

## **What Predicts Disconnection at Age 22, and What Experiences are Protective? 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. The children — now young adults — were re-interviewed between October 2020 and January 2024, at age 22, responding to questions about their income, earnings, living arrangements, employment, education, family, financial support, health, identity, and more.

As youth in the FFCWS cohort transition into young adulthood, the data offers a valuable opportunity to understand how today's young adults are doing. This brief focuses on risk and protective factors for disconnection — being neither enrolled in school/training nor employed — an important outcome for young adults. We take advantage of the longitudinal data to shed light on experiences during childhood and adolescence that predict disconnection at age 22 as well as factors that promote connection to education and/or employment.

### **Key findings**

- Young adults who are disconnected at age 22 already experience risk factors for disconnection during childhood and adolescence, when compared to their peers who are connected to school and/or work at age 22.
  - In elementary school (when surveyed at age 9), they are behind in vocabulary skills and are more likely to report being picked on by peers. They are more likely to have been absent from school, held back, suspended, or expelled.
  - In high school (when surveyed at age 15), they are less likely to report feeling connected to school and more likely to report being bullied. They are more likely to have failed a class, skipped school, been held back, suspended, or expelled.
  - They are also more likely to have been involved with the juvenile justice system and more likely to have been arrested or taken into custody by the police.
- Importantly, there are also some factors and experiences that are protective.
  - Youth who are connected to education and/or employment at age 22 are more likely to have attended preschool and to have parents with high levels of education themselves.
  - They are more likely to have mothers who are employed when they are in elementary and high school.

- They are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities at age 9 and 15 and more likely to work during high school.
- These findings suggest that it should be possible to identify children who are at risk of young adult disconnection earlier in childhood. The findings also point to experiences that could potentially be protective against disconnection.

## 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.<sup>1</sup> The children were born in 20 large cities but now reside all over the United States.<sup>2</sup>

[In an earlier brief](#), we reported that most young adults in the FFCWS sample are working or in school/training at age 22. However, a significant share are disconnected — neither working nor in school/training.

In this brief, we draw on the longitudinal data to identify experiences that are associated with higher risk of disconnection at age 22, as well as factors that are protective (associated with lower risk of disconnection). In particular, we look at children’s reports at age 9 about their experiences in elementary school, their reports at age 15 about their experiences in high school, and their reports at age 22 looking back retrospectively. We also make use of some data reported by children’s mothers (or other primary caregiver). We describe all the variables we use in the Data and Methods section of the Appendix.

## Results

### **Young adults who are disconnected at age 22 already differ from their peers during childhood**

As shown in Table 1, young adults who are disconnected at age 22 are more likely to have low vocabulary scores at age 9 than their peers who are working or in school/training at age 22 (33% as compared to 21%). They also report different elementary school experiences when surveyed at age 9 than their peers who are connected at age 22. They are more likely to report being picked on by other children one or more times a week (47% vs. 40%). They are also more likely to have been absent from school more than twice a year (60% vs 52%), ever held back (18% vs 14%), or suspended or expelled (8% vs 4%). Taken together, these differences indicate that children who are disconnected at age 22 are at higher risk of being less connected to school at age 9.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> The cities of birth: 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.

**Table 1. Experiences at age 9, by age 22 disconnection status**

	Disconnected (n=756)	Not disconnected (n=2,474)
Low vocabulary score	33%	21%
Being picked on once or more per week	47%	40%
Being absent more than twice a year	60%	52%
Child ever held back at school	18%	14%
Suspended/expelled during the past year	8%	4%

Note. The table shows the percentage of children with each characteristic or experience within the group that is disconnected at age 22 and the percentage within the group that is not disconnected at age 22. All percentages shown are significantly different across the two groups at  $p < 0.05$  (in pooled  $t$ -tests).

### Young adults who are disconnected at age 22 also differ from their peers during adolescence

As shown in Table 2, young adults who are disconnected at age 22 are more likely than their peers who are connected at age 22 to report having low school connectedness in high school (when surveyed at age 15), and more likely to report being bullied at least once a week (19% vs 13%). They are also more likely to have failed a class (62% vs 44%), skipped school (17% vs 11%), been held back (29% vs 20%), or been suspended or expelled (36% vs 22%). Similar to the age 9 results, these results from age 15 suggest that children who are disconnected at age 22 are already at elevated risk of disconnection during high school.

**Table 2. Experiences at age 15, by age 22 disconnection status**

	Disconnected (n=756)	Not disconnected (n=2,474)
Low school connectedness	17%	11%
Bullied by peers at school at least once per week	19%	13%
Ever failed a class in school	62%	44%
Ever skipped school	17%	11%
Ever held back since last interview	29%	20%
Ever suspended/expelled in past 2 years	36%	22%

Note. The table shows the percentage of children with each characteristic or experience within the group that is disconnected at age 22 and the percentage within the group that is not disconnected at age 22. All percentages shown are significantly different across the two groups at  $p < 0.05$  (in pooled  $t$ -tests).

### Young adults who are disconnected at age 22 are more likely to have been systems-involved

The previous sections have focused on experiences at home or in school. But young people engage with other systems as well. Here, we focus on involvement with two important systems: juvenile justice and the police.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In other work, we have examined the links between involvement with the child protective services system and disconnection. Berger et al., (2026). Adjusting for Underreporting of Child Protective Services Involvement in the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study and Assessing Its Empirical Implications Through Illustrative Analyses of Young Adult Disconnection. *Social Service Review*, 100(1), 000-000.

As shown in Table 3, we find young adults who are disconnected at age 22 twice as likely to have been involved with the juvenile justice system (22% vs 10%) and three times more likely to have been arrested or taken into custody by the police (15% vs 5%). Again, these findings point to differences between youth who are disconnected and those who are not disconnected before young adulthood.

**Table 3. Systems involvement, by age 22 disconnection status**

	Disconnected (n=756)	Not disconnected (n=2,474)
Juvenile justice system involvement before age 18	22%	10%
Ever arrested or taken into custody by police	15%	5%

Note. The table shows the percentage of children with each characteristic or experience within the group that is disconnected at age 22 and the percentage within the group that is not disconnected at age 22. All percentages shown are significantly different across the two groups at  $p < 0.05$  (in pooled  $t$ -tests).

***There are also some factors and experiences that are protective against disconnection***

As shown in Table 4, youth who are connected to school and/or work at age 22 are more likely to have attended pre-kindergarten or preschool (58% vs 49%) and to have parents with high levels of education themselves (for example, 14% vs 6% with a college degree or more). They are more likely to have mothers who are employed when they are in elementary school (66% vs 56%) and high school (74% vs 64%). They are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities at age 9 (84% vs 78%) and more likely to be involved in activities (84% vs 73%) and work during high school (66% vs 51%). These protective factors and experiences point to opportunities to engage and connect youth who may be at risk for disconnection before school starts or while they are still in elementary school or high school.

**Table 4. Protective factors, by disconnection status**

	Disconnected (n=756)	Not disconnected (n=2,474)
Child attended pre-kindergarten or preschool	49%	58%
Mother's education level at baseline		
1 Less high school	39%	29%
2 High school or equivalent	35%	30%
3 Some college, technical or trade school	20%	27%
4 College or graduate degree	6%	14%
Mother worked for pay past week at age 9	56%	66%
Primary caregiver worked for pay past week at age 15	64%	74%
Any extracurricular activities at age 9	78%	84%
Any activities during high school	73%	84%
Did work for pay during high school	51%	66%

Note. All percentages shown are significantly different across the two groups at  $p < 0.05$  (either in pooled  $t$ -tests, or Pearson chi-square tests of independence).

## Conclusions and implications for future research and policy

Disconnection in young adulthood is fortunately not a frequent outcome, but it is one with serious consequences for those who experience it, both in the short term and the longer term. For this reason, it is important to better understand what factors are associated with elevated risk of disconnection as well as what factors might help prevent it.

The FFCWS data provides a rare opportunity to identify such factors in a contemporary cohort of young adults. The results offer several implications for future research and policy.

First, with regard to factors that are associated with elevated risk of disconnection, our analysis highlights the important role of *school connection*. Our results for factors such as having low vocabulary skills, being picked on or bullied, not feeling strongly connected to school, being absent from school, failing classes, being held back, being suspended or expelled suggest that young people who are at risk for disconnection in young adulthood have weaker connections to school earlier in life. This finding points to a role for policies to strengthen such connections, such as tutoring for those with low vocabulary skills, bullying prevention programs, and programs to prevent absenteeism, failing grades and retention, suspensions and expulsions. Our results also point to the need for future research to trace out the pathways to disconnection from early childhood through young adulthood and the links between social disconnection (e.g., being picked on or bullied) and academic disconnection (e.g., failing classes or being held back).

Second, our analysis also highlights the elevated risk of disconnection associated with *systems involvement*. Young adults who are disconnected are more likely than their peers to have been involved with juvenile justice and the police. This finding points to the need for policies and programs to support connections to school and work for youth who are systems involved or have a history of such involvement. There is also a need for future research to trace out the links between different types of systems involvement, in particular for youth who are involved with multiple systems.

Third, our analysis points to several potentially protective factors. These include *pre-kindergarten or preschool*, and an array of *family factors*. The finding that having attended pre-kindergarten or preschool is associated with lower risk of disconnection points to a potential role for expanded access to such programs, through initiatives such as universal pre-kindergarten. The findings related to family factors — in particular, maternal education and maternal employment during childhood — point to a potential role for policies that support young parents and that support maternal education and employment (e.g., child care and after school programs). Future research should also look at the role played by family economic resources and the role of public policies to address poverty and hardship.

Fourth, the findings related to *school and/or work experiences* point to a role for policies and programs to increase access to extracurricular activities and employment for high-schoolers. There is a need for future research to disentangle the extent to which such experiences promote connection versus the extent

to which young people who are already more connected select (or are selected) to participate in such experiences. There is also a need for future research on policies and programs to help connect adolescents and young adults to education and employment.

Finally, there is a need for further research on how the role of risk and protective factors such as those examined here might vary across groups. Rates of disconnection vary considerably by gender and by race/ethnicity. [As we found in a previous brief](#), young men are at higher risk of disconnection at age 22 than young women, and Black young adults, particularly Black young men, are at higher risk than their White or Hispanic peers. Identifying which risk and protective factors are most important for the most affected groups is an important direction for future research.

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This brief is part of a series on how today's young adults are faring. Other briefs in the series are available from the [Center on Poverty and Social Policy](#) and [FFCWS](#).

## Appendix

### Data and Methods

We drew on data from the age 22 FFCWS surveys which provide information about disconnection status of 3,230 young adults. These young adults completed an interview (online, by phone, or in person) between October 2020 and January 2024 and provided information about their employment, enrollment in school or training, and other variables at age 22. Adults who were the youth's primary caregiver at age 15 were also interviewed, and we use the primary caregiver's report, when the information is not available from young adults. Among the 3,230 young adults in our sample, 2,978 use young adult self-reports, and 252 cases use primary caregiver (PCG) reports. Of these 3,230 young adults, 756 young adults were classified as disconnected, while 2,474 were not disconnected.

We also draw on data from earlier interview waves (birth, age 5, age 9, and age 15) for risk or protective factors, as detailed below.

**Disconnection:** For this analysis, we define a young adult as disconnected if they are neither “working” nor “in school/training”. 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. 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. Both young adult and primary caregiver survey at age 22 were used to construct this measure.

#### Risk factors - from age 9 reports

- **Low vocabulary score:** a binary indicator for low early vocabulary skills in early childhood (1=children fall in the bottom quartile; 0=otherwise), prioritizing use of standardized Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) measurement at age 9, and using age 5 standardized PPVT scores if age 9 measures are unavailable. (PPVT score is a measure used to assess how well a child understands spoken words. We use the standardized PPVT score that has been adjusted for the child's age.)
- **Being picked on once or more times per week:** a binary indicator for whether child was reported to be picked on by peers once or more per week during the past month (1=once a week, several times per week, or every day; 0=otherwise). This survey item was part of age 9 school connectedness scale.

- **Being absent more than twice a year:** a binary indicator for frequent school absence at age 9 based on the primary caregiver (PCG)'s report of how often the child missed school in the past year. (1=child missed school more than twice during the year; 0=child missed school once, twice, or not at all.)
- **Child ever held back:** a binary indicator for grade repetition at age 9 using PCG's report. (1=child has repeated any grade; 0=otherwise). Children who were homeschooled are coded as not having repeated a grade.
- **Suspended/expelled during the past year:** a binary indicator for school disciplinary action at age 9 using the PCG's report. (1=child was ever suspended or expelled during the past year; 0=otherwise). Children who were reported as never having missed school are coded as not having been suspended or expelled.

### **Risk factors - from age 15 reports**

- **Low school connectedness:** a binary indicator of whether the youth feel connected to their school, based on their responses to four survey questions at age 15. Students rated their agreement with statements about school belonging and engagement. We averaged their responses across the four items (requiring at least one valid answer), then created a binary indicator. (1=low school connectedness; student somewhat or strongly disagreed with statement about school connectedness; 0=otherwise). Students who didn't answer any of the four questions are coded as missing.
- **Bullied by peers at school at least once per week:** a binary indicator for whether the youth experienced peer bullying at school at least once per week at age 15. Students answered two questions "Kids at school pick on you or say mean things to you" and "Kids at school hit you or threaten to hurt you physically?" Response options ranged from never to about every day. (1=youth reported *either* type of bullying occurring once a week or more frequently; 0=youth reported less frequent bullying or no bullying for both items).
- **Ever failed a class in school:** a binary indicator for ever failing a class, using child's report (1 = yes; 0 = otherwise).
- **Ever skipped school:** a binary indicator for ever skipping school, using child's report (1 = yes; 0 = otherwise). Children who were homeschooled are coded as not having skipped school.
- **Child ever held back since last interview:** a binary indicator for ever repeating a grade since the last interview, using child's report (1 = yes; 0 = otherwise). Children who were homeschooled are coded as not having repeated grade.
- **Ever suspended/expelled in past 2 years:** a binary indicator for ever suspended or expelled in the past two years, using child's report (1 = yes; 0 = otherwise). Children who were homeschooled are coded as not having suspended/expelled.

### Risk factors - systems involvement

- **Juvenile justice system involvement before age 18:** a binary indicator for any juvenile justice system involvement before age 18, based on youth and PCG reports across waves (1 = yes; 0 = otherwise).
- **Ever arrested or taken into custody by police:** a binary indicator for ever being arrested or taken into custody by police by age 15, based on youth and PCG reports at age 15 (1 = yes; 0 = otherwise).

### Protective factors

- **Child attended pre-kindergarten or preschool:** constructed four-category measure (1=Pre-K/preschool; 2=Head Start; 3=Daycare; 4=Family/relative care only) of the child's early care arrangement around the age 5 interview, using mother and father reports. Each child is assigned to the program reported by either parent, in this priority order:
  - Pre-K/preschool, if either parent reports the child attends a pre-K/preschool-type program,
  - Head Start, if either parent reports Head Start,
  - Daycare, if daycare is reported and the child was not already classified as pre-K/preschool or Head Start,
  - Family/relative care only, if children was not reported to be in a center-based program, including other non-center-based care.
  - Cases with insufficient information are coded as missing.
  - We display category 1 (Pre-K/preschool) in Table 4.
- **Mother's education at baseline:** Constructed four-category measure (1=less than high school; 2=high school or equivalent; 3=some college and technical or trade school; 4=college or graduate degree) of mother's educational attainment measured at baseline using the self-reported highest level of education completed. Responses indicating missing or invalid values are coded as missing.
- **Mother/PCG worked for pay past week:** binary indicators of whether the caregiver worked for pay during the previous week, measured at age 5 (mother report) and age 15 (primary caregiver report) (1 = yes; 0 = otherwise). Responses indicating missing, refusal, or inapplicability are coded as missing.
- **Any extracurricular activities (focal child at age 9):** a binary indicator for whether the child participated in any types of extracurricular activities (athletics/sports team, music/art/performing arts, religious activities/services, scouts/YMCA), using PCG's report at age 9 (1 = yes; 0 = otherwise). Responses indicating missing, refusal, or inapplicability are coded as missing.
- **Any activity involvement during high school:** a binary indicator for whether the youth was involved in any type of activities (athletics/sports team, school activities, religious services, volunteer service activities) during high school (1 = yes; 0 = otherwise).

- **Did work for pay during high school:** a binary indicator for whether the youth ever worked for pay during the high school, based on youth retrospective self-reports collected at age 22 (1 = yes; 0 = otherwise). Response indicating missing or refusal also assigned 0.