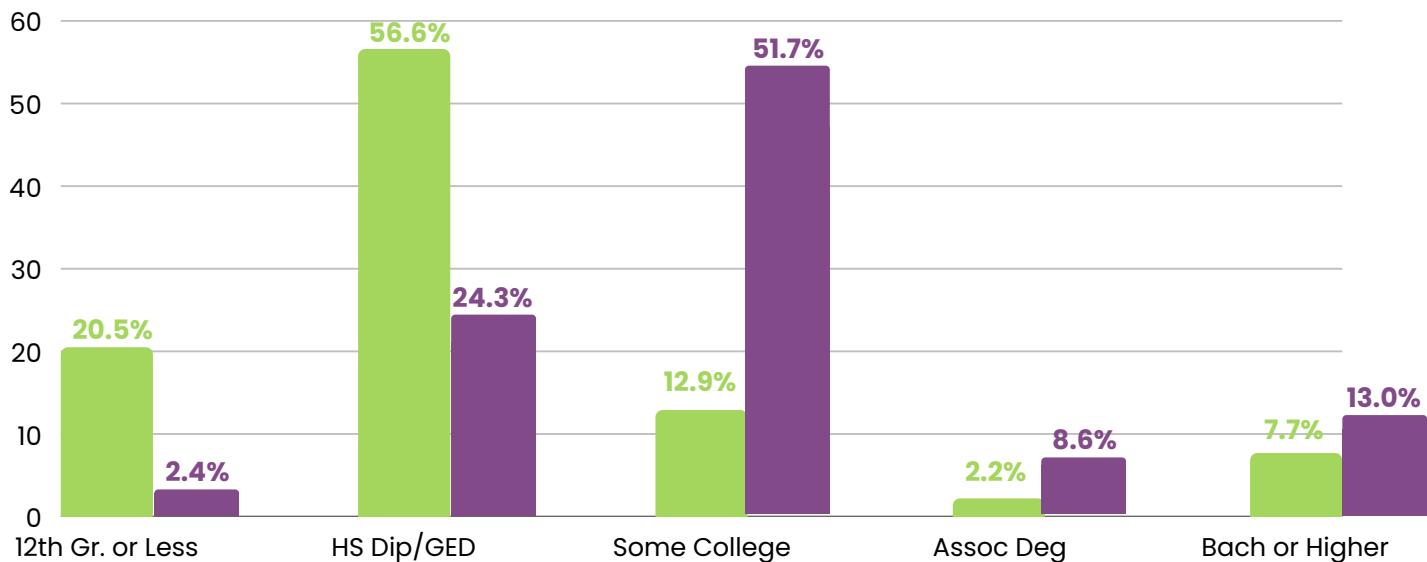
In contrast, the majority of their non-OY peers had progressed beyond secondary education. Over half of non-OY (51.7%) had some college experience without a degree, and another 21.6% had completed a postsecondary credential (associate, bachelor's, or higher):

-> **8.6%** held an associate degree
-> **13.0%** earned a bachelor's degree or higher

Only 2.4% of non-OY lacked a high school diploma, a striking gap compared to the 20.5% among OY.

These patterns underscore the strong relationship between educational attainment and disconnection from school and work. The disproportionate concentration of OY among those with lower levels of education highlights both the barriers many young adults face in completing postsecondary credentials and the importance of expanding pathways to further education and training.

Figure 4. Comparing Educational Attainment of OY and Non-OY (19-24-Year-Olds; 2023)



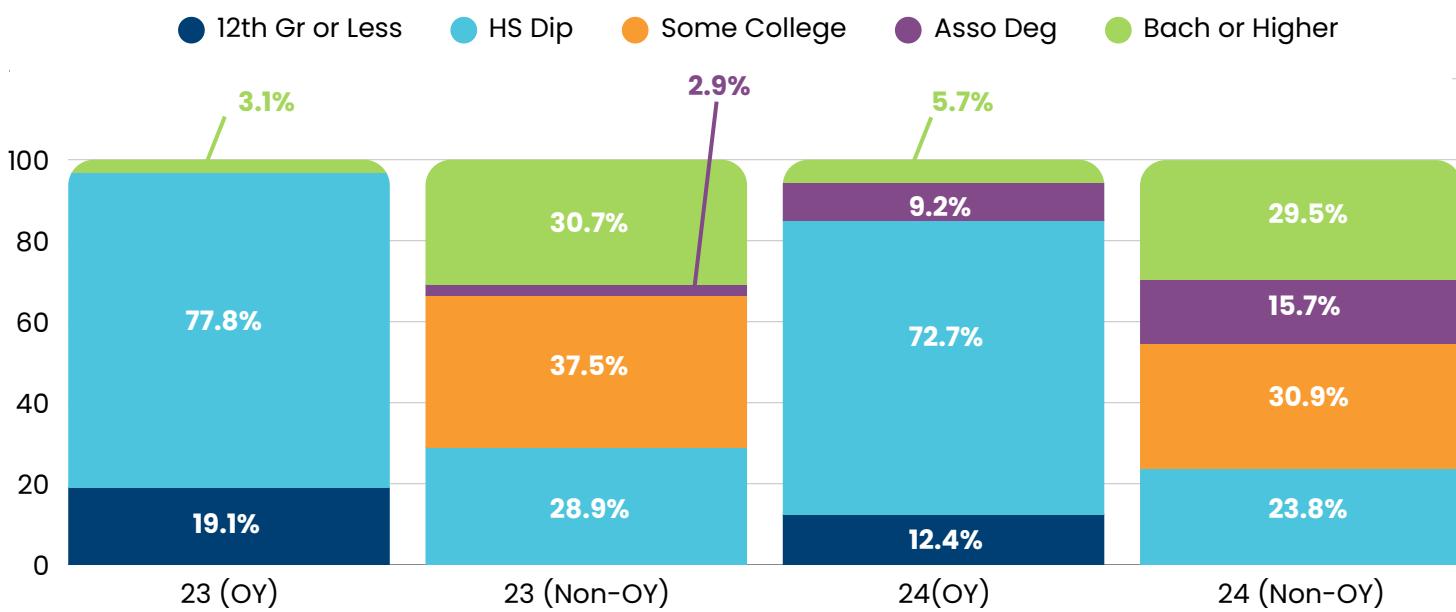
Source: Authors' compilation based on IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

When examined by single year of age, the gaps in educational attainment between OY and their peers remain consistent, with only modest variation between 23- and 24-year-olds. **Figure 5 below shows that among 23-year-old Opportunity Youth, nearly 98% held no more than a high school diploma or GED. Specifically, 77.8% had completed high school but had not pursued additional education, while 19.1% had not finished high school.** In contrast, 23-year-olds who were working or enrolled in school had much higher levels of educational attainment: over 30% held a bachelor's degree or higher, and 37.5% had completed some college coursework without earning a degree.

At age 24, the pattern remained similar. Over 85% of Opportunity Youth had a high school diploma or less – 72.7% held a diploma or GED, and 12.4% did not complete high school. Notably, a small share (9.2%) had earned an associate degree. Among non-OY 24-year-olds, educational attainment was substantially higher: nearly 30% held a bachelor's degree, and almost one-third had some college experience.

Across both ages, the absence of postsecondary credentials among Opportunity Youth stands in sharp contrast to their peers. These data reinforce the strong association between disconnection and limited educational attainment, suggesting that outreach and re-engagement efforts may be most effective when they incorporate pathways to college enrollment and completion.

Figure 5. Comparing Educational Attainment of Older OY and Non-OY (23- & 24-Year-Olds; 2023)



Source: Authors' compilation based on IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Comparing Socioeconomic & Employment Characteristics



Opportunity Youth in Long Beach face a distinct set of socioeconomic and employment challenges compared to their connected peers. As Figure 6 below shows, these disparities span educational attainment, work experience, poverty, and access to health care and benefits.

Among disconnected youth, 77% had no education beyond high school, compared to just 27% of connected youth.

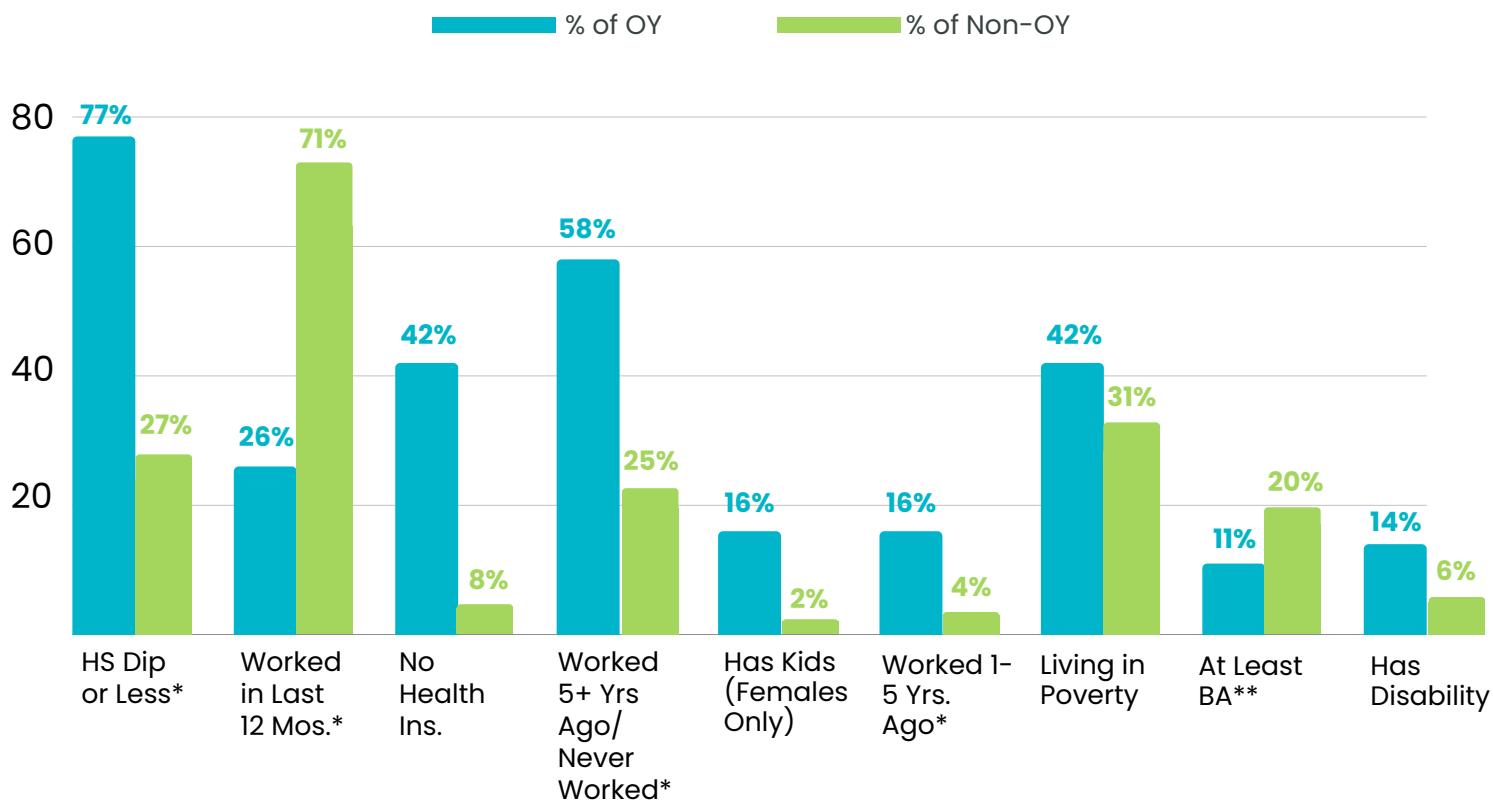
Employment differences were especially stark: only 26% of OY worked in the past 12 months, while 71% of connected youth did so. More than half of disconnected young people (58%) had either never worked or last worked more than five years ago.

Disconnection is also linked to higher rates of economic hardship and limited access to health coverage. 42% of OY lacked health insurance, and 42% lived below the poverty line – substantially higher than the rate among connected youth. Additionally, 16% of disconnected young women were parenting, compared to just 2% of their connected peers.

While most OY had lower educational attainment, a small share (11%) had a bachelor's degree or higher, underscoring the complexity and diversity of this population. Disparities in disability status were also evident, with disconnected youth more than twice as likely to have reported a disability (14% vs. 6%).

These patterns illustrate the multiple, compounding barriers that OY face as they navigate pathways to stable employment, education, and long-term economic security.

Figure 6. Comparing Socioeconomic and Employment Characteristics of OY and NON-OY (2023)



Note: *19–24-year-olds ONLY; **Note:** **21–24-year-olds ONLY.

Source: Authors' compilation based on IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Geographic patterns also revealed important disparities. To identify areas in Long Beach with the highest OY concentrations, this analysis used Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs) – statistical geographic units defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. Each PUMA contains a population of roughly 100,000 residents and typically reflects clusters of neighborhoods or city regions. While not perfectly aligned with city planning districts or ZIP codes, PUMAs provide a useful lens for examining geographic disparities in youth outcomes.

Geographic Differences in OY Concentration



Disconnection among Long Beach youth was not evenly distributed across the city. Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA) estimates revealed persistent and, in some cases, growing disparities between neighborhoods.

In 2023, the Southwest and Port PUMA had the highest disconnection rate in the city – 24.3%, more than double the citywide average of 9.8%. This area also accounted for 41.4% of all Opportunity Youth, a substantial increase from 2019, when it made up just 29.8% of the city's OY population. The rising concentration of disconnection in this region underscores the ongoing challenges faced by some of Long Beach's most historically underserved communities.

The North Long Beach PUMA also had a large share of disconnected youth in both years, but showed measurable progress: the count of OY dropped from 2,518 in 2019 to 1,887 in 2023, and the disconnection rate declined from 14.6% to 9.7%.

Despite this improvement, the area still accounted for 30.5% of the city's disconnected youth in 2023 – second only to the Southwest and Port area.

East Long Beach maintained the lowest disconnection rate across both years, increasing slightly from 3.7% in 2019 to 5.8% in 2023. Its share of the city's disconnected youth also remained relatively low, rising from 10.9% to 13.1%. This suggests that while disconnection rose modestly in this area, it remained significantly lower than in other parts of the city.

Meanwhile, the Central PUMA (including Signal Hill) saw a modest improvement in disconnection rates, decreasing from 7.4% in 2019 to 4.8% in 2023. Its share of the overall OY population held steady at around 15%. These geographic trends illustrate the uneven nature of youth disconnection and reinforce the need for place-based strategies. Local initiatives such as STRONG Beach, the city's comprehensive community safety and youth violence prevention plan, and Measure JB, which allocates dedicated funding for youth development programs in historically underserved neighborhoods, provide a foundation for these efforts. Targeting resources to areas with the highest and fastest-growing rates of disconnection – particularly the Southwest/Port and North Long Beach regions – is essential to ensuring fair and sustained access to education, employment, and long-term opportunity for all young people in Long Beach.

Table 2. Counts and Rates of OY (2023 and 2019) by Long Beach PUMA

Public Use Micro Data Areas (PUMAs)	2023			2019		
	OY Count	OY Rate	Share of OY	OY Count	OY Rate	Share of OY
Long Beach (SW & Port)	2,563	24.3%	41.4%	1,682	14.3%	29.8%
Long Beach (North)	1,887	9.7%	30.5%	2,518	14.6%	44.7%
Long Beach (East)	811	5.8%	13.1%	614	3.7%	10.9%
Long Beach (Central) & Signal Hill	928	4.8%	15.0%	822	7.4%	14.6%
Total	6,189	9.8%	100.0%	5,636	10.0%	100.0%

Source: Authors' compilation based on IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Conclusions



The data tells a clear and compelling story: while Long Beach has made meaningful progress in reducing youth disconnection over the past decade, thousands of young people remain disengaged from school and work – particularly older youth, Black and Latino populations, and those with limited educational attainment. In 2023 alone, nearly 1 in 10 residents ages 16–24 were neither in school nor employed, with disconnection disproportionately concentrated in specific neighborhoods and demographic subgroups.

These findings underscore the need for targeted, data-driven strategies that address both the symptoms and structural causes of disconnection. Sustained investment in equitable education pathways, culturally responsive career development, and neighborhood-based supports will be essential to expanding opportunity and stability for all youth. Prioritizing language access and culturally rooted supports will also be critical to engage immigrant and multilingual youth who face distinct barriers to education and employment.

This analysis aligns closely with the goals of the Long Beach Youth Strategic Plan, which calls for coordinated efforts across youth, city departments, community-based organizations, schools, and workforce partners to improve youth well-being, education, and economic opportunity.

The S.T.R.O.N.G. Beach Summer of Opportunity initiative exemplifies this approach, combining paid work experience, recreation, mentorship, and restorative justice programming to advance community safety and youth development. By focusing on historically underserved neighborhoods and partnering with trusted local organizations, the initiative offers a promising model for place-based strategies to reduce disconnection and expand opportunity.

The City's Office of Youth Development plays a central role in convening partners, coordinating resources, and tracking progress on shared indicators such as youth employment and participation in education and training. Additionally Measure JB, the City's Civil Service Reform, initiative strengthens inclusive pathways into city employment by modernizing hiring practices and expanding high-quality internships and workforce development programs designed to remove longstanding barriers to entry. Measure JB establishes localized preferences for residents, students, and interns presents an opportunity to expand public sector career pathways. Embedding supportive services, mentorship, and culturally rooted engagement into these pipelines can be supportive to Opportunity Youth and create access to stable, high-quality jobs and contribute to Long Beach's economic opportunity and vitality.

Moving forward, aligning resources, sharing accountability, and centering the voices of young people themselves will be critical to fulfilling the vision set out in the Youth Strategic Plan and Long Beach's strong prioritization of youth. City leadership and partners across the youth-serving system are encouraged to collaborate boldly to translate this vision into sustained action and ensure that every young person in Long Beach has the opportunity to thrive.

Notes

Notes



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