

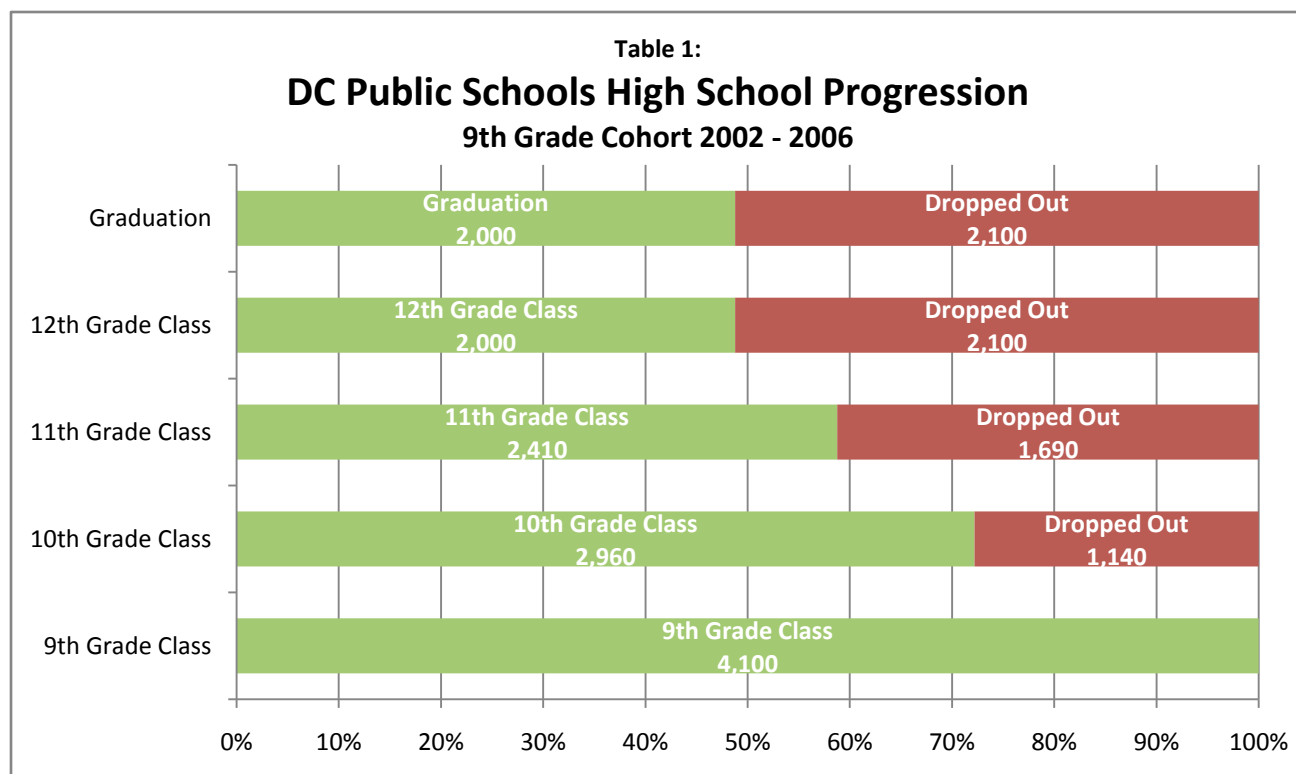
By Rhonda Tsoi-A-Fatt

AUGUST 2009

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 Washington, DC, just under half of students who entered the ninth grade in 2002 graduated four years later¹. There were approximately 4,100 students in that ninth grade class². Four years later, 2,100 students were left behind. Most of these students are youth of color, as 95 percent of Washington, DC's school enrollment is minority, the vast majority of which are black students.³

A young person's development and academic achievement in school is affected by several factors – 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. Schools cannot be responsible for solving all these issues and ensuring that youth achieve academic success. It takes the collective effort of an entire community to address these stumbling blocks and remove barriers that impede a young person's ability to succeed.

The purpose of the community profiles project is to highlight data that helps community members, advocates, and policy makers understand the nature and extent of the issues facing large numbers of youth in low-income urban and rural communities. Many communities 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 to target their planning and resources toward specific interventions, create services and activities at sufficient scale to address the needs of all youth, and make the case for increased investment.



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 the high-poverty and high-minority schools often have the least experienced teachers.

District of Columbia School District falls far behind the United States in graduating students on time. In 2006, only 49 percent of students who started the ninth grade actually graduated four years later. Research shows that 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 school⁴. In Washington, DC, the largest proportion of students (54 percent) dropped out in 9th grade. Attendance, behavior, and coursework achievement are key predictors in the middle school years of continued school engagement in high school⁵.

Minority youth fare far worse in high school, particularly males. Nationally, only about half of black students who begin high school will graduate four years later and in some of the most challenged communities, that number drops to only about one-third. In Washington, DC, there is an estimated 30 percent gap in rates of high school graduation between black and white male students. This gap is worse than the rest of the nation, and it means that far less than half of black students in the city are completing high school.

Table 2:
High School Graduation Rates
2005-06 School Year

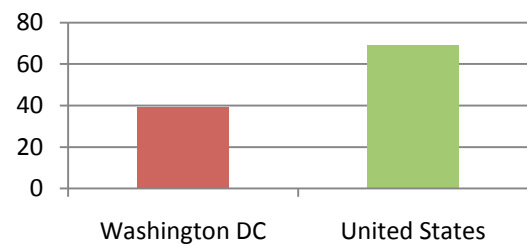


Table 3:
Where Youth Drop Out

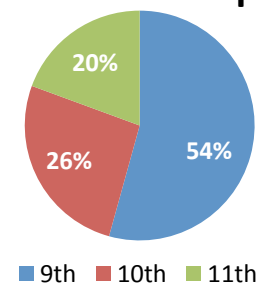
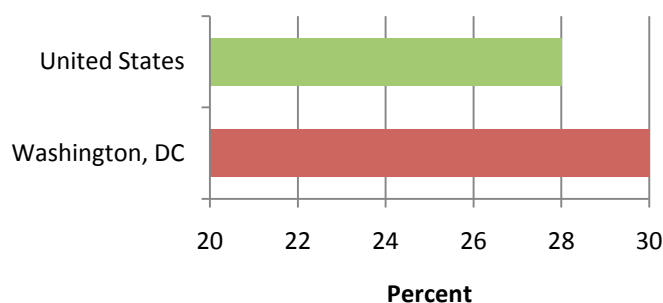


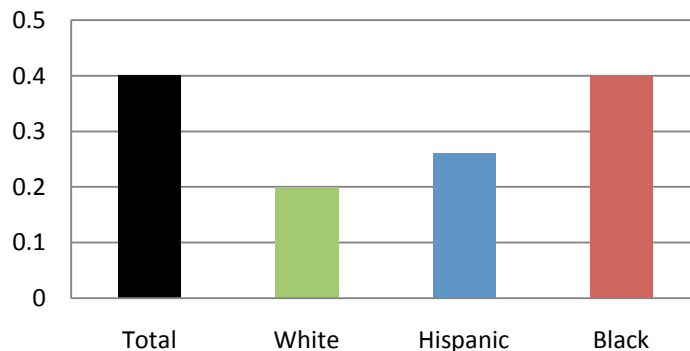
Table 4:
Black-White Gap in High School Graduation Rates



In 2007, 4,000 (11 percent) of youth ages 16 to 19 in Washington, DC were neither working nor in school⁶. Absent intervention, the segment of our population with less than a high school diploma will grow faster than any other⁷. 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 chance⁸.

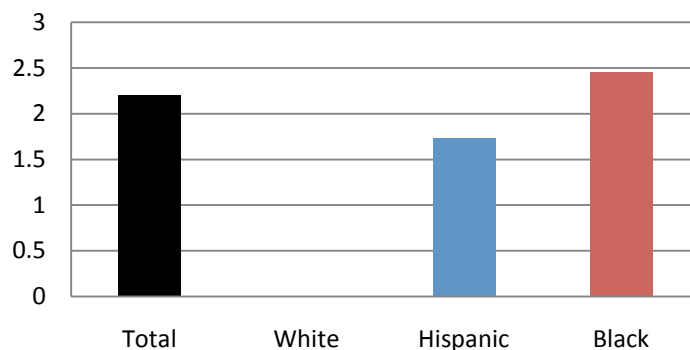
Two of the major ways that youth are pushed out of the education system are through harsh disciplinary policies and tracking of students into particular educational levels. Both of these practices have done more harm than good for youth and have contributed to the nation's large dropout problem. The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

Table 5:
Out of School Suspensions
(per 100 students)



Nationally, 2.3 million youth are punished for school infractions by out-of-school suspension each year. Almost 96,000 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 result⁹. They lose precious time 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 unnecessarily¹⁰.

Table 6:
Expulsions
(per 1000 students)



These outcomes are generally seen in large degree in urban and high minority school districts, where the existence of these policies is far more prevalent¹¹. Washington, DC's reported rate of suspension is actually much better than the national average, while its expulsion rate is comparable to the national average. Black students, however, are at least twice as likely to be suspended or expelled from school than their white peers.

The other area of major concern 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 coursework¹². 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 resources¹³.

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 fertility¹⁴. 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 community¹⁵. Exposure to violence is associated with a number of behavioral and psychological outcomes and has been found to be distraction in school¹⁶. The constant threat of violence in low-income communities prevents youth from visioning their life prospects, as they are uncertain of even surviving into adulthood¹⁷.

Table 7:
Violent Crimes
(per 1000 people)

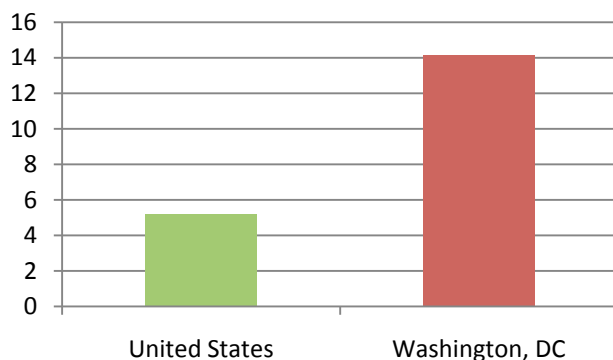
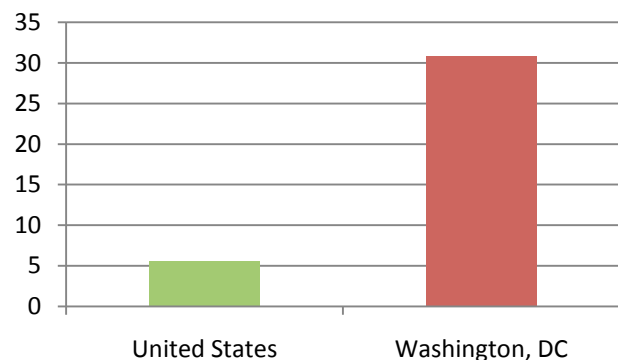


Table 8:
Murder Rate
(per 100,000 people)

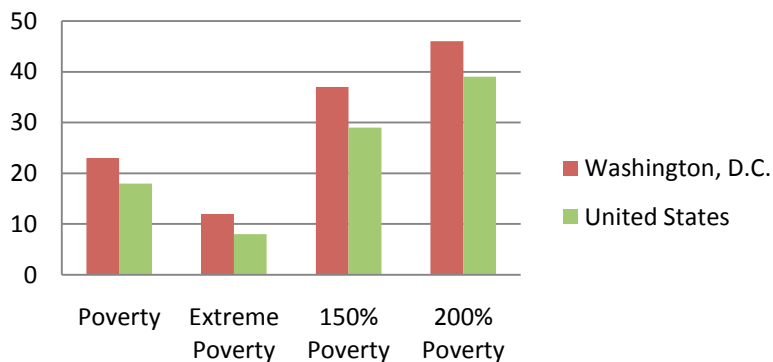


In the 1990s, Washington, DC experienced tremendous youth violence and homicide. Those days of record high amounts of violence are gone, however the community still has some distance to go. The homicide rate is just over five times the national average, while violent crime is about 2.5 times higher. Nationally, young people between ages 18 and 24 have the highest rate of homicide victimization, regardless of race or gender¹⁸. Black males in this same age category have the highest victimization and offending rates¹⁹. 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.

Youth in Washington, DC are significantly affected by issues of violence. A recent study cited that 14 percent of DC high school students did not attend school at least once in the last 30 days because they felt unsafe either at school, or on their way to or from school²⁰. In addition, 43 percent of high school students reported being in a physical fight, and 21 percent of students carry a weapon²¹. 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, 27 percent of students reported feeling sad and hopeless almost every day for two consecutive weeks.

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 Washington, DC'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 Washington, DC, the volume of youth facing these issues is far greater than in most other locales. Significant investment is needed to impact outcomes for the youth in the community.

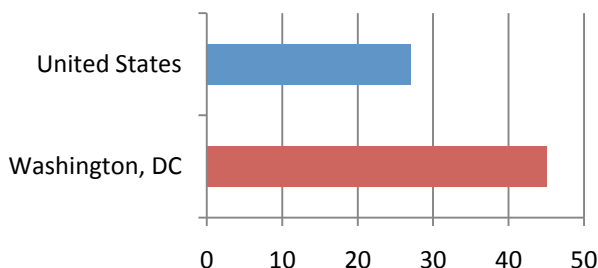
**Table 9:
Percent of Children Living in Poverty**



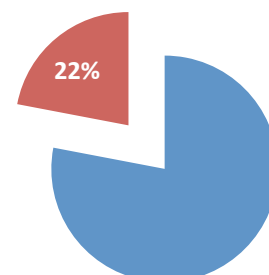
Child poverty levels grossly outpace poverty levels in the United States. In 2007, almost one-fourth of all children and youth under 18 lived below the federal poverty line in Washington, DC. Forty-six percent of children lived in low-income households with earnings less than 200 percent of poverty – less than \$34,340 per year for a family of three. A startling 43 percent of children live in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment²².

In addition to the earnings coming into a home, family situations present struggles for youth. Currently, 22 percent of Washington DC's children live in families where the head of household is a high school dropout. These parents or caregivers are not in a position to support the academic achievement of the youth in their homes. Washington DC's teen birth rate is 45 per 1000. Teens who have children are far less likely to graduate from high school²³. Without flexible educational options for these mothers, 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 successful²⁴.

**Table 10:
Births to Teen Mothers
(per 1000 girls)**



**Table 11:
Children in Homes Where Head of
Household is High School Dropout**



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 adulthood²⁵. 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 courses²⁶. Youth also begin to have higher expectations for 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 employed²⁷, therefore the level of crime in a community is reduced when its young people are put to work. In addition, the dollars earned and spent by these youth were most often spent within the community, having an important economic impact²⁸.

Despite all that is known about its benefits, youth employment in our nation is currently at its lowest point in 60 years²⁹. In Washington, DC, the youth employment situation is far worse than the national average. Eighty percent of youth ages 16 to 19 and are not employed. When the data is disaggregated by race, it shows that minority youth work less, with black youth being the least likely to have employment.

Table 12:
Percent of Youth Not Working

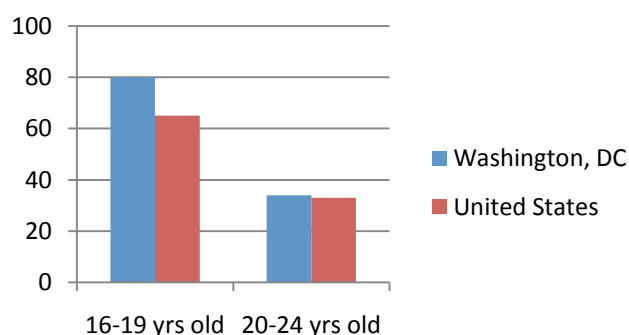
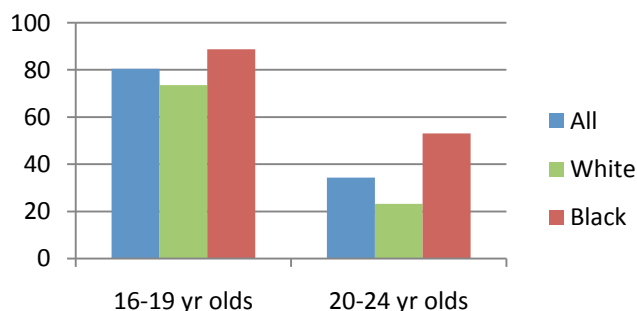


Table 13:
Percent of Youth Not Working, by Race



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.

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ENDNOTES

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ABOUT CLASP

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) is a national nonprofit that develops and advocates for policies at the federal, state, and local levels to improve the lives of low-income people.

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Rhonda Tsoi-A-Fatt is a Senior Policy Analyst in the area of youth policy. She specializes in approaches to address the high-school dropout issue. Her current work focuses on community and systemic solutions to support youth development and engagement in learning, with a particular focus on youth of color.

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