

# High School Dropout Rates

Indicators of Child  
and Youth Well-Being



The proportion of youth and young adults who are high school dropouts has been on the decline since 1967, but disparities persist across race/ethnicity and foreign-born status.

## Importance

The proportion of high school dropouts among 16- to 24-year-olds has declined by more than half since 1967, from 17 to seven percent in 2014,<sup>a</sup> but wide disparities by race, Hispanic origin, and foreign-born status persist. (Appendix 1)

A range of factors have been shown to increase a student's risk of dropping out, including high rates of absenteeism, low levels of school engagement, low parental education, work or family responsibilities, problematic or deviant behavior, moving to a new school in the ninth grade, and attending a school with lower achievement scores.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>

Dropping out from high school is associated with negative employment and life outcomes. Young people who drop out of high school are unlikely to have the minimum skills and credentials necessary to function in today's increasingly complex society and technology-dependent workplace. The completion of high school is usually required for accessing post-secondary education, and is a minimum requirement for most jobs.<sup>5</sup> A high school diploma is associated with higher incomes and occupational status,<sup>6,7,8,9</sup> and young adults with low education and skill levels are more likely to live in poverty and to receive government assistance.<sup>10,11,12</sup> High school dropouts are also more likely to become involved in crime.<sup>13,14</sup> Further, dropout status has been linked with poor health, including poor mental health.<sup>15,16</sup> Such negative outcomes, along with diminished labor force participation, exact a high economic toll on society. If the dropouts from the nation's class of 2011 had graduated, the U.S. economy would benefit by about \$154 billion dollars over their lifetimes.<sup>17</sup>

Many youth who drop out of high school do eventually earn a diploma or a GED,<sup>18</sup> although the benefit of a GED without a college education, especially for minorities, is disputed.<sup>19</sup> One study found that 63 percent of students who dropped out had earned a diploma or GED within eight years of the year they normally should have graduated.<sup>20</sup>

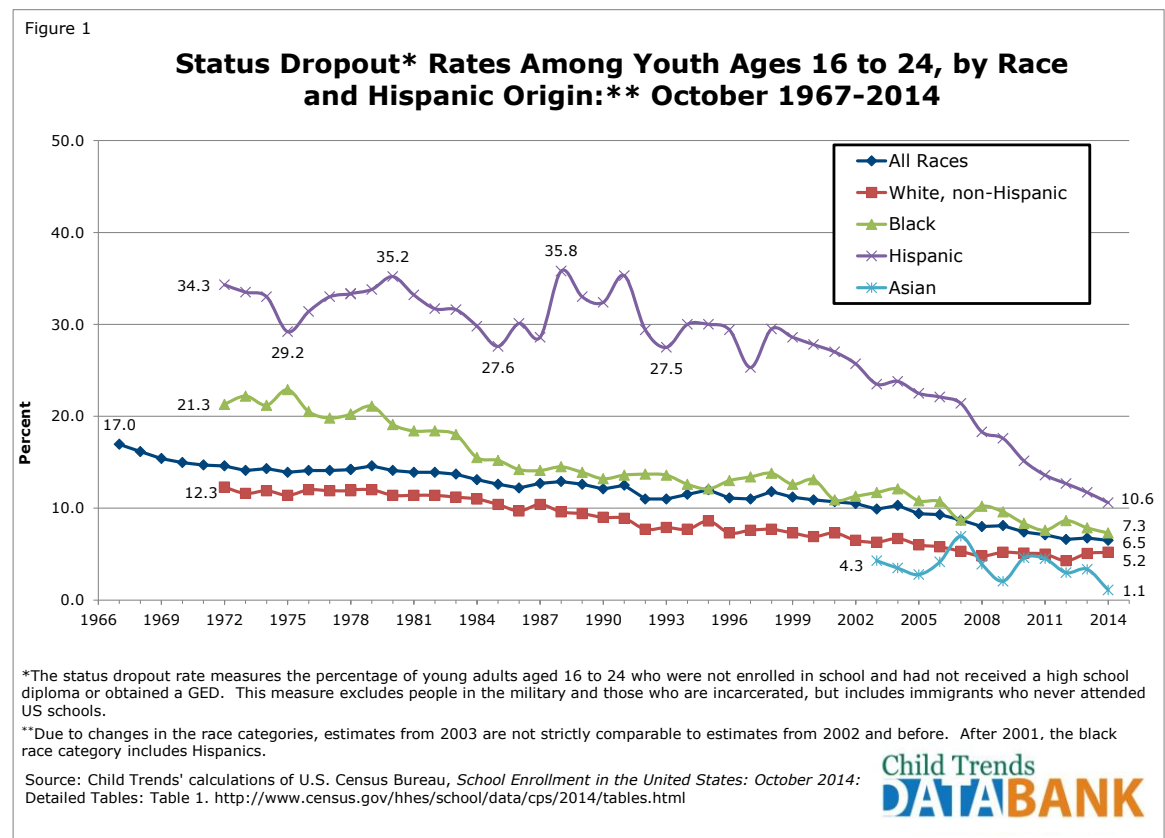
---

<sup>a</sup> Note that this measure—sometimes referred to as the “status” dropout rate—represents only one of several ways for calculating high school dropout. The “event” dropout rate reports the percentage of young people ages 15 through 24 who dropped out of grades 10 through 12 in the past year. The “cohort” dropout rate measures the percentage of an entering ninth-grade class that drops out before the end of the twelfth-grade year. The “status” dropout rate is the only measure for which there are reliable national data over a number of years. National data on cohort graduation rates show that 81 percent of the public high school class of 2012-13 graduated four years after entering ninth grade.



## Trends

For this indicator, dropouts are defined as individuals, ages 16 to 24, who are not currently enrolled in school and have not completed high school or obtained a GED. Overall, this rate has greatly declined, from 17 percent in 1967, to 7 percent in 2014. In 1972, the dropout rate was 21 percent among non-Hispanic blacks, 12 percent among non-Hispanic whites, and 34 percent among Hispanic youth. Dropout rates for Hispanic youth reached a peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s, at 36 percent; rates have since declined substantially for each group. In 2014, the dropout rate for black youth reached an historic low of seven percent, while rates among Hispanic youth also reached an historic low of 11 percent. (Figure 1) However, the long-term decline is, at least in part, related to increased incarceration rates among young black and Hispanic males (disproportionately affecting dropouts), which more than doubled between 1980 and 1999, removing them from the population base (non-institutionalized civilians) used for these estimates.<sup>21,22</sup>





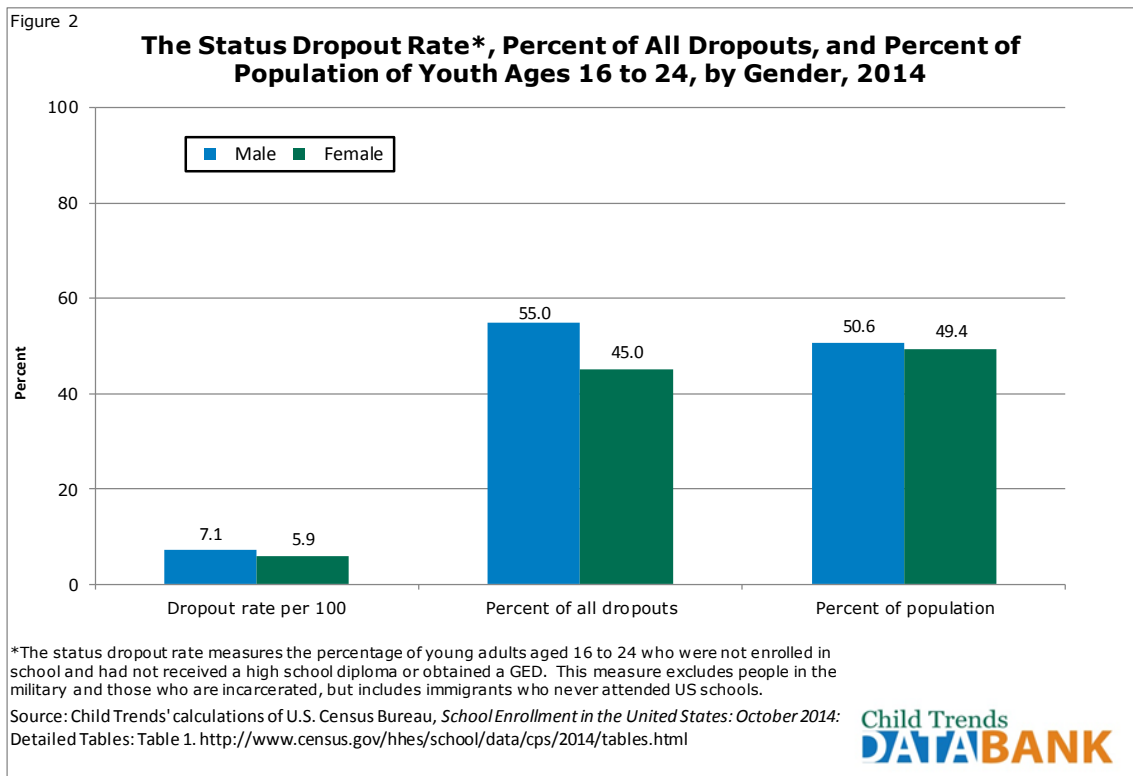
## Differences by Race and Hispanic Origin<sup>23</sup>

Black and Hispanic youth are more likely than whites or Asians to have dropped out of high school. In 2014, five percent of whites ages 16 to 24 were not enrolled in school and had not completed high school, compared with seven percent of blacks, and eleven percent of Hispanics. (Figure 1) The high rate for Hispanics is partly the result of the high proportion of immigrants in this age group who never attended school in the U.S.<sup>24</sup> Asian youth had the lowest rate of all the racial and ethnic groups tabulated here, at one percent in 2014. (Figure 1)

## Differences by Gender

In 2014, seven percent of males ages 16 to 24 were high school dropouts, compared with six percent of females. Although males comprise roughly half of the population in this age group, they make up 55 percent of the dropouts. (Figure 2)

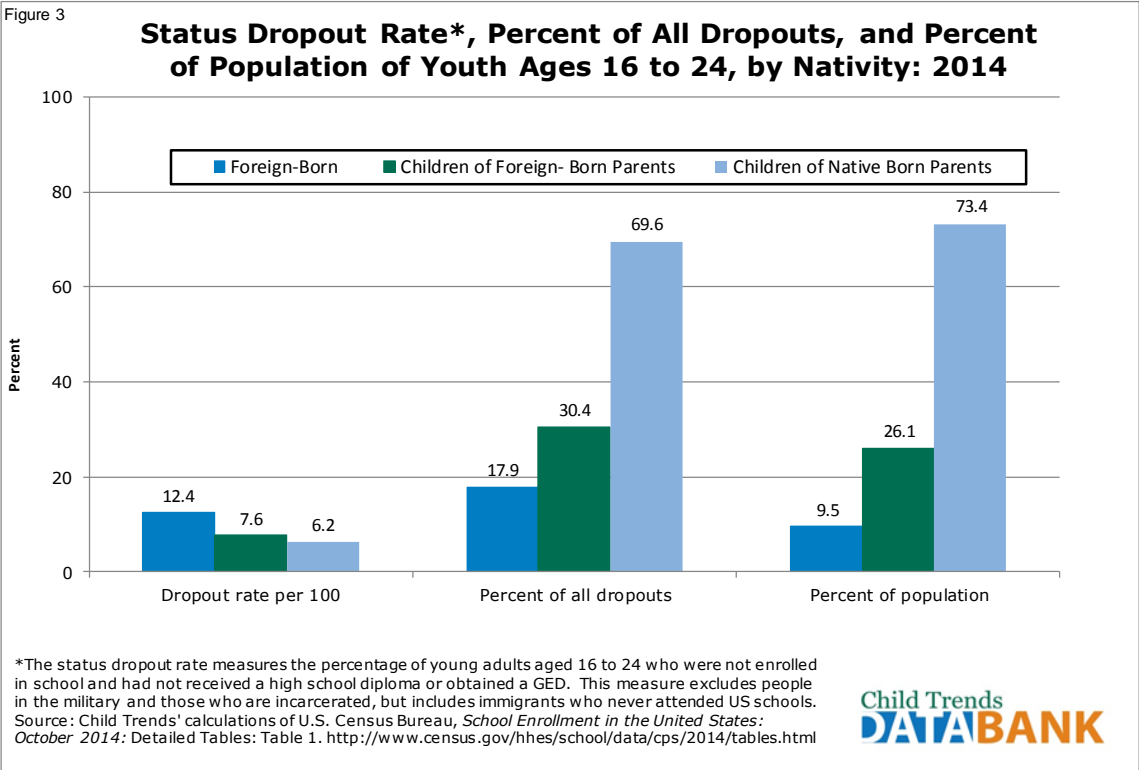
Although in recent years males are more likely to drop out, prior to 1980 female youth were more likely to drop out of school. (Appendix 1)





### Differences by Immigrant Status

Foreign-born youth had a status dropout rate of twelve percent in 2014, compared with eight percent for children of foreign-born parents, and six percent for children with native-born parents. While foreign-born youth make up 10 percent of the total population in this age group, they make up 18 percent of the dropout population; children of foreign-born parents represent 26 percent of the overall population, but make up 30 percent of dropouts. (Figure 3) Since 2007, the status dropout rate among foreign-born youth has been declining much faster than for native-born youth. The rate among foreign-born youth declined in that period from 27 to 12 percent, while the rate among native-born youth went from seven to six percent. (Appendix 1)





## State and Local Estimates

State estimates from 2000 through 2014 (including ages 16-19 only) are available at the [KIDS COUNT Data Center](#).

State estimates of public school on-time graduation rates for the classes of 2010-11, 2011-12, and 2012-13 are available from the National Center for Education Statistics: [https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR\\_2010-11\\_to\\_2012-13.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_2010-11_to_2012-13.asp)

## International Estimates

International estimates (2010 data) of upper-secondary graduation rates for most countries are available from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) at:

<http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012.htm>

(See Indicator A2)

## National Goals

*Healthy People 2020*, a federal government initiative to improve the health of Americans, has among its goals one to increase the averaged (high school) freshman graduation rate from 74.9 percent in 2007-08 to 82.4 percent in 2020.

For more information, see:

<http://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topicsobjectives2020/objectiveslist.aspx?topicId=2> (goal AH-5.1)



## What Works to Make Progress on This Indicator

Several recent reviews summarize the knowledge-base on effective, evidence-based practices to prevent or reduce the risk of students dropping out of school.

- Beyond the indicators: An integrated school-level approach to dropout prevention  
<http://eric.ed.gov/?q=ED539776&id=ED539776>
- IES What Works Clearinghouse: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/reports/topic.aspx?tid=06>
- What works for education: Lessons from experimental evaluations of programs and social interventions to enhance educational outcomes. [www.childtrends.org/Files/Child\\_Trends-2008\\_05\\_28\\_FS\\_WWEducation.pdf](http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2008_05_28_FS_WWEducation.pdf)

## Related Indicators

- Educational Attainment (Youth): [www.childtrends.org/?indicators=educational-attainment](http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=educational-attainment)
- Youth Neither Enrolled in School Nor Working: [www.childtrends.org/?indicators=youth-neither-enrolled-in-school-nor-working](http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=youth-neither-enrolled-in-school-nor-working)
- Student Absenteeism: [www.childtrends.org/?indicators=student-absenteeism](http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=student-absenteeism)
- Children Who Repeated a Grade: [www.childtrends.org/?indicators=children-who-repeated-a-grade](http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=children-who-repeated-a-grade)
- Parental Expectations for Their Children's Academic Attainment:  
[www.childtrends.org/?indicators=parental-expectations-for-their-childrens-academic-attainment](http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=parental-expectations-for-their-childrens-academic-attainment)

## Definition

This indicator uses the “status” dropout rate,<sup>25</sup> which measures the percentage of young adults aged 16 through 24 in the civilian, non-institutionalized population who were not enrolled in a high school program and had not received a high school diploma or obtained an equivalency certificate.<sup>26</sup> Note that this measure does not include youth in prison or in the military.

While this indicator uses the status dropout rate, other indicators (such as on-time high school completion or high school graduation rates) are also used to measure high school outcomes. For more information, see: the National Institute of Statistical Sciences/Education Statistics Services Institute Task Force on Graduation, Completion, and Dropout Indicators' Final Report, available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005105.pdf>.



## Data Source

Child Trends' calculations based on: U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey data on school enrollment*. Available at: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/school/data/cps/index.html>

## Raw Data Source

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, October Current Population Survey  
<http://www.census.gov/cps/>





## Appendix 1 - Dropout Rates<sup>1</sup> for 16- to 24-Year-Olds, by Gender and Race/Hispanic Origin: Selected Years, 1970-2014

	1970	1972	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
<b>Total</b>	15.0	14.6	13.9	14.1	12.6	12.1	12.0	10.9	9.9	10.3	9.4	9.3	8.7	8.0	8.1	7.4	7.1	6.6	6.8	6.5
<b>Sex</b>																				
<b>Male</b>	14.2	14.1	13.3	15.1	13.4	12.3	12.2	12.0	11.3	11.6	10.8	10.3	9.8	8.5	9.1	8.5	7.7	7.3	7.2	7.1
<b>Female</b>	15.7	15.1	14.5	13.1	11.8	11.8	11.7	9.9	8.4	9.0	8.0	8.3	7.6	7.5	7.0	6.3	6.5	5.9	6.3	5.9
<b>Race/Hispanic Origin<sup>2</sup></b>																				
<b>White, non-Hispanic</b>	-	12.3	11.4	11.4	10.4	9.0	8.6	6.9	6.3	6.8	6.0	5.8	5.3	4.8	5.2	5.1	5.0	4.3	5.1	5.2
<b>Black</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10.9	11.8	10.4	10.7	8.7	10.2	9.6	8.3	7.6	8.6	7.9	7.3
<b>Black, non-Hispanic</b>	-	21.3	22.9	19.1	15.2	13.2	12.1	13.1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Hispanic<sup>3</sup></b>	-	34.3	29.2	35.2	27.6	32.4	30.0	27.8	23.5	23.8	22.4	22.1	21.4	18.3	17.6	15.1	13.6	12.7	11.7	10.6
<b>Asian</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4.3	3.5	2.8	4.2	6.9	3.9	2.1	4.6	4.5	3.0	3.4	1.1
<b>Nativity</b>																				
<b>Foreign-born</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	28.9	25.8	25.9	24.4	25.4	26.5	21.6	20.7	18.2	17.9	15.5	14.6	12.4
<b>Native-born</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8.7	7.8	8.4	7.5	7.4	6.5	6.5	6.7	6.3	6.0	5.7	5.9	5.9

<sup>1</sup> This indicator uses the status dropout rate, which measures the percentage of young adults aged 16 to 24 who were not enrolled in school and had not received a high school diploma or obtained an equivalency certificate. Persons who are incarcerated or in the military are not included in this estimate.

<sup>2</sup> Due to relatively small sample sizes, American Indians/Alaskan Natives are included in the total but not shown separately. Due to changes in the race categories, estimates from 2003 and later are not strictly comparable to estimates from 2002 and before.

<sup>3</sup> Hispanics may be of any race.

Note: Data from the years 1987 through 2001 reflect new editing procedures instituted by the Bureau of the Census for cases with missing data on school enrollment items. Data from the years 1992 through 2012 reflect new wording of the educational attainment item in the CPS. Data for years 1994 through 2000 reflect changes in the CPS due to newly instituted computer-assisted interviewing and the change in the population controls used in the 1990 Census-based estimates.

Sources: Child Trends' calculations of U.S. Census Bureau, School Enrollment-Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: Detailed Tables.

<http://www.census.gov/hhes/school/data/cps/index.html>

## Appendix 2 - Dropout Rates,<sup>1</sup> and Number and Percentage Distribution of Dropouts Ages 16 to 24, by Selected Characteristics: October 2014

	Dropout rate (percent)	Number of Dropouts (thousands)	Percent of all dropouts	Percent of population
<b>Total</b>	6.5	2,527	100.0	100.0
<b>Gender</b>				
<b>Male</b>	7.1	1,389	55.0	50.6
<b>Female</b>	5.9	1,138	45.0	49.4
<b>Age</b>				
<b>16-17</b>	5.2	436	17.3	22.5
<b>18-19</b>	7.1	588	23.3	20.3
<b>20-21</b>	6.8	579	22.9	22.2
<b>22-24</b>	6.8	924	36.6	35.0
<b>Race/Hispanic Origin<sup>2</sup></b>				
<b>White, non-Hispanic</b>	5.2	1,113	44.0	54.9
<b>Black</b>	7.3	434	17.2	15.4
<b>Hispanic</b>	10.6	882	34.9	21.6
<b>Asian</b>	1.1	23	0.9	5.5
<b>Immigration status</b>				
<b>Foreign-Born</b>	12.4	452	17.9	9.5
<b>Children of Foreign-Born   Parents</b>	7.6	769	30.4	26.1
<b>Children of Native-Born   Parents</b>	6.2	1,758	69.6	73.4

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100.0 due to rounding. Details may not add to totals due to rounding.

<sup>1</sup>This indicator uses the status dropout rate, which measures the percentage of young adults aged 16 to 24 who were not enrolled in a high school program and had not received a high school diploma or obtained an equivalency certificate.

<sup>2</sup>Due to relatively small sample sizes, American Indians/Alaskan Natives are included in the total but not shown separately. Hispanics may be of any race.

Source: Child Trends' calculations of U.S. Census Bureau, School Enrollment--Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 2014: Detailed Tables: Table 1. <http://www.census.gov/hhes/school/data/cps/index.html>



## Endnotes

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Suh, S. & Suh, J. (2007). Risk factors and levels of risk for high school dropouts. *Professional School Counseling*, 10 (3), 297-306.
- <sup>2</sup> Christle, C. A., Jolivette, K., Nelson, C. M. (2007). School characteristics related to high school dropout rates. *Remedial & Special Education*. Nov/Dec2007, 28(6), 325-339.
- <sup>3</sup> Rumberger, R. W. (2004). Why students drop out of school. In Gary Orfield (Ed.). *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- <sup>4</sup> Balfanz, R. and Legters, N. (2004). Locating the dropout crisis: Which schools produce the nation's dropouts? In Gary Orfield (Ed.). *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- <sup>5</sup> Laird, L., Lew, S., DeBell, M., and Chapman, C. D. (2006). *Dropout rates in the United States: 2002, 2003*. (NCES 2006-062). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006062.pdf>
- <sup>6</sup> Chen, Z., Kaplan, H. (2003). School failure in early adolescence and status attainment in middle adulthood: A longitudinal study. *Sociology of Education*, 76 (2), 110-127.
- <sup>7</sup> Miller, P., Mulvey, C. and Martin, N. (1995). What do twins studies reveal about the economic returns to education? A comparison of Australian and U.S. findings. *The American Economic Review*, 85(3), 586-599.
- <sup>8</sup> Dubow, E. F., Huesmann, L. R., Boxer, P., Pulkkinen, L., Kokko, K. (2006). *Developmental Psychology*, 42(5), 937-949. doi: 10.1037/0012-1649.42.5.937
- <sup>9</sup> Fogg, N. P., Harrington, P. E., & Khatiwada, I. (2009). The tax and transfer fiscal impacts of dropping out of high school in Philadelphia City and suburbs. Boston, MA: Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University.
- <sup>10</sup> Laird, J., Kienzl, G., DeBell, M., and Chapman, C. (2007). *Dropout rates in the United States: 2005*. (NCES 2007-059). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics.
- <sup>11</sup> Martin, E., Tobin, T. J., & Sugai, G. M. (2002). Current information on dropout prevention: Ideas from practitioners and the literature. *Preventing School Failure*, 47(1), 10–18.
- <sup>12</sup> Moore, K., Gleib, D., Driscoll, A., Zaslow, M., and Redd, Z. (2002). Poverty and welfare patterns: Implications for children. *Journal of Social Policy*, 30(2), 207-227. Available at: <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=102533>
- <sup>13</sup> Lochner, L., and Moretti, E. (2004). The effect of education on crime: Evidence from prison inmates, arrests, and self reports. *The American Economic Review*, 94(1), 155-189.
- <sup>14</sup> Freeman, R. (1996). Why do so many young American men commit crimes and what might we do about it? *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 10(1), 25-42.

- 
- <sup>15</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education. (2006). *Healthier and wealthier: Decreasing health care costs by increasing educational attainment*. Washington, DC: Author. Available at: <http://www.all4ed.org/files/HandW.pdf>
- <sup>16</sup> Liem, J. H., Dillon, C. O. N., & Gore, S. (2001). Mental health consequences associated with dropping out of high school. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, CA. August 24-28, 2001.
- <sup>17</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education. (2011). *The high cost of high school dropouts: What the nation pays for inadequate high schools*. Issue Brief. Available at: <http://www.all4ed.org/files/HighCost.pdf>
- <sup>18</sup> Murnane, R., Willett, J., and Tyler, J. (2000). Who benefits from obtaining a GED? Evidence from high school and beyond. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 82(1), 22-37.
- <sup>19</sup> Tyler, J. H., Lofstrom, M. (2009). Finishing high school: Alternative pathways and dropout recovery. *The Future of Children*, 19(1), 77-103.
- <sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2004). *Issue Brief: Educational Attainment of High School Drop Outs Eight Years Later*, (NCES 2005-026). Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005026.pdf>.
- <sup>21</sup> Western, B. and Pettit, B. (2002). Beyond crime and punishment: Prisons and inequality. *Contexts*, 1(3), 37-43.
- <sup>22</sup> Heckman, J. J., LaFontaine, P. A. (2010). The American high school graduation rate: Trends and levels. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 92(2), 244-262. doi: 10.1162/rest.2010.12366.
- <sup>23</sup> Hispanics may be of any race. Totals of whites in this report do not include Hispanics.
- <sup>24</sup> Fry, R. (2003). *Hispanic youth dropping out of U.S. schools: Measuring the challenge*. Pew Hispanic Center. Available at: <http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=19>.
- <sup>25</sup> Status dropout rate differs from event dropout rate, which is measured as the percentage of young people who dropped out of grades 10 through 12 in the past year.
- <sup>26</sup> Chapman, C., Laird, J., Ifill, N., and KewalRamani, A. (2011). *Trends in high school dropout and completion rates in the United States: 1972-2009*, (NCES 2012-006). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012006.pdf>.