



School, Work and the Transition of Puerto Rican Youth to Adulthood

Research Brief

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to present a statistical profile of Puerto Rican youth ages 16 to 24 not at school or work, commonly referred to as “disconnected youth” in the academic literature and popular media. Nationally, research on disconnected youth tends to paint a profile of a population that is largely African American, male, and low-income. However as other research has shown, and as our analysis confirms that Latinos, and particularly Puerto Ricans, have as high an incidence of not being at work or school as African Americans, and Puerto Ricans have higher rates than other Latinos.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, in 2011 the United States was home to 6.7 million individuals who were 16 to 24 years old and were not in school or at work. This particular group of young adults has garnered considerable attention over the last three decades for good reasons. A recent report on this issue, entitled “Community Solutions for Opportunity Youth” (June 2012) by the White House Council for Community Solutions, states that “when lost revenue and direct costs for social supports are factored in, taxpayers will shoulder roughly \$1.6 trillion over the lifetimes of these young people.” Besides the economic costs and lost opportunity, social circumstances are cause for concern as studies continue to show that out of work and school youth are more likely to experience difficult transitions to and negative outcomes in adulthood including persistent poverty, long term unemployment, poor mental and physical health, substance abuse and dependency, homelessness and violence (Edelman et al. 2006, Fernandes 2009). Among this group, there are close to two hundred thousand youth of Puerto Rican descent. The reality is that the current economic climate will likely only contribute to the continuance of this very vulnerable population.

Differences in the Incidence of Out of School and Work Youth by Race and Ethnicity

According to the most recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2011 of the 6.7 million out of school or work, over 3 million young people are whites, as the majority group, representing 46 percent of the total, followed by Latino/as with 25 percent, and blacks, as the third largest group, comprising 22 percent (see Table 1). But as a proportion of each population, this problem impacts blacks and Latino/as to a greater extent than it does whites.

The portrait of “disconnected youth” can be viewed as a great concern for racial and ethnic minorities. Among Latino/as, there are 1.7 million youth out of school or work. Mexicans represent the largest

Table 1: Out of School and Work Youth by Race or Ethnicity, Ages 16 to 24

White	Black	Latino/as	Total
3,072,234	1,472,610	1,472,610	6,741,829
46%	22%	22%	100%

Source: US Census Bureau American Community Survey (1 year estimates).

Table 2: Latino/as Out of School and Work Youth by National Origin, Ages 16 to 24

Mexican	Puerto Rican	Central American	South American	Dominican	Total
1,166,905	187,684	147,082	56,508	56,361	1,718,696
68%	11%	9%	3%	3%	100%

Source: US Census Bureau American Community Survey 2011 (1 year estimates).

population sub-group in terms of total population, two-thirds (68%), followed by Puerto Ricans 11 percent of the total (see Table 2).

The fact that Latino/as have surpassed African Americans in the total number of youth who are out of school or work is a recent occurrence that requires further scrutiny. In 2011, the rates of non-participation in school or work were 23 percent for both blacks and Puerto Ricans, which are significantly higher than for other ethnic or racial groups (see Figure 1). The rates for blacks and Puerto Ricans were almost double the rate for whites. The rate for Latino/as as a group, 19 percent, was below those for blacks and Puerto Ricans but substantially higher than the 12 percent rate for whites.

The rates of youth that are out of school or work show great variability among the Latino/as subgroups. Though Puerto Ricans show the highest rate, in 2011 rates for Dominicans and Mexicans were 20 percent and 19 percent for Central Americans (see Figure 2). The 17 percent for Cubans was below the average for other Latino/as groups but higher than that for whites. Only the rate for South Americans was similar to that of whites at 12 percent.

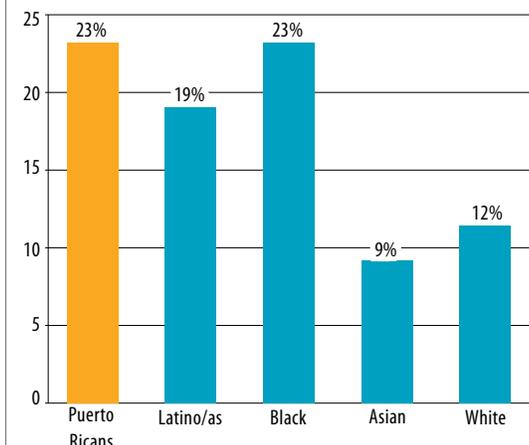
Comparative Analysis of Puerto Ricans, Whites and Latino/as Youth

Understanding the variations which exist between Latino ethnic subgroups is not only important but imperative to designing effective, efficient and equitable policy responses. We know that the unique migration patterns and residency status of Puerto Ricans on the mainland United States can illuminate the unique challenges and experiences which Puerto Ricans may face that other population groups— even within the Latino community – do not (Pereira, Frase, and Mollenkopf 2008). Such differences underscore the realities that policy interventions aimed at “disconnected youth,” and especially Latino “disconnected youth,” must take the ethnic-specific variations among Latinos into account.

An analysis of school enrollment and work by sex indicates that, in general, the differences between groups previously observed as not participating in school or work are more pronounced than the differences intra-group by sex. As depicted in Figure 3, the incidence of not at work or school of Puerto Rican females 20 percent, is similar to that of males, 22 percent, as are the rates for whites, 11 percent and 12 percent respectively. There is a more pronounced disparity among Latino/as with female rates at 20 percent and males at 16 percent.

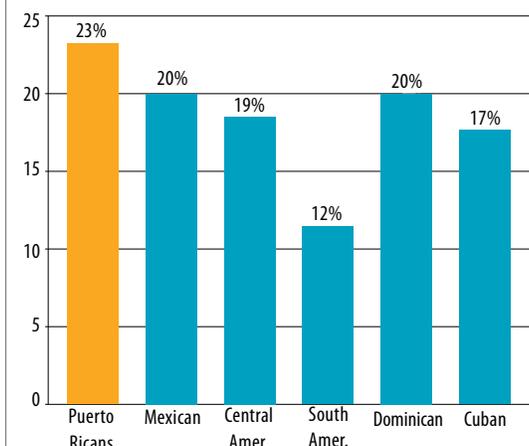
However, there are significant gender differences in other categories of school enrollment and work. Males have higher incidences of being employed and not enrolled in school than females. Among Puerto Ricans, the gender gap is five percentage points (25 percent male, 20 percent female), while Latino/as have an eleven percentage points gender gap (33 percent, 22 percent) and whites have a gender gap of five percentage points (27 percent, 22 percent). Females have a greater incidence of combining work and school than males. Puerto Rican females are four percentage points more likely to combine school and work than Puerto Rican males (18 percent to 14 percent); Latinas have a five percentage point advantage (19 percent to 14 percent) over Latinos; and white females have an eight percentage point advantage. The data presented here suggest significant variations in the transition to adulthood between young men and women even after controlling for differences between ethnic and racial groups.

Figure 1: Incidence of Out of School and Work Youth by Race or Ethnicity, Ages 16-24



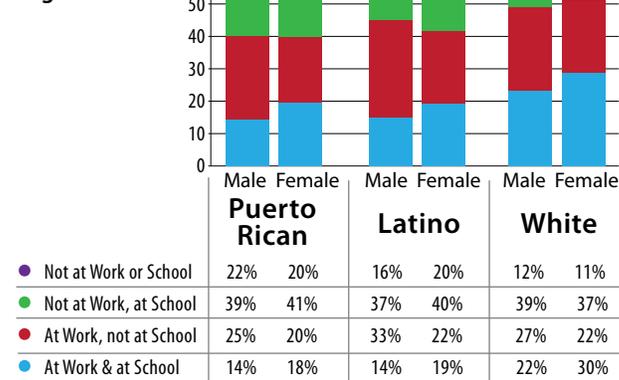
Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2011 (1 year estimates).

Figure 2: Incidence of Latino/as Out of School and Work, Ages 16-24

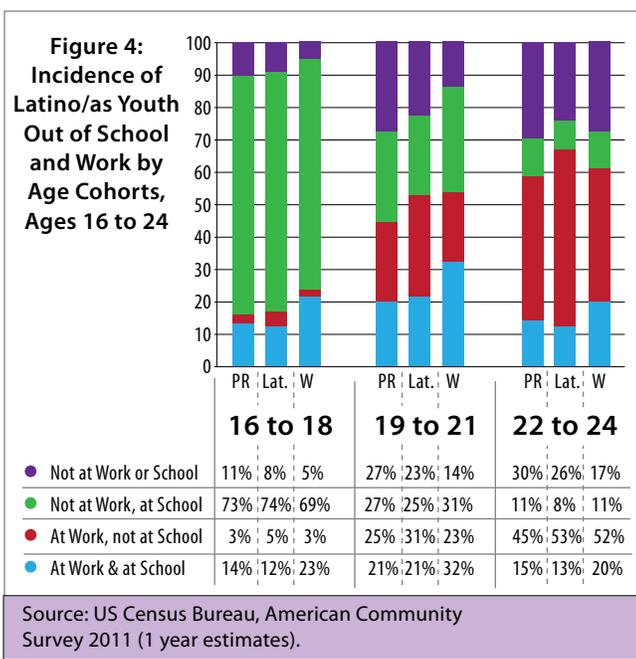


Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2011 (1 year estimates).

Figure 3: Incidence of Youth Out of School & Work by Sex, Ages 16 - 24



Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2011 (1 year estimates).



School enrollment and work status vary significantly for all groups between the ages of 16 to 24. For analytical purposes, we divide the transition to adulthood into three age cohorts: 16 to 18, 19 to 21 and 22 to 24. Considering the 16 to 18 age cohort as shown in Figure 4, the majority of youth are enrolled in school and do not work. However, there are important differences in patterns of school enrollment and work status among racial and ethnic groups. Puerto Ricans and Latino/as have a higher proportion of youth ages 16 to 18 enrolled in school and not working than whites, while whites have a higher proportion of youth at school and work. The rate of 11 percent not at school or work for Puerto Ricans between the ages of 16 to 18 is more than double that of whites, at 5 percent. Conversely, Puerto Ricans have a substantially lower rate of work and school, 14 percent, when compared to whites, 23 percent. Though the literature on the transition to adulthood is not conclusive on this matter, this evidence suggests that for some youth in high school part time work might be an approach that encourages school enrollment.

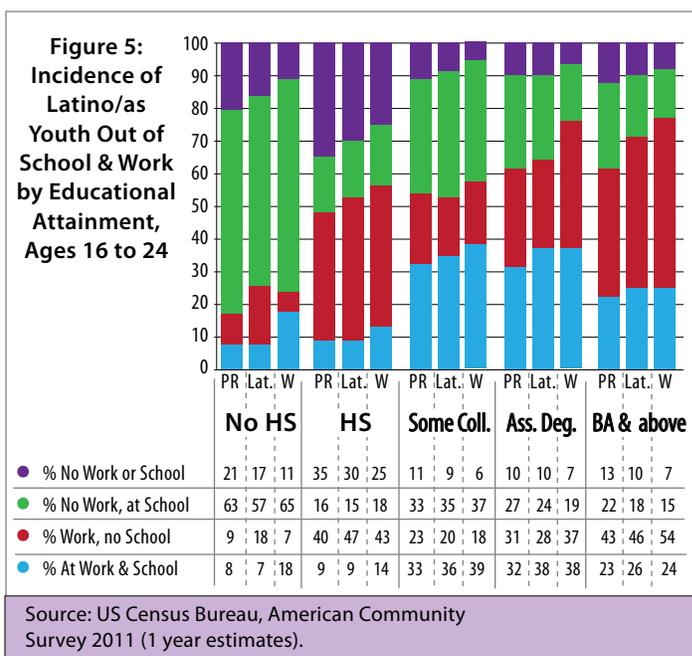
For most youth 19 to 21, this period corresponds to the completion of high school and transition to college. Figure 3 depicts a significant increase in the proportion of youth entering the labor force and not attending school or working. The rates of not attending school or having a job

increased to 27 percent for Puerto Ricans, which is double the rate of that (14%) for whites. However, the proportion of Puerto Ricans, Latino/as and whites that attend school and do not work is fairly similar, suggesting that there is a core group of youth that follow the idealized pattern of transitioning from high school into college enrollment or employment training. Latino/as, however, have a higher proportion of youth ages 19 to 21 that drop out of school to work, 31 percent.

The majority of youth ages 22 to 24 is entering the work force during this period. Yet, a significant number of young people reach this stage completely disconnected from school or work, and as suggested early on, thus continuing the disparities between Puerto Ricans and Latino/as when compared to whites. About half of youth in the 21 to 24 cohort are at work and not at school. The rates for Puerto Ricans (45%), Latino/as (53%) and whites (52%) at work and not at school are fairly similar. However, the incidence of not being enrolled in school or being employed shows significant disparities between the three groups. Puerto Ricans show the highest incidence of neither school enrollment nor at work, 30 percent, closely followed by Latino/as, 26 percent, in contrast to whites at 17 percent rate. These are staggering figures. Though the chances of being out of work and school by age 24 are one in six for Whites, the chances for Puerto Rican youth are one in three.

The most widely cited reason for youth to be out of school or work is lack of adequate education and not entering post-secondary educational institutions (Bloom et al 2010, Fernandes and Gabe 2009). A Report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2009) found that youth ages 17 to 24 without high school diplomas are three times more likely to be unemployed, underemployed or working for very low wages. This report also confirmed that “disconnected youth” have less education than their counterparts.

Figure 5 depicts the distribution of school enrollment and work status by educational attainment. The rate of Puerto Rican youth not at school and not at work, the so-called disconnected youth, is 21 per cent, higher than that of Latino/as (17 percent) or whites (11 percent). This pattern of disparities is consistent along the educational attainment spectrum. In addition, the incidence of not being enrolled in school or at work is significantly lower for those who advanced to or complete a college degree, though disparities among racial and ethnic groups persist. Interestingly, when it comes to work and educational attainment, the majority of whites (54 percent) who completed their bachelor’s degree are at work and not at school, and 39 percent are continuing their education, while 43 percent of Puerto Ricans and 46 percent of Latino/as who completed their bachelor’s degree are at work and not at school, and 45 percent and 34



percent respectively are continuing their education.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Recently, Centro researchers identified several pathways programs that are especially beneficial to youth that combine education and linkages to employment (Visser and Melendez 2011). Four key industries were targeted as having good job prospects: health services, green jobs, education and social work. These are especially important industries because of both their generation of new jobs and the potential for programs preparing students for careers in these fields to be linked from degree-granting higher education institutions (De Jesus 2011, Mercado 2011, Torres-Velez 2011). The publicly financed workforce-investment system and workforce intermediaries play a strong role in connecting employers and workers and providing the skills training and supports necessary to gain and sustain employment. However, Borges (2011) found disparities in how the Puerto Rican population is serviced, as well as little or no participation of Puerto Rican community-based organizations in the workforce-development system. The findings from these studies call for the need to integrate Puerto Rican community-based organizations into school and work youth programs. This integration can serve as an important vehicle for improved educational advancement and achievement of Puerto Rican students through opportunities to take advanced math and science courses and workforce preparation (Melendez and Visser 2011). Further down the education pipeline, successful pathways programs combine GED preparation and college readiness with workforce preparation targeting skills demanded by employers in growing industries.

The challenge now is for leaders in K-12 education, higher education, government, and community organizations to engage with employers and industry leaders in addressing the unique needs of Puerto Rican and other Latino youth.

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The Center for Puerto Rican Studies (Centro De Estudios Puertorriqueños) at Hunter College, City University of New York, is the only university-based research institute in the United States solely devoted to the interdisciplinary study of the Puerto Rican experience in diaspora. It is the oldest and largest Latino research and archival institution in the Northeast, and boasts the world's only repository of archival and library materials dedicated exclusively to the Puerto Rican migration. Since its inception in 1973, Centro also has developed notable ties to academic, advocacy, and community-based constituencies, enabling it to document and respond to critical cultural and social conditions within the stateside community. This report is part of a series designed to provide up-to-date information on demographic changes in our communities.