Risk and Protective Factors Associated with Opportunity Youth

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Introduction

The transition to adulthood sets the stage for the rest of one's life. During this time, educational attainment is generally established, youth set off on work trajectories, and partnering and family decisions are made that affect youth for the rest of their lives. A large subset of youth, however, stall out during this transition. More than one in 10 youth ages 16-24 are not actively engaged in society as either students or workers (Belfield, Levin, & Rosen, 2012; Burd-Sharps & Lewis, 2018). Youth not involved in school or work, who are known as opportunity youth or disconnected youth, are missing out on opportunities to develop skills — both technical and soft — that will set them up for success throughout the rest of their lives.

Opportunity Youth

Disconnected youth represent a huge opportunity for society. A 16 year old disconnected youth costs society over $750,000 throughout his or her life time through lost earnings and taxes, higher crime rates, worse health, and heavier reliance on welfare and other social supports (Belfield et al., 2012). There is a great societal opportunity to prevent these youth from becoming disconnected and to help them become fully contributing members of society, therefore, they are known as opportunity youth in addition to disconnected youth. Altogether, opportunity you could contribute between an additional

$55 billion and $93 billion to the economy annual through taxes and reduced reliance on social supports (Lewis & Gluskin, 2018).

Opportunity youth are not a monolithic group (Carrington, 2015). About half of this group is chronically disconnected, meaning that they have not been in school or worked after age 16. The other half of this group is under attached. They may have had some schooling or work experience since age 16, but have not had a stable job or progressed through post-secondary education (Belfield et al., 2012).

Predicting Disengagement

Risk factors at the societal, neighborhood, family, and individual levels increase the risk of disconnection, while protective factors reduce the risk of disconnection. Previous research has identified some of the risk and protective factors associated with youth disconnection, but analyses at the national level have been quite limited. Most national work to date has been cross-sectional snapshots that do not permit predicting disconnection throughout the transition to adulthood. Below I review what is known about predicting disconnection.

Risk Factors

Family-level risk factors for disconnection include family poverty, low parental education, relying on public assistance, and homelessness or housing instability. Educational risk factors for disconnection include chronic absenteeism, changing schools during the school year, being in special education, and grade retention. At the individual

level, risk factors for disconnection include substance abuse, having a disability, needing mental health treatment, being an English language learner, being a parent. Involvement in the criminal justice and child welfare systems are also known predictors of disconnection (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015; Patton, Liu, Felver, Lucenko, & Huber, 2016; Population Reference Bureau, 2019).

Protective Factors

Fewer protective factors have been identified. Currently, they include having a strong GPA at age 15, and being enrolled in school (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015; Patton et al., 2016).

The risk factors associated with disengagement are also not evenly distributed across society, so neither are opportunity youth.

Demographics of Opportunity Youth

Due to historical patterns in educational and career opportunities as well as gendered family dynamics, opportunity youth are more prevalent in certain demographic groups,

Black, Hispanic, and Native American youth are disproportionately likely to be opportunity youth (Belfield et al., 2012; Burd-Sharps & Lewis, 2018; Patton et al., 2016; Population Reference Bureau, 2019; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012). Disparities in the levels of disconnection by race/ethnicity have decreased over time, but strong disparities remain. In particular, black and Native American youth are twice as likely to

be disconnected as white youth (Population Reference Bureau, 2019) and their patterns of disconnection look different from those of non-Hispanic white youth.

Turning to gender, young women have historically been more likely to be disconnected than young men. But, these disparities have decreased over time as more women are working and stay-at-home mothering is becoming less common. Depending on the operationalization of opportunity youth and the dataset being analyzed, men and women may now have similar levels of disconnection (Population Reference Bureau, 2019). Women's patterns of disconnection are distinctly different from men's though, and are characterized by less criminal involvement and more family responsibility (Belfield et al., 2012; Burd-Sharps & Lewis, 2018).

Current Study

It is important to understand how the risk and protective factors associated with disconnection vary by these groups in order to effectively target prevention and re-engagement efforts. Therefore, this project asks three related research questions:

1. What are the risk and protective factors associated with becoming an opportunity youth at the national level?
2. How do these vary by severity of disconnection (chronic versus temporary)?
3. How do these vary by key demographic characteristics of youth themselves (race and gender)?

Methods

Data. This study uses data from the nationally-representative National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 cohort (NLSY97). NLSY97 participants were recruited as adolescents (ages 12-17), and this cohort is recent. Most importantly, the longitudinal nature of NLSY97 provides a detailed account of work and education histories without relying on retrospective reporting. Approximately 9,000 respondents born between 1980 and 1984 were first surveyed in 1997, and were surveyed annually between 1997 and 2011. Data collection covers the relevant ages 16-24 for almost all respondents.

Measures. Opportunity youth status is measured with a trichotomous categorical variable, indicating whether a youth is a) attached to society through work and/or education from ages 16-24; b) under attached to society through limited work and/or education from ages 16-24; or c) chronically disconnected from society with no substantial work or education experience after age 16. Connected is defined as being in school and/or worked at least one week in each calendar year. Temporary disconnection is defined as spending at least one calendar year neither enrolled in school nor working. Youth are considered chronically disconnected if they have been neither enrolled in school nor worked for at least five years between the ages of 16 and 24.The operationalizations for chronic disconnection and under-attachment are adapted from Belfield et al. 2012.

The following risk and protective factors are available in NLSY97: parental education, childhood hardship, household structure at age 12, teen parenthood, substance use, high school graduation, incarceration, aspirations, and cognitive ability.

As previous research has shown that profiles of opportunity youth look different for demographic groups, the national population will be broken down into the following subgroups: non-Hispanic white men, non-Hispanic white women, non-Hispanic black men, non-Hispanic black women, Hispanic men, and Hispanic women.

Analysis. I first descriptively examine the level of each protective and risk factor by opportunity youth status. Descriptive statistics are based on the full sample with available data. Next, the associations between the protective and risk factors and the outcomes are tested using a multivariate multinomial logistic regression. This model is then replicated with a series of multigroup models run with gsem in Stata 15. These models, which are run once by gender, once by race/ethnicity, and once by gender/race/ethnicity, facilitate the comparison of the strengths of associations between the risk and protective factors and disconnection between demographic groups of youth. To test differences between groups, post-estimation Wald tests are used to compare coefficients between groups.[1] All models account for the complex survey design of NLSY97, are appropriately weighted, and use list-wise deletion, for a final sample size of 4,237.

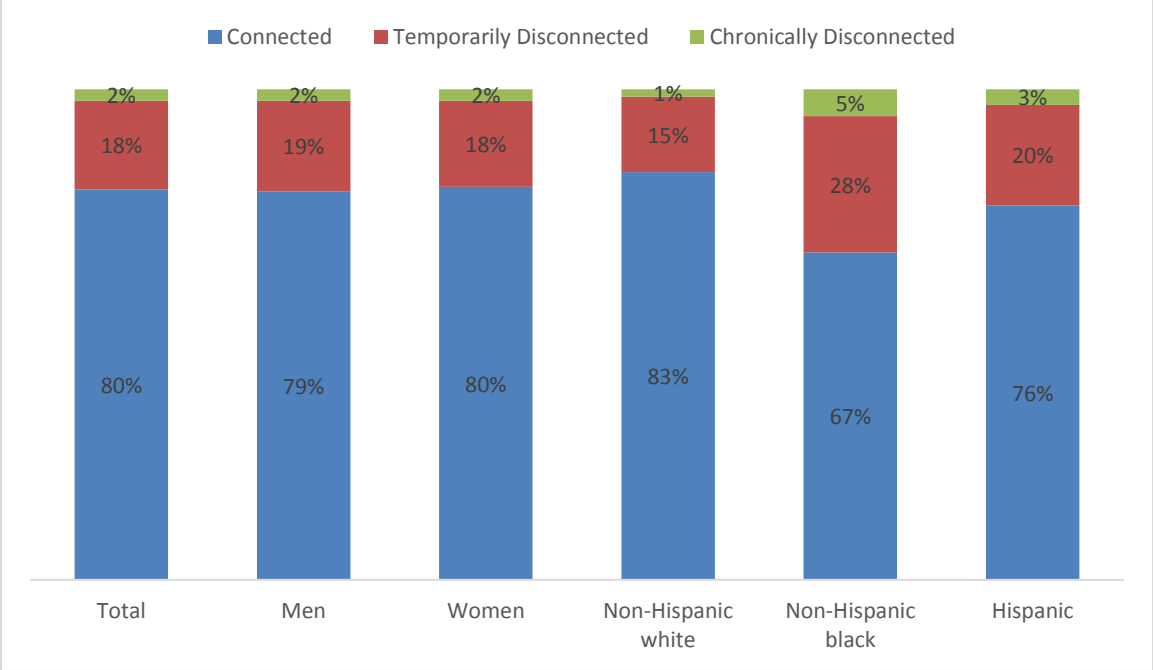
Results

Descriptive Statistics

[1] These results are presented with shading in Table 3 for groups by gender. Results are not presented in Table 4 or Table 5 due to the number of comparisons being made. All iterations of these comparisons have not yet been tested, so I have presented conservative estimates of differences between groups and carefully used non-statistical language to discuss these comparisons.

Eighty percent of youth are connected to school and/or work(see Figure 1). Eighteen percent of youth are temporarily disconnected, and 2.3 percent of youth are chronically disconnected.

Figure 1. Disconnection status, by gender and race (weighted)



Men and women have similar distributions of disconnection status, with about 80 percent of youth being connected. Their distributions are not significantly different from one another ($p=0.662$). There are differences in disconnection status across racial groups, though ($p<0.001$). More than twice as many non-Hispanic black youth are disconnected than non-Hispanic white youth (33 percent vs. 16 percent). Disconnection rates for Hispanic youth fall in between that of non-Hispanic black and white youth at 23 percent.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics by disconnection status (weighted)

	Total	Connected	Temporarily Disconnected	Chronically Disconnected
Childhood hardship	4.60%	3.80%	7.30%	9.70%
Lived with 2 married parents @ age 12	51.00%	54.80%	37.00%	26.20%
Teen parent	14.70%	10.60%	29.40%	38.30%
Cognitive ability (mean percentile)	51	54.5	37.2	29.4

Chronically disconnected youth have the highest levels of each risk factor, followed by temporarily disconnected youth, and connected youth have the lowest level of each risk factor. For example, disconnected youth (both temporary and chronic) are more likely to have experienced childhood hardship, than connected youth. Additionally, 38 percent of chronically disconnected youth are teen parents, followed by 29 percent of temporarily disconnected youth, and 11 percent of connected youth.

Research questions 1 and 2: Risk and protective factors associated with disconnection, by severity of disconnection

Table 2. Relative risk ratios from multinomial logit predicting youth disconnection, compared to constant connection (weighted)

	Temporarily Disconnected	Chronically Disconnected
Female	0.89	0.9
Race (ref. Non-Hispanic white)		
Non-Hispanic black	1.11	1.52 +
Hispanic	0.9	1.32
Childhood hardship	1.45 +	1.52
Household structure (ref. 2 married parents)		
Bio parent and step parent	1.25	1.07
Bio parent, marital status unknown	1.41 **	1.55
Other	1.3	1.16
Teen parent	2.68 ***	3.95 ***
Cognitive ability (mean percentile)	0.98 ***	0.98 **

N=4,237

+ p<.10 * p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

Once risk and protective factors are included in the model, the association between race and disconnection largely disappears. Race no longer predicts temporary disconnection, and being non-Hispanic black, compared to non-Hispanic white, is associated with elevated risk of being chronically disconnected at a marginally statistically significant level.

Living in a household without two married parents at age 12 may also be associated with temporary disconnection. Youth who live with one biological parent whose marital status is unknown (likely single parents) are 40 percent more likely to be temporarily disconnected than youth who live with two married parents. Household structure is not related to chronic disconnection, however.

Being a teen parent and cognitive ability are associated with both temporary and chronic disconnection. Cognitive ability acts as a protective factor: scoring higher on cognitive ability reduces the odds of being disconnected, either temporarily or chronically. Meanwhile, teen parenthood is a risk factor: teen parents are 168 percent more likely to be temporarily disconnected and almost 300 percent more likely to be chronically disconnected than youth who do not have a child in their teens. The magnitudes of these associations do not differ based on the severity of disconnection ($p > 0.1$). Preliminary analyses examining the association between the demographic, risk, and protective factors and opportunity youth status find similar associations across the levels of disconnection (see Table 2).

Research question 3: Risk and protective factors associated with disconnection, by demographic characteristics of youth

The associations between the predictors of race, family structure, teen parenthood, and cognitive ability and the outcome of youth disconnection vary significantly by gender. Below I discuss differences in the magnitudes of predictors that are statistically significant and substantively meaningful (see Table 3).

Race is more strongly associated with disconnection among men than among women. Race is not related to either level of disconnection at the conventional $p<0.05$ level among women. There are strong associations between race and disconnection among men, though. Black men are 73 percent more likely to be temporarily disconnected than

white men, and 314 percent more likely to be chronically disconnected than white men. Hispanic men are no more likely than white men to be temporarily disconnected, but are 134 percent more likely to be chronically disconnected.

Being a teen parent is more strongly related to disconnection for young women than for young men. A teen mother is almost four times as likely to be temporarily disconnected and six times as likely to be chronically disconnected than a woman who did not have a child in her teens. Conversely, being a teen father is not significantly associated with being temporarily disconnected, and is only marginally associated with being chronically disconnected. The differences in the associations between teen parenthood and disconnection by gender are statistically significant at $p<0.05$ for temporary disconnection and are marginally significant at $p<0.1$ for chronic disconnection.

Table 3. Relative risk ratios from multinomial logit predicting youth disconnection, compared to constant connection, by gender (weighted)

	Women		Men	
	Temporarily Disconnected	Chronically Disconnected	Temporarily Disconnected	Chronically Disconnected
Race (ref. Non-Hispanic white)				
Non-Hispanic black	0.70 +	0.56	1.73 ***	4.14 ***
Hispanic	0.76	0.77	1.06	2.34 ***
Childhood hardship	1.32	0.76	1.43	2.20
Household structure (ref. 2 married parents)				
Bio parent and step parent	1.29	1.35	1.09	0.00 ***
Bio parent, marital status unknown	1.49 *	1.25	1.32 +	1.82
Other	1.14	0.54	1.38	1.84
Teen parent	3.95 ***	6.08 ***	1.29	2.14 +
Cognitive ability (mean percentile)	0.98 ***	0.96 ***	0.99 ***	0.99

N=4,237

+ p<.10 * p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

Statistically different from other gender

The association between gender and teen parenthood and disconnection also varies by race/ethnicity (see Table 4). Black men are more likely to be disconnected than black women, but this pattern does not hold for non-Hispanic white youth or Hispanic youth. Being a teen parent is consistently associated with increased odds of being temporarily disconnected across races. The increased odds of temporary disconnection for being a teen parent range from 148 percent to 177 percent. The association between being a teen parent and being chronically disconnected is less consistent, however. For non-Hispanic whites, teen parents are almost eight times as likely to be chronically disconnected. Hispanic teen parents are approximately three times as likely to be chronically disconnected, and, conversely, non-Hispanic black teen parents do not have increased odds of being chronically disconnected.

Table 4. Relative risk ratios from multinomial logit predicting youth disconnection, compared to constant connection, by race/ethnicity (weighted)

	Non-Hispanic White		Non-Hispanic Black		Hispanic	
	Temporarily Disconnected	Chronically Disconnected	Temporarily Disconnected	Chronically Disconnected	Temporarily Disconnected	Chronically Disconnected
Female	0.99	1.34	0.62 ***	0.47 +	0.96	0.93
Childhood hardship	1.66 +	2.02	1.11	0.88	1.29	1.95
Household structure (ref. 2 married parents)						
Bio parent and step parent	1.2	0.89	1.99	1.14	0.97	0.79
Bio parent, marital status unknown	1.45 *	1.2	1.77 *	1.18	1.04	3.43 *
Other	1.39	0 ***	1.87 +	2.24	0.52	0.79
Teen parent	2.77 ***	7.97 ***	2.48 ***	1.8	2.71 ***	3.09 **
Cognitive ability (mean percentile)	0.99 ***	0.98 ***	0.97 **	0.95 *	0.98 ***	0.99

N=4,237
+ p<.10 * p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

The associations between the predictors and disconnection also vary at the intersection of race and gender (see Table 5). Notably, childhood hardship is predictive of disconnection only for non-Hispanic white men. Specifically, non-Hispanic men who experienced hardship as children are 6.7 times as likely to be chronically disconnected as men who did not experience hardship.

Teen parenthood is most predictive of chronic disconnection for non-Hispanic white women. White teen mothers are more than 12 times as likely to be chronically disconnected as their peers who did not become mothers in their teens. In comparison, Hispanic teen mothers are almost four times as likely to be chronically disconnected as their peers, and black teen mothers are no more likely to be disconnected than their peers who did not become mothers in their teens.

Table 5. Relative risk ratios from multinomial logit predicting youth disconnection, compared to constant connection, by gender and race/ethnicity (weighted)

	Women					
	Non-Hispanic White (2)		Non-Hispanic Black		Hispanic (6)	
	Temporarily Disconnected	Chronically Disconnected	Temporarily Disconnected	Chronically Disconnected	Temporarily Disconnected	Chronically Disconnected
Childhood hardship	1.69	0.69	0.78	1.08	0.89	0.63
Household structure (ref. 2 married parents)						
Bio parent and step parent	1.27	1.24	1.16	1.44	1.55	1.19
Bio parent, marital status unknown	1.71 **	1.24	1.57	0.5	0.73	2.09
Other	1.52	0 ***	1.04	0.95	0.32	0 ***
Teen parent	4.27 ***	12.08 ***	3.06 ***	1.67	4.2 ***	3.93 *
Cognitive ability (mean percentile)	0.98 ***	0.96 *	0.97 ***	0.95 +	0.97 ***	0.96 *
	Men					
	Non-Hispanic White (1)		Non-Hispanic Black		Hispanic	
	Temporarily Disconnected	Chronically Disconnected	Temporarily Disconnected	Chronically Disconnected	Temporarily Disconnected	Chronically Disconnected
Childhood hardship	1.49	6.72 *	1.32	0.86	1.59	3.4
Household structure (ref. 2 married parents)						
Bio parent and step parent	1.01	0 ***	3.2 *	0 ***	0.21	0 ***
Bio parent, marital status unknown	1.28	1.05	1.97 *	2.26	1.46	6.36 *
Other	1.22	0 ***	2.96 *	4.67 ***	0.63	1.83
Teen parent	0.86	3.44	1.96 **	1.85	1.42	3.1
Cognitive ability (mean percentile)	0.99 ***	1	0.98 ***	0.96 +	0.99	1.01

N=4,237

+ p<.10 * p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001

Discussion

The first set of analyses showed that the strongest predictor of youth disconnection, across demographic groups, is being a teen parent. Teen parents are 2.7 times as likely to be temporarily disconnected and four times as likely to be chronically disconnected as non-teen parents. Subsequent analyses revealed that being a teen parent is a stronger predictor of disconnection for women than for men. Specifically, teen mothers are nearly four times as likely to be temporarily disconnected and more than six times as likely to be chronically disconnected as women who did not become mothers as teenagers. Teen fathers, on the other hand, are not more likely to become disconnected than their peers. This finding reflects the gendered norms around child rearing in our society. Mothers — especially single mothers — bear a disproportionate amount of child rearing responsibilities, especially when children are young, as they are in this young adult sample. Digging down to the intersection between gender and race, the final set of analyses shows that white teen mothers are more likely to be disconnected than their black and Hispanic peers who are teen mothers. This smaller association between teen motherhood and disconnection among young mothers of color could be reflective of their stronger family support networks. For example, it could be that the stronger extended family networks of teens of color are able to watch young children while the mother pursues school or employment, allowing them to stay connected to school and/or work.

The multigroup analyses also showed that race is more strongly associated with disconnection for men than for women. In particular, young black men are more likely to be disconnected than are young white men. There are a number of potential explanations

for this finding, all of which are tied to institutional racism. First, black boys and men tend to be framed in a negative manner in American society. This skewed portrayal is associated with fewer opportunities for young black men, including fewer job opportunities and fewer school admissions offers (The Opportunity Project 2011). Additionally, this difference may reflect the over incarceration of young black men. Youth who are incarcerated are, by definition, not involved in work or education and are considered disconnected. Black youth are five times as likely to be incarcerated as white youth (The Sentencing Project 2017).

The other hypothesized risk and protective factors, including family structure at age 12, cognitive ability, and childhood hardship had relatively inconsistent or small contributions to disconnection status. Surprisingly, childhood hardship is largely unrelated to disconnection. The exception is that childhood hardship is related to chronic disconnection among white men. This finding is counterintuitive and warrants further study.

Taken together, these findings emphasize the larger social constraints that are placed on young people that may encourage their disconnection from society, rather than individual decisions leading to disconnection. The fact that being a teen parent is largely unrelated to disconnection for men, for example, indicates that being a teen parent does not need to be related to disconnecting from school and work.

Limitations

This study utilizes NLSY97 because it facilitates detailed longitudinal measurement of disconnection across adolescence and young adulthood. It is limited, though, by the array of the risk and protective factors available in NLSY97. Future work using complementary datasets, such as the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) may be able to examine additional predictors of disconnection to paint a more complete picture of the predictors of youth disconnection.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature on opportunity youth in two main ways: a) by examining how predictors of youth disconnection vary by the severity of disconnection; and b) by examining the relatively influence of risk and protective factors for different demographic groups. Similar factors predict both temporary and chronic disconnection, but these factors vary by demographic groups. In particular, being a teen parent is especially salient for young women, and being a youth of color is especially salient for young men. This variation is largely reflective of longstanding structural constraints in our society that limit individual agency and ability to remain connected to work and education.

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