

DON'T

CALL THEM

DROPOUTS

UNDERSTANDING

THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

WHO LEAVE HIGH SCHOOL

BEFORE GRADUATION

A Report from America's Promise Alliance and its Center for Promise at Tufts University



TIME TO LISTEN

Let me begin with a simple request for readers of this report.

Please set aside your preconceptions and assumptions about young people who don't finish high school. Fight the instinct to reach for quick solutions. Just listen hard and try to understand their experience and perspective.

Young people who don't finish high school have few avenues for sharing their stories with adults, school professionals, community leaders, and policymakers. The goal of this report is to change that – to raise up the voices of young people who have not graduated from high school so that we all gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and choices they face.

With enthusiastic support from our partners at Target, the research team at our Center for Promise set out to discover what young people say about the experiences that lead them away from high school. By conducting interviews with more than 200 young people and surveying several thousand more, we listened deeply to what leads to leaving school before graduation. Throughout the process, our goal remained the same – to hear what young people say about their lives and decisions.

Readers of this report know the challenge our nation faces now: Approximately 20 percent of young people – about 800,000 per year – don't graduate from high school. We at America's Promise and our Alliance of partners and communities are dedicated to reducing that number dramatically. Together with the President and the Secretary of Education, we've set a goal of raising the graduation rate from its current 80 percent to 90 percent by 2020.

All of us – individuals, organizations, communities – share the responsibility and opportunity for creating the conditions under which all young people have a real chance to thrive. We make choices every day that can ease the path young people walk or make that path more difficult. These decisions should be informed by the voices and realities of the teens we want to support. We can't help them meet their own goals if we don't understand the lives they lead, the challenges they face and the perspectives they bring.

One small and important way for us to start changing course is captured in the title of this report. Let's grant the wish expressed in several of the group interviews to stop calling this group of young people "dropouts." Let's leave behind the "loser" and "quitter" undertones that word conveys.

And then let's get to work helping to build a future in which all young people can flourish and thrive.



John Gomperts

President and CEO,

America's Promise Alliance

Join the conversation and read the whole report at [GradNation.org/NotDropouts](https://gradnation.org/NotDropouts)
and on Twitter using [#notdropouts](https://twitter.com/notdropouts).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A stable place to live. Feeling safe at home, at school, and in between. Parents who say, “I’m proud of you.” Schools and neighborhoods where high school graduation is the norm. Programs and people that help you navigate through difficult times. Many of us take these circumstances for granted; yet many young people who leave high school before they graduate don’t have that luxury.

The past decade has seen impressive growth in and commitment to helping more students graduate, fueled in part by a growing body of research on barriers. What has been missing from the current research, however, is a vibrant portrait of young people’s experiences gathered and reported in a way that deepens the national conversation about why some young people are still failing to graduate despite historic advances in graduation rates. Building on studies like *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, as well as the *Building a GradNation* reports and the work of The Aspen Institute’s Opportunity Youth Network, *Don’t Call Them Dropouts* begins to fill that gap.

As you read, you will notice that we avoid using the familiar term “dropout.” We made this choice for two reasons. First, we heard from young people themselves that this term does not describe their experience of leaving school. Second, most of the interview participants and survey respondents had returned to school or re-engagement programs to complete their education.

OVERVIEW

Our Center for Promise research team traveled across the country to investigate these initial research questions:

- What do young people say about why they leave high school before graduating? What circumstances surrounded the decision to leave?
- What were students’ lives like when they left school, and what effects did leaving school have on them and their families?
- Why do young people say they come back to school?
- What opportunities do young people have to re-engage after leaving school, and what barriers do they encounter along the way?

Through systematic analysis of 200+ interviews and nearly 3,000 survey responses, four themes emerged:

- **Clusters of factors, rather than one event or cause, lead young people away from school.** Young people disengage from school because of clusters of factors that affect their lives. There is no single cause driving most students to leave school, nor is there a uniform profile of students who leave school before graduation. Young people who ultimately re-engage also do so because of multiple influences.
- **Toxic environments.** Young people who leave high school are likely to be growing up in harsh environments. That is,

they describe surviving violence, being exposed to violence, being affected by adverse health events in their families, or experiencing school climates and policies that are unsafe, unsupportive or disrespectful.

- **Yearning for supportive connections.** Connectedness to others is both a risk factor and a protective factor for disengaging from school. The nature of relationships with parents, other family members, teachers, counselors, and peers can lead young people toward or away from school.
- **Resilience, in need of more support and guidance to thrive.** Young people who left school typically bounced back from difficult circumstances. Our data suggest that this resilience is a necessary quality for day-to-day coping, but insufficient by itself for longer-term positive development (what we call “reaching up”). In order to thrive, young people require consistent support from people and places that combine caring connections with the capacity to help them navigate around obstacles.

While we treat the four findings separately, they are inextricably related to one another.

Interview participants described their experiences of **multiple, prevalent stressors** – such as witnessing or being victimized by violence, living in unsafe neighborhoods, experiencing unstable home lives or homelessness, taking responsibility for earning money to meet basic needs (including relying on illegal sources of income), or becoming caregivers for parents or siblings at a young age. In the midst of these circumstances, the young people we interviewed are seeking and creating connectedness wherever they can find it. As their stories illustrate, this may mean choosing family caregiving, gang affiliation, or teen parenting over school attendance. Importantly, seeking **connectedness** led both to disengagement from and reengagement with education; survey findings in particular suggest that being connected to supportive peers and adults is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for staying engaged in school.

Finally, we heard a clear and powerful theme about **resilience and thriving**. The young people we talked to consistently “bounced back” and survived the stressors in their environments. However, in order to thrive – to “reach up” to a place where longer-term investment in the future was possible – a significant change in circumstances was necessary. Young people needed connections with adults and peers who cared about them, people who provided support and guidance, and access to relevant educational programs and social services. That is, staying engaged or re-engaging in school depends on a young person’s individual strengths and perseverance meeting with social connection and institutional support.

For more information about each finding, along with related research, please see the full report at ([GradNation.org/NotDropouts](https://gradnation.org/NotDropouts)).

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. Mixed-methods designs recognize that not all research questions can be answered using a single formulation of data. An exploratory design is most applicable where not enough is known about a given phenomenon to develop theories or hypotheses with confidence (e.g., what is the lived experience of youth who have stopped going to school?). In an exploratory sequential design, the qualitative component of the study is conducted first and facilitates the conceptualization of the quantitative component's design and analysis. We conducted 30 group interviews in 16 cities with 212 18-to-25 year-olds, using an interactive methodology designed by the Center for Teen Empowerment ([TeenEmpowerment.org](https://teenempowerment.org)) to build trust and elicit stories from the young people. The subsequent online survey – whose development was informed by the interview data – was conducted with 1,942 young people (18 to 25 years-old) who had left school, as well as a sample of 1,023 young people who had graduated without interruption.

Please see the full report at ([GradNation.org/NotDropouts](https://gradnation.org/NotDropouts)) for a detailed description of the research methods.

FOUR MAJOR FINDINGS

1. Clusters of Factors

“Pain, hurt, being abused, being raped ... just a lot of things like seeing my homeboy stabbed to death, multiple deaths, having a cousin that was murdered when I was five, just a lot of things. I started hanging around with the wrong people, gang members getting into crap like...just a lot of stuff. And I don't want my kids to grow up thinking that it is okay to be doing all that.”

- Sara¹

Explaining why young people leave high school is at once quite simple and overwhelmingly complex. Young people's words often illustrate the interplay among factors like absent parents, the impact of violence close to home, negative peer influences, and a sense of responsibility for others. Sara's story is one example.

We closely analyzed the comments of the participants in the group interviews we conducted. We found that participants across the sixteen cities frequently mentioned 25 different factors or events that influenced their decisions about school. Among these were support and guidance from adults, incarceration, death in the family, health challenges in the family, gangs, school safety, school policies, peer influences, and becoming a parent. For more information, see Section 3 of the tables in the full report.

The survey findings make clear that the factors mentioned in the interviews did not exist in isolation. For example, no group of

survey respondents demonstrated behaviors like drug use or gang involvement without also experiencing an unstable environment, the death of a person close to them, or abuse. Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative findings suggest that multiple life challenges influenced choices about interrupting school enrollment, leading us to the finding about clusters of factors.

2. Toxic Environments

“Like I said, my father used to beat on me. Never had my mom in my life; she was always on drugs. It was just me growing up watching over my little brothers while she was out in the street doing her thing. So me and my other brothers grew up too quick, took responsibility, we just - it was too late to go back to school.”

- Thomas

Participants in the group interview sample describe environments that can be characterized as “toxic” because of their potential long-term negative effects. The stories we heard from interview participants highlight three pervasive elements of this toxicity:

- Violence at home, in school or in their neighborhoods that they witness or personally endure;
- Health trauma they or their family members experience; and
- Unsafe, unsupportive, or disrespectful school climates and policies.

Janis, like Thomas, endures violence at home and takes on responsibility for younger siblings:

“My mom would get drunk so I would take my little brothers outside. When she woke up, she would beat me up for taking them out. But it was whatever... it was worth it for them.”

School, unfortunately, did not always provide a safe haven from violence. As Lance says,

“People would be outside of the school waiting for us with guns, so I was forced to bring my gun to school.”

Interview participants in all 16 cities talked about experiencing abuse, being bullied, and witnessing violence. Survey respondents confirm the prevalence of traumatic and stressful life events among young people who dis-engage from school. A large number of interrupted-enrollment respondents reported being abused (30%), homeless (22%), or spending time in juvenile detention (18%). Interrupted-enrollment survey respondents experienced these three types of events with significantly greater frequency than continuously-enrolled high school students. For more details, see section 4 of the tables in the full report.

In addition to these experiences of violence, young people often found themselves in the role of caregiver or wage-earner because a parent became ill. As Amy told us,

“My mom had a hernia and needed an operation to get rid of it... I went to go ask if I could get a month off school to help out with my mom and I was told that if I left to help my mom that I would have

¹ All quotes are from a single individual, referred to by an alias. To protect the young people's identities, the quotes are not associated with the cities or the programs where interviews took place. For a list of the cities and programs associated with the group interviews, please see Appendix III of the full report.

to stay for two more years in school and I was already on my last year so I just dropped out.”

Amy’s story points to the kinds of unresponsive school policies that failed to align with students’ life circumstances. In addition to incidences of caregiving competing with school attendance, young people experienced frustration with a lack of support for their efforts to stay on track. For example, Donald said:

“Even though I was taking extra credit classes and doing after school work, they didn’t give me any of my extra credits or any credits from the credit recovery program. So, then I just kind of fell off, I figured there was no point in trying. There was no way I could win. No matter what I said about my lost grades, they just had the same excuse.”

Interview participants in 12 out of 16 communities mentioned school policies (e.g., those related to correctly attributing the credits needed to graduate) as a factor affecting their ability to graduate on time.

3. Yearning for Supportive Connections

“And then I would try to go to school and teachers didn’t seem like they really cared, then I didn’t care anymore. You know what I’m saying, I was already upset... like if I was in a relationship and I got everyone around me, and then I come home and I get none of my girl... You know, so that’s how I felt at school all the time, I was really down and depressed and I just stopped going.”

- Darrell

Seeking connections with parents, other family members, school professionals, peers, and participants’ own children was a consistent theme. The presence or absence of these connections drove many of the choices that young people made, including about school attendance and completion. Across all 16 group interview cities, young people mentioned support and guidance from adults as a factor that influenced their decisions about school.

Many interview participants described unsuccessful efforts to connect to helping professionals. Antonio tried to reach out at school to tell adults around him that he was having a tough time at home -- with two parents absent for different reasons, a period of homelessness, and a period of incarceration for robbery.

“Teacher didn’t care, principal didn’t care... I told my counselor and a couple teachers, but I didn’t want to because they didn’t care... you know from the way that they come at me on a regular basis... they don’t try to talk to me.”

- Antonio

Both qualitative and quantitative findings suggest that several different types of life experiences may contribute to feeling a lack of connection; that young people sought connection where it was offered; and that both positive and negative decisions could emerge from connectedness.

One participant describes the frustration of being unseen at school, despite efforts to “stay engaged”:

“I was trying to stay engaged as much as I could but it was like nobody was helping me, nobody. I would go to school. The teachers wouldn’t even acknowledge me, I would say I’m behind, can you do this for me? They were like no, all I can do is give you this and try to do what you can do today. A lot of teachers didn’t even know my name, it got really bad and came to the point where I wasn’t going to graduate.”

- Arielys

A lack of connection could discourage students like Arielys from staying in school; positive connections also helped young people who had left to re-engage with educational goals. Interview participants and interrupted-enrollment survey respondents both emphasized the importance of the people who supported them. Forty-one percent (41%) of survey respondents cite “someone encouraged me” as their reason for returning to school, and over one-quarter (27%) indicated that the support of their family was a critical reason for their return. For more information, see section 7 of the tables in the full report.

4. Young People Leaving High School Display Resilience; They Also Need More Support and Guidance to Thrive

“I’m trying to make it here, I’m trying to do good. Like it is possible for us to bounce back from negative situations we went through in the past, it’s possible.”

- Juice

Persistence, personal agency, courage, and optimism about the future shone through the interview participants’ stories. Within the context of the complex circumstances described in interviews and echoed in survey data, staying engaged with school or re-engaging after a hiatus seems like an extraordinary achievement. **Bouncing back** is the term we chose for the resilience we observed.

For the young people with whom we spoke, resilience too often entailed bouncing back from traumatic or toxic situations – suffering physical and psychological abuse, witnessing violence, experiencing significant health challenges, or having early-age caregiving and financial responsibility. Bouncing back from such events meant marshaling the inner strength and perseverance to survive from day-to-day – expressed through actions such as earning money, taking care of parents or siblings, or taking care of their own child.

“I eventually dropped out because the bills weren’t getting paid, I knew I could pay the bills. I wanted to step up, I never took on responsibility like that before in my life.”

- Aaron

Overall, we found that young people who left school have strengths that enable them to cope in difficult contexts. To meet long-term goals like staying in or going back to school, getting a better job, or making positive contributions to their communities, young people needed more than their own perseverance; they need to “reach up.” That is, consistent with the principles of positive youth development, young people began to thrive acade-

mically, socially, and emotionally when they were able to connect to individuals and institutions that support them.

Despite their many strengths, the young people we interviewed could not reach beyond day-to-day coping without additional support from both caring adults and connected institutions in their communities. Approaches like integrated student services and comprehensive re-engagement programs recognize the confluence of factors that can lead students out of school. These approaches show promise for resolving the factors that lead too many young people to disengage from school or facilitating young people's re-engagement. As one participant describes,

"I do need an education in this society unfortunately to excel to places I want to be. Eventually, I found this place, [program], and I feel like this a great school system. It's not traditional but it's a good place for misfit kids or kids that can't work well in the traditional schools and just belong here. That's what we are all here for because we ain't working well in traditional society or school."

- Beverly

Some young people named a peer or an outreach worker as the impetus for positive change in their lives.

"My homies told me about this program. My friends are the only reason why I'm here."

- Marcus

"I started going here because I was still talking to my counselor, he was a really cool counselor...probably saved my life. He was getting me into all these different programs that were not working at all, and then he told me this is your last resort if you want a high school diploma."

- Kayti

Just as they followed their neighborhood peers into negative behavior patterns, these young people also followed their peers to make a positive change in their lives.

The patterns of resilience we saw in the group interviews were also present in survey findings. A large percentage of our survey sample of interrupted-enrollment young people had strengths that would be important for bouncing back and reaching up in school and beyond. This group, representing 85% of the sample, reported that they were able to solve problems, had a five-year goal that they wanted to achieve, and that they had learned from their pasts. These qualities were associated with a higher likelihood of completing high school and even continuing on and finishing college.

Despite the challenges they faced, the young people in our interrupted-enrollment survey sample were overwhelmingly on a path to reaching up. All but 36% had completed high school; 18% had completed at least some post-secondary education. Almost half were employed either full- or part-time. Of those who were not employed, 23% were in school. In the context of the adverse life events we see in the survey data, combined with the qualitative findings, these achievements demonstrate enormous strength. Moreover, we see individuals in the survey sample with adverse life history experiences who returned to high school and college.

Although experiences like foster care set youth back from obtaining a college degree (77% less likely), those experiences do not necessarily hinder eventual high school completion.

"[Program name] structure your life as a young man...

It's really about how much love is growing, it's about growing and it's about making yourself a man. If you're not a factor out here -- I mean you have to be a factor out here if you want to be known as someone that did something, that tried to do something at least and not just give up. We go to the capital...a lot of us we never did stuff like that, like "we're going to the capital to talk about second chances." You know and we got felonies and we just ignore it and we should be up there talking to these people cause we're the ones, cause there's a lot of people that don't have felonies that be out there supporting us, we should be supporting ourselves."

- Paul

The programs that are re-engaging young people who have interrupted their education create supportive structures, help connect young people to new opportunities, and foster civic engagement activities like "going to the capital to talk about second chances." Young people therefore have opportunities not just to complete their high school education, but also to develop networks of support that help them succeed beyond graduation day. And to bring the story full circle – these relationships matter. What young people who are at risk for stopping school need most are more people in their lives who not only care about their success, but who listen to what they say they need and offer them opportunities to reach up beyond the obstacles that they encounter in their daily lives.

FIVE CONCLUSIONS

- 1. Students who leave school before graduating are stronger than popular opinion and current research literature describe. These strengths could, with the right supports, allow them to stay in school; and these abilities do, ultimately, help many to re-engage.** On the whole, the young people who participated in interviews or responded to the survey display enormous strengths including personal agency, problem-solving, and positive life goals. These characteristics enabled young people to re-engage in their education. These same qualities could also have enabled them to stay in school if adults at home, at school, and in the community had helped them navigate around barriers so that consistent school attendance aligned with their life circumstances.
- 2. Students who leave school before graduating are often struggling with overwhelming life circumstances that push school attendance far down their priority lists.** Students leave school not because of a particular event or factor, but because circumstances accumulate in ways that push school further and further down their list of priorities. The reasons they cite for dropping out are the breaking point, the end of the story rather than the whole story. Early attention from every available adult – extended family members, school professionals, youth workers, religious leaders, neighbors, and others to specific events such as the death of a family member, parent incarceration, changing

schools, or homelessness could slow the rate at which a cluster of events pushes or pulls a student out of school.

3. Young people who leave high school need fewer easy exits from the classroom and more easy on-ramps back into education.

Some young people who stop going to school find it easier to leave school than to stay in or get back in. In other words, there are too many off-ramps and exits that are too easy to take, and too few on-ramps that are too hard to access. Asking teachers, parents, and students to examine the formal policies related to both leaving and re-entry could point out specific ways to help students stay in school or create opportunities for them to re-engage more easily.

4. Young people who leave high school emphasize how much peers, parents, and other adults matter.

Parents, teachers, other school-based professionals, after-school leaders, neighborhood adults, and peers all influence young people's expectations, behavior, and decision-making. Caring connections that follow students from home, through their neighborhood, to the school building are important. However, caring is not enough. The young people who are experiencing multiple adverse events in their lives need caring combined with connections to people and places that help them solve problems that get in the way of school achievement.

5. Everyone in a young person's life and community can do something to help.

Everyone – teacher, school administrator, bus driver, clergy, program leader, parent, grandparent, business owner – can make a difference by listening to what young people are experiencing at and outside school. While teachers, counselors, and administrators in high-need schools are often overwhelmed themselves, attentive school leadership, community oversight of graduation patterns, and greater support for an environment that encourages positive connections could all be counterweights to the lack of consistent support that young people say they often encounter from the adults closest to them.

FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Listen. Our overriding recommendation relates to the importance of listening to young people. Too often, what we think we know stands in the way of knowing what is true for young people who have left school. Take time to understand the circumstances affecting young people who have already stopped attending school or who have recently re-engaged after interrupting their education. Include their voices in discussions about policies, programs, and community activities that affect their lives. Being curious and inquiring about what is happening in young people's lives can inform future action so that solutions are closely aligned with the true nature of the challenges. America's Promise Alliance and our partners can do this through additional research efforts, community dialogue sessions, and including young people in policy and program planning. The more we can create the circumstances for constructive personal connections with and

around young people who are struggling, the closer we will get to building a nation in which all students graduate high school.

2. Surround the highest-need young people with extra supports.

The Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University has developed school-based early warning systems that allow educators to identify students whose attendance, behavior, and course performance suggest that they need extra support to stay in school. We recommend that communities consider how to create similar early-warning supports and systems beyond the school building for young people who are affected by risk factors like a death in the family, an incarcerated parent, housing instability, or shifting from school to school. This could be as simple as a religious leader noticing that a family is struggling, and asking its young people what they need. Formal systems might include a city- or county-level coordinating council that meets regularly to share information about what is happening with young people in the community. A wide range of neighborhood adults can communicate caring support and high expectations for young people through informal, day-to-day contact.

3. Create a cadre of community navigators to help students stay in school.

The young people affected by multiple "adverse life events" like incarcerated parents, foster care, loss of someone close to them, witnessing violent events, or financial struggles need a person or series of people who can help them navigate through these challenges and stay in school. Communities can mobilize program-based, faith-based, and school-based leaders to be the "whatever it takes" adults for these young people, working alongside caring parents when they are present.

4. Follow the evidence. It is essential to identify, support, and spread proven and promising approaches – not just programs, but methods that have worked in one place and could work elsewhere. Both large-scale studies and evaluations of individual programs to date suggest that what it takes is an all-in, never-give-up, holistic approach that responds to each young person's needs and strengths. The places where we conducted interviews are just a few of the examples across the country. (See short descriptions in Appendix II.) The findings in this report add to a growing body of academic and practical evidence that can shape future actions and investments.

5. Place young people in central roles in designing and implementing solutions that will work for their peers.

Research confirms that peer influence matters. It's important not only to listen to young people but also to involve them in crafting solutions. Decision-makers in and outside school can seek formal and informal opportunities to include young people's voices and their activism in efforts to boost graduation rates. Young people themselves can tell their stories – to each other and to decision-makers – to create a growing chorus of voices that help to change the national conversation about graduating from high school.



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