

# Youthwork *Information Brief*

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## Dropouts

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A school dropout is an individual who is no longer attending any school and who has not received a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent. Although local school systems have the primary responsibility of seeing that young people complete their high school education, dropouts are also an important population served by Workforce Investment Act (WIA) programs. WIA programs are especially necessary to help dropouts obtain the skills and credentials they need to become employed and advance in the workforce.

### What Are the Consequences of Dropping Out?

In 2005, 1,269,000 youth aged 16-19 were not employed or in school; 1,114,000 were considered high school dropouts. There are many negative results associated with dropping out of high school.

- Dropouts earn less income than high school graduates. Median annual income in 2005 for dropouts aged 18 and over was \$12,184 versus \$20,431 for high school graduates and General Educational Development (GED) certificate recipients.
- High school graduates have a higher household income and better health than GED recipients.
- Dropouts are more likely to be unemployed or out of the labor force than high school graduates.
- Dropouts are overrepresented in prisons; about 75 percent of state inmates and 59 percent of federal inmates are dropouts.
- Dropouts report being in worse health than high school graduates, regardless of income.
- Dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to be early parents and to receive food stamps, public housing, and cash assistance.
- Dropouts engage in less civic activity, including voting and volunteering, than high school graduates.

In addition to those negative consequences for dropouts, society loses the benefits of higher tax receipts, increased purchasing power, and higher levels of worker productivity. It is estimated that each dropout costs the nation approximately \$260,000 over his or her lifetime.

### Why Do Youth Say They Drop Out?

About 70 percent of dropouts believe they could have graduated if they had tried. Dropouts cite features of school environment and practice as well as personal reasons for dropping out.

- Youth feel unwelcome or unsafe in school for various reasons:
  - o Bullying or other violence in or near the school

- Inappropriate or inequitable discipline, such as suspensions or expulsions for minor infractions of rules
- Racial or cultural tensions between students or between students and staff
- Lack of support or overt hostility towards youth who are considered trouble-makers or who don't fit in
- Too much freedom
- Lack of personal relationship and interest from teachers and other adults
- Classes that are too easy or too hard
- Inability to see value or usefulness of school subjects
- Disengagement with either the social or academic aspects of school
- Lack of support or interest in school by parents
- Need to work or preference for work
- Need to care for a family member
- Pregnancy or parenting

## What Other Factors Are Associated with Dropping Out?

Many personal, family, school, and community factors are associated with dropping out of high school.

Personal Factors	Family Factors	School Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disabilities, including learning disabilities</li> <li>• Membership in a minority racial or ethnic group</li> <li>• Speaking English as a second language</li> <li>• Drug or alcohol use</li> <li>• Mental illness</li> <li>• Working more than 20 hours per week while in school</li> <li>• Living in multiple residences or attending multiple schools</li> <li>• Low educational or occupational aspirations</li> <li>• Repeated one or more grades in elementary or middle school</li> <li>• Stereotypes (e.g., women are not good at math)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low income</li> <li>• Single parent or step-parent family</li> <li>• Parents or other family who did not complete high school</li> <li>• Conflict or violence at home</li> </ul> <div style="background-color: #f4a460; text-align: center; padding: 2px;"><b>Community Factors</b></div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low-income community even if family is not low income</li> <li>• Peer pressure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low attendance rates</li> <li>• Low average grades</li> <li>• High rates of students repeating a grade</li> <li>• Difficulty during the transition from middle school or junior high to high school</li> <li>• High proportion of students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches</li> <li>• Markedly fewer seniors than incoming freshmen</li> </ul>

## What Is Dropout Recovery?

Once a youth has dropped out and is disengaged from school, dropout recovery programs attempt to reengage the youth. Good dropout recovery programs do not duplicate the school environment that led youth to drop out in the first place. Instead, they have features like these:

- A portfolio of recovery options that recognize that dropouts have diverse needs and have dropped out for diverse reasons
- Open entry and exit to allow youth to master curricula at their own pace
- Flexible scheduling and year-round learning that accommodate students with family and work responsibilities
- Teachers and other adults who respect students and provide positive relationships and guidance
- Career-to-work or other career-oriented curricula to help youth with near-term employment or educational goals
- Opportunities for employment for current income
- Clear, consistently enforced codes of conduct involving attendance requirements, often in the form of honor codes or contracts
- Extensive support services, especially those related to health and transportation

## **Dropping Out: A Detour, Not a Final Destination**

Recent research suggests that most dropouts regret dropping out. As many as 85 percent intend to complete their education, and nearly 65 percent do, in fact, complete high school or obtain a GED within 12 years of entering the 9th grade.

How can WIA youth programs help dropouts make a successful transition to employment and further education?

- Help dropouts get a high school diploma by placing them in a high-quality dropout recovery program.
- If dropout recovery and a high school diploma are not options, place dropouts in a GED program.
- Do not place dropouts in a program that just duplicates the factors that led them to drop out in the first place.
- Provide necessary support services.
- Remember that for most youth, dropping out should be considered a detour rather than a permanent status.

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