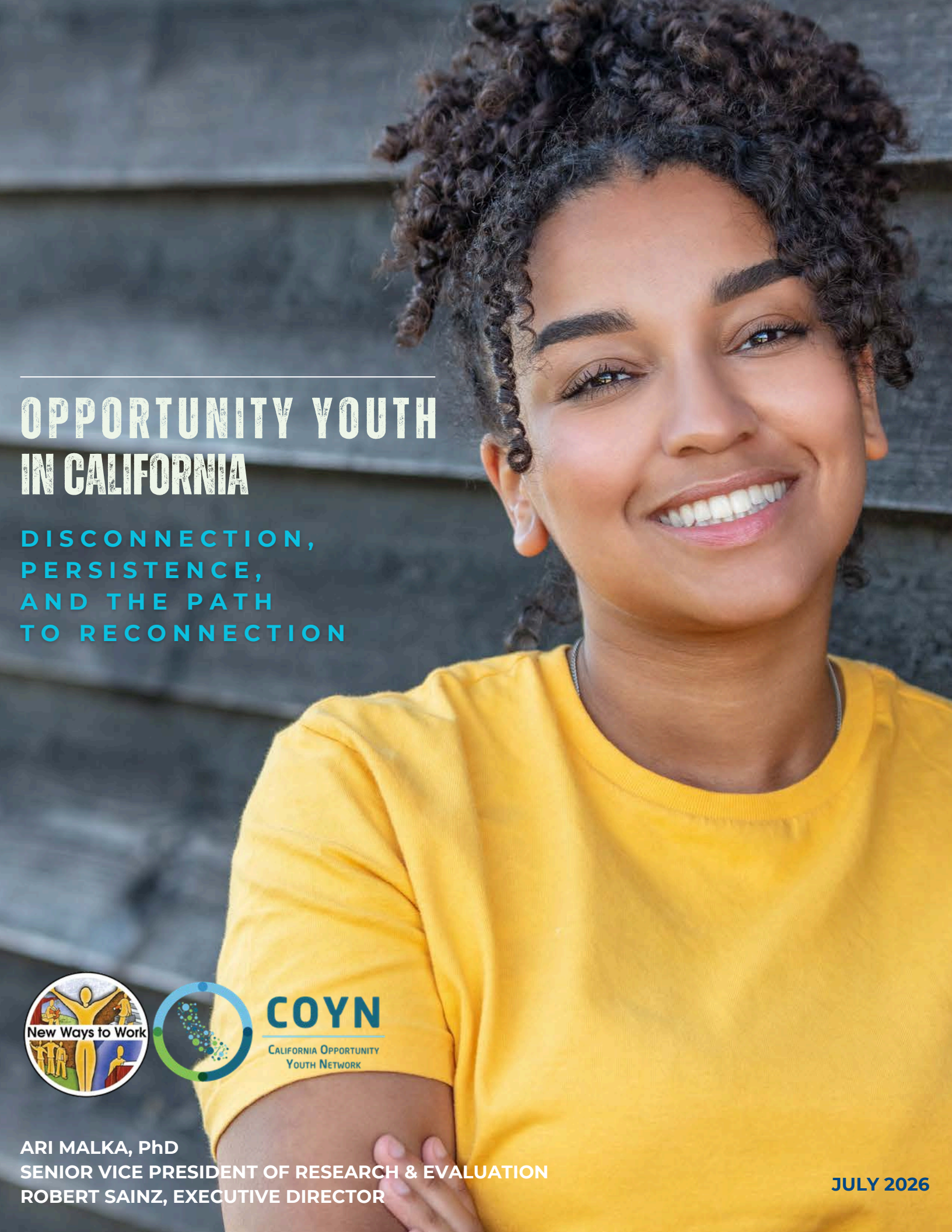


# OPPORTUNITY YOUTH IN CALIFORNIA

## DISCONNECTION, PERSISTENCE, AND THE PATH TO RECONNECTION

New Ways to Work

COYN
California Opportunity Youth Network

ARI MALKA, PhD
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT OF RESEARCH & EVALUATION
ROBERT SAINZ, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

JULY 2026

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2024, 510,727 young Californians between the ages of 16 and 24 – 10.8% of the age group, or roughly one in nine – were neither in school nor working.[1] This report examines that population, the opportunity youth of California, drawing on five data sources to move beyond a count toward an account of how disconnection forms, persists, concentrates, and might be addressed.

- **Disconnection has receded from its pandemic peak but not to its prior low.** The opportunity youth rate fell through the late 2010s to 10.3% in 2019, rose to 12.5% in 2021, and has since settled at 10.8%. The long-run improvement reflects genuinely falling disconnection within demographic groups; the incomplete recovery since 2019 reflects both a shift toward higher-risk composition and conditions that have yet to fully rebound.

- **Disconnection rises sharply at the end of high school and continues to climb.** Relatively low before 18, the rate quadruples once compulsory schooling ends and reaches 16% by the mid-twenties – and it does not subside thereafter, exceeding the 16-to-24 rate among those aged 25 to 30. Risk accumulates with age rather than resolving.

- **The conditions that produce disconnection are visible years in advance**. Dropout, chronic absenteeism, and a rising rate of non-transition to college all fall hardest on the same groups – foster youth, students experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, English learners, and Black and Hispanic students – identifying the at-risk population through records the state already maintains.

- **Disability, parenthood, and the absence of education beyond high school are the strongest independent predictors of disconnection.** Holding other factors constant, a disability more than triples the odds of disconnection and parenthood more than doubles them, while a high school graduate who goes no further has roughly four times the odds of a peer who reached some college. Several demographic gaps prominent in the raw data – including sex, ethnicity, and English proficiency – diminish or disappear once these factors are accounted for.

- **Opportunity youth divide into four distinct segments.** About two-thirds face few structural barriers and are reachable through employment-focused services; the remaining third comprise young people with disabilities and health barriers, immigrant and limited-English youth, and young parents – each requiring a more specialized and intensive form of support.

- **Disconnection persists.** Only about half of opportunity youth reconnect to school or work within a year; the other half remain disconnected, with persistence highest among young adults, those out of the labor force, and those whose education ended at a high school diploma.

- **Disconnection concentrates geographically.** Fifty-three of California's 281 sub-county areas – clustered in the Central Valley, the Inland Empire, and Los Angeles County – contain about 36% of the state's opportunity youth, a concentration that makes targeted investment disproportionately effective.

- **Accessible work is mismatched to where opportunity youth live.** Entry-level openings within reach of most opportunity youth are numerous but concentrated at the low-wage end of the labor market, and they are scarcest, relative to need, in the same Central Valley regions where disconnection is densest.

- **A single thread runs through these findings.** Across persistence, education, and labor-market data alike, the young people who completed high school but went no further emerge as a distinct and under-recognized risk group – most likely to stay disconnected, least likely to advance, and most constrained to low-wage work.

The report's recommendations follow from this structure: prevention upstream of the age-18 cliff; differentiated response by persistence and labor-market attachment; services matched to segment; place-based investment where disconnection concentrates; attention to the demand side and the quality of accessible work; and the longitudinal data infrastructure required to sustain this kind of analysis. Disconnection, the evidence shows, is structured – and a response matched to its structure can reach California's opportunity youth by stage, by segment, and by place.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Definitions of the principal terms, measures, data sources, and methods used in this report.

### *Population and Status*

- **Opportunity youth.** Young people ages 16 to 24 who are neither enrolled in school nor employed. This report uses the term for the population itself.
- **Disconnection / disconnected.** The state of being neither in school nor working – the condition that defines opportunity youth. Used to describe the status rather than the population.
- **NEET.** "Not in Education, Employment, or Training," the international term for the same concept. Recognized here but used selectively; "opportunity youth" is preferred.
- **Reconnection.** The transition out of disconnection – a return to school, work, or training.
- **Persistence.** Remaining disconnected from one year to the next. The report measures one-year persistence using linked survey panels.

### *Rates & Measures*

- **Opportunity youth rate.** The share of all youth ages 16 to 24 who are opportunity youth.
- **Five-year cohort dropout rate.** The percentage of a ninth-grade cohort that leaves high school without completing within five years.
- **Chronic absenteeism.** Missing at least 10% of enrolled school days in a year, for any reason (excused or unexcused).
- **College-going rate (and non-enrollment).** The share of high school completers who enroll in college within 16 months of completing; non-enrollment is its complement.
- **Representation index**. A group's share of opportunity youth divided by its share of the youth population. Values above 1 indicate over-representation; below 1, under-representation.
- **Cohort.** A group of students who enter a grade together and are tracked over time.

### *Statistical Methods*

- **Logistic regression.** A statistical model that estimates how several characteristics each relate, independently, to the probability of an outcome – here, being disconnected.
- **Odds ratio.** The factor by which a characteristic multiplies the odds of disconnection, holding other factors constant. Above 1 means higher odds; below 1, lower odds.
- **Latent class analysis**. A method that identifies underlying subgroups, or segments, from the way characteristics cluster together across individuals, rather than imposing groups in advance.
- **Confidence interval.** A range, derived from the sample, within which the true value is expected to fall with a stated probability (90% in this report). Wider intervals indicate less precise estimates.
- **Design-based variance.** Estimation of uncertainty that accounts for the survey's complex sampling – its clustering and stratification – rather than assuming a simple random sample.

### *Data Sources*

- **American Community Survey (ACS).** The U.S. Census Bureau's large annual household survey; the report's primary source for counts, demographics, geography, and predictive models. Accessed through IPUMS.
- **Current Population Survey (CPS).** A monthly federal household survey whose linked panels allow the same individuals to be observed twelve months apart, supporting the persistence analysis.
- **California Department of Education (CDE).** The state education agency; source for dropout, chronic absenteeism, and college-going records.
- **Employment Development Department (EDD).** The state labor agency; source for occupational employment projections through 2033.
- **Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA).** A Census-defined geographic unit of roughly 100,000 residents – the smallest geography available in the ACS public-use data. California has 281.

### *Student and Population Groups*

- **English learners.** Students whose English proficiency is still developing and who receive language support in school.
- **Limited English proficiency.** Speaking English less than "very well," as reported in the American Community Survey.
- **Nativity (foreign-born).** Whether a person was born outside the United States; nativity refers to native-born versus foreign-born status.
- **Socioeconomically disadvantaged.** A CDE designation for students who are low-income or whose parents did not complete high school.

### *Program and Policy Terms*

- **Entry-level openings.** Projected job openings requiring no formal credential or no more than a high school diploma – the work most accessible to opportunity youth.
- **Supported employment.** Employment that comes with ongoing, individualized on-the-job support, often for people with disabilities.
- **Two-generation programming.** Services that address the needs of parents and their children together, such as pairing childcare with a parent's education or employment.
- **Cradle-to-Career Data System.** California's developing longitudinal data system, which links education, workforce, and social-service records over time.

# INTRODUCTION

Opportunity youth are young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor working.[1] In 2024, California was home to 510,727 of them – 10.8% of its young people, or roughly one in nine. The term is deliberate: it names not a deficiency in young people but an opportunity the state has yet to act upon, a population ready to contribute where education and employment systems are organized to reach it.

Earlier editions of this report established the size and composition of California's opportunity youth population and tracked its trajectory over time. That foundation makes a further step possible. Knowing how many young people are disconnected, and who they are, this edition turns to the questions that follow: whether disconnection is temporary or lasting, who is most likely to remain disconnected without intervention, what distinct forms it takes, where it concentrates, and whether accessible work exists where opportunity youth actually live. These questions determine how resources should be targeted and answering them requires a wider evidence base than any single source provides.

To answer them, this edition draws on five data sources. The American Community Survey (ACS) supplies the count, the demographic profile, the geographic distribution, and the models that identify the strongest independent predictors of disconnection. The Current Population Survey's (CPS) linked panels add a longitudinal view, and with it a central finding: of the young people disconnected in a given year, only about half have reconnected to school or work a year later. California Department of Education records trace the pathways into disconnection before age 18 – dropout, chronic absenteeism, and a declining rate of transition into postsecondary education. Employment Development Department projections describe the labor market opportunity youth would re-enter, and how far its openings are within reach. And the economic-value framework developed for the Aspen Institute quantifies the fiscal and social cost disconnection imposes. Together they carry the report from description to analysis – of persistence, predictors, subgroups, geography, and the conditions that precede disconnection.

The analysis arrives in a demanding moment. California is still recovering from successive wildfire seasons that have strained many of the communities where opportunity youth live. Intensified federal immigration enforcement bears directly on a population that is disproportionately immigrant and limited-English-proficient.

And cuts to federal workforce, nutrition, and health-coverage programs – the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, SNAP, and Medi-Cal among them – are narrowing the systems through which reconnection has long been funded and delivered. The cost of inaction is not abstract: the annual fiscal and social burden of disconnection in California runs into the tens of billions of dollars.

One pattern recurs across the analysis and deserves emphasis at the outset. Young people who finished high school but went no further emerge, across three independent sources, as a distinct and under-recognized risk group: the most likely to remain disconnected from one year to the next, increasingly unlikely to move on to further education or training, and best served by jobs clustered at the low-wage end of the labor market. For many opportunity youth, the diploma marks not the completion of a transition but the point at which it stalls.

The sections that follow take up these findings in turn – the scale and age structure of disconnection, the educational pipeline that precedes it, the factors associated with it, its persistence, its geographic concentration, and the labor-market demand available to meet it. The report closes with recommendations organized around the stages, segments, and regions where California's opportunity youth can most effectively be reached.

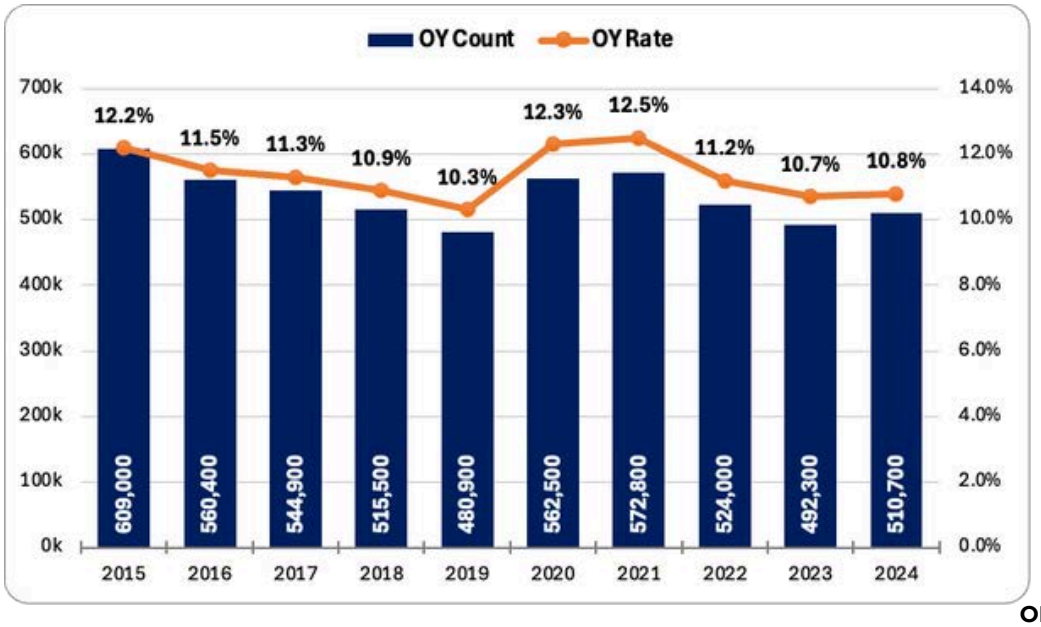
# SECTION 1. THE SCALE AND TRAJECTORY OF DISCONNECTION

Any assessment of opportunity youth must begin with two questions: how many young people are disconnected, and whether their number is growing or receding. In 2024, 510,727 young Californians between the ages of 16 and 24 were neither in school nor working – 10.8% of the age group, or roughly one in nine. It is a population larger than the residents of Oakland, dispersed across every county and labor market in the state. The figure is the starting point for everything that follows: the count establishes the magnitude of the opportunity, and the sections that follow examine its dynamics, its causes, and its distribution.

### *A Decade of Change*

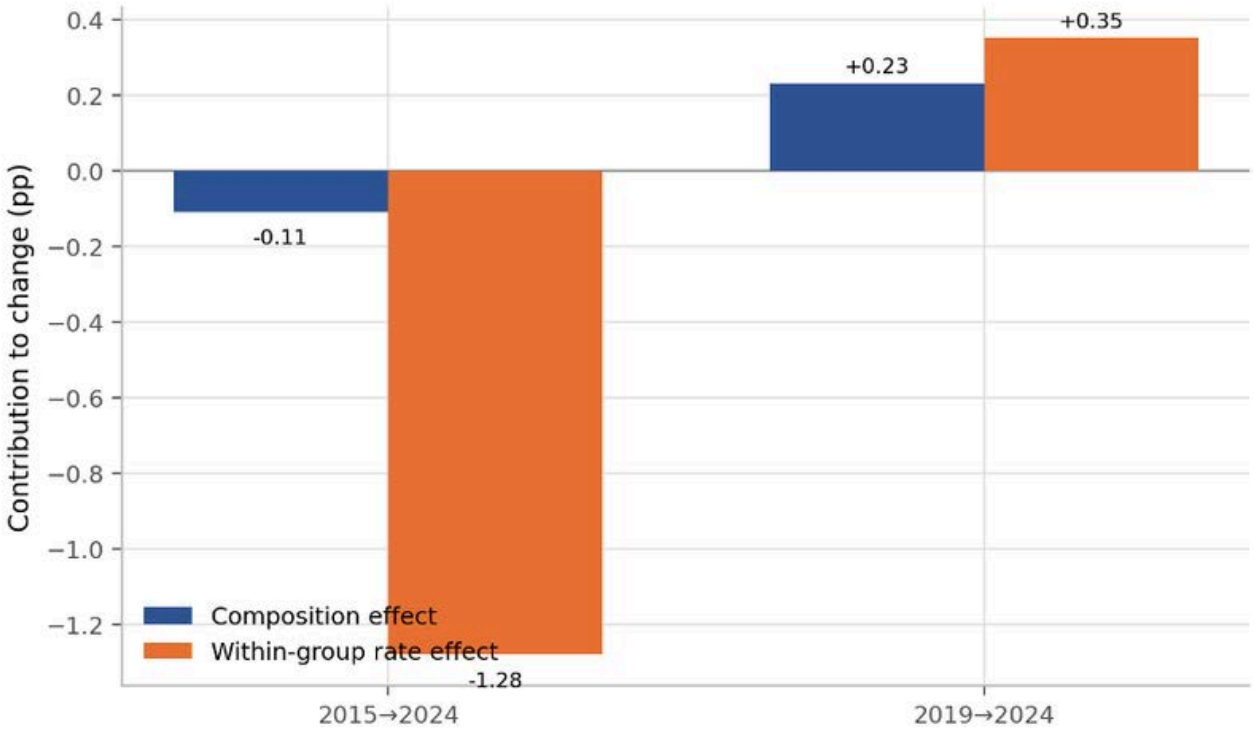
That magnitude has not held steady. Over the past decade, California's opportunity youth rate declined gradually through the latter half of the 2010s, fell to a low of 10.3% in 2019, then rose sharply with the onset of the pandemic, peaking at 12.5% in 2021 as school disruption and labor-market contraction converged on young people. The rate has since receded, returning to 10.8% in 2024. The recovery is real but incomplete: disconnection has fallen back to roughly its pre-pandemic trend, but it has not regained the 2019 low. The confidence intervals around these estimates are narrow – on the order of three to four tenths of a percentage point – so the pandemic-era increase and the subsequent recovery both reflect genuine movement rather than sampling noise.

*Figure 1.1 – California opportunity youth rate, 2015-2024, with 90% confidence intervals*



A change in the overall rate can arise from two distinct sources: a shift in the composition of the youth population toward groups with higher or lower disconnection, or a change in the underlying rate of disconnection within those groups. Distinguishing the two matters, because they carry different implications – the first reflects who young Californians are, the second reflects the conditions they face. Decomposing the change confirms that the long-run improvement is genuine. Of the 1.4-percentage-point decline between 2015 and 2024, nearly all is attributable to falling disconnection within demographic groups rather than to compositional shifts. The more recent period tells a more cautionary story: the modest increase between the 2019 low and 2024 divides roughly evenly between composition and rate, indicating that the youth population has shifted somewhat toward higher-risk groups even as within-group conditions have yet to fully recover.

*Figure 1.2 – Decomposition of the change in the opportunity youth rate, composition versus within-group rate*



### *The Cost of Disconnection*

The persistence of disconnection at this scale carries a measurable cost. Drawing on the economic-value framework developed for the Aspen Institute, which estimates the per-youth fiscal and social burden of disconnection, California's 2024 opportunity youth population represents an annual taxpayer burden on the order of ten billion dollars and a total social cost – including lost earnings and productivity alongside public expenditure – in the range of twenty-five to thirty billion dollars.[2] Measured across the working lives of this single cohort, the lifetime figures extend into the hundreds of billions. These estimates frame disconnection not as a fixed expense but as an ongoing liability, one the state continues to absorb for each year a young person remains disconnected, and a corresponding return available when reconnection succeeds.

Box 1.A – The cost of disconnection: annual and lifetime fiscal and social burden, California 2024

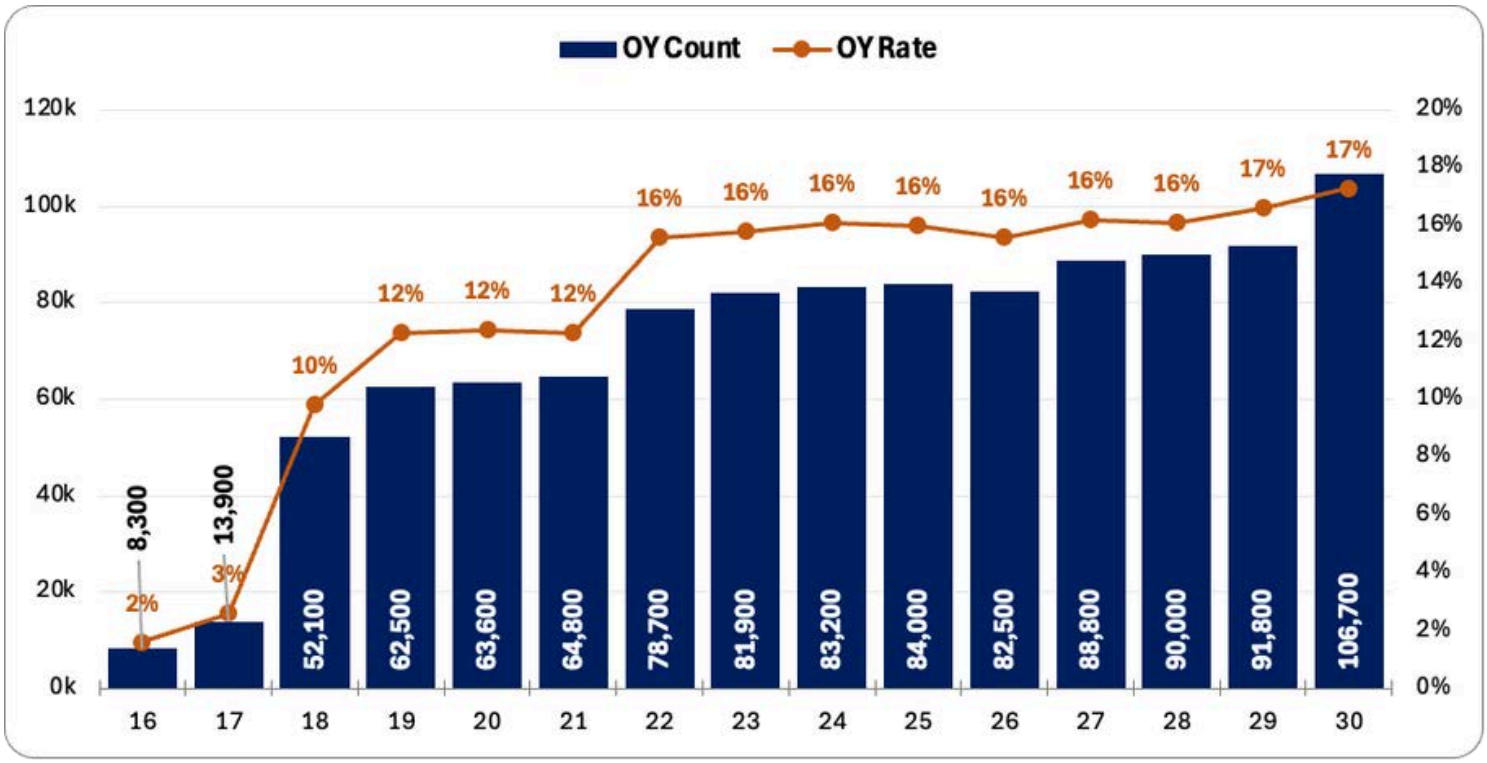
| Burden Measure | Per Opportunity Youth (2024 $) | California Total (510,727 youth) |
|---|---|---|
| Annual — taxpayer (fiscal) | $19,400 | $9.9 billion |
| Annual — social (total) | $52,200 | $26.7 billion |
| Lifetime — taxpayer (fiscal) | $238,200 | $121.6 billion |
| Lifetime — social (total) | $738,000 | $376.9 billion |

[2] Per-youth fiscal and social burden estimates draw on the economic-value framework of Belfield, Levin, and Rosen (2012), expressed in 2011 dollars and adjusted to 2024 dollars using the Consumer Price Index. The aggregate figures are approximate and rounded, intended to convey magnitude rather than a precise accounting.

# SECTION 2. THE AGE STRUCTURE OF DISCONNECTION

A single statewide rate reveals the scale of disconnection, but not when it begins. The aggregate rate conceals a steep age gradient that is central to understanding how disconnection forms. Among 16- and 17-year-olds, disconnection is low – 1.6 and 2.6% respectively – because compulsory schooling keeps nearly all of them enrolled. At 18, the rate quadruples to roughly 10%, and it continues to climb through the early twenties, reaching 16% by age 24. The pattern is less a gradual slope than a threshold: disconnection is held down by the structure of the K-12 system and then rises sharply the moment that structure falls away.

*Figure 2.1 – Opportunity youth rate by single year of age, California, pooled 2022–2024*

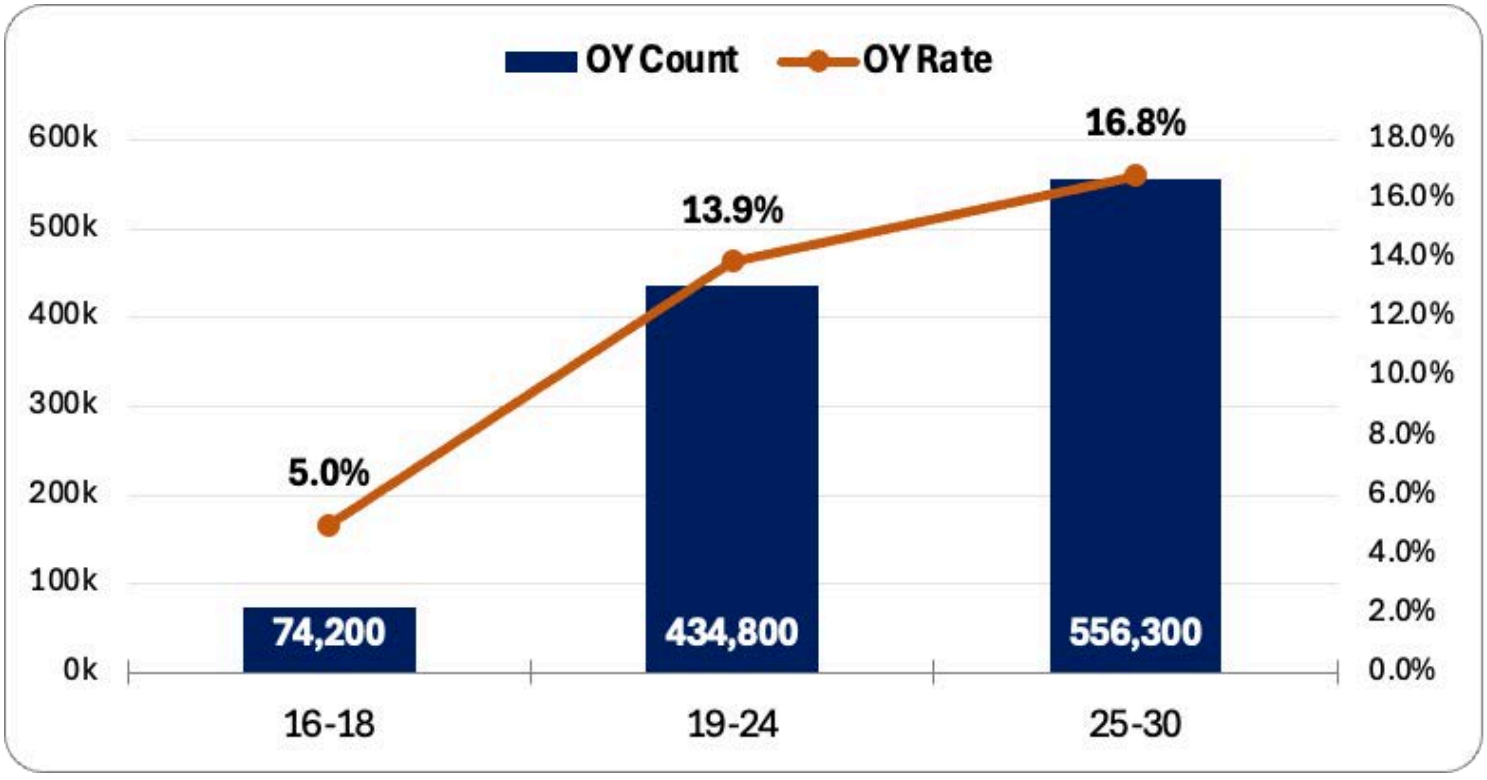


The implication of this gradient is twofold. First, it locates the critical transition precisely at the end of high school, when young people lose the institutional scaffolding that enrollment provides and must navigate the move into work or further education largely on their own. This is the point at which prevention efforts, to be effective, must already be in place – a theme developed in the next section. Second, the continued rise through the early twenties indicates that risk does not resolve with age but accumulates: the 19-to-24 cohort is disconnected at nearly three times the rate of 16-to-18-year-olds – 13.9 versus 5.0% in 2024 – and the figure is highest among those in their mid-twenties. Reconnection strategies that concentrate on the youngest opportunity youth address the smaller share of the problem.

### *Disconnection Beyond Twenty-Four*

That observation extends naturally beyond the conventional upper boundary of 24. Disconnection does not subside at 25; it intensifies. Among Californians aged 25 to 30, the rate reaches 16.8% – higher than at any point within the standard 16-to-24 window – adding more than 556,000 disconnected young adults to the population. Defined across the full 16-to-30 range, the disconnected population exceeds one million. While this report retains the 16-to-24 definition for comparability with prior work and national benchmarks, the trajectory beyond 24 is a reminder that the conditions producing disconnection persist well into adulthood, and that services ending abruptly at 24 leave the period of greatest need unaddressed.

*Figure 2.2 – Opportunity youth rate by age group, including the 25–30 extension*



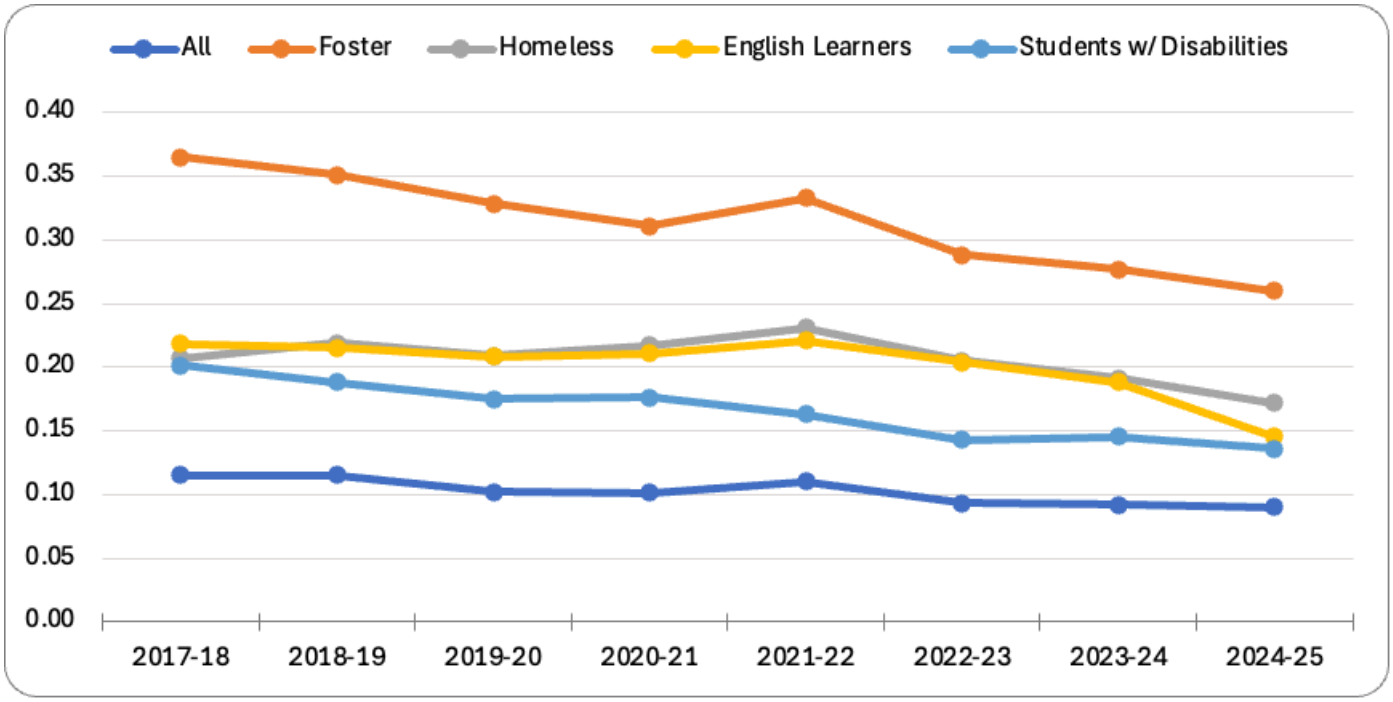
# SECTION 3. THE PIPELINE INTO DISCONNECTION

Where the preceding section located disconnection in time, this one looks behind it, to the school years in which the risk first takes shape. Disconnection at age 18 is rarely abrupt. For most young people who leave high school without a clear path into work or further education, the signs appear years earlier, in patterns of attendance, completion, and transition that the state already observes. Where the ACS captures opportunity youth once they have become disconnected, California Department of Education records make visible the period before – the stretch of the school career during which risk accumulates and, in principle, can still be interrupted. Three measures drawn from those records describe the pipeline: chronic absenteeism, high school non-completion, and the failure to transition into postsecondary education after completion. Together they show both that disconnection is foreseeable and that the same groups of students are exposed at every stage.

### *Leaving School Without Finishing*

The most direct precursor to disconnection is leaving high school without finishing. Over the past eight years, California's five-year cohort dropout rate has declined steadily, from 11.5% for the 2017-18 cohort to 9.0% for 2024-25, interrupted only by a brief uptick around the pandemic. The aggregate improvement is real, but it is unevenly distributed. Foster youth, while improving more than any other group in absolute terms – from 36.5 to 26.0% – continue to leave school at roughly three times the all-student rate. Students experiencing homelessness drop out at about twice the rate, and students with disabilities, English learners, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students all remain elevated. The gap has narrowed; it has not closed.

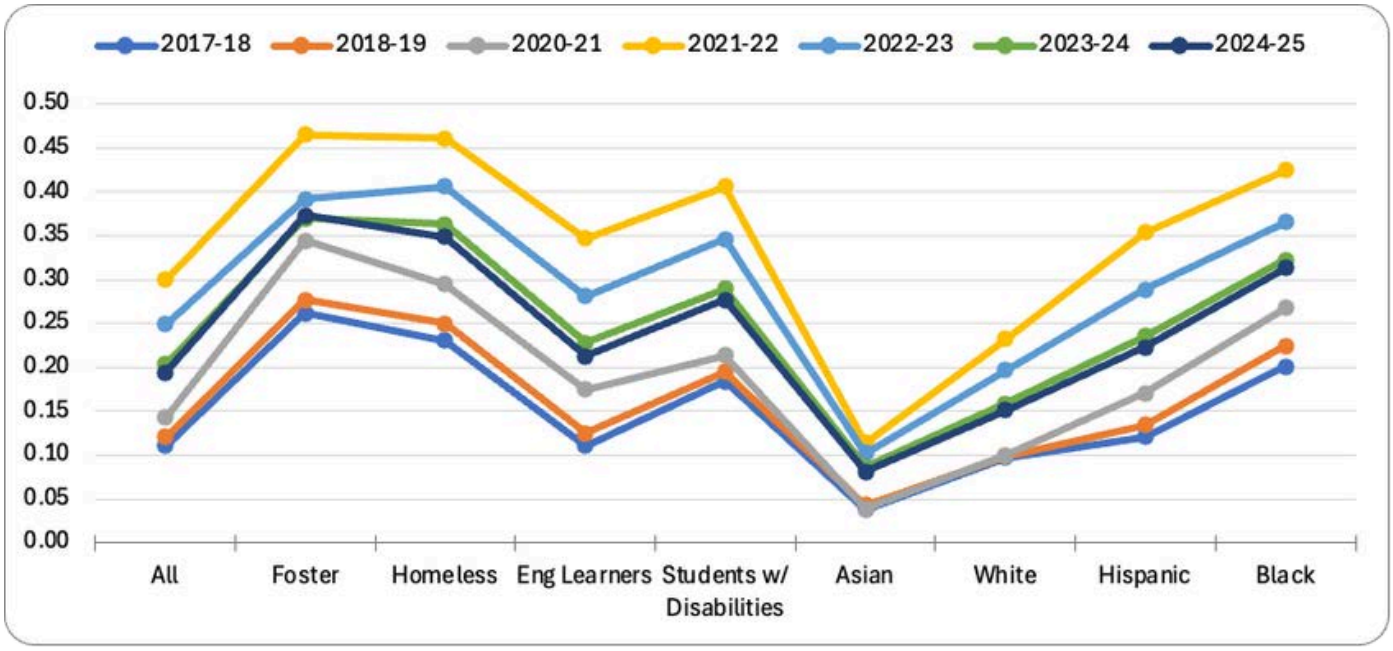
*Figure 3.1 – Five-year cohort dropout rate by student group, California, 2017–18 to 2024–25*




### *An Earlier Signal: Chronic Absenteeism*

Chronic absenteeism – typically defined as missing at least 10% of the school year – is the earlier signal, the one that often precedes both disengagement and departure. Its recent trajectory is dominated by the pandemic: after holding around 11 to 12% before 2020, the statewide rate rose to 30.0% for 2021–22 before receding. The decline since the peak has been substantial but partial; at 19.4% in 2024-25, chronic absenteeism remains well above its pre-pandemic level. The pattern by student group is again the more telling figure. Foster youth and students experiencing homelessness, at 37.3 and 34.9% respectively, have seen the least recovery – for these groups, absenteeism has barely retreated from its peak – and the gradient by race mirrors the one that appears throughout this report, from 8.1% among Asian students to 31.3% among Black students. Because the pandemic so heavily shapes this series, the levels for 2020-21 and 2021-22 should be read as crisis-era figures rather than as the underlying trend; the signal worth retaining is that absenteeism has settled at a markedly higher plateau than before, and that it remains concentrated among the same students.

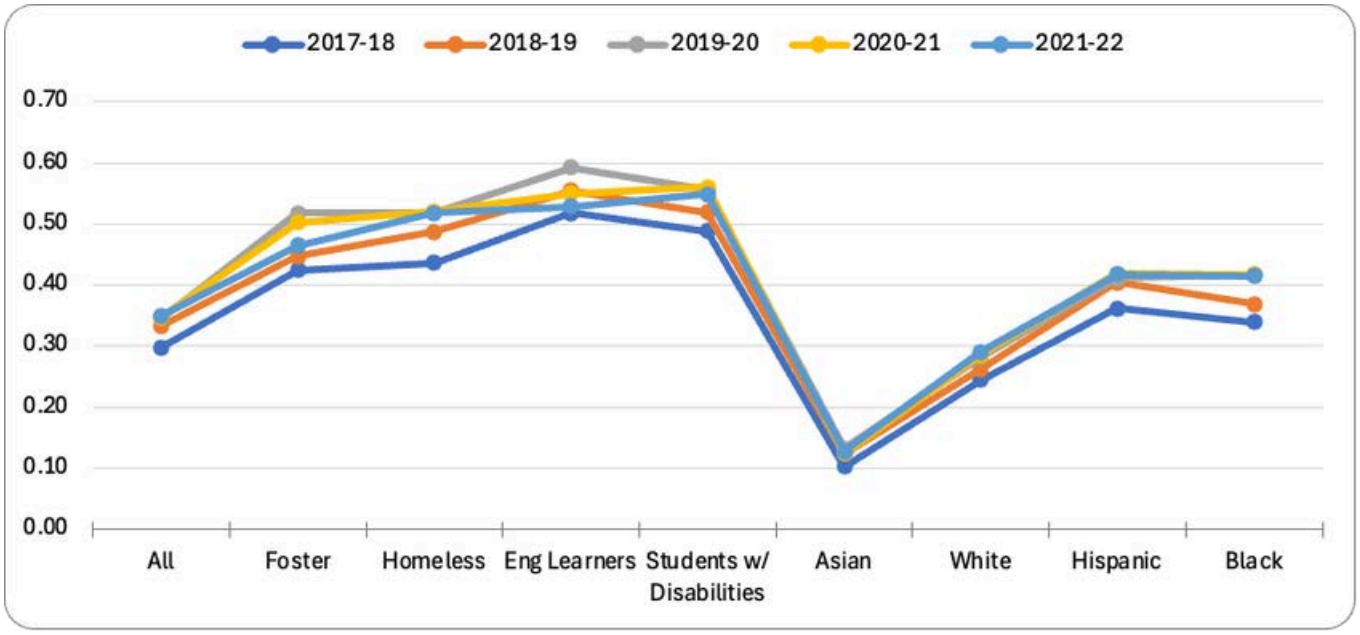
*Figure 3.2 – Chronic absenteeism rate by student group, California, 2017–18 to 2024–25*




### *The Transition After Completion*

The third measure marks the transition that follows completion, and it points in the opposite direction from the dropout trend. Even among students who finish high school, a substantial and growing share do not enroll in college within sixteen months. Statewide, that share rose from 29.8% for the 2017–18 cohort to 35.0% for 2021–22 – meaning that better than one in three California high school completers does not move on to postsecondary education in the period when transition is most likely. The increase predates the pandemic, which suggests a structural weakening of the school-to-college pathway rather than a temporary disruption. Non-enrollment is far higher among the groups already most exposed – exceeding half among students with disabilities, English learners, and students experiencing homelessness – and ranges from 12.8% among Asian students to roughly 42% among Hispanic and Black students. Completing high school, on its own, increasingly fails to secure a transition into anything beyond it.

*Figure 3.3 – Share of high school completers not enrolled in college within 16 months, by student group, California, 2017–18 to 2021–22*




### *One Pipeline, the Same Students*

Read together, the three measures describe a single population moving through successive points of risk. Chronic absence signals disengagement during the school years; non-completion ends the K-12 path for some; and non-transition stalls many of those who remain. At each stage, the same students are over-represented – foster youth, students experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, English learners, and Black and Hispanic students. The consistency is the point: disconnection is not randomly distributed across the youth population but concentrated among groups identifiable years in advance, through data the state already collects. That foreknowledge is the foundation of any preventive response, and it defines the population to whom such a response should be directed.

*Table 3.1 – Dropout, chronic absenteeism, and college non-enrollment by student group, most recent year*

| Student group | Dropout 2024-25 | Absenteeism 2024-25 | College Non-Enroll 2021-22 |
|---|---|---|---|
| All | 9.0% | 19.4% | 35.0% |
| Foster | 26.0% | 37.3% | 46.5% |
| Homeless | 17.2% | 34.9% | 51.8% |
| English Learners | 14.5% | 21.3% | 52.9% |
| Students w/ Disabilities | 13.6% | 27.7% | 54.9% |
| Asian | — | 8.1% | 12.8% |
| White | — | 15.1% | 29.1% |
| Hispanic | — | 22.3% | 41.7% |
| Black | — | 31.3% | 41.5% |

# SECTION 4. WHO CALIFORNIA'S OPPORTUNITY YOUTH ARE

Having traced the pathways that lead into disconnection, the report turns from how it forms to whom it affects. Disconnection is not evenly distributed across California's young people. Some groups are disconnected at well above the statewide rate, others well below, and the composition of the opportunity youth population reflects both these differences in risk and the underlying size of each group. The two are easily conflated. A group may be over-represented because its members face elevated risk, or simply because it is large; sound targeting requires holding the two apart. The analysis that follows reports each group three ways – its disconnection rate, its share of all opportunity youth, and its share of the youth population – so that risk and scale can be read independently.

### *Race and Ethnicity*

By race and ethnicity, disconnection rates vary nearly threefold. American Indian and Black youth face the highest rates, at 18.0 and 16.4% respectively – roughly one and a half times their representation in the youth population.[3] Hispanic/Latino youth are disconnected at 12.1%, modestly above the statewide figure, but their significance lies in scale: at 57.5% of all opportunity youth, they constitute the clear majority of the population by volume. White and Asian/Pacific Islander youth are disconnected at below-average rates – 9.4 and 6.5% – and are correspondingly under-represented. The distinction between rate and share is consequential for policy: efforts organized around the highest-risk groups and efforts organized around the largest groups would direct resources differently, and both considerations are legitimate.

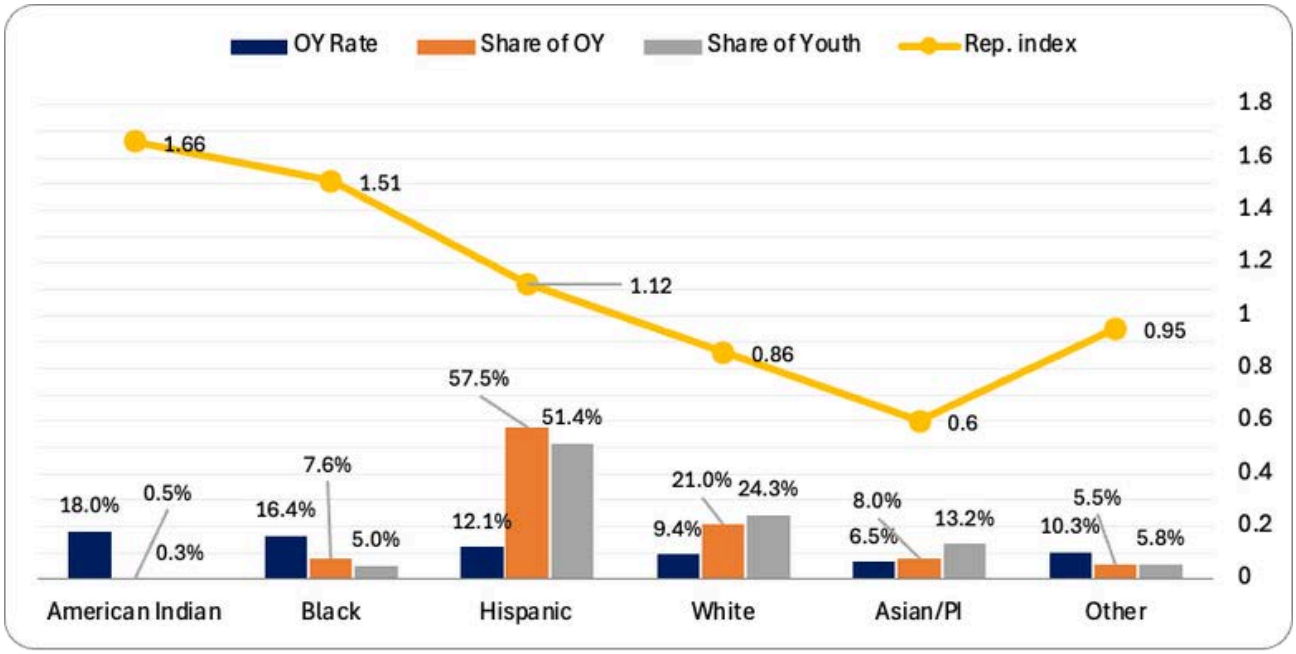
[3]The estimate for American Indian youth rests on a small sample and carries a wide margin of error; it should be read as indicative rather than precise.

*Table 4.1. Opportunity youth by race and ethnicity: rate, share of opportunity youth, and share of youth population, California 2024*

| Group | OY Rate (%) | Share of OY (%) | Share of Youth (%) | Rep. Index |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| American Indian | 18.0% | 0.5% | 0.3% | 1.66 |
| Black | 16.4% | 7.6% | 5.0% | 1.51 |
| Hispanic | 12.1% | 57.5% | 51.4% | 1.12 |
| White | 9.4% | 21.0% | 24.3% | 0.86 |
| Asian/PI | 6.5% | 8.0% | 13.2% | 0.60 |
| Other | 10.3% | 5.5% | 5.8% | 0.95 |

Figure 4.1 brings these two dimensions together. The bars show each group's disconnection rate, while the overlaid line traces its representation index – the extent to which a group is over- or under-represented among opportunity youth relative to its share of the youth population, with 1.0 marking parity. Reading the two together separates groups whose prominence reflects genuinely elevated risk – American Indian and Black youth, who stand well above parity on both measures – from Hispanic/Latino youth, whose large presence among opportunity youth owes more to the size of the population than to a disproportionately high rate.

*Figure 4.1. Disconnection rate and over- or under-representation by race and ethnicity*



### *Gender, Nativity, and Language*

Other characteristics sharpen the picture. The difference by gender is small – 11.3% among young men, 10.4% among young women – and, as the next section shows, it disappears entirely once other factors are accounted for. Nativity and language carry more weight. Foreign-born youth are disconnected at 13.9%, against 10.4% among the U.S.-born, and the gap by English proficiency is wider still: 20.5% among youth with limited English proficiency, nearly double the rate of their English-proficient peers. These two measures identify a smaller but distinctly exposed segment of the population, one whose circumstances bear directly on the policy environment described in the introduction and whose profile reappears in the typology developed in Section 6.

*Table 4.2 – Opportunity youth by gender, nativity, and English proficiency, California 2024*

| Group | OY Rate (%) |
|---|---|
| Male | 11.3% |
| Female | 10.4% |
| Foreign-born | 13.9% |
| U.S.-born | 10.4% |
| Limited English | 20.5% |
| English proficient | 10.5% |
| Overall | 10.8% |

### The Reach Beyond Twenty-Four

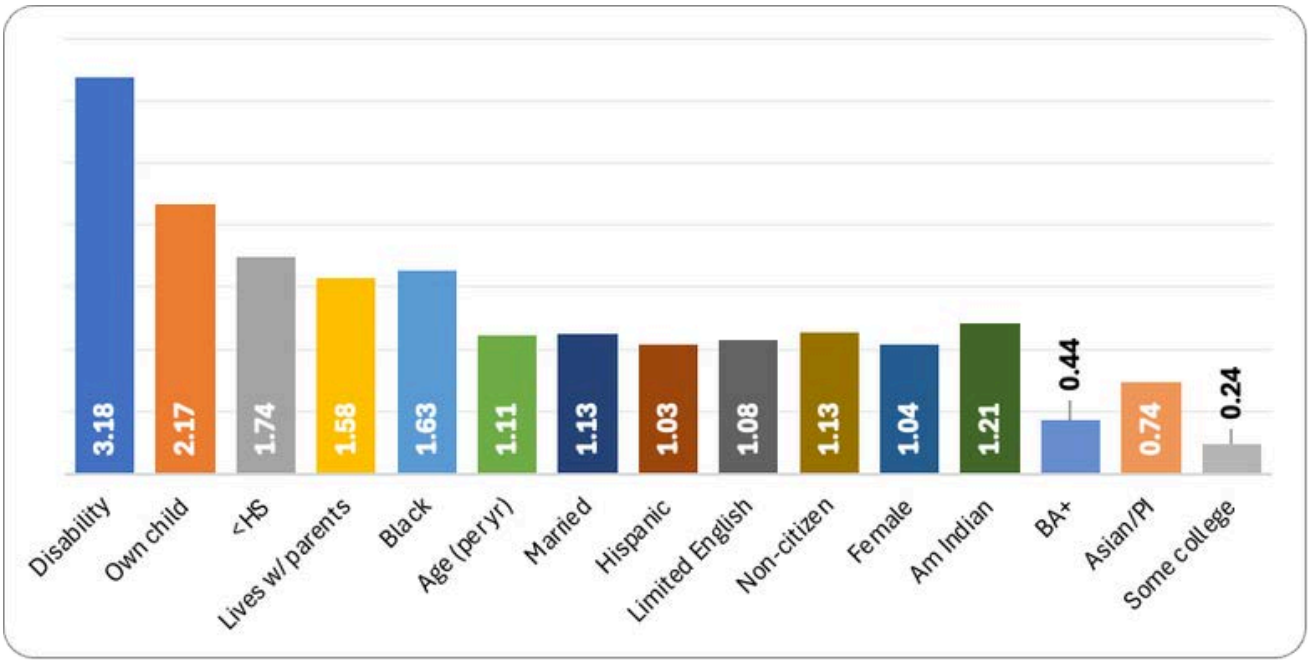
Finally, the conventional age boundary of 24 understates the scope of disconnection. As Section 2 showed, disconnection does not subside at 25 but intensifies, and the characteristics that drive it – disability, parenthood, and limited education – carry into the late twenties rather than fading. The 16-to-24 definition is retained here for comparability, but the population it describes does not end cleanly at its upper bound.

# SECTION 5. WHAT PREDICTS DISCONNECTION

The demographic patterns in the preceding section describe who is disconnected, but they cannot by themselves identify why. Many of the characteristics associated with disconnection are also associated with one another – limited English proficiency with nativity, parenthood with age, disability with educational attainment – so a simple comparison of rates risks attributing to one factor what properly belongs to another. To separate the independent contribution of each, this section turns to a multivariate model: a logistic regression estimating the odds of disconnection as a function of demographic, educational, and household characteristics considered simultaneously. The model is estimated for young adults aged 19 to 24, the range in which the relevant transitions have largely occurred and educational attainment can be meaningfully assessed, and it accounts for the survey's complex sample design in its estimates of statistical significance.

The results reframe the descriptive picture in instructive ways. Some characteristics that appear influential in isolation prove to be largely artifacts of their correlation with other factors, while a smaller set emerges as genuinely associated with disconnection once the others are held constant.

*Figure 5.1 – Adjusted odds ratios for disconnection, ages 19–24, California 2024*



### The Strongest Predictors

Three factors stand out for the magnitude of their independent association with disconnection. Disability is the strongest: holding all else equal, a young person with a disability has more than three times the odds of being disconnected. Parenthood is the next most powerful – having an own child more than doubles the odds – followed by the absence of education beyond high school, discussed below. Each of these operates independently of the others and of demographic background, which makes them especially salient for policy: they identify circumstances, not categories, and each points toward a specific form of support – accommodation and supported employment, childcare and two-generation programming, postsecondary access. Notably, disability and parenthood are also largely invisible to the education and labor-market data sources examined elsewhere in this report; the survey is the only place they come clearly into view.

### Education and the Diploma Threshold

Educational attainment shows the steepest gradient of all. Relative to a young adult whose highest credential is a high school diploma, those who have completed some college are markedly less likely to be disconnected, and those with a bachelor's degree less likely still. Read in the other direction, the comparison is stark: a high school graduate who has gone no further has roughly four times the odds of disconnection of a peer who reached some college, and about twice the odds of a bachelor's-degree holder. The diploma, on its own, is associated with substantially elevated risk relative to any further attainment – the regression's expression of a pattern that recurs in the persistence and labor-market findings that follow.

### What Adjustment Changes

Among demographic characteristics, the adjusted results diverge sharply from the raw rates. Black youth retain elevated odds of disconnection after adjustment, and living in the parental household is independently associated with higher odds – consistent with constrained means rather than independent establishment. But several differences prominent in the descriptive data lose statistical significance once other factors are controlled. The gap by sex disappears entirely. So too do the apparent effects of Hispanic ethnicity, limited English proficiency, and non-citizenship – not because these characteristics are unimportant, but because their association with disconnection operates largely through the educational, household, and economic circumstances that accompany them. The finding is a caution against reading the demographic rates as causal: the factors most strongly and independently tied to disconnection are disability, parenthood, and the absence of education beyond high school, not demographic identity as such.

*Table 5.1 – Logistic regression results: adjusted odds ratios, confidence intervals, and significance, ages 19–24*

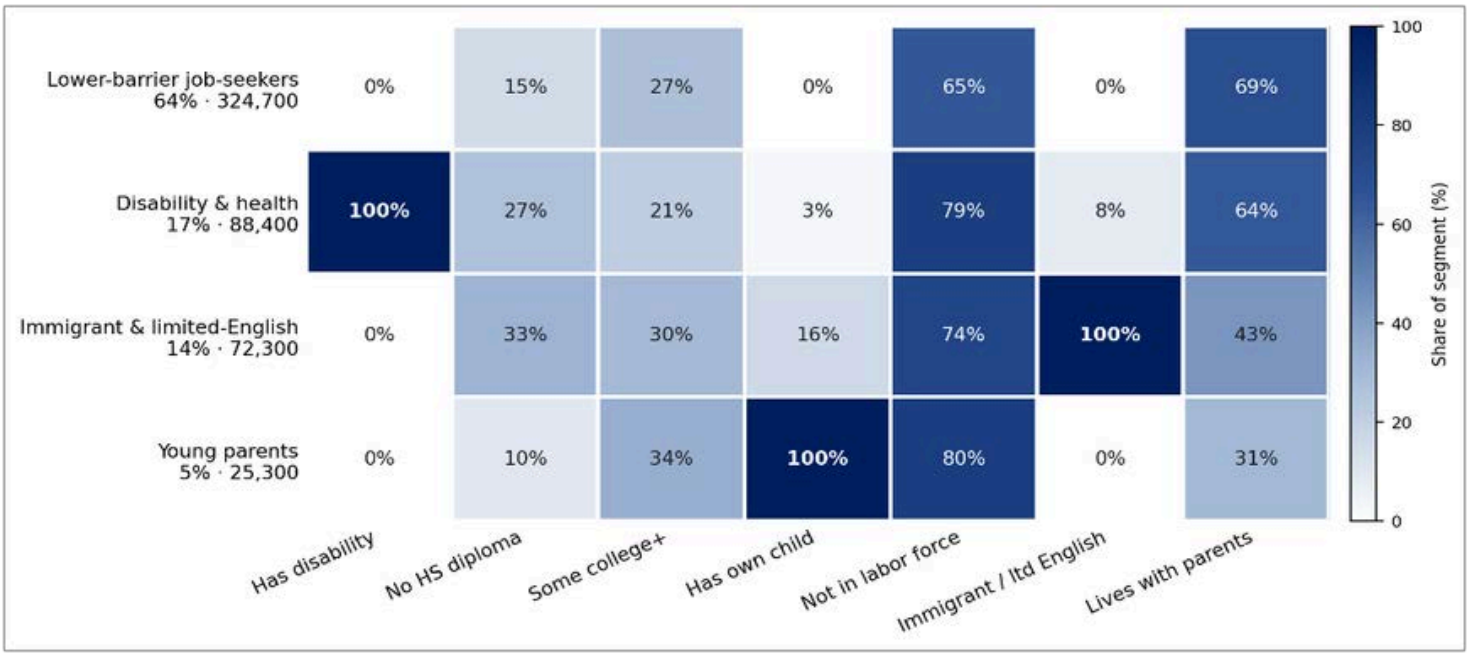
| Predictor | Odds Ratio | CI Low | CI High | *p*-value | Sig (90%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Disability | 3.18 | 2.85 | 3.56 | 0.000 | * |
| Own child | 2.17 | 1.81 | 2.60 | 0.000 | * |
| <HS | 1.74 | 1.52 | 1.98 | 0.000 | * |
| Lives w/ parents | 1.58 | 1.45 | 1.72 | 0.000 | * |
| Black | 1.63 | 1.33 | 2.00 | 0.000 | * |
| Age (per yr) | 1.11 | 1.08 | 1.13 | 0.000 | * |
| Married | 1.13 | 0.95 | 1.34 | 0.256 | NS |
| Hispanic | 1.03 | 0.93 | 1.15 | 0.601 | NS |
| Limited English | 1.08 | 0.88 | 1.33 | 0.538 | NS |
| Non-citizen | 1.13 | 0.97 | 1.32 | 0.196 | NS |
| Female | 1.04 | 0.96 | 1.12 | 0.464 | NS |
| Am Indian | 1.21 | 0.84 | 1.75 | 0.386 | NS |
| Some college | 0.24 | 0.22 | 0.27 | 0.000 | * |
| BA+ | 0.44 | 0.38 | 0.50 | 0.000 | * |
| Asian/PI | 0.74 | 0.63 | 0.86 | 0.001 | * |
| C(raceeth)[T.Other] | 1.17 | 0.96 | 1.42 | 0.193 | NS |

# SECTION 6. A TYPOLOGY OF OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

The preceding section identified the factors most strongly associated with disconnection; this one asks how those factors combine in actual young people. Opportunity youth are not a uniform group, and the characteristics that define them – educational attainment, disability, parenthood, work history, language and nativity – co-occur in patterned ways rather than at random. A young parent out of the labor force faces different circumstances, and requires different support, than a young adult with a disability who has never worked, or a recent immigrant with limited English seeking a first job. Identifying these patterns is the difference between a single, undifferentiated program and a strategy matched to the population it serves.

To derive these groupings empirically rather than impose them, this analysis applies latent class analysis – a statistical method that identifies underlying subgroups from the way characteristics cluster together across individuals. Applied to California's opportunity youth, the method yields four distinct segments, each with a characteristic profile and a corresponding set of needs. The segments are described below in order of size; their defining features are summarized in the accompanying exhibits.

*Figure 6.1 – Four segments of California's opportunity youth: defining characteristics by class*



## Four Segments

The four segments differ not only in size but in the nature of the barriers their members face, and therefore in what reconnection would require of each. The largest is defined by the near-absence of structural barriers; the other three, smaller and more sharply drawn, are organized around disability, immigration, and parenthood respectively. Each is described below in order of size, with its defining characteristics and the form of support it implies.

- **Lower-barrier job-seekers –** roughly two-thirds (about 345,000). They hold a high school diploma or some college, rarely report a disability, and seldom have children; most live with their parents, and they show the highest rate of active job search of any group. Their disconnection appears situational rather than structural – they are, for the most part, between things rather than blocked from them. Relatively light-touch interventions, such as job placement, paid work experience, and clear postsecondary and training pathways, are likely to be sufficient. By its educational profile, this is also the segment most exposed to the high-school-diploma risk identified throughout this report.

- **Disability and health barriers –** just under a fifth (about 100,000). Well over half report a disability and nearly two-thirds lack a high school diploma; effectively none are in the labor force. Employment-first approaches are insufficient on their own. Reconnection depends on supported employment, accommodation, benefits navigation, and access to health services – a substantially more intensive model, directed at a group that conventional workforce programming often does not reach.

- **Immigrant and limited-English youth –** about 8%. Almost entirely foreign-born or limited-English young people; many are young mothers, few live with their parents, and the group reports the highest poverty rate of any segment. Their needs center on language instruction, credential recognition, and the childcare that would make either accessible.

- **Young parents –** roughly 5%. Nearly all are caring for young children, the overwhelming majority are women, and most are out of the labor force as a result. For this group, childcare and two-generation programming are not adjuncts to reconnection but its precondition. This figure is the share of opportunity youth whose defining profile is parenthood; it is not the total share of opportunity youth who are parents, which is higher once parents who fall into the other segments are counted.

*Table 6.1. Opportunity youth segments: size, defining characteristics, and primary service needs*

| Segment | Share (%) | Count | Defining Profile | Primary Service Needs |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lower-barrier job-seekers | 67.5% | 344,863 | HS diploma or some college; rarely a disability; seldom children; most live with parents; highest job-search rate | Job placement, paid work experience, postsecondary & training pathways |
| Disability & health barriers | 19.6% | 99,870 | Well over half report a disability; nearly two-thirds lack a high school diploma; effectively none in the labor force | Supported employment, accommodation, benefits navigation, health services |
| Immigrant & limited-English | 7.7% | 39,337 | Almost entirely foreign-born or limited-English; many young mothers; few live with parents; highest poverty rate | Language instruction, credential recognition, childcare |
| Young parents | 5.2% | 26,657 | Nearly all caring for young children; overwhelmingly women; mostly out of the labor force | Childcare, two-generation programming |

The value of the typology is not merely descriptive. It establishes that a majority of California's opportunity youth are reachable through employment-focused services of modest intensity, while a substantial minority – roughly a third, distributed across the disability, immigrant, and parenting segments – require distinct and more specialized forms of support. A reconnection strategy calibrated to this structure, rather than to the population as a whole, can direct intensive resources where they are needed without expending them where they are not. The segments also align closely with the factors identified in the regression: disability, parenthood, and educational attainment, the strongest independent predictors of disconnection, are precisely the dimensions along which the population divides.

# SECTION 7. PERSISTENCE AND RECONNECTION

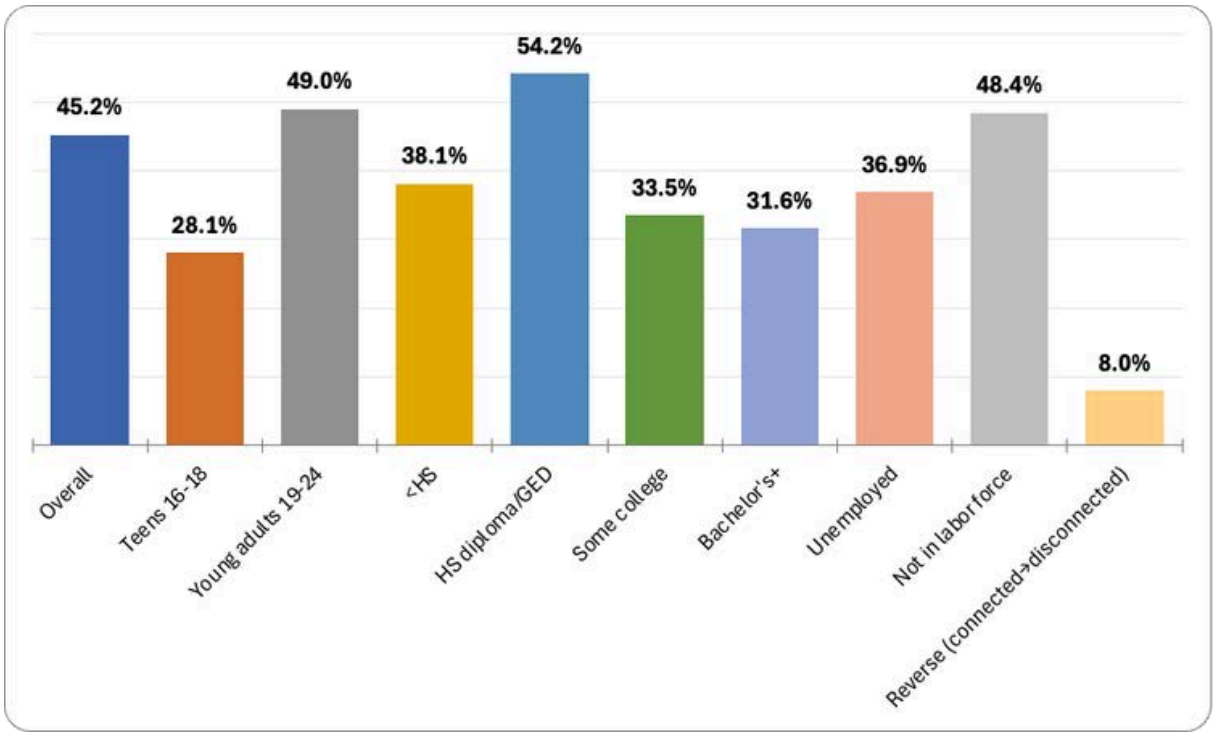
Every measure presented so far describes disconnection at a single moment – how many young people are disconnected, who they are, where they live. None can answer the question that most determines what disconnection means for a young person's life: whether it lasts. A snapshot cannot distinguish the graduate spending a few months between a diploma and a first job from the young person who has been out of school and work for years, though the two represent very different problems and call for very different responses. Answering that question requires following the same individuals over time, which the ACS, as a cross-sectional survey, cannot do. For this, the analysis turns to the CPS, whose design allows a share of respondents to be linked across a twelve-month interval and their transitions observed directly.

### *How Many Reconnect*

The central finding is sobering. Of the young people disconnected in a given year, only about half have reconnected to school or work one year later; the remaining half – an estimated 46% – are still disconnected.[4] Disconnection, in other words, is not predominantly a brief, self-correcting episode. For a substantial share of opportunity youth, a year of disconnection is followed by another, and the longer that state persists, the more the early detachment from school and work compounds into lasting disadvantage in earnings and employment.

*[4]Persistence estimates are based on respondents linked across Current Population Survey panels twelve months apart. Because not all respondents link, the survey is used here for rates and transitions rather than counts, and the horizon is a single year; multi-year persistence may differ.*

*Figure 7.1. One-year outcomes for opportunity youth: share reconnected versus still disconnected*




## Who Remains Disconnected

Persistence is not uniform, and the variation is where the finding becomes useful. It rises markedly with age. Among teenagers aged 16 to 18, roughly 28% remain disconnected a year later; among young adults aged 19 to 23, the figure approaches half. The difference reflects the same dynamic visible in the age gradient of Section 2: for the youngest opportunity youth, disconnection is more often a transient interruption, while for those past the typical age of high school completion it more frequently sets in. Persistence also varies with how a young person is disconnected. Those who are unemployed – actively seeking work – reconnect at appreciably higher rates than those out of the labor force entirely; about 35% of the former remain disconnected a year later, against roughly half of the latter. Active job search, even unsuccessful, marks a meaningful difference in trajectory.

*Table 7.1. One-year persistence of disconnection by age, educational attainment, and labor-force status*

| Group | Still Disconnected at t+12 (%) | 90% CI | *n* (unweighted) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Overall | 45.2% | 42-49 | 519 |
| Teens 16-18 | 28.1% | | 105 |
| Young adults 19-24 | 49.0% | | 414 |
| <HS | 38.1% | | 114 |
| HS diploma/GED | 54.2% | | 274 |
| Some college | 33.5% | | 97 |
| Bachelor's+ | 31.6% | | 34 |
| Unemployed | 36.9% | | 151 |
| Not in labor force | 48.4% | | 368 |
| Reverse (connected → disconnected) | 8.0% | | 4,014 |

Educational attainment produces the sharpest divide, and it is here that the report's recurring pattern reappears in its most consequential form. Young people whose highest credential is a high school diploma or its equivalent are the most likely of any educational group to remain disconnected – roughly 55% persist, against about a third of those with either less or more education. This is the same group identified in the regression as facing elevated odds of disconnection and, in the labor-market analysis that follows, as constrained to the low-wage end of available work. The convergence is notable: across three independent datasets and three different questions – who becomes disconnected, who stays disconnected, and what work is available to them – the high-school-diploma-only group occupies the position of greatest risk. The credential that has long been treated as the basic threshold of opportunity is, for many, the point at which forward movement stops.

### *Movement in Both Directions*

Disconnection also runs in the other direction, a reminder that the boundary between connected and disconnected is permeable. In any given year, roughly 7.5% of young people who are connected – in school or working – become disconnected within twelve months, and the risk of that reverse transition is itself elevated among the unemployed and among those whose education ended at a high school diploma. Reconnection, then, is not a one-way door; a portion of the connected population is continually at risk of slipping out, which argues for retention and stabilization supports alongside reconnection efforts.

### *Three Operational Groups*

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that opportunity youth are not a single caseload but three operational groups, each calling for a different response:

1. **The short-term disconnected,** who will largely reconnect on their own and need light, timely support.
2. **The persistently disconnected,** for whom a year of disconnection signals entrenched barriers and who require sustained, intensive intervention.
3. **The at-risk connected,** whose tenuous attachment to school or work warrants attention before it breaks.

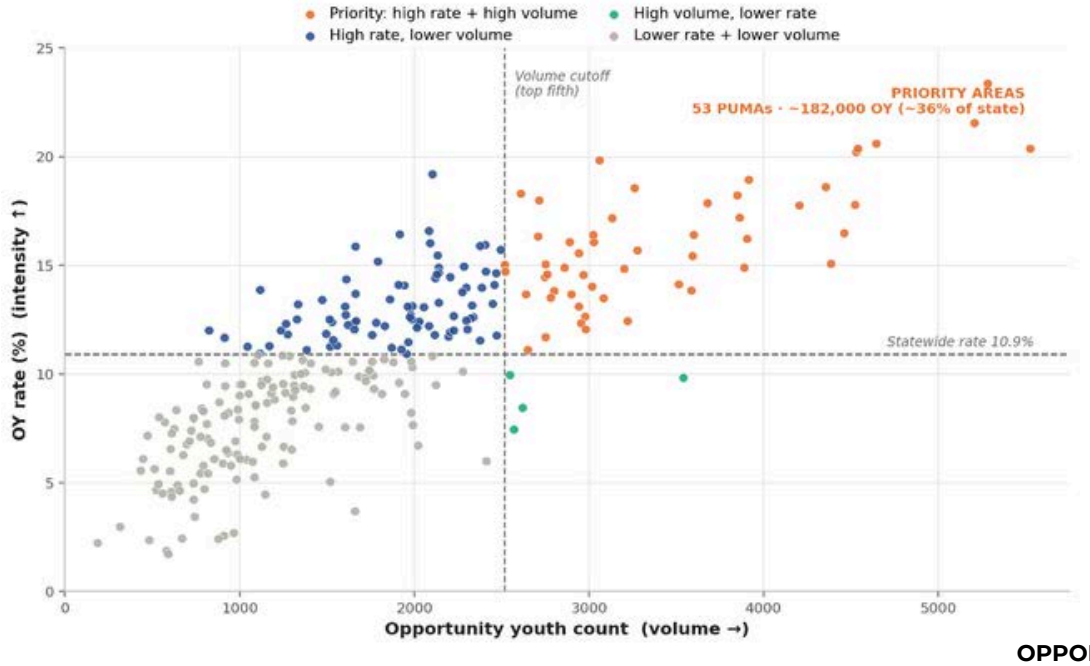
The static count cannot see these distinctions; the longitudinal view makes them the basis for how a reconnection system might be designed.

# SECTION 8. WHERE DISCONNECTION CONCENTRATES

The persistence traced in the preceding section is compounded by a second kind of clustering, a geographic one. Disconnection is not distributed evenly across California's geography any more than across its demography. A statewide rate of 10.8% is the average of wide local variation, and the places where opportunity youth are most concentrated differ from one another in ways that bear directly on how resources should be deployed. Two distinct questions matter for targeting, and they do not always have the same answer: where is the disconnection rate highest, and where are the largest numbers of disconnected young people located. A sparsely populated area may have a severe rate but a modest count; a dense metropolitan area may have a moderate rate but a large absolute population. Effective geographic targeting depends on reading both together.

To do so, this analysis maps California's Public Use Microdata Areas – the 281 sub-county geographies the Census defines for the state – along two axes simultaneously: the local disconnection rate and the number of opportunity youth. Pooling three years of survey data, 2022 through 2024, yields estimates stable enough to compare areas reliably. The result sorts the state's geographies into four groups, of which one is the clear priority.

*Figure 8.1. California PUMAs by disconnection rate and opportunity youth count, pooled 2022–2024*



## The Priority Areas

The areas of greatest concern are those that rank high on both measures at once – above the statewide rate and among the most populous in absolute terms. Fifty-three of California's 281 PUMAs fall into this category, and together they account for roughly 182,000 opportunity youth, or about 36% of the statewide total. That a third of California's opportunity youth are concentrated in fewer than a fifth of its geographies is the central geographic finding of this report: it means that targeted investment in a defined set of places could reach a disproportionate share of the population, a leverage that a uniform statewide approach forgoes.

These priority areas are not scattered at random. They cluster in two regions and one county. The Central Valley – Kern, Fresno, San Joaquin, Tulare, Merced, Kings, and the surrounding counties – appears repeatedly among the highest-rate, highest-count areas. The Inland Empire counties of Riverside and San Bernardino form a second concentration. And Los Angeles County, by virtue of its sheer population, contains more priority areas than any other single county, even where its rates are less extreme than the Valley's. These are the same regions that recur in the labor-market analysis of the next section, and the overlap is not incidental.

*Table 8.1. Priority PUMAs by county: number of high-rate, high-count areas and opportunity youth population*

| County | OY in Priority PUMAs | # Priority PUMAs |
|---|---|---|
| Los Angeles | 43,600 | 13 |
| Riverside | 23,100 | 7 |
| Kern | 20,100 | 5 |
| San Bernardino | 15,700 | 4 |
| Fresno | 13,200 | 4 |
| San Joaquin | 11,600 | 3 |
| Tulare | 11,500 | 3 |
| Other/small | 8,900 | 3 |
| Sacramento | 5,800 | 2 |
| Merced | 4,500 | 1 |
| Kings | 3,900 | 1 |
| Madera | 3,000 | 1 |
| Stanislaus | 3,000 | 1 |
| Imperial | 3,000 | 1 |
| Santa Barbara | 2,900 | 1 |
| Humboldt | 2,700 | 1 |
| Ventura | 2,600 | 1 |
| San Diego | 2,600 | 1 |

## Beyond the Hotspots

The remaining geographies call for different approaches rather than none. A second group of areas exhibits high disconnection rates but smaller absolute numbers – predominantly rural areas where the intensity of need is real but the population is dispersed, and where outreach and access, rather than scale, are the operative challenges. A third group, comparatively few in number, combines large populations with below-average rates. The distinction matters because a strategy suited to a dense urban area – where opportunity youth are numerous and proximate –will not serve a rural area where they are equally disadvantaged but widely separated. Geography, in short, conditions not only where reconnection efforts should concentrate but what form they should take.

# SECTION 9. THE LABOR MARKET WITHIN REACH

The preceding sections establish where opportunity youth are and what characterizes them. A reconnection strategy, however, depends on a further condition: the existence of work they can actually obtain, in the places they actually live. A region may have many disconnected young people and few accessible openings, or the reverse, and the relationship between the two – between the supply of opportunity youth and the demand for entry-level labor – determines how readily reconnection through employment is even possible. This section joins the two sides, drawing demand from the California Employment Development Department's occupational projections and supply from the opportunity youth counts developed earlier.

## The Structure of Accessible Work

The starting point is the structure of accessible work. Of the openings California's labor market is projected to generate through 2033, a large share require no formal credential or no more than a high school diploma – the jobs realistically within reach of most opportunity youth. Statewide, these entry-level openings are numerous: the economy is expected to produce them in the millions, concentrated in a familiar set of occupations. The single largest category is home health and personal care aides, followed by fast food and counter workers, cashiers, stockers and order fillers, and waitstaff. The openings exist; the question is their quality and their location.

*Table 9.1. Largest entry-level occupations by projected openings and median wage, California 2023–2033*

| Occupation | Total Openings 2023-33 | Median Hourly Wage | Entry-Level Education |
|---|---|---|---|
| Home Health and Personal Care Aides | 1,792,170 | $17 | HS diploma or equivalent |
| Fast Food and Counter Workers | 1,175,130 | $18 | No formal edu credential |
| Cashiers | 632,020 | $18 | No formal edu credential |
| Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers, Hand | 552,370 | $21 | No formal edu credential |
| Waiters and Waitresses | 548,780 | $17 | No formal edu credential |
| Retail Salespersons | 518,620 | $18 | No formal edu credential |
| Stockers and Order Fillers | 478,460 | $19 | HS diploma or equivalent |
| Farmworkers and Laborers, Crop, Nursery, & Greenhouse | 393,270 | $18 | No formal edu credential |
| Janitors & Cleaners, Except Maids & Housekeeping Cleaners | 392,530 | $19 | No formal edu credential |
| Office Clerks, General | 352,540 | $24 | HS diploma or equivalent |
| Cooks, Restaurant | 318,190 | $22 | No formal edu credential |
| Security Guards | 257,970 | $22 | HS diploma or equivalent |

## The Quality of the Work

On quality, the picture is mixed. The accessible occupations cluster at the low-wage end of the labor market: median wages in the largest entry-level categories fall in the range of seventeen to nineteen dollars an hour, and roughly one in four accessible openings pays at or near the state minimum wage. This is the labor-market expression of the pattern traced through the report's earlier sections. The work available to opportunity youth – and disproportionately to the high-school-diploma-only group, who face the steepest barriers to anything better – exists in volume but offers limited earnings, which constrains how far employment alone can serve as a route out of disconnection. Reconnection into a near-minimum-wage job is reconnection nonetheless, but it is not, on its own, a path to economic security.

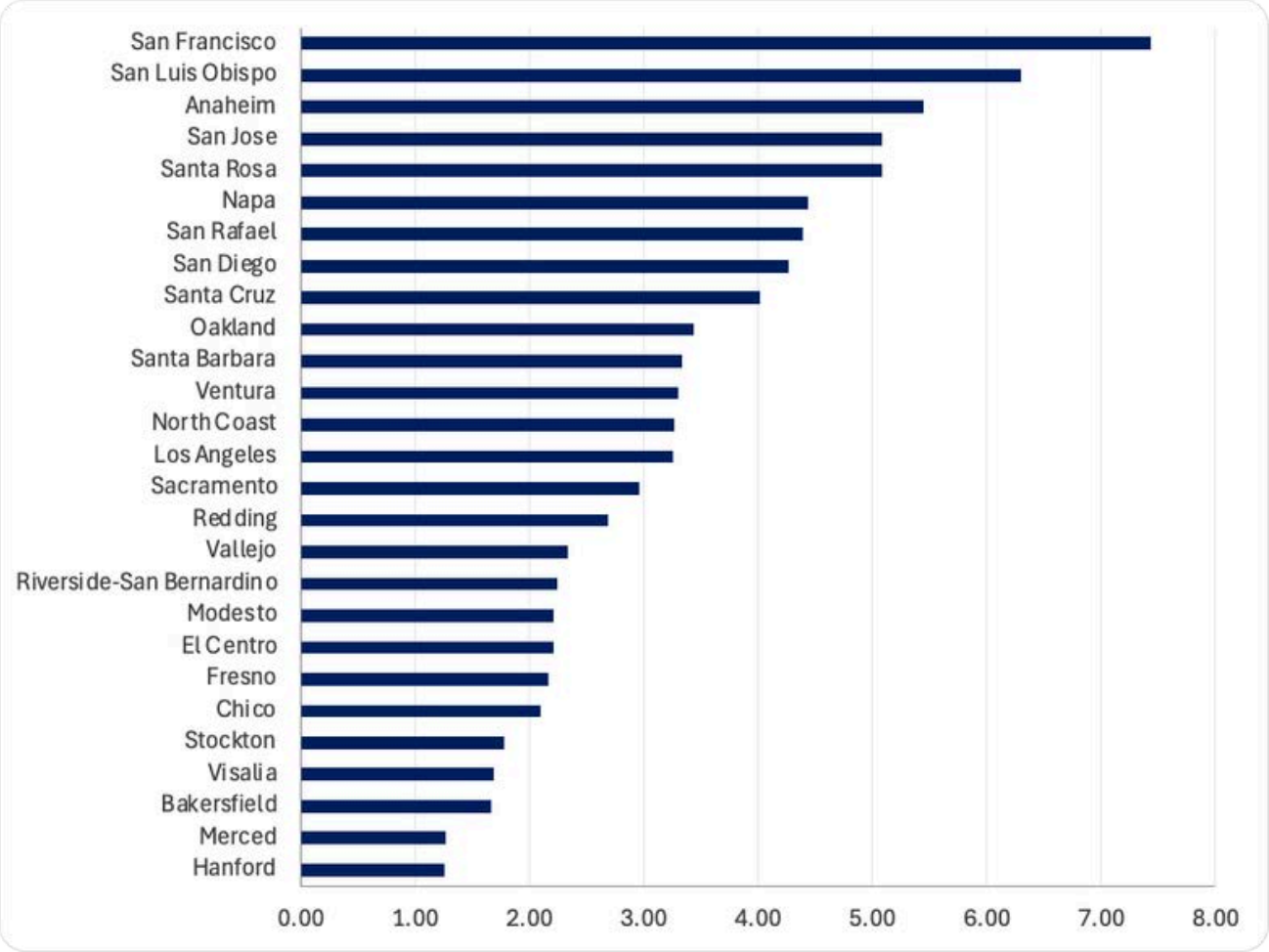
The changing nature of work adds another layer of uncertainty to this labor-market picture. The projections used here reflect the state's current occupational outlook, but they do not fully capture how artificial intelligence and automation may reshape entry-level work over the coming decade. This matters because many of the jobs most accessible to opportunity youth are routine, customer-facing, administrative, or support roles — precisely the kinds of work whose tasks may change as new technologies spread. The implication is not that entry-level pathways are disappearing, but that reconnection strategies must be paired with digital skill-building, career navigation, and advancement pathways that help young people adapt as the structure of accessible work changes.

## The Geographic Mismatch

On location, the analysis reveals a more actionable problem: accessible work and opportunity youth are unevenly matched across the state. Expressing each region's projected entry-level openings relative to its opportunity youth population yields a measure of how much accessible demand exists per disconnected young person, and that ratio varies roughly sixfold across California.[5] At one end are regions where openings are relatively abundant relative to need; at the other, regions where they are scarce.

[5]Projected entry-level openings serve all jobseekers, not opportunity youth alone; the openings-per-youth figure is therefore a relative indicator of labor-market slack, and the comparison across regions, rather than any absolute value, is what it supports. The measure covers 27 of the state's 31 substate areas, about 96% of opportunity youth; four areas whose counties are not separately identified in the public-use sample are excluded.

*Figure 9.1. Entry-level job openings per opportunity youth, by region*




The geography of that scarcity is the section's most consequential finding, because it coincides with the geography of disconnection itself. The regions with the fewest accessible openings per opportunity youth are concentrated in the Central Valley – Hanford, Merced, Bakersfield, Visalia, and Stockton occupy the bottom of the distribution, each with fewer than two projected annual openings per disconnected young person. These are precisely the areas that Section 8 identified as having both the highest disconnection rates and the largest opportunity youth populations. The regions where accessible work is most plentiful relative to need, by contrast, are the coastal metropolitan areas – San Francisco, San Jose, and Orange County – where opportunity youth are comparatively fewer. Supply and demand are mismatched in the most consequential way: the young people are concentrated where the accessible jobs are not.

## Implications for Strategy

This mismatch carries a direct implication for strategy. In the Central Valley and similar labor markets, reconnection cannot rely on local demand alone, because the demand is insufficient; these regions require deliberate job creation, employer engagement, training aligned to what regional growth does exist, and, where appropriate, support for mobility. In the coastal metropolitan areas, where accessible openings are relatively plentiful, the binding constraint is not the supply of jobs but the connection of young people to them – a matching and access problem rather than a scarcity one. A statewide reconnection strategy that treats all regions alike would misallocate effort in both directions. The labor market within reach is not the same labor market everywhere, and the response must vary with it.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis points toward a reconnection strategy organized not around a single intervention but around the structure of the problem itself – its timing, its persistence, its distinct subgroups, its geography, and the labor market that must ultimately absorb it. The recommendations that follow mirror that structure. They are framed as directions for state policy and for the network of agencies, educational institutions, and community organizations that serve opportunity youth, and each follows from a specific finding established in the preceding sections. Together they describe a system calibrated to reach different young people, in different places, through different means, rather than one that treats a varied population as uniform.

***1. Intervene before the cliff, through the data the state already holds.***

Disconnection rises fourfold at age 18, the moment compulsory schooling ends, but the conditions that produce it are visible years earlier – in chronic absence, in the uneven dropout rates that fall hardest on foster youth, students experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, and English learners, and in the growing share of high school completers who do not transition to anything beyond. Because these signals appear in records the state already maintains, prevention need not wait for young people to disconnect before identifying them. California should reinvent – not merely strengthen – early-warning and intervention systems so that they act on these indicators during the school years, with particular focus on the student groups over-represented at every stage of the pipeline, and should treat the transition out of high school – including the increasingly fragile move into postsecondary education or training – as a point requiring active support rather than assumption. Experience elsewhere underscores the scale of the task: an analysis of linked administrative data in Connecticut found roughly twice as many young people at risk of disconnection as already disconnected, a reminder that prevention must reach well beyond those already counted.

***2. Differentiate response by persistence and labor-market attachment.***

Because roughly half of opportunity youth reconnect on their own within a year while the other half do not, a uniform response would over-serve some young people and under-serve others. The longitudinal evidence distinguishes three operational groups, each warranting a different intensity of effort: the short-term disconnected, who need timely, light-touch support to accelerate a reconnection that is already likely; the persistently disconnected – disproportionately young adults, those out of the labor force entirely, and those whose education ended at a high school diploma – for whom continued disconnection signals entrenched barriers and who require sustained, intensive intervention; and the at-risk connected, whose tenuous hold on school or work warrants retention support before it breaks.

Distinguishing active jobseekers, who reconnect at higher rates, from those who have withdrawn from the labor force altogether should guide how that effort is allocated. Because at least a third of opportunity youth will not reconnect on their own, this differentiation calls for substantially greater investment in reengagement and reconnection capacity – of the kind built by the Los Angeles YouthSource system and the Los Angeles Opportunity Youth Collaborative and its peers in the California Opportunity Youth Network – placed alongside, not subordinate to, upstream prevention.

### *3. Match services to the segment, not the population.*

The typology demonstrates that a majority of opportunity youth – roughly two-thirds – face few structural barriers and are reachable through employment-focused services of modest intensity, such as job placement, paid work experience, and clear postsecondary and training pathways. The remaining third, however, divide into segments whose needs are specific and more demanding:

- **Young people with disabilities and health barriers** require supported employment, accommodation, and benefits navigation.
- **Immigrant and limited-English youth** require language instruction, credential recognition, and the childcare that makes either accessible.
- **Young parents** require childcare and two-generation programming as a precondition of reconnection rather than an adjunct to it.

A reconnection system calibrated to this structure can concentrate intensive resources where they are needed without expending them where lighter support would suffice.

### *4. Concentrate place-based investment where disconnection is densest.*

A third of California's opportunity youth are concentrated in fewer than a fifth of its geographies – fifty-three priority areas, clustered in the Central Valley, the Inland Empire, and Los Angeles County. This concentration is an opportunity for leverage: targeted investment in a defined set of regions can reach a disproportionate share of the population. The form of that investment should vary with local conditions. In dense metropolitan areas, where opportunity youth are numerous and proximate, reconnection efforts can operate at scale; in high-rate rural areas, where need is severe but the population is dispersed, outreach and access are the operative challenges. Resource allocation formulas and program siting should reflect this geography rather than distribute effort evenly across a state in which need is anything but even.

***5. Address the demand side, and the quality of the work within reach.***

Reconnection through employment presupposes employment to reconnect to, and the labor-market analysis shows that accessible work is both unevenly distributed and concentrated at the low-wage end of the market. In the Central Valley regions where opportunity youth are most numerous, entry-level openings are scarcest relative to need; these labor markets cannot rely on existing demand alone and require deliberate job creation, employer engagement, and training aligned to what regional growth does exist. Where accessible openings are more plentiful, the constraint is matching young people to them rather than generating them. Across all regions, the predominance of near-minimum-wage openings argues for pairing reconnection with advancement – sectoral training and career pathways that move young people, and particularly the high-school-diploma-only group constrained to the low-wage floor, beyond a first job toward work that offers economic security.

***6. Build the longitudinal data infrastructure to sustain this analysis.***

Much of what is most actionable in this report – the persistence of disconnection, the movement of young people into and out of it – was possible only by linking survey records across time, and even then within the limits of sample size and a one-year horizon. California's emerging Cradle-to-Career Data System offers the foundation for a far more complete account: one capable of following young people through school, disconnection, and reconnection at scale and over years, as other states have begun to do with integrated administrative data. The state should prioritize the inclusion of opportunity youth measures within that system, and in the interim should support the linked-data analyses that existing research partnerships can already produce. The capacity to observe disconnection as a trajectory, rather than a yearly snapshot, is itself a precondition for managing it.

# CONCLUSION

California's opportunity youth have been counted before, and counting remains the necessary first step: 510,727 young people neither in school nor working is a figure that defines the scale of what the state has left unaddressed. But the value of this edition lies in what the count alone could not reveal. Disconnection is not, for most opportunity youth, a brief pause that resolves itself; for roughly half, it persists from one year into the next, and the longer it lasts the more firmly it sets. It is not uniform; it divides into segments whose circumstances and needs differ sharply, from the largely job-ready majority to the smaller groups defined by disability, immigration, and parenthood. It is not evenly spread; it concentrates in a definable set of places, and most heavily where the accessible labor market is thinnest. And it is not unforeseeable; it announces itself years in advance, in school records the state already keeps.

These findings cohere around a single observation that recurs across every data source examined. The young people who complete high school and go no further are, simultaneously, the most likely to remain disconnected over time, the least likely to transition into further education, and the most constrained to the low-wage margins of the labor market. The high school diploma, long treated as the threshold of opportunity, marks for a substantial share of young Californians the point at which forward movement stalls. A reconnection strategy that takes this seriously would not end its attention at high school completion but would treat the years immediately after it as the period of greatest risk and greatest leverage.

The implication is not that the problem is intractable but that it is structured, and that a response matched to its structure – to the timing, the persistence, the segments, and the geography established here – can be more effective than the undifferentiated effort that a single statewide rate invites. Much of that response can begin now, with the evidence in hand. The remainder depends on the state's capacity to observe disconnection as a trajectory rather than a yearly snapshot, a capacity that the Cradle-to-Career Data System places, for the first time, within reach. The opportunity in opportunity youth is real and measurable. What this report establishes is that it is also addressable – by stage, by segment, and by place – for a state prepared to act on what the evidence now shows.

New Ways to Work expresses deep appreciation to the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Walter S. Johnson Foundation, and Stuart Foundation for supporting this research. We also thank Khi Jackson, Managing Director for RAPSA and Andy Moore, Managing Director for National Reengagement Initiative.

# OPPORTUNITY YOUTH IN CALIFORNIA

## DISCONNECTION, PERSISTENCE, AND THE PATH TO RECONNECTION

COYN
California Opportunity Youth Network

New Ways to Work

FOR MORE INFORMATION
**Ari Malka, PhD, SENIOR Vice PRESIDENT OF RESEARCH & EVALUATION**
Ari@NewWaysToWork.org

**ROBERT SAINZ, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**
Robert@NewWaysToWork.org

**JULY 2026**