



KEEPING YOUTH CONNECTED

FOCUS ON DENVER



August 2011

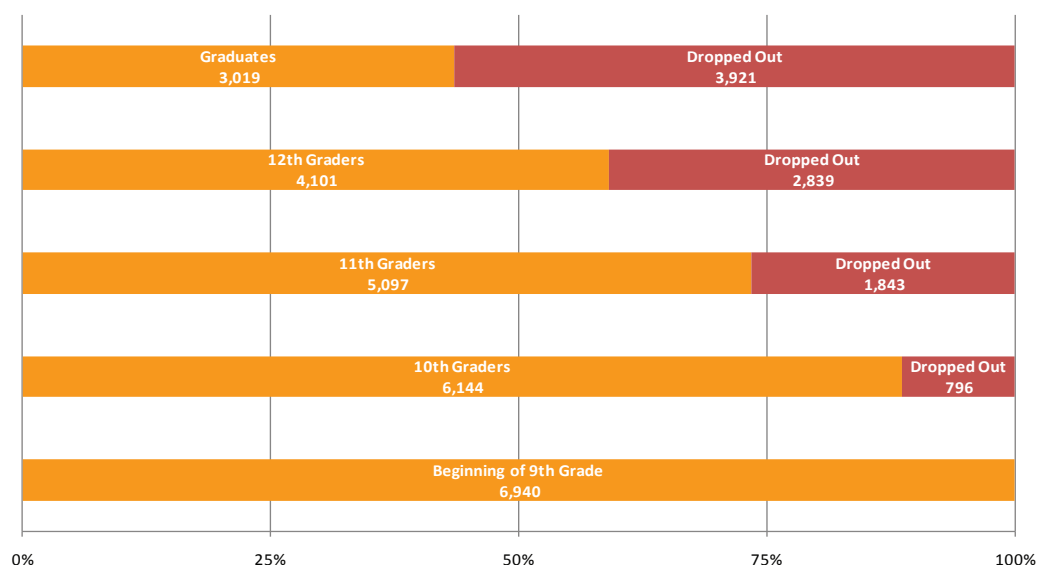
In communities across our nation, thousands of students drop out of high school every day. For most, academic struggles and lack of support make the dream of completing high school and postsecondary education seem impossible. Dejected and defeated, many youth give up. In Denver, just over 43 percent of students who entered the ninth grade in 2004 graduated four years later.¹ Of the approximately 6,940 students in that ninth grade class, four years later, 3,921 students were left behind.² Most of these students are youth of color, as 80 percent of Denver's school enrollment is minority. Fifty-seven percent of Denver's students are Hispanic and 18 percent are black.³ Failure to complete high school has serious effects on long-term life outcomes for young people. Many will endure unemployment and poverty due to lack of education and skills.

Several factors affect a young person's development and academic achievement in school: the school environment, the conditions of the community in which they live, family stability, and peer influences. In low-income communities, the combination of all these factors

makes it extremely difficult for youth to develop well, achieve in school, and remain on the path to success. For youth to thrive, it takes the collective effort of an entire community to address multiple stumbling blocks and remove barriers that impede a young person's ability to succeed in school and work.

The purpose of the community profiles project is to highlight data that help community members, advocates, and policymakers understand the nature and extent of issues facing large numbers of youth in low-income urban and rural communities. Many communities, such as Denver, already have begun to work on strategically addressing the issue of dropouts in their communities and are making great strides in this regard. Data and research help communities elevate the issue of youth development and high school dropout, target planning and resources toward specific interventions, create services and activities at sufficient scale to address the needs of all youth, benchmark progress, and make the case for increased investment.

**Denver Public Schools
Graduation Pipeline, Class of 2008**



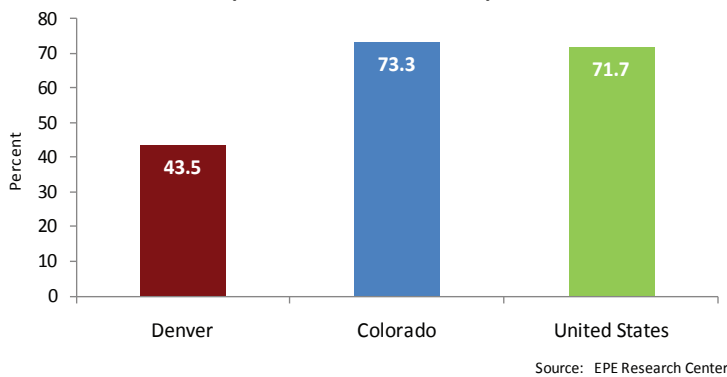
Source: Author's analysis using National Center for Education Statistics and EPE Research Center data

Schools

Educational success is the cornerstone to creating successful pathways for youth. Many schools in low-income communities are simply not making the mark. The school environment is not functioning well and, as a result, youth are disengaged from school and fail to complete their education.

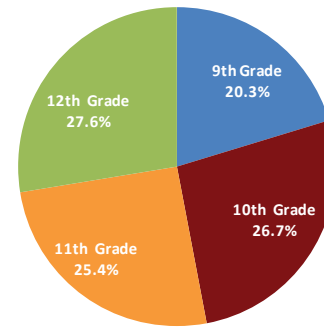
Many schools or districts allocate insufficient staff and resources to address issues such as guidance and counseling, attendance, or additional course help. Disciplinary policies often cause students to spend too many days outside the school building for behavioral infractions. The curriculum is not sufficiently rigorous, and high-poverty and high-minority schools often have the least-experienced teachers.

**High School Graduation Rates
(2007-2008 School Year)**



Denver School District falls far behind Colorado and the United States in graduating students on time. In 2008, the cohort graduation rate was 43.5 percent. The four year cohort graduation rate tracks students who entered ninth grade in 2004 and graduated four years later (the class of 2008) in order to find out the outcome for each individual student. Nationally, the majority of students drop out early in high school, after having experienced several years of difficulty, beginning at the end of elementary school or in middle school.⁴ In Denver, however, the drop out percentages for students are fairly proportionate across grades, although the largest proportion of students (nearly 28 percent) dropped out in 12th grade. Attendance, behavior, and coursework achievement are key predictors in the middle school years of continued school engagement in high school.⁵ Tracking these critical areas for all students will enable schools to identify students most in danger of dropping out and provide them with academic and supportive services to keep them connected to school.

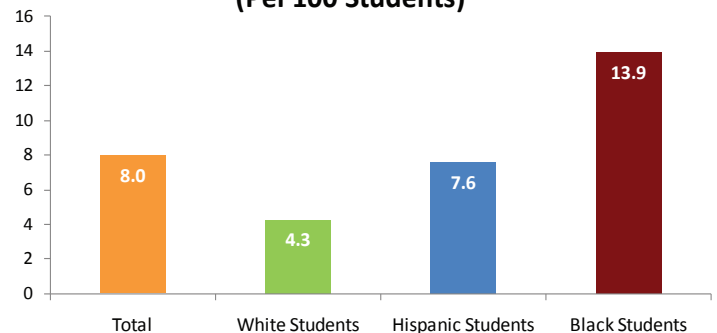
**When Do Denver's Youth Drop Out?
(2004-2008 Cohort)**



Source: EPE Research Center

Youth of color fare far worse in high school than their white counterparts, particularly males. Nationally, only about half of Hispanic and black students graduate from high school. Those in high poverty communities are even less likely to complete school. In Colorado, the black-white gap in high school graduation is estimated to be 30 percent.⁶

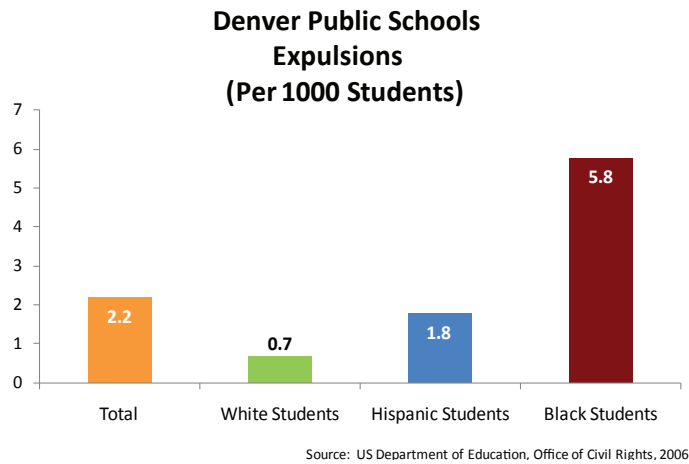
**Denver Public Schools
Out of School Suspensions
(Per 100 Students)**



Source: US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2006

Two of the major ways that youth are pushed out of the education system are through harsh disciplinary policies and tracking of students into particular educational levels. Both of these practices have done more harm than good for youth and have contributed to the nation's large dropout problem. The effect is felt more intensely by youth of color, as they are disproportionately affected by the implementation of these policies in school systems.

Nationally, 3.3 million youth are punished for school infractions by out-of-school suspension each year. Almost 103,000 more youth are expelled from school. The policies that made these forms of school punishment so prevalent (zero tolerance policies) began as a way of protecting students from truly dangerous situations. Their implementation, however, has been far too sweeping, punitive, and ineffective, and too many students have suffered a loss of educational opportunities as a result.⁷ They lose precious time while out of the classroom, and become disengaged from learning. These young people become more likely to drop out of school. Many are also being placed into the criminal justice system unnecessarily.⁸



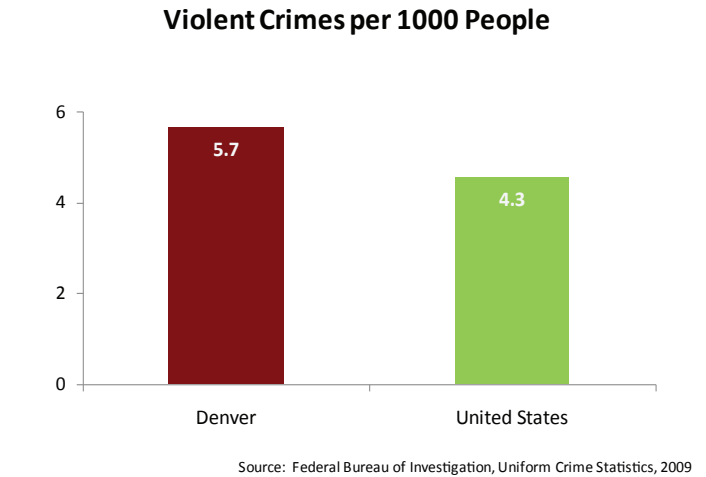
These outcomes are usually seen in large degree in urban and high minority school districts, where the existence of these policies is far more prevalent.⁹ Denver’s rate of suspension outpaces the national average. Moreover, black students are over three times more likely to be suspended from school than their peers. In addition, youth of color face higher rates of expulsion than their white counterparts.

Another area of educational concern for children and youth is the tracking of students into courses based on their perceived ability to succeed. Tracking that occurs in elementary school tends to follow students for the rest of their lives. Those placed in lower level tracks tend to stay there, even if they are performing well academically and would benefit from higher level coursework.¹⁰ There is a strong correlation between race, class, and track placement. Black and Hispanic students are disproportionately tracked into lower-level courses with less-qualified teachers, reduced expectations, and fewer resources.¹¹

The large number of youth dropping out of school in Denver requires attention. Many of these youth are not in other educational settings or working.¹² Absent intervention, the segment of our population with less than a high school diploma will grow faster than any other.¹³ It is important to note, however, that youth who drop out of school are not beyond our reach. Many recognize their limitations without an education and seek opportunities to reconnect to educational and work experiences to enhance their skills and future prospects. In a recent national survey of high school dropouts, 76 percent said that they would likely re-enroll in school if given a chance.¹⁴ Reconnecting youth by providing them with pathways back to complete their high school education, and linking them to postsecondary education and training opportunities will set them on the right course for more economically stable futures.

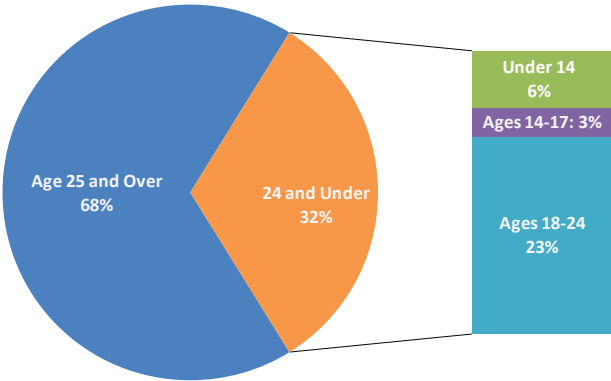
Community

The community in which youth live plays a significant role in their development. Research shows that community socio-economic status has an effect on achievement, emotional and social well-being, and sexual activity and fertility.¹⁵ Youth perception of the community, both in terms of connectedness and safety, is also critical. Positive connections to adults and institutions within the community and opportunities for civic engagement give youth a sense of worth and help them feel connected to the communities in which they live. Unfortunately, low-income communities lack adequate social and recreational resources, such as after-school and youth programs. This dearth of services has an adverse effect on youth development in the community.¹⁶ Exposure to violence is associated with a number of behavioral and psychological outcomes and has been found to be a distraction in school.¹⁷ The constant threat of violence in low-income communities prevents youth from envisioning their life prospects, as they are uncertain of even surviving into adulthood.¹⁸



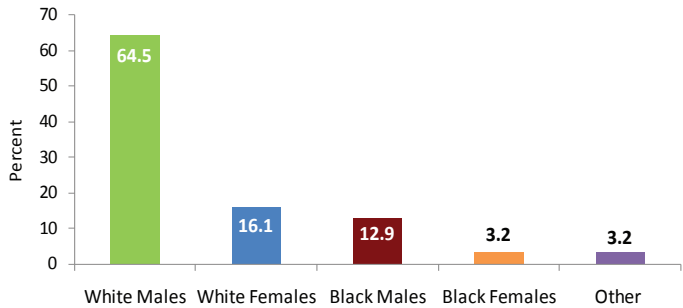
In 2009, over 3,400 violent crimes were reported in Denver. This represents a per-capita rate of 5.7 which is above the national average of 4.3 violent crimes per 1,000 people. Reported homicide data for 2009 shows that people under age 25 represent 32 percent of victims. The majority of young homicide victims are between ages 18 and 24. A look at homicide data by race reveals that the overwhelming majority (65 percent) of victims were white males. The data does not, however, specify ethnicity, making it likely that many victims were Hispanic. Black individuals, mostly males, comprised the remainder of the homicide victims (16 percent), though only making up ten percent of the population of Denver. Many cities struggle to get a handle on violence, which is so integrally related to educational and employment success. Too many youth are lost, both as victims and perpetrators of violent crime.

Homicide Victims in Denver, by Age



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, United States Department of Justice, 2009

Homicide Victims in Denver, by Race



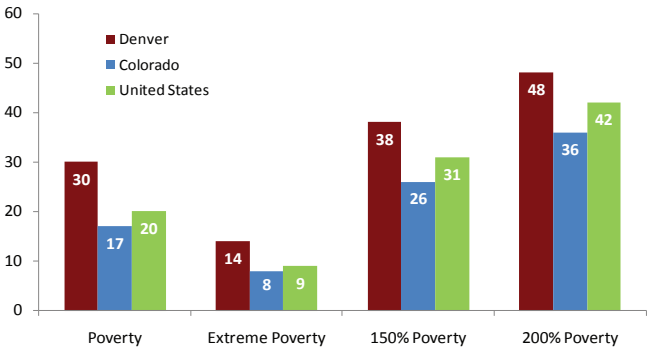
Source: Authors analysis of data from Bureau of Justice Statistics, United States Department of Justice and Census Bureau, 2009

Youth in Denver are significantly affected by issues of violence. A recent study cited that eight percent of Denver's high school students did not attend school at least once in a 30-day time span because they felt unsafe either at school, or on their way to or from school.¹⁹ In addition, 38 percent of high school students reported being in a physical fight, and 20 percent of students carried a weapon.²⁰ In the face of conditions of violence and poverty, it is easy to see how youth may feel ambivalence or, worse yet, despair about their futures. In the same survey, a large portion of students reported feeling sad and hopeless almost every day for two consecutive weeks.

Family

Poverty and family circumstances also play a role in a young person's ability to complete high school and be successful in adulthood. Youth do not exist separate from their families or households. Issues of poverty and fragile families affect their development and academic attainment. Many of Denver's youth grow up in impoverished families, may have fragile living situations, or have parents or caregivers who themselves are not educated. All of these scenarios present extra obstacles to a young person's successful transition into adulthood. These youth need additional services and supports to be successful. In communities such as Denver, the volume of youth facing these issues is far greater than in most other locales. Significant investment is needed to affect outcomes for youth in the community.

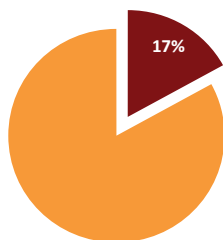
Percent of Children Under 18 Living in Poverty



Source: Kids Count Data Center, The Annie. E. Casey Foundation, 2009

Child poverty levels in Denver grossly outpace poverty levels in Colorado and the United States. In 2009, just under one-third of all children and youth under 18 lived below the federal poverty line in Denver. About half (66,000 children and youth) lived in low-income households with earnings less than 200 percent of poverty – less than \$43,512 per year for a family of four. In 2007, a startling 42 percent of children lived in families where no parent had full-time, year-round employment.²¹

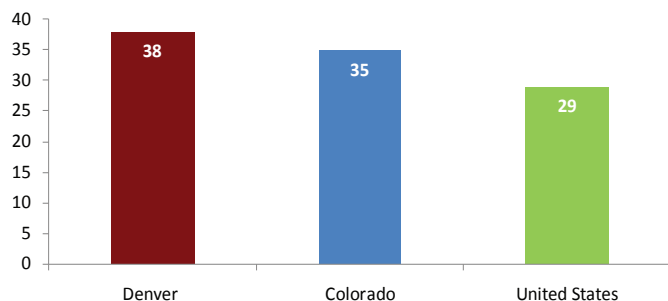
Denver Children Whose Parents All Lack High School Diploma



Source: Kids Count Data Center, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009

In addition to the lack of earnings coming into a home, family education levels present struggles for youth. Currently, 17 percent of Denver's children live in families where no parent has a high school diploma. These parents or caregivers are often not able to effectively support the academic achievement of the youth in their homes. Another area of concern is teen pregnancy. Denver's teen birth rate is 38 per 1,000. Teens who have children are far less likely to graduate from high school.²² Without flexible educational options for these mothers and fathers, they are more likely to drop out and raise their children in poverty. This continues the cycle of poverty because their children are less likely to be successful.²³

Births to Teen Mothers (Per 1000 Girls)



Source: US Census, American Community Survey, 2008

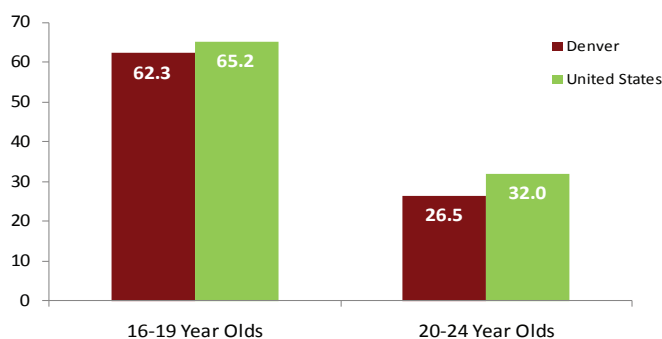
Employment

Employment is an important part of youth development and successful progression into young adulthood. A key predictor of consistent employment in adulthood is early exposure to the world of work through summer and year-round employment, internships, and service opportunities in the teen years. Youth who have been employed tend to have higher earnings in young adulthood.²⁴

Teen employment exposes youth to careers, promotes job readiness and develops their skills in particular industries. Community-based employment programs that support the development of soft skills such as communication, work ethic, appropriate dress, interviewing skills, etc. provide the preparation that youth need to be successful in the workforce. These types of programs also have significant value with regard to educational outcomes. Youth employment programs reduce absences from school, and can promote positive academic attitudes and increase the likelihood that students will take academic courses.²⁵ Youth also begin to have higher expectations of themselves and to set higher life goals as a result of being exposed to the world of work.

In addition to the many developmental benefits, youth employment is also helpful for the quality of community life, particularly during the summer months when youth work the most. Youth engage in less criminal activity while employed,²⁶ therefore the level of crime in a community declines when young people are put to work. In addition, dollars earned and spent by these youth are most often spent within the community, having an important economic impact.²⁷

Percent of Youth Not Working, by Age*



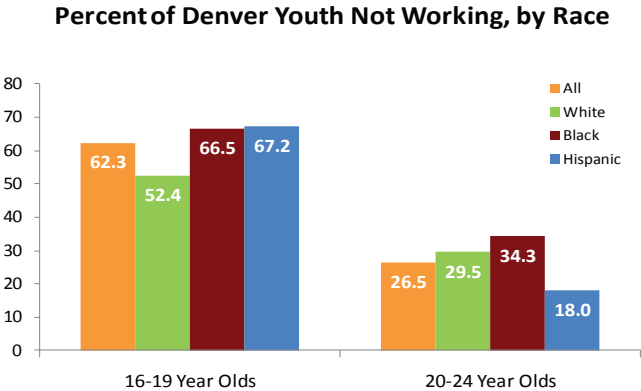
Source: US Census, American Community Survey, 2008

* Note: "Not Working" is defined as either unemployment or not participating in the labor force.

Despite all that is known about its benefits, youth employment in our nation is currently at its lowest point in 60 years.²⁸ In Denver, the youth employment situation is equivalent to the national average, though still alarming. Two-thirds of youth ages 16 to 19 are not employed. When the data is disaggregated by race, it shows that minority youth ages 16 to 19 work less, with Hispanic youth being the least likely to have employment. While Hispanic youth ages 20 to 24 tend to close the employment gap that exists between them and their white counterparts, black youth continue to fall behind during an age when establishing work history is critical.²⁹

Conclusion

Too many youth are lost each year when they drop out of school without completing a high school education. They are destined for lifelong poverty and difficulty if they are unable to complete their education and acquire the skills and knowledge that will enable them to work and have a meaningful career. Communities will suffer tremendously if this problem is not addressed – they will lose a significant amount of human capital, and will face rising costs in public services to meet the needs of an uneducated population. Young people, particularly those in low-income communities, must overcome many hurdles to be successful, including the conditions of their schools and neighborhoods. Communities must band together to figure out how to systemically deal with these issues – such as failing schools, family poverty, unemployment, and youth violence – so that youth can be successful. By using data to guide the planning and use of resources, communities can create sustainable solutions that will help to keep youth on the path to success in school and in life.



Source: US Census, American Community Survey, 2008
*Note: "Not Working" is defined as either unemployment or not participating in the labor force.

In many urban areas, there are few jobs located in close proximity to low-income neighborhoods, as many businesses have relocated to suburban areas. Often, youth are competing with unemployed adults for low-wage employment. The end of crucial government-funded programs has significantly hampered the ability of communities to support youth employment. While some communities continue to invest local funds in summer employment, it does not nearly meet the vast need for employment and pathways to careers for youth in low-income communities. Many low-income teens also struggle with balancing the need to help support their families and to finish their education. When communities are able to structure programs that enable youth to accomplish both, everyone benefits.

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- ¹ "School District Graduation Report: Denver SD," District Graduation Rate Map Tool, Education Week EPE Research Center, <http://www.edweek.org/apps/gmap/>
- ² "Enrollment by Grade, Gender, and Race," National Center for Education Statistics, United States Department of Education, <http://www.nces.ed.gov/ccd/bat/>
- ³ "Enrollment by Grade, Gender, and Race."
- ⁴ Robert Balfanz & Lisa Herzog, "Keeping Middle Grades Students On Track to Graduation: Initial Analysis and Implications," May 2006, www.philaedfund.org/powerpoint/dropoutresearch_4.06.ppt
- ⁵ Balfanz, "Keeping Middle Grades Students."
- ⁶ Yes We Can: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males, Schott Foundation, 2010, <http://www.blackboysreport.org>
- ⁷ Darrel Janerette & Barbara Shepperson, "Zero Tolerance Policies and School Discipline," Delaware Education Research and Development Center 28 (2009): 1-6, <http://dspace.udel.edu:8080/dspace/bitstream/19716/3930/1/Zero%20Tolerance-%20Education%20Policy%20Brief%20January%202009.pdf>
- ⁸ Opportunities Suspended: The Devastating Consequences of Zero-Tolerance and School Discipline, Advancement Project, 2006, <http://www.advancement-project.org/publications/opportunity-to-learn.php>
- ⁹ Opportunities Suspended
- ¹⁰ Amanda Datnow, *The Gender Politics of Educational Change*, 1998, 27-28.
- ¹¹ Datnow, *The Gender Politics*.
- ¹² American Community Survey, 2009. <http://factfinder.census.gov>
- ¹³ Patrick J. Kelly, "Mounting Pressures Facing the U.S. Workforce and the Increasing Need for Adult Education and Literacy," National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2007, <http://www.nchems.org/pubs/detail.php?id=104>
- ¹⁴ John M. Bridgeland, John L. Dilulio, Jr., & Karen Burke Morison, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2006, <http://www.civicenterprises.net/pdfs/thesilentepidemic3-06.pdf>
- ¹⁵ Tama Leventhal & Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, "Neighborhood Residence and Youth Development: Empirical Findings and Theoretical Models," *The Prevention Researcher* 15, no. 2 (2008): 3-6.
- ¹⁶ Leventhal, "Neighborhood Residence and Youth."
- ¹⁷ Ray Swisher, "Neighborhoods and Youth: How Neighborhood Demographics and Social Processes Affect Youth Outcomes," *The Prevention Researcher* 15, no. 2 (2008): 7-11.
- ¹⁸ Alford A. Young, Jr., "The (Non) Accumulation of Capital: Explicating the Relationship of Structure and Agency in the Lives of Poor Black Men," *Sociological Theory* 17, no. 2(1999), 201-227.
- ¹⁹ "Youth Online: Comprehensive Results," Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Centers for Disease Control, <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/yrbss/>
- ²⁰ "Youth Online: Comprehensive Results"
- ²¹ "Profile for Denver (City)," Kids Count Data Center, Annie E. Casey Foundation, <http://datacenter.kidscount.org>
- ²² "Teen Pregnancy Fact Sheet," March of Dimes, http://www.marchofdimes.com/professionals/14332_1159.asp
- ²³ "Teen Pregnancy Fact Sheet"
- ²⁴ Linda Harris, "The Tragic Loss of the Summer Jobs Program: Why It Is Time to Reinstate," Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, July/August 2007, 13-14.
- ²⁵ Susan Jekielek, Stephanie Cochran, and Elizabeth Hair, *Employment Programs and Youth Development: A Synthesis*, Child Trends, 2002, http://www.childtrends.org/what_works/clarkwww/employ/EmployRpt.pdf
- ²⁶ Jekielek, *Employment Programs and Youth Development*
- ²⁷ Harris, "The Tragic Loss"
- ²⁸ Andrew Sum, Joseph McLaughlin, Ishwar Khatiwada, et al., *The Continued Collapse of the Nation's Teen Job Market and the Dismal Outlook for the 2008 Summer Labor Market for Teens: Does Anybody Care?*, Center for Labor Market Studies, 2008, http://www.clms.neu.edu/publication/documents/The_Continued_Collapse_of_the_Nations_Teen_Job_Market.pdf

ABOUT CLASP

CLASP develops and advocates for policies at the federal, state and local levels that improve the lives of low-income people. We focus on policies that strengthen families and create pathways to education and work. Through careful research and analysis and effective advocacy, we develop and promote new ideas, mobilize others, and directly assist governments and advocates to put in place successful strategies that deliver results that matter to people across America.

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