

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## KEY POINTS:

- Direct resources to areas with the highest rates of youth disconnection.
- Recognize that one size does not fit all.
- Don't let young people who fell through the cracks over the last two years lose their chance at an education.
- Continue to reduce Covid-19's spread.



The Covid-19 pandemic's impacts will reverberate for decades to come. Death, deprivation, and drastically different learning experiences have disrupted the transition to adulthood for millions of our young people. As with most natural or human-caused disasters, the burden of Covid-19 has fallen disproportionately on low-income communities of color, which are also disproportionately home to the highest rates of youth disconnection.

### **Direct resources to areas with the highest rates of youth disconnection.**

The young people struggling and off track prior to the pandemic will have the hardest time reconnecting to jobs and schools. These young people and their communities should receive the lion's share of attention and resources available to address this pressing issue. These hardest-hit youth tend to live in low-income communities of color, particular Black and Native American communities.

Pockets of high youth disconnection did not appear out of nowhere with the onset of the pandemic; rather, they are the product of years of neglect and underinvestment. The light-speed passage of the CARES Act in March 2020 showed that, when political will appears, trillions of dollars could be shoveled into the economy to shore up its perceived shakiness. Depriving millions of their chance at a freely chosen life of opportunity, youth disconnection in America is a slow-motion disaster, taking years to unfurl but no less urgent due to its pace. With the tremendous resources that Americans as a whole have at our disposal, meeting the needs of disconnected youth in our communities is a moral imperative.

### **Recognize that one size does not fit all.**

Data in this report show that disconnected young people share many challenges but also differ in important ways. School enrollment for the population ages 3 to 34 declined dramatically in 2020—the largest drop since records began in 1964—a shift that will likely reverberate well into the future.<sup>13</sup> Efforts to reconnect youth need to take this broad backdrop into account, although it is important to keep in mind that one size does not fit all.

Tailoring interventions to the specific needs of communities and individuals experiencing disconnection should be front of mind for policymakers, philanthropists, advocates, and researchers. For instance, some girls and young women may need appealing and attainable educational and career options that make delaying motherhood worthwhile as well as support like childcare to reengage with educational programs, whereas others may need help to improve their English-language skills so that they can find employment commensurate with their educational backgrounds. Reaching disconnected youth in rural areas will be a more formidable challenge than connecting out-of-school-and-work young people in urban areas with broad and thriving job markets. Tailoring programs to meet the distinct needs of different groups of young people is more important than ever.

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### **Don't let young people who fell through the cracks over the last two years lose their chance at an education.**

Covid-19 disrupted the educational trajectories of millions of young people. Hundreds of thousands of teens and young adults who did everything right and were enrolled in, poised to begin, or on-track to apply to degree, certificate, or training programs found the rug pulled out from under them. There is a very real danger that many of these young people—especially first-generation and low-income students—will find themselves unable to reconstruct and resume their plans. Postsecondary educational institutions should be as creative and flexible as possible with a view to bringing students back, allowing previously accepted students another chance to start, adjusting entrance requirements to account for two lost Covid years, and strengthening bridges from high school to postsecondary education for vulnerable youth. High schools must cultivate welcoming environments and develop holistic approaches that respond not just to learning loss but also to the trauma, isolation, and disengagement so many young people experienced during Covid. Fostering a sense of belonging and focusing on social-emotional learning as well as academic skills is critical. A generation of young people is at risk of being permanently scarred by lost educational opportunities: this is a tragedy we must work to avert.

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### **Continue to reduce Covid-19's spread.**

Pandemic containment fatigue is real; as of early March 2022, all fifty states have repealed their respective mask mandates against a backdrop of around 1,500 deaths a day. Even with the advantages of pioneering vaccines and booster shots, Covid-19 remains far deadlier than even the most lethal recent seasonal flus.<sup>14</sup> While children and young adults are far less likely than adults to die of Covid-19, their caregivers and teachers are not similarly protected by the advantages of youth.

The effects of “long Covid” on children remain poorly understood; recent research on adults has documented neurological damage in nonhospitalized Covid-19 survivors equivalent to up to a decade of aging.<sup>15</sup> Assessing the tradeoffs involved in Covid-19 mitigation—for instance, when to test and mask youth—is an exercise beyond the scope of this paper. That said, we urge caution against rushing toward a “return to normal”—a normal that is still far off for the families of the thousands of Americans that are dying each day, and those that live with less visible conditions who remain vulnerable to a continually virulent and mutating pathogen.