

Employment, Education, and Disconnection at Age 22:

Evidence from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study

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The Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) has been following a large and diverse sample of children born in 20 large US cities since their births in 1998 to 2000. Between October 2020 and January 2024, the children, who are now young adults, were re-interviewed and provided information about their employment and education at age 22. When the data are weighted, as they are here, these young people are nationally representative of young adults born in large cities in the United States.

As the FFCWS youth transition into young adulthood, these interviews provide an opportunity to learn how today's young adults are faring. At age 22, young adults are usually expected to be employed or to be in school or training, or both. With that expectation in mind, we analyzed the FFCWS sample to learn whether they are working, in school/training, both working and in school/training, or neither working nor in school/training. Following a large literature, we refer to the latter group as disconnected.¹

This brief presents a first look at patterns of employment, education, and disconnection at age 22 for contemporary young adults overall and by gender, race, and ethnicity. It concludes with implications for future research and policy.

Key Findings

- Recent survey results from 22-year olds are encouraging: despite pandemic disruptions, most young adults – 83% - are working, in school/training, or both.
- But around one in six (16%) 22-year olds are disconnected – neither working nor in school.
- The majority (66%) of disconnected young adults are looking for work, and 59% had a job in the past year. Others report health limitations or care responsibilities.
- Patterns of connection to education and work vary considerably by gender, race, and ethnicity, reflecting long-standing structural differences in family advantage, opportunity, and risk.
- In particular, the risk of being disconnected is higher for young Black men (30%) than for other groups, although the majority (63%) of disconnected young Black men are looking for work, and 33% had a job in the past year.

¹ For example, see a recent report from The Measure of America Disconnection Series by Kristen Lewis (2023, October 3). *Ensuring an equitable recovery: Addressing COVID-19's impact on education*. New York: Measure of America, Social Science Research Council. Available at: <https://measureofamerica.org/youth-disconnection-2023/>

Background

FFCWS is a long-running birth cohort study, which has followed a large and diverse sample of children since their births in 1998 to 2000.² The children were born in 20 large cities but now reside all over the United States.³ When weighted, the study provides data that is nationally representative of young adults born in large cities and as such is the only nationally representative sample of a contemporary cohort of young adults followed longitudinally since birth. The study over-sampled Black, Hispanic, and low-income participants, collecting detailed data about the mothers, fathers, and children. The children – now young adults – were re-interviewed between October 2020 and January 2024, at age 22, responding to questions about employment, education, family, health, identity, and more.

Data and Methods

We draw on data from 2,146 young adults who completed interviews (online, by phone, or in-person) between October 2020 and January 2024, provided information about their employment and education at age 22, and have a national weight available in Y22 dataset. All results are weighted so that they are representative of 22-year-olds born in large US cities.

We code young adults' race/ethnicity based on their self-reported race/ethnicity in the age 22 interview. If that is missing, we use data from their age 15 interview or (if that is not available) data on parents' race/ethnicity at baseline (following Thomas & Waldfogel 2022⁴). When weighted, the sample is 23% Black non-Hispanic, 33% Hispanic, 34% white non-Hispanic, 5% multi-racial non-Hispanic, and 4% other non-Hispanic racial/ethnic group (this includes Asian, Native American, and other or missing). Results for the last two groups should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes. (Please note that here and elsewhere percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.)

We assign youth to one of four mutually exclusive employment and education categories as follows.

- We code a young adult as in school/training if they report they are currently attending college or were attending college within 3 months of the interview start date, or if they report they are not looking for a regular job or are working part-time because they are in school or training, and they are not working.
- We code a young adult as working if they report that they worked for pay last week (including those on vacation, ill, or on temporary layoff), own a business, or are currently serving in any branch of the Armed Services, and they are not in school/training.
- We code a young adult as working and in school/training if they report both working and being in school/training.
- We code a young adult as disconnected if they are neither working nor in school/training.

² Reichman, N. E., Teitler, J. O., Garfinkel, I., & McLanahan, S. S. (2001). Fragile families: Sample and design. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 23(4-5), 303-326. For more information, visit the FFCWS website, <https://ffcws.princeton.edu/>

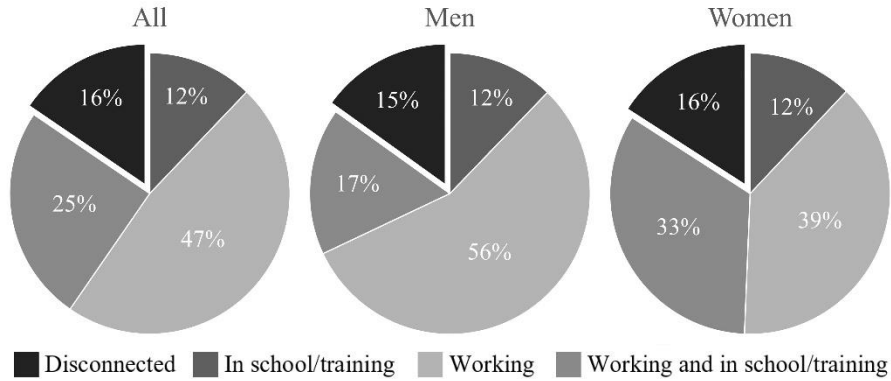
³ The cities of birth are: Austin, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Corpus Christi, Detroit, Indianapolis, Jacksonville, Milwaukee, Nashville, New York, Newark, Norfolk, Oakland, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Richmond, San Antonio, San Jose, and Toledo.

⁴ Thomas, M. M., & Waldfogel, J. (2022). What kind of “poverty” predicts CPS contact: Income, material hardship, and differences among racialized groups. *Children and youth services review*, 136, 106400.

What are young adults doing at age 22?

As shown in Figure 1 below, we find that most young adults at age 22 are working, in school/training, or both, but 16% are disconnected. Rates of disconnection are similar by gender.

Figure 1. Education, employment, and disconnection status of young adults: Overall and by gender



Figures 2 and 3 present results for young men and young women by race/ethnicity. In Figure 2, we can see that patterns of activity for young men vary considerably by race/ethnicity. Among Black young men, more than half (57%) are working, but a relatively small share (about 13%) are in school, leaving 30% disconnected. Hispanic young men have the highest likelihood of being employed, at nearly 61%, with 22% in school and 17% disconnected. Among white young men, over half are employed, but 39% are in school, leaving only 7% disconnected. Among multi-racial young men, 38% are working, with about 60% in school, leaving only 2% disconnected. Young men in the other race/ethnicity group have a relatively low employment rate at 40% but a high enrollment rate at 54%, leaving 6% disconnected.

Figure 2. Young men’s employment, education, and disconnection status by race/ethnicity

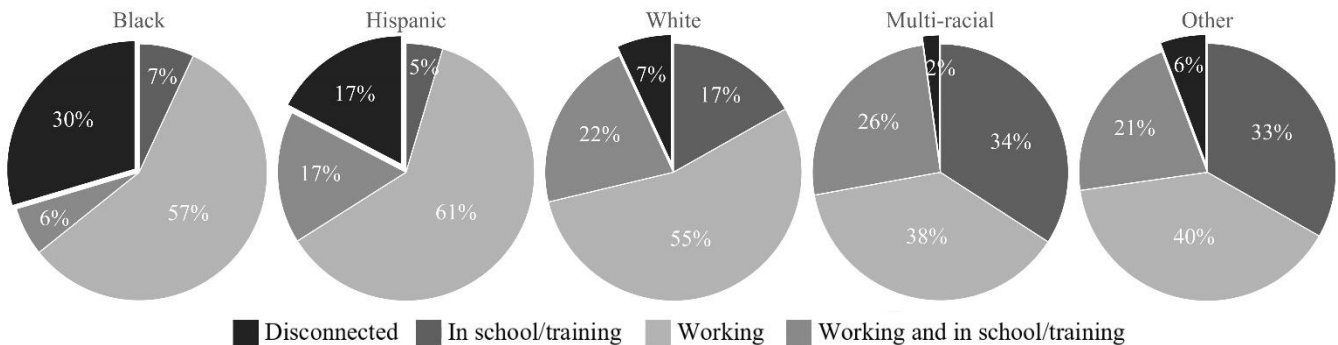
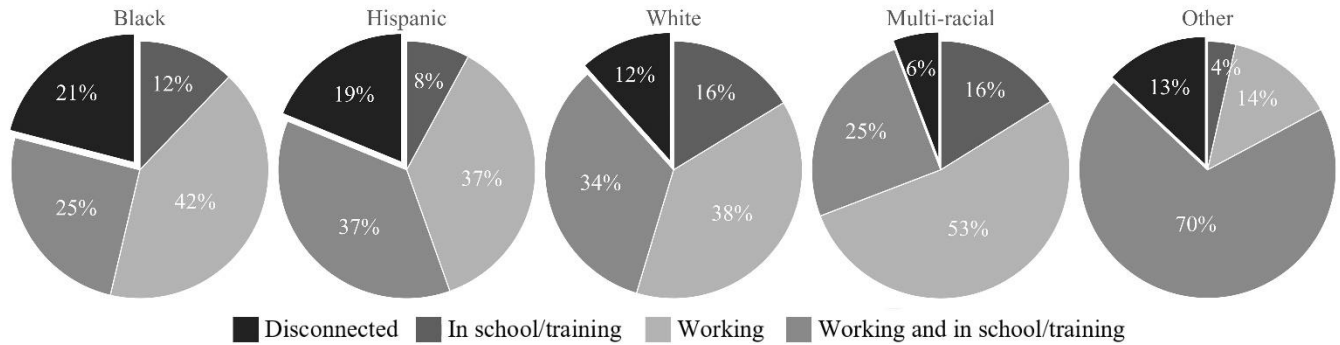


Figure 3. Young women’s employment, education, and disconnection status by race/ethnicity

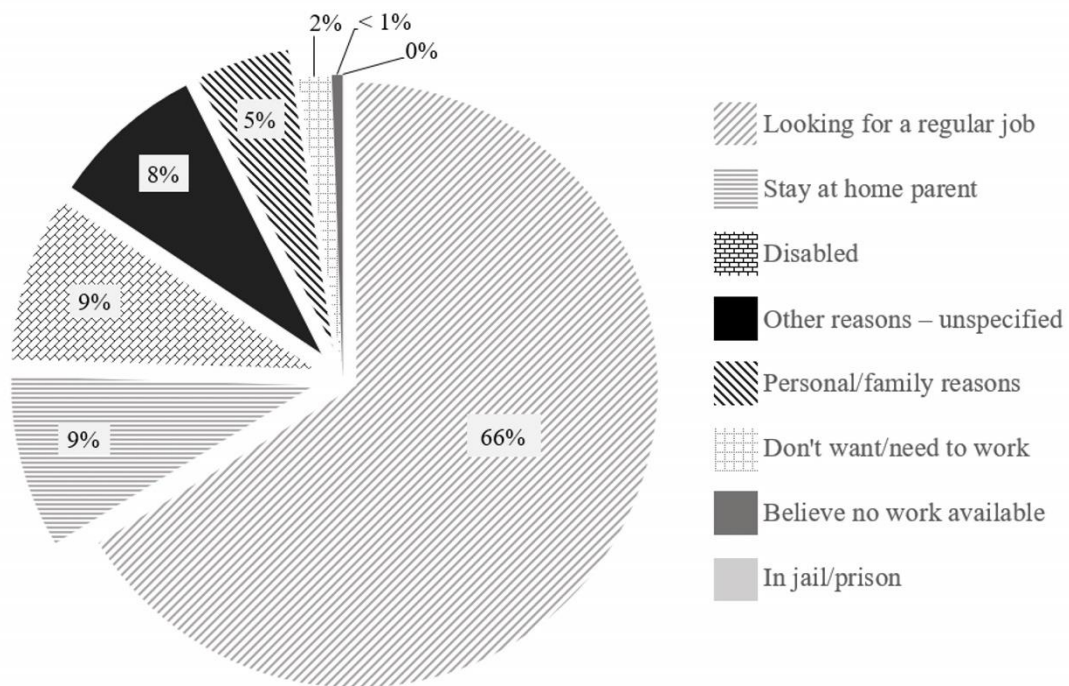


As shown in Figure 3, patterns of activity at age 22 also vary quite a bit for young women. Among Black young women, 42% are working, with 37% in school, leaving 21% disconnected. Among Hispanic young women, 37% are employed and 45% are in school, with 19% disconnected. Employment is similar for white women, at 38%, but a higher share (50%) is in school, with just 12% disconnected. Among multi-racial young women, over half are employed (53%), 41% are in school and 6% disconnected, while among youth of other race/ethnicity, 14% are employed, 74% in school, and 13% disconnected.

What are the disconnected doing at age 22?

Among those who are disconnected at age 22, two-thirds are looking for a regular job, as shown in Figure 4 below. Not shown in the figure, most (about 48%) said they wanted to work full-time.

Figure 4. Reasons for disconnection



Other notable reasons for being disconnected include 9% who were stay-at-home parents, 9% who were disabled, and 5% who had personal/family reasons.

As shown in Appendix Table 3, among disconnected youth, women were more likely than men to be looking for a regular job (71% for women vs. 61% for men) and more likely to be stay-at-home parents (17% for women vs. 2% for men), while men were more likely to report being disabled (16% for men vs. 2% for women). Racial/ethnic differences were also apparent, with disconnected Black young adults the most likely to be looking for a regular job (76%), while disconnected white young adults were the most likely to be stay-at-home parents (35%).

Results by gender and race/ethnicity, also shown in Appendix Table 3, reveal striking differences in the reasons for disconnection. Among Black young women who are disconnected, nearly all (94%) are looking for work, as are 70% of Hispanic young women who are disconnected. In contrast, only about half of white women who are disconnected are looking for work, with the other half being stay-at-home parents. (We do not discuss results for the multi-racial or other group here due to small sample sizes among the disconnected).

The patterns for men are quite different. While between half and two-thirds of Black, Hispanic, and white men who are disconnected are looking for work, there are also sizeable shares who report being disabled (38% of disconnected white young men and 21% of disconnected Black young men) or who cite other reasons for not currently working (12% of disconnected Black young men and 20% of disconnected Hispanic young men).

What were disconnected young adults doing in the last 12 months?

Young adults reported not just on their current employment or enrollment in education, but also on what they were doing in the last 12 months. These data reveal that 59% of young adults who were disconnected at the time of their interview had a job in the past year (see Appendix Table 4). The survey asked not just about formal employment in the past year but also about informal or off the books work, self-employment, gig work, or doing something else to make money. A further 14% of those who were disconnected had engaged in one or more of these activities in the past year, leaving just over a quarter (27%) who were not economically active in the past year. (We also checked for past year education or military service, but fewer than 1% of disconnected youth who were not working in the past year were in school, and none were in the military).

Among the disconnected, men were less likely than women to have had a job in the last year and more likely to have worked informally or not at all. Activity during the past year also varied considerably by race/ethnicity: just over half of disconnected Black and Hispanic young men had a job in the past year, compared to nearly 80% of disconnected white young men. (We do not discuss results for the multi-racial or other racial/ethnic groups due to small sample sizes among the disconnected).

Turning to results by gender and race/ethnicity, a majority of disconnected women had a job in the past year, across all racial/ethnic groups. The patterns are quite different for disconnected men. Among Black young men who are disconnected, only a third had a job in the past year, with 27% working informally

and 39% not economically active. Similarly, for Hispanic young men who are disconnected the figures are 39%, 15%, and 45%, while for disconnected white young men the figures are 45%, 16%, and 38%.

How does economic activity in the past year relate to the reasons for current disconnection?

Combining the data from the past year with the current data provides some insight into whether the reasons for disconnection differ for those who had a job in the past year as compared to those who did not. As shown in Appendix Tables 5 and 6, we find that they do. Across all gender and race/ethnicity groups, those who had a job in the past year but are not working currently are strongly likely to say that they are looking for work (with a small share saying that they are stay-at-home parents). In contrast, those who did not have a job in the past year and are not working currently, while predominantly saying they are looking for work, are much more likely to say that they are disabled or to cite other reasons for not working currently.

Conclusion and implications for future research and policy

The results from the age 22 wave of FFCWS are encouraging: in spite of the disruptions of the Covid pandemic, most young adults are working or in school, or both. Moreover, the relatively small share (just over a sixth) who are disconnected – that is, not currently working or in school – are mostly connected to the labor market: two-thirds (66%) are looking for work, and a majority had a job in the past year (59%).

It is clear, however, that patterns of connection to education and work vary considerably by gender, race, and ethnicity, reflecting long-standing structural differences in family advantage, opportunity, and risks. White young adults are notably more likely than others to be enrolled in school at age 22 – about 50% of young white women and 39% of young white men are in school or combining work and school, compared to 37% of young Black women and 13% of young Black men. These patterns likely reflect differential experiences by gender and race during elementary and secondary school as well as differences by race in families' financial resources and ability to pay for higher education. Future work with the FFCWS data should explore the role of state and federal education and financial aid policies in reducing or exacerbating these differences.

Another striking finding is that young Black men are notably more likely than other groups to be disconnected, with about 30% not in school or work. The majority of this group (63%) is seeking work. Past research has highlighted the precarious position of young Black men in the labor market, but it is disappointing to see this group continuing to struggle to find employment in spite of seeking work. Future analyses of the FFCWS data should explore the trajectories of this group, with a view to better understanding what structural barriers may be preventing them from gaining steady employment and what policies might be most helpful. Policymakers should accelerate their efforts on behalf of this group, including through existing programs such as unemployment insurance or the Earned Income Tax Credit, or through new models such as basic income or young adult tax credits.

Hispanic young adults have a rate of disconnection slightly higher than the overall average and display different patterns of involvement in school vs work. Hispanic young men have the highest rate of working (about 61%) but are less likely than their non-Hispanic white peers to be in school. Future work with the FFCWS data should further explore these patterns and the role that state or federal policies might play in

producing or altering them. Policymakers should consider what policies might address the particular challenges faced by Hispanic young adults.

We also find some evidence that patterns of employment may persist over time. In particular, young adults who did not have a job in the past year and are disconnected at age 22 are less likely to be looking for work, and more likely to say they are disabled or cite other reasons for not working than their peers who did have a job in the past year and are disconnected at age 22. Future research should delve more deeply into the experiences of these youth to better understand the persistent challenges they may be facing in the labor market and to identify policies or programs that might help address them.

These patterns of employment, education, and disconnection are consequential not just for young adults' current wellbeing but also for their prospects as they move further into young adulthood and later life stages. Education, while costly in the short run, will set the stage for future economic wellbeing and health. Early labor market experiences are also critical in setting the stage for future employment and earnings. While it is reassuring to see that most contemporary urban young adults are connected to school or work or both at age 22, the disparities we see between groups are concerning and merit further attention by researchers and policymakers.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table 1.1. Distribution of the analytic sample (weighted)

	N (%)
Overall	2,146 (100%)
By gender	
Men	1,112 (52%)
Women	1,034 (48%)
By race/ethnicity	
Black	504 (23%)
Hispanic	708 (33%)
White	737 (34%)
Multi-racial	115 (5%)
Other	83 (4%)
Men by race/ethnicity	
Black	239 (23%)
Hispanic	346 (33%)
White	343 (33%)
Multi-racial	66 (6%)
Other	47 (5%)
Women by race/ethnicity	
Black	266 (24%)
Hispanic	362 (33%)
White	397 (36%)
Multi-racial	48 (4%)
Other	34 (3%)

Note: This table displays the number of cases in the analytic sample and their distribution by gender and race/ethnicity, weighted. A total of 2,978 young adults completed the age 22 interview and provided information about their employment and education. Of these, 2,146 were born in one of the 16 cities selected for a nationally representative sample of large cities. These 2,146 young adults constitute the analytic sample used here, and all analyses are weighted using the national weight (k7natwt) from the age 22 dataset. The other 833 respondents at age 22 were born in one of the four cities that are not part of the nationally representative sample (Oakland, Detroit, Newark, and Milwaukee) and thus do not have national weights (20 cities were included in the study, of which 16 cities were used for national estimate).

Table 1.2. Distribution of the analytic sample (unweighted)

	N (%)
Overall	2,146 (100%)
By gender	
Men	1,040 (48%)
Women	1,106 (52%)
By race/ethnicity	
Black	886 (41%)
Hispanic	640 (30%)
White	454 (21%)
Multi-racial	95 (4%)
Other	71 (3%)
Men by race/ethnicity	
Black	420 (40%)
Hispanic	307 (30%)
White	224 (22%)
Multi-racial	48 (5%)
Other	41 (4%)
Women by race/ethnicity	
Black	466 (42%)
Hispanic	333 (30%)
White	230 (21%)
Multi-racial	47 (4%)
Other	30 (3%)

Note: This table displays the number of cases in the analytic sample and their distribution by gender and race/ethnicity, unweighted (see Note to Table 1.1 for more detail).

Table 2. Education, employment, and disconnection rates at age 22

Column % (weighted)	All	By gender		By race/ethnicity				
		Men	Women	Black	Hispanic	White	Multi-racial	Other
Working	47	56	39	50	50	46	44	29
Working and in school/training	25	17	33	10	6	16	27	22
In school/training	12	12	12	16	26	28	25	40
Disconnected	16	15	16	25	18	9	4	9

Men by race/ethnicity

Column % (weighted)	Black	Hispanic	White	Multi-racial	Other
Working	57	61	55	38	40
Working and in school/training	6	17	22	26	21
In school/training	7	5	17	34	33
Disconnected	30	17	7	2	6

Women by race/ethnicity

Column % (weighted)	Black	Hispanic	White	Multi-racial	Other
Working	42	37	38	53	14
Working and in school/training	25	37	34	25	70
In school/training	12	8	16	16	4
Disconnected	21	19	12	6	13

Table 3. Disconnected young adults: Reasons for disconnection

Column % (weighted)	All	By gender		By race/ethnicity				
		Men	Women	Black	Hispanic	White	Multi-racial	Other
Looking for a regular job	66	61	71	76	68	49	59	39
Personal/family reasons	5	6	4	1	11	1	0	11
Stay-at-home parent	9	2	17	1	4	35	30	1
Disabled	9	16	2	14	1	14	9	20
Don't want/need to work	2	1	2	0	4	0	2	0
Believe no work available	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	27
In jail/prison	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	8	13	3	8	13	0	0	2

Men by race/ethnicity

Column % (weighted)	Black	Hispanic	White	Multi-racial	Other
Looking for a regular job	63	65	51	71	6
Personal/family reasons	2	12	2	0	26
Stay-at-home parent	0	0	9	0	0
Disabled	21	1	38	23	0
Don't want/need to work	1	2	0	5	0
Believe no work available	0	0	0	0	67
In jail/prison	0	0	0	0	0
Other	12	20	0	1	1

Women by race/ethnicity

Column % (weighted)	Black	Hispanic	White	Multi-racial	Other
Looking for a regular job	94	70	48	52	62
Personal/family reasons	1	9	1	0	0
Stay-at-home parent	1	8	49	48	2
Disabled	2	0	0	0	33
Don't want/need to work	0	6	0	0	0
Believe no work available	0	0	0	0	0
In jail/prison	0	0	0	0	0
Other	2	7	1	0	3

Table 4. Disconnected young adults: Work last year

Column % (weighted)	All	By gender		By race/ethnicity				
		Men	Women	Black	Hispanic	White	Multi-racial	Other
Had a job	59	39	80	52	54	79	89	70
Informal work	14	21	6	21	10	6	11	5
In school	<1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
None of the above	27	40	13	26	35	14	1	26

Note: Informal work includes working off the books, having own business, doing gig work, and/or doing something else to make money.

Men by race/ethnicity

Column % (weighted)	Black	Hispanic	White	Multi-racial	Other
Had a job	33	39	45	69	95
Informal work	27	15	16	29	2
In school	0	1	0	0	0
None of the above	39	45	38	2	4

Women by race/ethnicity

Column % (weighted)	Black	Hispanic	White	Multi-racial	Other
Had a job	80	70	99	100	52
Informal work	13	5	0	0	7
In school	0	0	0	0	0
None of the above	7	25	1	0	41

Table 5. Disconnected young adults who had a job in the past year: Reasons for disconnection

Column % (weighted)	All	By gender		By race/ethnicity				
		Men	Women	Black	Hispanic	White	Multi-racial	Other
Looking for a regular job	75	87	69	95	71	59	66	42
Personal/family reasons	4	2	5	1	9	1	0	15
Stay-at-home parent	13	0	19	1	4	40	34	1
Disabled	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don't want/need to work	2	1	3	1	5	0	0	0
Believe no work available	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	39
In jail/prison	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	5	7	4	2	11	0	0	3

Men by race/ethnicity

Column % (weighted)	Black	Hispanic	White	Multi-racial	Other
Looking for a regular job	93	84	100	99	0
Personal/family reasons	0	2	0	0	28
Stay-at-home parent	1	0	0	0	0
Disabled	1	0	0	0	0
Don't want/need to work	2	0	0	0	0
Believe no work available	0	0	0	0	70
In jail/prison	0	0	0	0	0
Other	3	14	0	1	1

Women by race/ethnicity

Column % (weighted)	Black	Hispanic	White	Multi-racial	Other
Looking for a regular job	96	64	49	52	93
Personal/family reasons	1	13	1	0	0
Stay-at-home parent	1	6	50	48	3
Disabled	0	0	0	0	0
Don't want/need to work	0	9	0	0	0
Believe no work available	0	0	0	0	0
In jail/prison	0	0	0	0	0
Other	2	9	0	0	4

Table 6. Disconnected young adults who did not have a job in the past year: Reasons for disconnection

Column % (weighted)	All	By gender		By race/ethnicity				
		Men	Women	Black	Hispanic	White	Multi-racial	Other
Looking for a regular job	53	45	80	55	63	11	6	34
Personal/family reasons	7	9	1	2	13	4	0	0
Stay-at-home parent	4	2	8	1	4	16	0	0
Disabled	21	25	9	28	2	68	76	65
Don't want/need to work	1	2	0	0	2	0	18	0
Believe no work available	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
In jail/prison	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	13	17	2	14	16	1	0	1

Men by race/ethnicity

Column % (weighted)	Black	Hispanic	White	Multi-racial	Other
Looking for a regular job	49	53	11	6	100
Personal/family reasons	3	19	3	0	0
Stay-at-home parent	0	0	16	0	0
Disabled	31	2	70	76	0
Don't want/need to work	0	4	0	18	0
Believe no work available	0	0	0	0	0
In jail/prison	0	0	0	0	0
Other	17	23	0	0	0

Women by race/ethnicity

Column % (weighted)	Black	Hispanic	White	Multi-racial	Other
Looking for a regular job	85	85	13	29	0
Personal/family reasons	0	1	12	0	0
Stay-at-home parent	3	12	20	0	0
Disabled	11	1	28	70	0
Don't want/need to work	0	0	0	0	0
Believe no work available	0	0	0	0	0
In jail/prison	0	0	0	0	0
Other	1	1	27	1	0