CONNECTING YOUTH TO OPPORTUNITY:

How Black and African American Youth Perspectives Can Inform a Blueprint for Improving Opportunity in Montgomery County, Maryland

Commissioned by The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region
Conceived and written by The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region and Betah Associates

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Connecting Youth to Opportunity
MONTGOMERY COUNTY

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LEADING THOUGHT

Montgomery County, Maryland, is becoming increasingly diverse, with over one-half of residents self-identifying as persons of color, and 19% as Black or African American.[1] Approximately 120,000 youth between the ages of 15 and 24 years live in Montgomery County, and one-fifth of these youth and the over 150,000 students in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) are Black and African American.

According to a 2013 Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) report on *Youth and Work in Montgomery County*, approximately 8,000 youth in Montgomery County are either disconnected – neither in school nor working – or weakly connected to school or work. **Black and African American youth are three times as likely as their peers to be disconnected**.

Being out of work and out of school in the late teens and early twenties substantially increases the chances of young adults being jobless, poor, unmarried, and economically dependent in their mid-twenties. This creates a cycle of poverty that has a direct and devastating impact on individuals, families, and communities – now and in years to come. **The findings and recommendations in this report will help to shape prevention and intervention efforts and mobilize stakeholders to provide more opportunities to help Black and African American youth in the County become successful adults who contribute significantly to their communities**.

Although graduation rates are increasing and dropout rates are decreasing for African American youth in Montgomery County, achievement gaps for Black and African American youth compared to White and Asian youth persist. According to data reported by MCPS, between 2013 and 2014, the graduation rate for Black and African American students was 87.9% compared to over 95% for White and Asian students. The dropout rate for Black and African American students was 9% compared to less than 3% for their White and Asian American peers, according to the OLO 2014 report on the *Performance of Montgomery County Public Schools' High Schools*.

As our study documents, students drop out of school for many reasons. We must identify these reasons and make it the community's priority to enact real, lasting solutions to address them. To do so, we must solicit the input of those who are most impacted — the youth themselves.

[1] The U.S. Census Bureau defines Black and African American as "having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa." It includes people of African descent who identify as African American, from the continent of Africa, or the Caribbean.

The purpose of the Connecting Youth to Opportunity study was to identify potential risk and protective factors of disconnection for Black and African American youth to improve opportunities in the County. The survey instrument, administered to 1,210 Black and African American youth in Montgomery County, asked questions regarding family environment; social connections; socialization; physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being; school climate; academic performance; labor market skills; and employment. The findings, combined with feedback solicited from community stakeholders in the County, informed recommendations to strengthen efforts to enhance school, workforce, and other community services and supports for Black and African American youth, particularly those at risk of disconnection. The youth surveyed ranged in age from 14 to 24 and were students in MCPS, high school graduates, and youth who left high school before graduating.

Using quantitative and qualitative research methods, this study allows us to better understand:

1. The needs and assets of Black and African American youth living in Montgomery County who are disconnected or are at risk of disconnection.
2. The factors associated with disconnection from the school system.
3. The factors associated with disconnection from the workforce.

It builds upon a 2013 study of Latino youth that was commissioned by The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region and conducted by Identity, Inc. for much the same purpose and with similar findings.

Long-term success for the Black and African American youth in Montgomery County, Maryland requires positive change across a broad mix of youth- and adult-serving government agencies, nonprofits, funders, and institutions. This kind of systemic reform is challenging, but it is not overwhelming. Other jurisdictions, including many with demographic characteristics similar to Montgomery County, are beginning to enact broad-based reform to develop community-level outcomes for underserved youth populations. This survey's findings and recommendations are meant to serve as a blueprint that informs the same kind of success for Montgomery County. As such, they provide a starting point for the County to begin working toward its goal of guaranteeing every young person the support, education, and training he or she needs to achieve lifelong success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of our study, The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region, Montgomery College, and BETAH Associates, Inc. offer four primary recommendations for changes in policy, practice, and programs intended to promote the healthy development of all Black and African American youth in Montgomery County. Our findings offer ample evidence that the many challenges facing youth who are disconnected or at risk of disconnection are complex. Our recommendations, therefore, assume that change will require collective, multi-sectoral effort – guided by a common agenda, with well-defined outcomes, measures of success, and accountability.

1. MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS (MCPS) SHOULD WORK WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS TO CHANGE POLICIES, PRACTICES, AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION TO LOWER THE DROPOUT RATE AND CLOSE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP FOR BLACK AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS.

Issue: As the MCPS website explains, in Montgomery County, if a young person is not yet 21 years of age on the first day of school, she or he is eligible for enrollment in MCPS. And yet, 13% of the youth in our study who left school before graduating were ages 14 to 17 and another 55% were ages 18 to 20. Despite a 15% decrease in their dropout rate from 2010 to 2013, 9% of Black and African American students had dropped out of their four-year cohort in 2013 compared to 3% or less of White and Asian students, according to the OLO 2014 report on the *Performance of Montgomery County Public Schools' High Schools – A FY 2014 Update*.

National studies that surveyed youth have found that lack of a safe and welcoming climate is one of the six most frequently cited reasons for leaving high school before graduating. In our study, youth at risk of disconnection, compared with high school graduates, were 40% less likely to feel connected to their school and 36% less likely to receive support from teachers. They were also 25% less likely to believe that their teachers expected them to finish high school.

In 2013, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) made sweeping changes in school discipline regulations. Since then, the number of high school suspensions in Montgomery County has fallen by nearly 37%. Nevertheless, Black and African American MCPS high school students still have a significantly higher rate of out-of-school suspensions than their White and Asian peers do. In 2013, 9% of Black students received an out-of-school suspension compared to less than 3% of White and Asian students. In our survey, youth who had left school before graduation were more than twice as likely to have been suspended, compared with high school graduates.

Although youth who left school before graduation were 11 times more likely to have the lowest reported grade point average (GPA; 0.5 or less), more than half of youth from all groups in our study (high school students, high school graduates, and youth who dropped out of high school) wanted more academic support programs. Moreover, more than half the youth in all groups felt that their parents needed support to better understand the school system.

While some progress has been made, key academic indicators continue to show that Black and African American students lag behind their White and Asian peers and will continue to do so unless significant steps are taken. In fact, the aforementioned OLO study concluded that the achievement gap persists system-wide and that it has widened between high poverty and low poverty high schools.

Recommendation A: Promote student engagement and academic achievement. Every school has a distinctive climate, and that climate can either foster or undermine students' development, learning, and achievement. MCPS should work in partnership with key stakeholders to take steps to create a safe, supportive, and culturally sensitive school environment for Black and African American students. MCPS should be commended for using the Gallup Student Survey biennially to assess student engagement. They should now take the next step: use data—disaggregated by race and ethnicity—from the Gallup Survey to identify schools with below desirable

levels of Black student engagement and then work with the principals of those schools to identify and employ interventions to increase safety (like anti-bullying and anti-violence programs) and to increase connectedness (like school-wide climate programs).

Recommendation B: Increase diversity and cultural competence. MCPS should redouble its efforts to attain greater diversity in school leadership, teachers, and staff. In an issue brief on *Teacher Diversity Revisited*, the Center for American Progress reported that 82% of public school teachers in the United States are White. The study's state-by-state analysis included Maryland in the list of states with high demographic misalignment between teachers and students. Similarly, the OLO study on *Cultural and Linguistic Diversity of MCPS Students and Staff* found that "students of color and English language learners comprise two-thirds of Montgomery County Public Schools' enrollment while White educators account for roughly three-fourths of all school-based professionals." Specifically, Black and African Americans are 21% of students and 12.5% of staff; at the high schools with the highest concentration of Black and African American students, the ratio is 44 Black students per one Black staff.

To strengthen teacher expectations of, and support for, Black and African American students and teachers' capacity to demonstrate care and concern, MCPS should also continue to increase the cultural competence of all staff through both ongoing training and the adoption of cultural competency policies, practices, and accountability measures at the school and individual levels.

Recommendation C: Adopt best practice approaches to closing the achievement gap. School systems throughout the country have been experimenting with methods to both reduce dropout rates and close the achievement gap. One of the more promising methods is the creation of "early warning systems" that use data to identify at-risk students and design appropriate interventions. MCPS already gathers and analyzes a wealth of data on all its students and, as of 2014, launched an early warning indicators system. To promote Black academic achievement, MCPS should use that data systematically to identify students at risk for either disengagement and/or poor academic performance. Working with key stakeholders, they should identify and implement a range of effective and tailored early interventions to address the needs they find.

MCPS should also provide enrichment opportunities for youth who are performing well academically to help them continue to achieve. In choosing interventions, it will be especially important to focus on critical transitions such as the transition from middle to high school and from high school to post-secondary education and training.

Recommendation D: Inform and engage parents. To increase Black parents' ability to navigate the school system for their children, MCPS should develop and fund a plan to strengthen the capacity of parents to support and advocate for their children's education and of teachers and other MCPS staff to work effectively with parents. The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) calls this a "Dual Capacity" education framework, which includes strengthening family-school partnerships through increasing networks, collaborations, skills and knowledge, families' confidence, and creating welcoming school environments. The DOE argues that this approach should be an integral part of all school reform efforts. Working with the MCPS Office of Community Partnerships, community and parents' groups should provide more information and training to parents on school policies, the wealth of options MCPS offers, post-secondary educational and employment options, financial aid, ways parents can work with their children at home to enhance student achievement, and sources of help for their children inside and outside MCPS. MCPS could disseminate information through in-person sessions; electronic newsletters; and connecting parents through blogs, social media, and online forums or communities of practice. In developing training,

outreach, and engagement activities for parents, MCPS and community partners **must** consider parents' own educational experiences and the financial and other barriers to their engagement. The range of supports will vary depending upon parents' needs, but might include multimedia information sharing and providing childcare and meals at meetings to make resources most accessible to parents. The Office of Community Partnerships will need additional resources to effectively implement this recommendation.

Accountability: MCPS should work with stakeholders and community partners to develop a comprehensive plan for reducing the dropout rate and closing the achievement gap. The MCPS plan must address all the issues raised above and have well-defined outcomes and measures of success. MCPS should complete the plan before FY2018 budget planning begins in September 2016. To promote transparency and accountability, MCPS should disseminate the plan community-wide and provide annual reports to the community on its outcomes and measures of success.

Black and African American community groups should provide input to and feedback on the MCPS plan; advocate for its implementation; and meet regularly with MCPS and School Board representatives to monitor progress and assess lessons learned.

2. MONTGOMERY COUNTY SHOULD CREATE A COORDINATED ARRAY OF SERVICES AND SUPPORTS DESIGNED TO RECONNECT DISCONNECTED YOUTH TO EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE.

Issue: Our study found that youth became disconnected through a variety of circumstances: academic disengagement, judicial entanglements, substance use, and lack of employment opportunities, to name just four. **Only 31% of the youth in our study who dropped out of school reported that they were currently working**. Youth who had left school were also less likely to feel positive about their future and were more likely to feel sad or hopeless. Additionally, they were much more likely to engage in multiple risk behaviors and received less support and encouragement from their parents and guardians. And once they become disconnected from school, work, or both, their need for support and services multiply.

It follows that reconnecting youth to education and employment will require a multifaceted, cross-system approach. No one department or agency can do this alone. But studies on disconnected youth and reconnection, like the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Youth and Work: Restoring Teen and Young Adult Connections to Opportunity*, have also pointed out that the various systems that need to work together "often have conflicting priorities, target populations, and metrics for success" and "funding streams and programs remain largely categorical and fragmented."

In its report on *Youth and Work in Montgomery County*, the OLO examined the County's portfolio of youth career development programs. The report described County programs for three types of youth: 1) high-school-age youth who are disengaged from school, from low-income families, pregnant and parenting, and/or gang involved; 2) at-risk youth who have minimal job experience and who have dropped out of school, who may also be court-involved, in foster care, or homeless; and 3) youth who are not in school and who are not working and who may have been adjudicated.

The OLO report did not attempt to assess the quality of individual programs, but reached three conclusions about the whole: 1) the County's efforts operate in an adhoc fashion that is disconnected from a broader strategy of improving economic self-sufficiency for at-risk youth; 2) the County may adequately serve youth connected to the social service or criminal justice systems, but few, if any, services exist for disengaged and other at-risk youth due to limited resources; and 3) reconnecting disconnected youth to education and employment will require long-term funding commitments for a comprehensive set of services.

Our findings also support the need for interventions for all youth who may be at risk of disconnection and for subsets of our sample who are at

heightened risk: 1) youth who identify as lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, and questioning; 2) teen parents; and 3) youth with substance use and/or mental health problems.

Recommendation A: Coordinate across systems to provide an array of services. How, then, should Montgomery County bring all the relevant organizations and agencies to the table to craft a single strategy for a coordinated array of services and supports for disconnected youth? County and State youth-serving systems and departments, such as the Montgomery County Collaboration Council for Children, Youth and Families (Collaboration Council), MCPS, Department of Health and Human Services, Montgomery College, and the Department of Juvenile Services, should join with the newly established Workforce Development Board to develop a comprehensive, cross-system "reconnection plan" that combines and coordinates efforts to reconnect youth to both education and work. Participation from youth-serving nonprofits, such as Making a New United People, Pride Youth Services, Inc. and YMCA Youth and Family Services, would provide additional valuable insight about the role nonprofits can and should play.

The plan should address the following educational and occupational needs of disconnected youth: 1) multiple pathways to a high school diploma, GED, and transitioning to a post-secondary degree or credential; 2) support to build essential soft skills and job readiness skills and to reduce risk behavior; and 3) opportunities to gain work experience and attain marketable skills.

The philanthropic sector should support both the development of the plan and the programs and services needed to implement it.

Recommendation B: Enhance and expand efforts to prepare students for the workforce. MCPS should look at other school systems and districts to find effective workforce development programs that may be adapted to meet the needs of County youth. Philadelphia Public Schools, for example, has successfully created a Re-Engagement Center and Accelerated Schools and the District of Columbia has recently launched a Re-Engagement Center and has expanded its vocational training offerings. In addition, philanthropy should invest in programs — such as YouthBuild, Year Up, and Latin American Youth Center's Career Academy — that pair education with workforce development to help youth obtain both educational and workforce skills.

In its report on *Closing the Graduation Gap*, The Youth Transition Funders Group argues that "responsiveness" should be an essential element of any reconnection to education plan. Responsiveness means, among other things, helping disconnected youth get back on a graduation pathway and opening doors to off-track, out-of-school students like many of the respondents to our survey. Philadelphia's Project U-Turn is an example: with support from the school system, it has created a customized pathway that allows older teens with fewer academic credits to earn a high school diploma or GED.

Recommendation C: Scale up best practice approaches and programs focused on transition, recuperation, and recovery. To address the needs of at risk youth, funders should expand the delivery of a range of highly effective, out-of-school-time programs, including positive youth development, mentoring, risk reduction, and academic support programs. The County should also increase access to programs designed to help youth transition seamlessly from high school to post-secondary education and the workforce. For example, expanding the Achieving Collegiate Excellence and Success (ACES) program to all high schools in the County would support more students who are first generation college students and/or from low-income families in successfully transitioning to and completing college or in getting a post-secondary certificate. Black and African American students are a large proportion of these underrepresented youth. To help students prepare for post-secondary education and the workforce, Urban Alliance programs provide internships and comprehensive support — from life skills, to job attainment and work skills, to college and career planning.

All programs should be strengths-based, developmentally appropriate, and culturally competent.

Recommendation D: Expand or create programs for special populations. In addition to the above programs for all youth, we recommend expanding and creating programs, supports, and services to address the needs of specific high-risk groups. Examples include: Rainbow Youth Alliance peer-to-peer support groups for lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, and questioning youth; Crittenton Services of Greater Washington's PEARLS (Parenting, Education, and Responsive Life Skills) program for pregnant and parenting teens; and the Montgomery County Mental Health Association's CINS (Children In Need of Supervision) for youth dealing with substance use and mental health issues.

Accountability: To both develop and vet its proposals, the departments, agencies, and organizations charged with crafting the County strategy and "reconnection" plan should consult with youth, youth-serving organizations, other community-based organizations, the philanthropic sector, and the private sector. Because no group better understands the challenges and choices disconnected youth face or is in a better position to assess the likely impact of possible interventions, youth representatives should be active members of this group.

The goal should be to finalize the plan in time to request funding when FY2018 budget planning begins in September 2016. The reconnection plan must include specific markers and milestones, which will allow the Black and African American community and other stakeholders to hold the systems accountable for its advancement.

3. THE BLACK AND AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY ALONG WITH LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT, STATE'S ATTORNEY'S OFFICE, MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS, AND MONTGOMERY COUNTY GOVERNMENT MUST FIND WAYS TO REDUCE DISPROPORTIONATE MINORITY CONTACT (DMC) WITH THE JUSTICE SYSTEM.

Issue: Among the most stunning finding of our study was the universal reporting of contact with law enforcement that Black and African American youth (both male and female) have experienced in Montgomery County. Thirty-one percent of high school students, 49% of graduates, and 64% of youth who dropped out of school reported that they had been stopped by the police. Moreover, 45% of youth who dropped out had been arrested, and 42% had ever been in detention and/or jail.

Encounters with the justice system also "push" Black and African American youth towards disconnection. Half of the juvenile arrests made in Montgomery County are of African Americans. At a minimum, being stopped or detained by the police may result in a sense of alienation and hostility. Being charged and convicted of even minor offenses can create significant barriers to future education and employment opportunities.

Recommendation A: Decrease contact with the justice system. MCPS, the Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD), State's Attorney's Office, the courts, youth-serving systems, and youth-serving nonprofits must continue to work collaboratively to develop and implement policy and service-system changes to reduce DMC of Black and African American youth with law enforcement and the justice system in the County. This must include reforming school disciplinary referral and suspension policies, creating or expanding alternatives to detention, taking action to improve community relationships with law enforcement, educating youth and their families on their rights, and providing technical assistance to youth-serving systems to ensure that service delivery is equitable.

We also recommend continued support for DMC reduction initiatives that engage diverse stakeholders in defining problems and implementing solutions. The Council for Court Excellence's *Guide to the DC Juvenile Justice System* argues for increased access to diversion and treatment programs to decrease placement in juvenile detention. The University of Maryland Institute for Governmental Service and Research report on

Disproportionate Minority Contact in the Maryland Juvenile Justice System recommends, among other things, support for developmentally and culturally appropriate alternatives to detention and early intervention programs that are evidence-based, community-based, and include wraparound and service coordination to help youth connect to the systems that best address their needs.

Recommendation B: End discriminatory policing. All stakeholders in Montgomery County should fully support steps Montgomery County Executive Ike Leggett and Maryland Attorney General Brian E. Frosh are taking to establish guidelines to direct police to avoid racial profiling. In addition, we recommend Montgomery County increase ongoing cultural competency training and development for MCPD to ensure that officers are better able to address potential bias, understand and relate to Black and African American youth, and communicate effectively with their families. To sustain cultural sensitivity and equitable treatment, law enforcement and justice system actors must adopt appropriate policies; use those policies to guide hiring, retention, and promotion decisions; use data to monitor outcomes; and provide continuous training and support to managers and staff.

Accountability: Ensuring that the above efforts to reduce DMC are effective will require an ongoing process of monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement. The Department of Juvenile Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has provided funding to states, including Maryland, for developing, monitoring, and evaluating DMC reduction plans. In keeping with this approach, community organizations, MCPS, State's Attorney's Office, MCPD, Montgomery County government, and other key stakeholders should use data systematically to monitor disparities in school referrals, suspensions, arrests, diversion, and detention and to evaluate the impact of policies and services as well as the performance of providers.

4. THE PHILANTHROPIC SECTOR, COMMUNITY OR ENGAGEMENT ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD USE THE MOMENTUM GENERATED BY THIS REPORT TO GALVANIZE SUPPORT FOR A COORDINATED COUNTYWIDE CAMPAIGN TO RECONNECT DISCONNECTED YOUTH.

Issue: Change on the scale needed to promote the healthy development of Black and African American youth, to prevent their disengagement, and to enable re-engagement will require a coordinated, well-resourced, countywide effort. It cannot be successful without the full participation of the Black and African American community, County government, MCPS, youth-serving agencies and organizations, community organizations, the faith community, and a range of other stakeholders.

Recommendation A: Convene to make the case for change. Because of the role it plays and its relationships with all other sectors, the philanthropic sector is best positioned to bring the people and groups mentioned above to the table to mobilize support for a coordinated, countywide campaign to reduce the number of disconnected youth.

Recommendation B: Educate and advocate to promote change. Philanthropy should use its role as a trusted messenger, its convening power, and resources to increase understanding of the root causes of disconnection and then make the case for change. In addition to funding programs to serve disconnected youth, the philanthropic sector should fund policy analysis, civic engagement, and advocacy initiatives focused on informing policy change, monitoring public and private investment in reconnection, and assessing the quality of reconnection plans and programs.

Accountability: The philanthropic sector should work with all the above-mentioned actors and other stakeholders to monitor adoption of this report's recommendations, to track the levels of funding provided by all sources for implementation, to assess the effectiveness of the partnerships formed to both promote and implement the recommendations, and lead assessments of collective impact.

POTENTIAL RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS OF DISCONNECTION

The 2014 OLO report on the *Performance of Montgomery County Public School's High Schools* documented an increase in the stratification of MCPS high schools by income, race, and ethnicity. Sadly, they also noted that the achievement gap between high- and low-poverty high schools has widened. While the graduation rates for all students, including Black and African American youth, have risen, Black youth still have higher suspension and dropout rates than White students.

For many Black and African American disconnected youth, the path to disconnection may begin in school settings, but it does not end there because the opportunities for meaningful work are limited for Black youth. Our study found that only 31% of youth who dropped out of school were working. According to the OLO report on *Youth and Work* in the County, between 2008 and 2011, Black male teens saw employment rate declines from 36% to 17%. In 2011, County employment rates for White female, Latino, and Latina teens were nearly 1 in 3; rates for White male and Black female teens were 1 in 4; and rates for Black male teens were only 1 in 6.

To better understand and address the factors that are associated with disconnection, we compared socio-demographic, behavioral, and environmental factors and school performance for Black and African American high school students (HSS), high school graduates (HSG), and youth who dropped out of high school (HSD). Our analysis found the following factors that are strongly associated with risk of disconnection from both school and work.

Analysis of Factors That Reveal Potential Risk and Protective Factors of Disconnection

Compared to high school graduates (HSG), youth at risk of disconnection (HSD) were:

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND SCHOOL BEHAVIOR

- ***11 times more likely*** to have a *GPA of 0.5 or below* during their last year of school.
- ***7 times more likely*** to have a *GPA of 1.0* during their last year of school.
- ***4 times more likely*** to have a *GPA of 1.5* during their last year of school.
- ***Over twice as likely*** to have *failed a subject* in school.
- ***Over twice as likely*** to have been *suspended from school one time or three or more times* during their last year in school.

EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

- ***65% more likely*** to *feel sad or hopeless*.
- ***33% less likely*** to feel *positive about their future*.

NEED FOR SUPPORT

- ***Four times more likely*** to *seek community services* for support.

PARENTAL SUPPORT AND EXPECTATIONS

- ***50% less likely*** to receive encouragement from their parents to *do well in school*.
- ***40% less likely*** to receive support from their parents *to complete high school, to discuss their future after high school with their parents, or to believe that their parents had high expectations for them to go to college*.

TEACHER SUPPORT AND EXPECTATIONS

- ***36% less likely*** to receive help from teachers to *stay engaged in their classes*.
- ***25% less likely*** to believe that their teachers *expect them to finish high school*.
- ***25% less likely*** to believe that their teachers *expect them to attend college*.

RISK BEHAVIOR

- ***Over twice as likely*** to have ever been *arrested or put in detention*.
- ***Twice as likely*** to be *in a gang or have a sibling in a gang*.
- ***Nearly 50% more likely*** to *have a friend in a gang*.
- ***Nearly 50% more likely*** to have *used marijuana*.

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

- ***40% less likely*** to *feel connected to their school*.

Other key findings are as follows:

- Disconnected and at-risk youth in the study reported significant levels of unemployment: only 31% of youth who dropped out of school reported currently working.
- Nearly one-half (48%) of youth who dropped out reported their economic condition as "bad or very bad" compared to 29% of high school graduates and 14% of high school students who responded.
- For all youth, their primary sources of support were their parents and guardians (35% of high school students, 41% of high school graduates, and 49% of youth who dropped out of school); peers (28% of high school students, 41% of high school graduates, and 42% of youth who dropped out); and God and faith (22% of high school students, 25% of high school graduates, and 28% of youth who dropped out).
- MCPS has many talented, dedicated, and caring teachers. Still, as indicated by the frequency of responses, the most needed supports for youth were teachers who seemed to genuinely care about Black and African American students being successful (70% of high school students, 62% of high school graduates, and 56% of youth who dropped out of school); academic enrichment programs (65% of high school students, 63% of high school graduates, and 51% of youth who dropped out); and support for their parents to better understand the school system (61% of high school students, 54% of high school graduates, and 51% of youth who dropped out).
- Despite multiple differences across groups, the youth in the study had strikingly similar levels of contact with local law enforcement. Thirty-one percent of high school students, 49% of graduates, and 64% who dropped out of school reported that they had been stopped by the police.

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHICS OF SURVEYED YOUTH

Who are Montgomery County's at-risk and disconnected youth? Montgomery County is home to 120,000 residents ages 15 to 24. Of those residents, nearly 20% are Black and African American. According to the 2013 OLO report on *Youth and Work*, Montgomery County has 3,900 disconnected youth, and Black teens are nearly three times as likely as their peers to be disconnected. Our survey of 1,200 Black and African American high school students, graduates, and youth who dropped out revealed the following:

Gender

Sixty-one percent of the total sample were male, and 39% were female. In our sample, a notably higher percentage of youth who left high school before graduating were male (69% vs. 31%).

Sexual Orientation

The majority of all groups identified as heterosexual, but a higher percentage (18%) of youth who had dropped out of school identified themselves as lesbian or gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning.

Age

The average age of high school students was 16 years. The average age of both youth who had graduated from high school and youth who had dropped out of high school was 20 years. It is important to note that 68% of youth who dropped out reported being age 20 or younger and were therefore still entitled to attend County public schools according to the MCPS website.

Parents' Educational Attainment

The majority of parents of high school students and graduates (59% to 62%) had post-secondary education. In contrast, youth who dropped out of high school reported that their parents had less formal education than parents of high school students and graduates. Nearly 20% of parents of youth who dropped out did not complete high school, and nearly 30% had a high school education. Thirty-six percent of mothers and 28% of fathers of youth who dropped out of school completed post-secondary education.

Family and Living Arrangements

High school students (52%) were more likely to live with both parents than were high school graduates (39%) or those who had dropped out of high school (38%). Less than 40% of all groups lived in single parent-headed households. It may, however, be telling that 20% of youth who dropped out of school lived with neither parent.

Parenting

Although none of the high school students were parents, 13% of a subset of respondents (59%) who had dropped out of school and 7% of a subset (39%) of high school graduates were parents.

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDY RESPONDENTS

		HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS	HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES	HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS
Gender		*n=392*	*n=364*	*n=390*
	Male	55%	59%	69%
	Female	45%	41%	31%
Sexual Orientation		*n=393*	*n=352*	*n=365*
	Heterosexual	93%	87%	82%
	Lesbian or Gay	2%	6%	8%
	Bisexual	4%	6%	7%
	Transgender	--	>1%	1%
	Questioning	1%	1%	2%
Age		*n=380*	*n=345*	*n=358*
	14-17 years	79%	4%	13%
	18-20 years	20%	53%	55%
	21-24 years	1%	43%	32%
	Average Age	16	20	20
Highest Level of Education Completed by Mother or Female Guardian		*n=395*	*n=369*	*n=397*
	No School	<1%	1%	5%
	Less than High School	4%	8%	14%
	High School Graduate	21%	22%'	29%
	Technical School/College	26%	20%	20%
	Graduate/Professional	36%	39%	16%
	Respondent Doesn't Know	11%	11%	16%
Highest Level of Education Completed by Father or Male Guardian		*n=391*	*n=369*	*n=397*
	No School	1%	2%	5%
	Less than High School	2%	4%	12%
	High School Graduate	16%	21%'	28%
	Technical School/College	23%	24%	16%
	Graduate/Professional	37%	32%	12%
	Respondent Doesn't Know	21%	17%	27%
Respondent Lives with...		*n=403*	*n=406*	*n=401*
	Two Parents	52%	39%	38%
	One Parent	38%	30%	37%
	Others	10%	26%	20%
	Alone	--	6%	5%
Respondent is a Parent		*n=403*	*n=338*	*n=322*
	Yes	--	7%	13%
	No	100%	93%	87%

YOUTHS' ASSETS AND NEEDS

A new report from the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), *One in Seven: Ranking Youth Disconnection in the 25 Largest Metro Areas*, presents what it calls an "astonishing finding": 5.8 million — one in seven — American youth, ages 16 to 24, are neither working nor in school. In both the United States and the state of Maryland, the majority of these disconnected youth are Black and African American. This same is true for Montgomery County: Black youth are three times as likely as other youth to be disconnected.

To effectively ensure that youth do not become disconnected and to create pathways to reconnection, it is important to understand the risk factors that may lead to disconnection; the assets that can protect against disconnection; and the needs of at-risk and disconnected youth. According to the OLO *Youth and Work* report, Montgomery County has 3,900 disconnected youth plus another 3,900 who are at risk for disconnection. Like the SSRC report, this study uses the most common definition of disconnected youth: youth who are not in school and who are not working. We further define "risk of disconnection" as not being in school **or** not working. Of the 1,200 youth who responded to our survey, 124 fit this definition of disconnection. Another 235 were at risk of disconnection or possibly were disconnected.

PERCENTAGE OF YOUTH WHO WERE DISCONNECTED OR AT RISK OF DISCONNECTION

	HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES *(n=406)*	HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS *(n=401)*	TOTAL
Neither in school nor working	51 (13%)	73 (18%)	124
Taking GED, not working	--	35 (9%)	35
School status unknown, not working	5 (1%)	3 (1%)	8
Not in school, work status unknown	52 (13%)	101 (25%)	153
Both school and employment status unknown	33 (8%)	6 (2%)	39
			359

Factors Associated with the Risk of Being Disconnected from School

Our research confirmed a number of factors in the lives of youth that may increase the likelihood of disconnection.

Low Academic Performance

Youth who dropped out of school were more likely to have failed a subject, been suspended, and received poor grades.

More youth who dropped out of school (59%) reported at least one suspension during their last year in school than high school students (14%) or graduates (24%) who responded. Youth who dropped out also reported earning lower grades than the other study participants, most frequently reporting a 1.5 GPA (29%). The majority of high school students (65%) and high school graduates (53%) had GPAs between 3.0 and 4.0, indicating that many of these youth were performing well in school. A substantial proportion of youth in all groups (about one-fifth), however, reported earning B's and C's, suggesting academic support could help these students build upon their strengths to prevent declines in grades and improve their performance.

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE DURING THEIR LAST YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL

		HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS	HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES	HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS
Ever Failed a Subject in School		*n=391*	*n=355*	*n=382*
	No	72%	73%	39%
	Yes	28%	27%	61%
Number of Suspensions Last School Year		*n=348*	*n=335*	*n=267*
	None	86%	76%	41%
	One	9%	5%	15%
	Two	3%	8%	14%
	Three or More	2%	11%	30%
Grades and GPA Last School Year		*n=396*	*n=362*	*n=394*
	Mostly Below D's (0.5)	>1%	1%	14%
	Mostly D's (1.0)	1%	2%	14%
	C's and D's (1.5)	4%	7%	29%
	Mostly C's (2.0)	7%	13%	13%
	B's and C's (2.5)	23%	24%	16%
	Mostly B's (3.0)	25%	27%	8%
	A's and B's (3.5)	35%	23%	4%
	Mostly A's (4.0)	5%	3%	2%

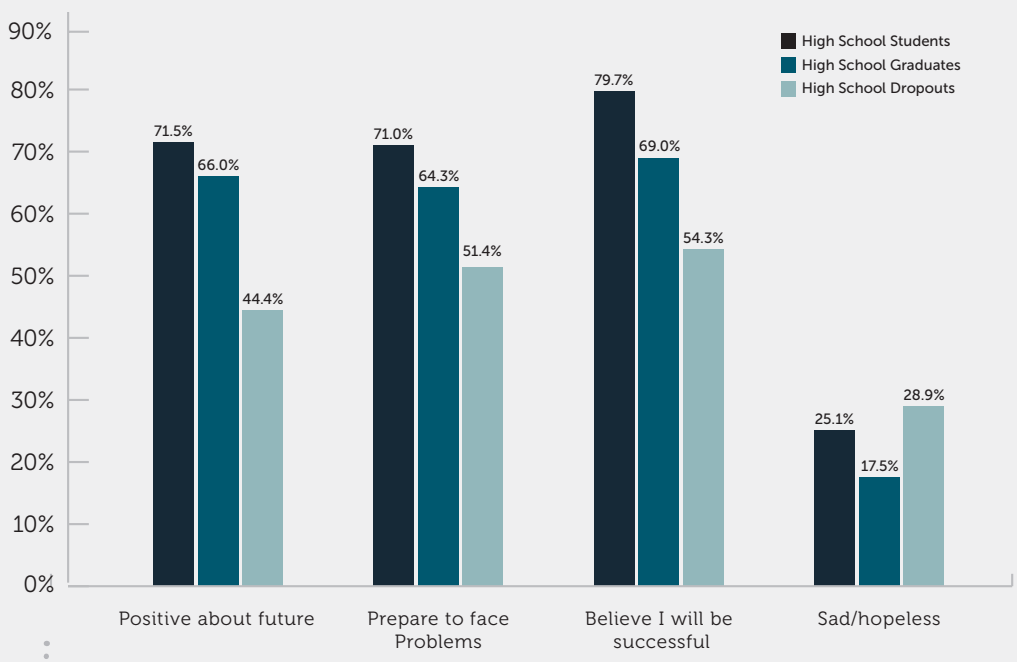
Emotional Well-being

Youth who dropped out of school were less likely to feel positive about their future, feel prepared to face problems, or believe they would be successful.

The survey asked participants about their feelings of hope, hopelessness, and sadness. Youth who had dropped out of school were less hopeful, felt less prepared to face their problems, and were less likely to believe they would be successful than either high school students or graduates.

More high school students (25%) and youth who had dropped out of school (29%) reported feeling sad or hopeless in the last year than graduates did (18%).

FEELINGS OF HOPE AND HOPELESSNESS

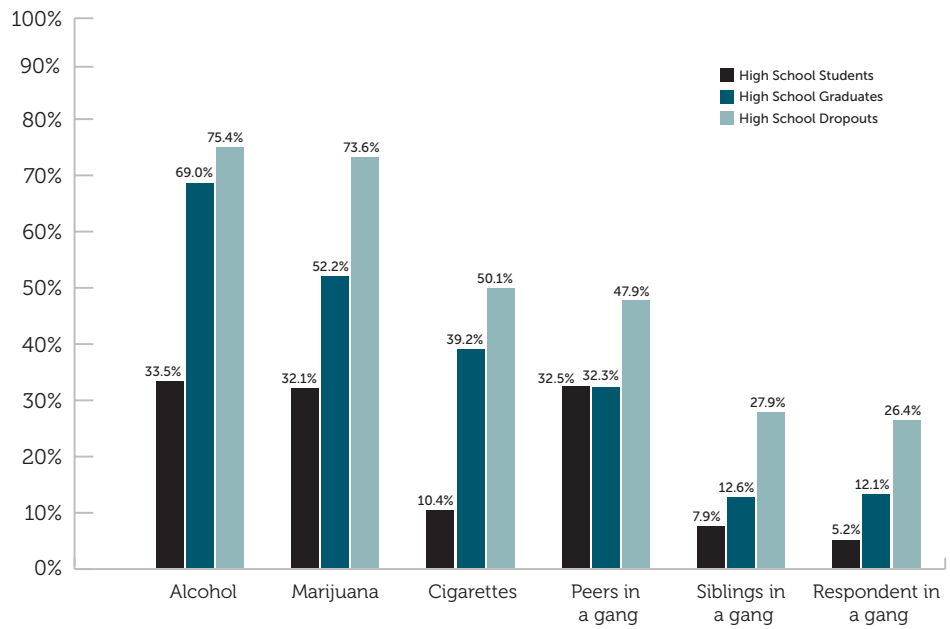


Risk Behavior

Youth who dropped out of school were more likely to report engaging in risky behavior, being involved with gangs, and being arrested or put in detention.

The survey asked youth about their substance use behavior[2] and gang involvement. Although all groups reported underage and young adult substance use, graduates and youth who dropped out reported higher levels than high school students. Survey participants who dropped out of high school were more likely to be in a gang (26%) and to have a peer (48%) or a sibling (28%) in a gang.

RISK BEHAVIOR AND GANG MEMBERSHIP



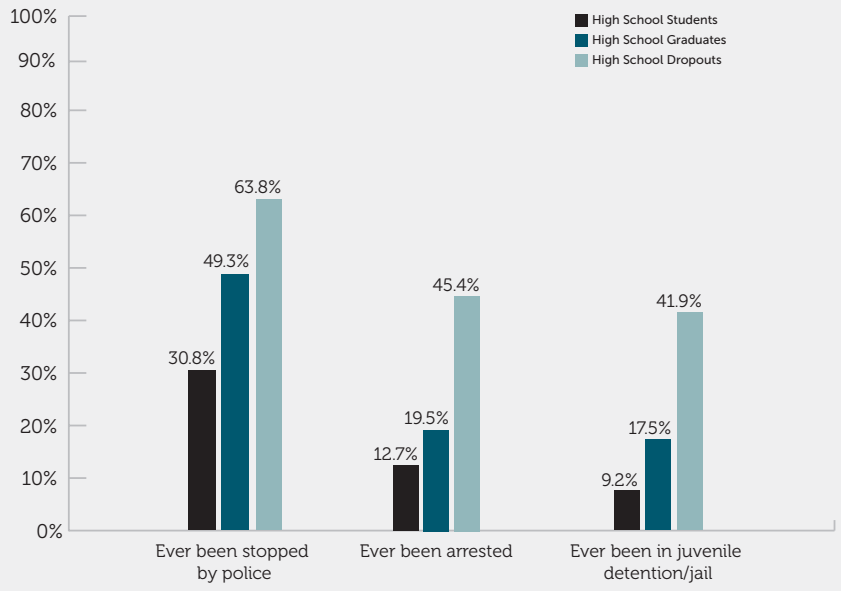
[2]Respondents also were asked about use of cocaine, crack, heroin, or other drugs but the reported use was very low and therefore not included in this report.

Contact with the Law Enforcement and Juvenile Justice Systems

Both nationally and locally, Black and African American youth are overrepresented in their contact with the law enforcement and juvenile justice systems. In the County, young Black and African American men are nearly 51% of male youth arrested in the County and are almost 75% of youth in secure detention.

Their contact with these systems may not indicate delinquency, but it does mean that they are at greater risk for negative experiences and outcomes. Consistent with national an d County data, a substantial percentage of youth in all survey groups reported being stopped by the police, but more youth who had dropped out of school had been arrested (45%) or been in juvenile detention or jail (42%) than high school students or graduates.

REPORTED CONTACT WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT AND JUVENILE JUSTICE



Parent and Teacher Support and Expectations

"When I was in school, if I had known what life would be like, how hard it would be, without having a high school diploma or a GED, I would have focused more."

Research has found that a strong support system which includes caring adults helps youth achieve in high school and beyond. Parents' support, educational attainment, and empowerment are positively related to students' successful completion of high school and college. High quality teacher-student relationships are associated with better youth outcomes, including positive academic attitudes and self-esteem. Studies have also found that improving teacher expectations can contribute to reducing the achievement gap for Black and African American students. Other supports in the community such as mentors also are important resources to help Black and African American students stay connected to and achieve in school.[3]

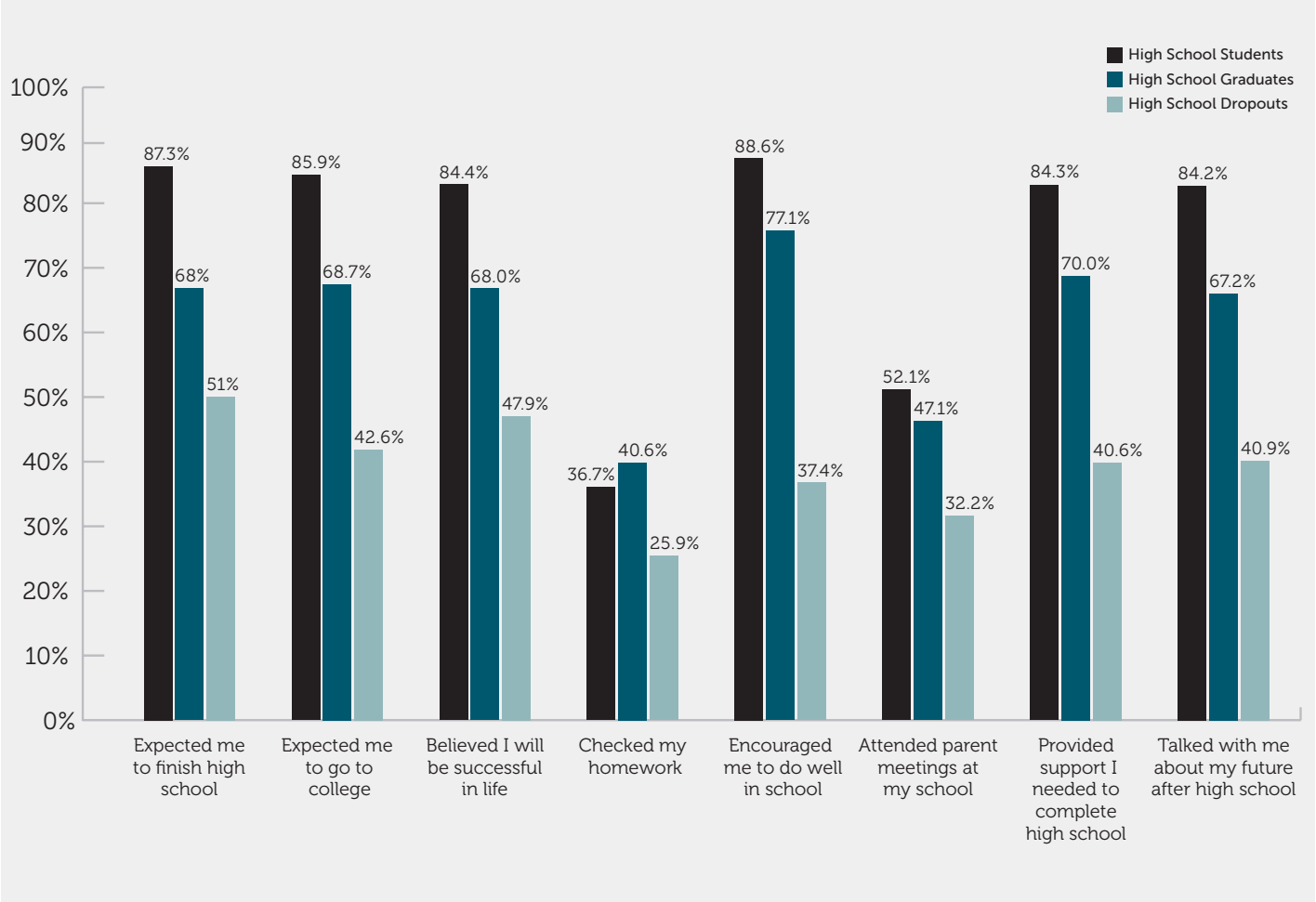
[3] Chan, C. S., Rhodes, J. E., Howard, W. J., Lowe, S. R., Schwartz, S. E., & Herrera, C. (2013). Pathways of influence in school-based mentoring: The mediating role of parent and teacher relationships. *Journal of School Psychology, 51*, 129-142; Gordon, D. M., Iwamoto, D. K., Ward, N. L., Potts, R., & Boyd, E. (2009) Mentoring urban Black middle school male students: Implications for academic achievement. *Journal of Negro Education, 78*, 277-289; Hurd, N. M., & Sellers, R. M. (2013). Black adolescents' relationships with natural mentors: Associations with academic engagement via social and emotional development. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 19*, 76-85; Ward, N. L. (2006). Improving equity and access for low-income and minority youth into institutions of higher education. *Urban Education Review, 41*, 50-70.

Parent Support and Expectations

Youth who dropped out of school were least likely to receive support or encouragement from their parents to be successful, complete high school, and plan for life after high school.

Compared to high school students and graduates, youth who dropped out of high school reported receiving less support and encouragement from their parents. The largest differences were in parents encouraging their children to do well in school (37% HSD vs. 89% HSS), providing their children support to complete high school (41% HSD vs. 84% HSS), talking with them about their future after high school (41% HSD vs. 84% HSS), and expecting them to go to college (43% HSD vs. 86% HSS). It is important to note that, compared to parents of high school students and graduates (less than 10%), a higher proportion of parents of youth who dropped out of high school (17% to 19%) did not complete high school themselves, possibly influencing how they encourage and support their children in school.

YOUTHS' REPORT OF PARENTAL SUPPORT AND EXPECTATIONS

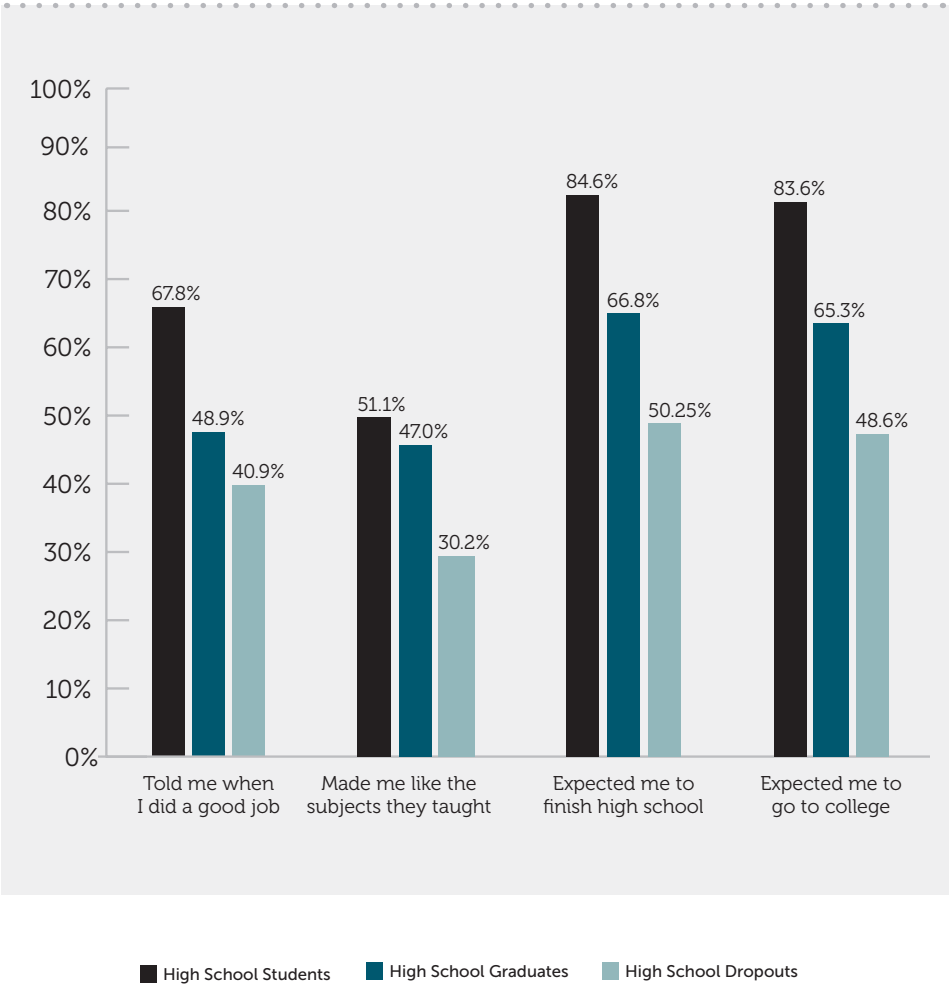


TEACHER SUPPORT AND EXPECTATIONS

Youth who dropped out of school were least likely to receive support or encouragement from their teachers to engage in and complete school.

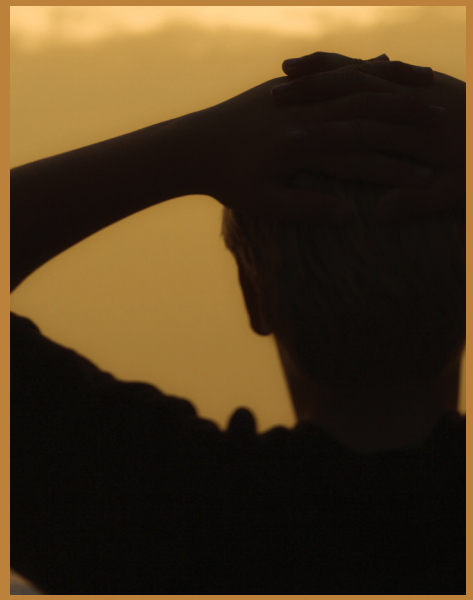
Youth who dropped out of high school also reported receiving less support and encouragement from their teachers than high school students and graduates. Only 30% of youth who dropped out felt their teachers helped them like school, 41% felt teachers encouraged them, 50% felt teachers expected them to finish high school, and 49% felt that their teachers expected them to attend college. In sharp contrast, 51% of high school students felt their teachers helped them like school, 68% felt encouraged by their teachers, 85% felt that their teachers expected them to finish high school, and 84% felt that their teachers expected them to attend college.

YOUTHS' REPORT OF TEACHER SUPPORT AND EXPECTATIONS



"Teachers need to understand that some students need help with things that are going on outside of school."

"If you didn't have at least a 2.5 GPA or if you weren't into sports," it was difficult to get attention. Still, some of the teachers were "pretty cool, looked out for you, and really did care."



JIMI will be 19 years old in December. Born in Pennsylvania, his family moved to Montgomery County when he was in the fourth grade. He ultimately attended four county high schools.

Jimi admits that he was never the "best student" and had a temper. During his freshman year, he "slacked off" and "fell in with the wrong crowd." At another school, he was suspended for "sharing my opinions."

He changed schools for the last time for the 11th and 12th grades, but Jimi didn't feel connected to this school because, as he put it, "if you didn't have at least a 2.5 GPA or if you weren't into sports," it was difficult to get attention. Still, some of the teachers were "pretty cool, looked out for you, and really did care." One example was an English teacher who had a unique teaching style. His grade in that class went from a D to a B.

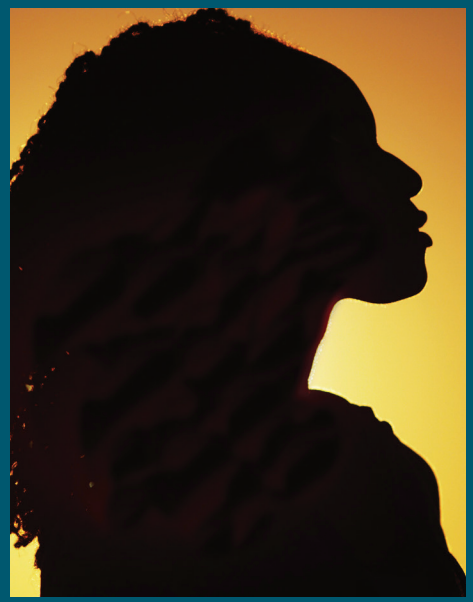
For Jimi's Mother, his older sister had set the bar high: she graduated with a 4.5 GPA and honors from schools in the District. When Jimi didn't do as well as his sister had, his Mother because increasingly critical and discouraging.

In the 12th grade, because he wanted to graduate, Jimi said, "I cleaned myself up, I was coming to school every day, I was doing my work."

But things fell apart again during the last semester, after his Mother put him out; and he moved to a place nearby. When he informed the school that he had moved, Jimi learned that he was no longer eligible to attend that school. When he left school in February — just three months before graduation — he first thought he would just give up.

A few weeks later, his cousin told him about the GED program at the Latin American Youth Center/ Maryland Multicultural Youth Center (LAYC/MMYC). Next month, when he takes and passes two tests, he will have only one test left before he earns his GED.

"Without a family support network, you feel alone – with no one to rely on when things get hard."



TONI is a 17-year-old senior at T. S. Wootton high school. A lifelong county resident, she currently lives with her Grandmother, who has raised her since her Mother died when she was five years old.

She is one of only two African-American girls to win Wootton's "Pedram Tousi Hall of Fame Award," the school's most prestigious award, established in 1996 to honor the student who "best exemplifies the spirit of the school."

Toni attributes her academic success to her entire family's strong and unflagging support for her and her education. Her Grandfather helped her with her homework "every day when I came home from school." Her family's encouragement gave her a "positive attitude" toward education, made her interested in learning, and got her off to the "good start" in school. Toni also says that Wootton's environment is not only challenging and rigorous, but also welcoming and comfortable. She has received encouragement from some teachers; and the school's college resource has been supportive — sending her information and reminding her of deadlines.

Toni has also been able to take advantage of out-of-school-time activities like the National Student Leadership Conference at Fordham University that enabled her to better define her career goals and the College Boot Camp Provided by Wootton High School that helped her prepare her college admissions and financial aid applications.

But Toni is also keenly of the challenges faced by Black and African American students who might not have had the level of family support and engagement that she has had: "without a family support network, you feel alone – with no one to rely on when things get hard." She pointed out that "teachers need to know more about different backgrounds" and believes that schools could better meet the needs of these students by strengthening currently under-staffed counseling departments so that counselors can become more involved in student's lives, making more help for students available and better known, hiring more African-American teachers, and insuring that students see more examples of Black and African American success.

Social Supports

Survey participants reported that they turned to a number of sources of support when they were in need, including family members, friends, teachers and guidance counselors, their faith and places of worship, and community-based services.

For all youth, their primary sources of support were their parents and guardians (35% to 49%), peers and friends (28% to 42%), and God and their faith (22% to 28%). Although a small proportion, youth who dropped out of high school (5%) sought suppaort from community organizations and social services more than did high school students or graduates.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT WHEN IN NEED

	HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS *(n=403)*	HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES *(n=406)*	HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS *(n=401)*
Parents/Guardians	35.0	41.2	48.6
Peers/Friends	28.0	40.9	41.6
God/Faith	21.8	24.8	27.9
Siblings	18.4	20.3	27.3
Adult Relatives	15.1	22.3	20.7
Teachers/Guidance Counselors	15.6	13.9	12.5
Church/Place of Worship	9.9	8.7	10.0
Community Organizations	1.2	1.2	4.7
Social Services	0	0.5	20

School Environment

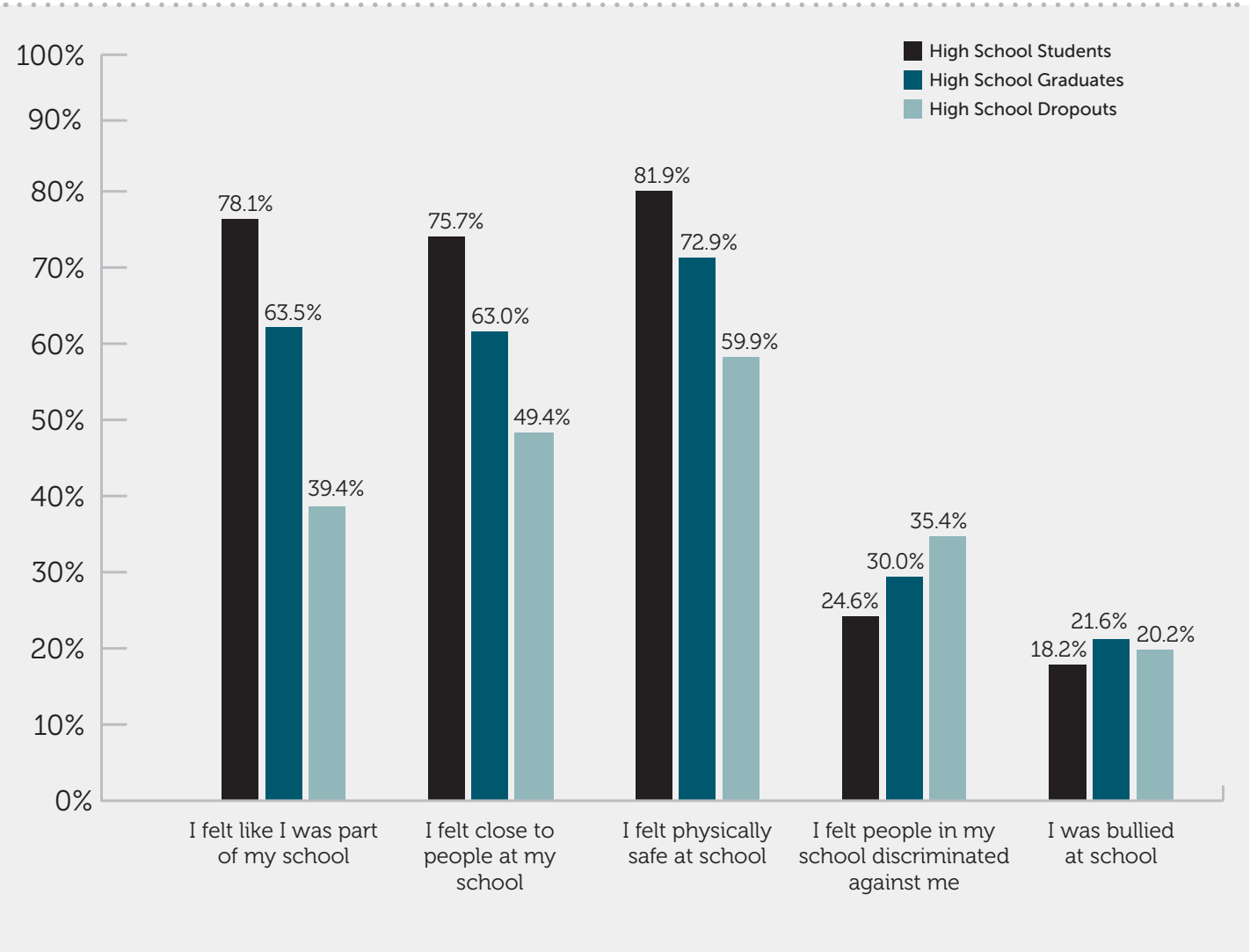
Youth who dropped out of school were less likely to feel connected to school than were high school students or graduates.

During their last year of school, fewer youth who had dropped out of school felt connected to the school itself (39%), connected to people in school (49%), or physically safe while in school (60%), compared with high school students and graduates. A proportion of all youth felt discriminated against (25% to 35%) and were bullied in school (about 20% of all groups).

The risk factors identified by survey participants are not perfect predictors of disconnection. However, research does show that adverse life events can lead to negative outcomes and that multiple risk factors related to disconnection can increase the likelihood of poor outcomes such as economic instability, involvement in the legal system, health challenges, and unstable relationships.[4]

[4] Race Matters Institute (2013). *Opportunities for youth*, Issue Brief. Retrieved from http://www.racemattersinstitute.org/resources/opportunitiesforyouth

PERCEPTIONS OF THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT



"When I saw my friends getting ready to graduate and I knew that I would have to come back for at least half a year or maybe a full year, I didn't want to be there anymore. I dropped out."

BARRY is 20 years old. Originally from New York, he attended Montgomery County schools from the 8th grade until he "felt he wasn't going anywhere" and left school at the end of his 12th grade year. "Every year, I would start school with a mindset of trying to do good, but somehow it didn't work out. I always thought I would graduate; I thought it would be easy; but it turns out it wasn't."

Barry's Father never asked him much about school. Although his Mother always told him that school was important, she only had a ninth-grade education, couldn't help much with his school work, and once he was in high school didn't pay a lot of attention to how he was doing in school. Without much parent help, he felt he was on his own.

At school, he liked his fellow students, but felt his teachers "weren't there enough to help me." Teachers, he said, also didn't pay enough attention to what was going on outside of school — "if I was having troubles at home" — and only paid attention to academics.

Finally, in May 2013, "when I saw my friends getting ready to graduate and I knew that I would have to come back for at least half a year or maybe a full year, I didn't want to be there anymore. I dropped out." For the first six *months* after leaving school, Barry didn't think about school because he had gotten his own place and needed to work.

Then, Barry's brother told him about a program at the Latin American Youth Center/Maryland Multicultural Youth Center (LAYC/MMYC). "The funny thing was they kept calling me!" At LAYC/MMYC, Barry says he has a teacher who really connects with all program participants and four staff members he can talk with when he has a problem or is feeling down. "And you can see that they really care."

After a little less than fifteen months, Barry is only two tests away from getting his GED, thinking about college, and looking for a career.

Youth Needs

All youth wanted more supportive teachers, academic enrichment programs, and support for their parents so that they would better understand the school system.

Both at-risk and disconnected youth identified a broad range of supports that would help maintain engagement/connection or promote reconnection. The majority of youth wanted more teachers who seemed to genuinely care about African American students being successful (56% to 70%), academic enrichment programs (51% to 65%), and support for their parents so that they would better understand the school system (51% to 61%). The majority of high school graduates and youth who dropped out of school also wanted more diverse teachers and counselors and more vocational classes.

	HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS *(n=403)*	HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES *(n=406)*	HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS *(n=401)*
More teachers/counselors that care about Blacks/African Americans being successful	70%	62%	56%
More academic support programs	65%	63%	51%
More support to enable parents to better understand the school system	61%	54%	51%
More diverse teachers, counselors, and principals	31%	57%	50%
More vocational classes	49%	51%	50%
More extracurricular activities that do not require a GPA of 2.0	39%	46%	43%

"I have a daughter now. But I still don't have a high school diploma or a GED. And I can't read. I'm bad in math. I'm so depressed that I can't do certain things that it's holding me back. All my dreams are just dreams now."

Economics and Employment

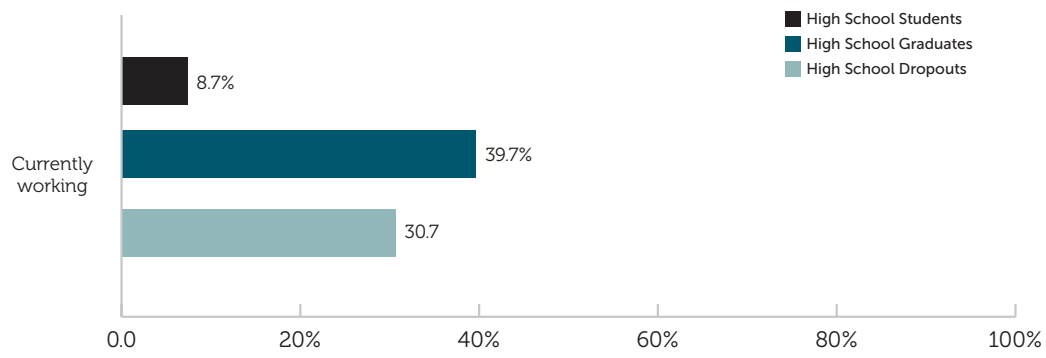
Youth who dropped out of school were more likely to report an unstable economic situation and less likely to have jobs.

Among the most serious consequences of disconnection is unemployment. To assess participants' economic stability and connection to the workforce, the survey included questions on current economic situation (using a scale ranging from "very bad" to "very good") and employment. Disconnected and at- risk youth in this study reported significant levels of unemployment, as only 31% of youth who dropped out of school reported currently working. Nearly one-half (48%) of youth who dropped out described their economic condition as "bad/very bad" compared to 29% of high school graduates and 14% of high school students.

ECONOMIC SELF-ASSESSMENT

Economic Situation	HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS *(n=379)*	HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES *(n=352)*	HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS *(n=365)*	TOTAL
Good/Very Good	86%	71%	52%	70%
Bad/Very Bad	14%	29%	48%	30%

CURRENT EMPLOYMENT STATUS



PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the **Connecting Black and African American Youth to Opportunity** study was to use quantitative and qualitative research methods to better understand:

- The needs and assets of Black and African American youth living in Montgomery County who are disconnected or are at risk of disconnection.
- The risk and protective factors associated with disconnection from the school system.
- The risk and protective factors associated with disconnection from the workforce or labor market.

To ensure that Black and African American youth have the supports they need prepare them for success in adulthood, it is essential to understand the risk and protective factors of youth disconnection from educational systems, the workforce, and other relevant organizations.

The findings from the study can help guide improved youth and family services and systems as well as positive social and physical conditions for youth ages 14 to 24 years in the County. Specifically, our goal is to use the findings to:

- Increase the presence of Black and African American youth on the agendas of the public, private, and philanthropic sectors.
- Leverage an increase in public and private funding for effective programs to reconnect youth who have disconnected from the traditional education or from the career pipeline.
- Develop and implement practical recommendations that a collective of subject matter experts, advocates, interest groups, decision-makers, and Black and African American community members support to increase opportunities for Black and African American youth in the County.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Recruitment

The sample comprised three groups of youth, ages 14 to 24 years:

- **403** youth who were enrolled in high school and who had completed at least the 9th grade at the time of the study.
- **406** youth who had graduated from high school at the time of the study.
- **401** youth who had dropped out of school (i.e., who did not obtain a high school diploma before leaving school, but who might have earned a GED after leaving school).

The other inclusion criteria were identifying as Black or African American (e.g., Black American, African, Caribbean) and as a Montgomery County resident throughout childhood and young adulthood.

To encourage participation and generate enthusiasm, we branded and marketed the study as *"1000 Youth. 1000 Voices. The African American Youth Opportunity Needs Assessment: A Collective Community Effort"* (1000 Youth. 1000 Voices). We used a peer-to-peer engagement approach to recruit youth for the study. We hired 19 young men and 7 young women, including high school students, high school graduates, and youth who had dropped out of high school, to serve as our Survey Administrators. We trained them to maximize their social networks to identify and administer surveys to their peers. They recruited and surveyed youth in schools, malls, restaurants, churches, and other places frequented by youth. We provided Survey Administrators with mobile offices and paid them $10 for every completed and approved survey.

In addition, our team's Research and Community Engagement Coordinator and Project Director worked with local churches, nonprofits, correctional facilities and pre-release centers, Montgomery College, and other public and private sector partners to host organized sessions for administering the survey to groups of youth. Approximately 15 to 40 youth participated in each session hosted by a community partner. By using multiple recruitment strategies, we were able to find study participants from a variety of localities in the County, including Burtonsville, Gaithersburg, Germantown, Montgomery Village, North Potomac, Rockville, Silver Spring, Wheaton, and White Oak.

Instrument Development

In 2013, The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region and Identity, Inc. conducted a study of Latino youth in Montgomery County. Our team used many of the survey questions from the Latino youth study; adapted some questions to ensure cultural appropriateness and relevance for Black and African American youth; and added new questions on topics such as ethnic identity, discrimination outside of school, contact with law enforcement, and spirituality.

Our attention was to produce a set of research tools that would enable us to identify both similarities and differences in the views and experiences of Black and Latino youth. The following is a selection of established tools used to develop the study instruments:

- Engagement in Academic Activities (Dornbusch, Ritter, & Steinberg, 1991)
- Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Roberts, Phinney, Masse, Chen, Roberts, & Romero, 1999)
- National Survey of Parents and Youth Questionnaire (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2002)
- Quality of School Life Scale (Epstein & McPartland, 1976)
- School Connectedness Scale (California Department of Education, WestEd, 2006)
- Self-Scoring Self-Control Scale (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004)

Survey Administrators piloted the surveys for high school students, high school graduates, and youth who dropped out of high school to determine user-friendliness and the clarity of survey items and instructions. The research team then revised the surveys based on feedback from the Survey Administrators.

The final instruments had six primary domains (Socio-demographics and ethnic identity, Social support/engagement, Emotional well-being, Protective and risk behavior, Academic performance and school environment, and Workforce and employment) and 166 items (about 200 questions, including sub-items). The survey took respondents about 40 to 45 minutes to complete.

We made the survey available in two formats: paper-and-pencil (for individual administration in the community and hosted sessions) and online (for Montgomery College students).

Data Quality and Analysis

To monitor and ensure the quality of the collected data, the Research and Community Engagement Coordinator conducted weekly check-ins with Survey Administrators to review completed surveys and confirm respondents had signed informed consent forms. Additional quality control measures included checking each survey for completion and verifying the number of submitted surveys versus valid surveys. After we completed the quality control checks, data entry personnel entered the data into SurveyMonkey.

The Biostatistician for the study used SurveyMonkey to clean and analyze the data. Descriptive analyses (e.g., frequencies, percentages) were run to examine the needs and assets of the youth surveyed across the various domains assessed. Data were presented for the sample that responded to reflect appropriate response rates. Risk ratios were used to identify correlates of disconnection. The high school graduate sample was used as the reference group for these analyses. The magnitude of the ratios for a specific measure provided a good indication of the needs of youth who were at risk for disconnection.

Based on the cross-sectional nature and convenience sampling approach of the study, the collected data provided a snapshot of youths' experiences. A cross-sectional rather than longitudinal design does not allow identification of factors that predict disconnection or outcomes of disconnection. Although there was minimal non-participation, use of convenience rather than randomized sampling can introduce differences between respondents and those who chose not to participate in the study as well as potential administrator influences (e.g., gender and other characteristics of peers the administrators were able to recruit).

Analyses of the data revealed potential risk and protective factors of disconnection (as detailed in the Potential Risk and Protective Factors of Disconnection and Assets and Needs sections). A number of variables assessed were not substantially different between the groups of youth in the study[5] but should be further explored because existing research suggests that they are important considerations for Black and African American youth. These areas include examining ethnic diversity within Blacks and African Americans and mentoring. Examining gender differences in needs, assets, and risks can further guide gender-specific support for youth. School and workforce connection factors such as youths' experiences in middle school and job skills and readiness also should be further explored to inform early interventions to support youths' success in school and the workforce.

[5] Other variables examined but not reported because of lack of differences between high school students, graduates, and youth who dropped out of school included: parents' educational attainment, ethnic identity, discrimination outside of school, beliefs about the public's perceptions of African Americans, locus of control, anxiety, protective behaviors, spirituality, job readiness, knowledge of community services, and experiences in middle school.

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