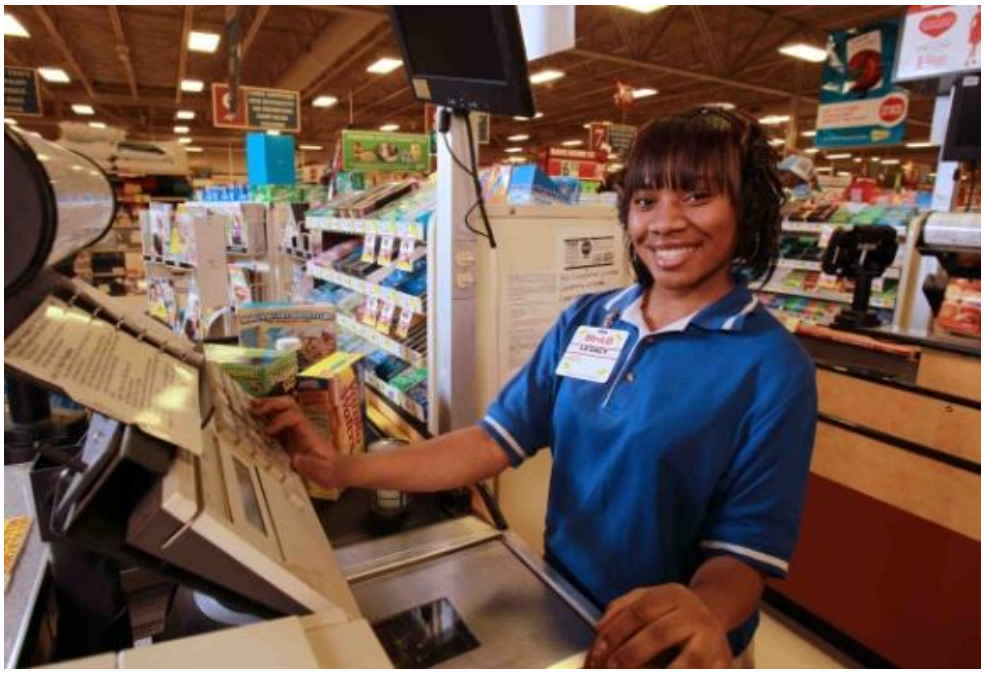

PREPARING OUR YOUTH FOR WORK: A COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

UNC CHARLOTTE
Urban Institute

Goodwill
Industries of the Southern Piedmont

August 2010

Charlotte, North Carolina

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Acknowledgements

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND RESEARCH TEAM

Linda Jacobs Shipley, Senior Associate Director, led the Institute's research team. Ms. Shipley has more than 35 years of experience working on issues of educational and workforce access and community development for low-income youth and minorities and has degrees in economics and city and regional planning. Ms. Shipley was responsible for overall project direction, including conceptual research design, results analysis, and report writing and presentation.

Dr. Bill McCoy, former director of the Institute, served as emeritus advisor extraordinaire. Dr. McCoy served as director of the Institute from 1985 to 2001 and has over 40 years of experience with Charlotte's various economic, political, and social arenas. On this project, Dr. McCoy conducted numerous interviews of community leaders, service providers, and employers and was a key contributor to the results analysis and report writing.

Laura Simmons, Social Research Specialist, played a primary role in the coordination of the research, analysis of the findings and writing of the report. With Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Geography, Ms. Simmons added her expertise in demography and urban social geography to the project.

Dr. Susan Harden, UNC Charlotte Crossroads Coordinator, joined the Institute staff to complete the university research team. With a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Teaching, Dr. Harden brought expertise in developing and implementing youth program models to this assessment. She consulted on research instruments, created a Youth Council Manual, conducted focus groups with participants, and created a program model for the community based on based practices.

Additional research support was provided by Social Research Specialists Eric Caratao, Kevin Hart and Claire Apaliski and by Zane Curtis-Olsen, a PhD candidate at Yale University.

Throughout the life of the project, guidance and feedback were provided by Goodwill's Vice President of Development LaRita Barber, Director of Career Development Services Susan Furtney, and Vice President of Workforce Development Paulette Griffin. Staff from Goodwill's Youth Job Connection were also instrumental in this research by assisting with the implementation of the youth survey and multiple focus groups. Unless noted otherwise, all photos used in this report come courtesy of Goodwill.

The Institute would also like to acknowledge the many members of the Charlotte community that supported this study and contributed their thoughts and opinions by participating in the numerous surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Without their input and support, this study would not have been possible.

ABOUT THE SPONSORING ORGANIZATIONS

Goodwill Industries of the Southern Piedmont is part of a network of more than 200 autonomous, non-profit Goodwill organizations in 24 countries. Goodwill serves the Southern Piedmont region of the Carolinas, which includes 13 counties in North Carolina and 5 counties in South Carolina. Goodwill's mission is Changing Lives through the Power of Work. For more information about Goodwill, visit http://www.goodwillsp.org/.

The UNC Charlotte Urban Institute ("the Institute") was created in 1969 as a non-profit, non-partisan, applied research and consulting services outreach unit of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. The Institute provides a wide range of services, including technical assistance and training, public opinion surveys, land-use and natural resources consulting, economic development research, and community planning to meet the needs of the region and its citizens. For more information about the Institute, visit http://ui.uncc.edu/.

Preface

DR. BILL MCCOY

The problem of students who disconnect from the education system prior to completing even a rudimentary program has been with us for as long as there has been a public education system with achievement goals and attendance rules. When our economy was primarily agrarian or even later as industrial production expanded, young people dropping out of school to work on the farm or in the textile mill was accepted and, in many cases, expected behavior. Many school systems had eighth grade graduation exercises because that was the highest level most young people would attain.

As the national economy moved away from an agricultural and labor-intensive manufacturing base toward a knowledge-based system, the specter of having a large, untrained group of young people became an increasing cause for concern. For many, the key challenge became how to keep young people actively engaged in their education at least through the completion of high school. Hence, over the last 50 years, there have been numerous attempted educational reform programs directed toward solving "the dropout problem" with what one would have to say are disastrous results. Currently, approximately three-quarters of students who begin high school finish in the normal four-year time frame. Among schools in disadvantaged areas with high enrollment of minorities, the proportion of entering freshmen who make it to graduation in four years is often lower, reaching fifty percent or less in some cases. In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School system, this figure is currently around seventy percent, with significant variation between individual schools.

Recessions, both mild and severe, exacerbate the consequences of untrained youth disconnecting from the education system. Even when we have full employment, like Charlotte did for the better part of a fifteen year run (early nineties to the mid 2000s), the concern surrounding dropouts persists although almost any able-bodied person can find a job with unemployment holding at three or four percent. Times have changed drastically as we are currently in the midst of the most severe economic downturn that most of us have ever experienced. Unemployment in Mecklenburg County is in the ten percent range (as of mid-summer 2010). When those who are unemployed but no longer actively seeking work and those who are working part-time but wish to be working full-time are added to the unemployed number, close to twenty percent of the labor force is unemployed or underemployed. Consequently, a huge pool of qualified people is available for any and all job openings.

Hence, with the current high levels of unemployment and the reserve of skilled workers looking for a job, the current prospects for youth that are not prepared to succeed in the workforce are more grim than ever. Even during the recent years of strong employment, little was done to alleviate the conditions that lead to disconnection or to find solutions for youth that have failed to successfully navigate the educational system. Certain environments tend to produce children that are disadvantaged from birth if not before—teenage pregnancies, broken families, drug use by parents, low income and low educational attainment by parents, lack of a positive role model, lack of a caring adult, and living in a neighborhood where these characteristics are prevalent. These conditions set the stage for behavior problems, mental health issues, low educational attainment, and poor social skills for the children. The result of this situation is often disconnection from the educational system and, in effect, jeopardizing future employability.

The strategies that are discussed today are not much different from the ones that were introduced decades ago—having a caring adult in every child's life; minimizing the amount of time a child has to stay

in a toxic environment; provision of safe places for children; increasing vocational education options starting at least in middle school; providing more information about the world of work and what it requires from each individual; instituting more one-on-one intervention either in the schools or from other agencies; providing activities that build self-esteem; improving parenting skills; and, anything else that might improve the chances for success of at-risk and disconnected youth.

While such strategies have demonstrated effectiveness in various programs over time and throughout the country, we have failed to adopt a systemic approach that applies these strategies in a unified voice across a community. If, as a nation and a locality, we are unable to make a dent in this problem of untrained and thus unemployable youth, we will experience labor shortages as the economy recovers. At the same time, societal costs of having as many as half of our young people unable to engage and be productive citizens will likely overwhelm our already strained social service resources.

Against this backdrop, the approach that Goodwill takes in providing youth training programs could be critical to how we as a community respond to the needs of at-risk and disconnected youth. Conversations are taking place across this community about this critical need, and the potential for the community to come together with a coordinated approach to this issue is possibly at an all time high. Goodwill has shown a remarkable commitment to exploring how to effectively serve this demographic, as demonstrated by its support for this report and the significant resources it already directs to youth. Through this commitment, Goodwill has become an essential partner not only as a direct service provider but also as a leader in engaging other public and private partners in decisions and actions that will yield long range collective responses, and perhaps solutions, to the disconnected youth dilemma that continues to haunt our community.

PREPARING OUR YOUTH FOR WORK: A COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

August 2010

Charlotte, North Carolina

UNC CHARLOTTE
Urban Institute

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Industries of the Southern Piedmont

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Executive Summary

In February 2009, Goodwill Industries of the Southern Piedmont (GISP) launched a year-round youth employment program called "Youth Job Connection" (YJC) that offered workforce development classes and job search assistance to at-risk youth ages 14–21 in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Well-versed in and known for workforce development services for at-risk adult populations, this program followed Goodwill's first foray into such services for youth through its delivery of the Summer Youth Employment Pilot program in partnership with the City of Charlotte the previous year. Although this represented a logical extension of its services to a younger demographic, it also presented the challenge of tailoring these services to this new population. Not long after the program began, leaders at Goodwill decided to take a step back and get an outside perspective on this initiative. In September 2009, Goodwill commissioned the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute to assess the need for a workforce development program for youth in the community and recommend any changes that should be made to put its program on the right track.

> "Goodwill plans to use the findings to guide and inform the design and delivery of our services to at-risk youth in our community to ensure that we are making the greatest long term impact possible while effectively leveraging available resources."
>
> -Michael Elder, GISP President & CEO

RESEARCH DESIGN

Charged with conducting a needs assessment for youth employment services in Mecklenburg County, the Institute began its research by examining the two sides of the service delivery equation: the level of need for a particular service and the array of services that address that particular need. On the need side of the equation, the Institute turned to secondary data to paint a detailed portrait of the youth demographic in Mecklenburg County and, in particular, those within that population who are most in need of employment services: at-risk and disconnected youth. On the service supply side of the equation, the Institute compiled a comprehensive and in-depth catalog of all of the programs and organizations in Mecklenburg County that provide employment services to at-risk and disconnected youth. This catalog not only provides a valuable tool for the youth service community, but the information from interviews and analysis of the program information also helped identify gaps in the current service array Goodwill could fill as well as potential strategic partnerships Goodwill might want to pursue. Simultaneously, we reviewed examples of approaches that are considered to be "best practices" for such programs in cities throughout the nation.

Following this initial stage of the research, the Institute set out to talk to the many stakeholders in the development of at-risk and disconnected youth about the needs of this population and how best to meet those needs at the program, organization, and community levels. For those that had experience with the Youth Job Connection program, we also sought feedback on the elements and operation of that program in particular. Using the findings from the data and best practices to guide the formulation of questions, we administered on-line surveys to youth, employers, and school professionals; conducted focus groups with youth, parents, Goodwill staff, and youth service agencies; and conducted interviews with civic and business leaders, employers, school officials and individuals that provide services to youth throughout the community.

Through the surveys, focus groups, and interviews, we received feedback from over 350 individuals. Finally, we analyzed the data, best practices, and feedback from the surveys, interviews and focus groups to develop a detailed picture of the challenges facing Charlotte's youth, the community's response to these challenges, and recommendations for new and/or improved approaches to open meaningful opportunities to this city's young citizens.

DISCONNECTED YOUTH NATIONALLY AND LOCALLY

Despite the many laments of "young people today", the great majority of youth in our nation will drop their "whatever" attitudes, retract their outstretched hands, and blossom into independent, working adults and contributing members of society. Unfortunately, not all youth achieve this. Some youth disengage from the social institutions of school and work, essentially disconnecting from their community and society, and many become adults who have difficulty finding stable jobs or never work at all and exist outside mainstream society, impoverished and isolated. This second group is referred to as "disconnected youth".

Most similar studies define disconnected youth as young people in a variety of age ranges (anywhere from 12 to 25) who are not in school, are not working, and do not have a high school diploma. These studies also acknowledge that youth in certain circumstances (such as youth living in poverty, in single-parent

> "The problem of disconnected and at-risk youth is a serious issue. We have a lot of youth trying to find their way and understand their purpose. It affects everyone, whether you are from a corporation trying to hire talented people or a family trying to raise children."
>
> - Reggie Isaac, Senior Director, Microsoft Charlotte Campus

families, youth in or aging out of foster care, adjudicated youth, pregnant or parenting teens, etc) are highly vulnerable to becoming disconnected. The Institute chose to focus on both youth who are disconnected as well as those at high risk of becoming disconnected in the future, and thus defined at-risk and disconnected youth as young people between the ages of 14 and 24 who fall under one or more of the following categories:

- Youth not in school, not employed, and lacking a high school diploma
- Youth in alternative schools
- Adjudicated youth
- Pregnant or parenting teens
- Youth in or aging out of foster care
- Homeless youth
- Youth struggling with substance abuse

Overarching all of these categories is poverty.

Youth in Mecklenburg County

According to the most recent data, an estimated 116,000 people in Mecklenburg County fall between the ages of 15 and 24. One-fifth of these youth are in poverty, putting a significant number at-risk in at least one regard. Only 1/3 are currently employed, and the unemployment rate for this age group is around 18%, while that of the general population is hovering between 10 and 11%.

The following statistics provide an idea of the size of the highest risk categories in Mecklenburg County.

- Over 2,000 students dropped out of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) in 2008–09. These dropouts are predominantly male and black.
- During the same year, there were about 750 students attending alternative schools. These students are also predominantly black and male as well as low-income.
- About 3,200 youth in this age range (14-24) are or have been involved with the criminal justice system.
- Over 1,300 young women between the ages of 15 and 19 and 2,100 unmarried women between the ages of 20 and 24 gave birth in 2008.
- In the 2008-2009 fiscal year, 455 youth between the ages of 13 and 18 were in the foster care system in Mecklenburg County and 46 youth "aged out".
- As of May 2010, over 3,000 youth in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools were homeless.

Geographically, the neighborhood with the highest number of disconnected youth is East Forest in east Charlotte, and that with the highest concentration of disconnected youth is J.T. Williams in north Charlotte. Other neighborhoods with notably high values and/or concentrations of disconnected youth include the Hidden Valley and Mineral Springs/Rumble Road neighborhoods in northeast Charlotte, the Henderson Circle, Nevin Community, and University Park neighborhoods in north Charlotte, the Todd Park, Ashley Park, and Boulevard Homes neighborhoods in west Charlotte, and the Montclaire South, Starmount Forest, and Yorkmount neighborhoods in southwest Charlotte. The lowest concentrations of disconnected youth within the City of Charlotte appear in south Charlotte.

> "The youth in this age group who are from families in poverty, and many are from families that have experienced intergenerational poverty, are much more likely to have a lack of hope for the present and the future and even a lack of knowing how to go about obtaining skills."
>
> - Barb Pellin, Assistant Superintendent, CMS

KEY FINDINGS

Need for youth employment services in Charlotte is considerable.

The secondary data analysis revealed that there is a sizeable population of disconnected and at-risk youth in Mecklenburg County and that many of them are either unemployed or not even actively looking for work. This need for employment services was further confirmed by numerous groups we heard from in the primary research. The community leaders spoke to this in general terms; the local agencies and school professionals provided anecdotal evidence through their experience serving and interacting with this population; and the youth we surveyed said directly that the area in which they need the most help is finding a job. Among the many barriers that stand in the way of these youth

finding jobs, the most pressing according to youth, parents, and school professionals alike, are age and lack of experience, transportation, and lack of motivation.

Charlotte's youth employment service system is in need of repair.

In the search for best practices, we found that communities with successful initiatives for disconnected youth address the problem at the community level, requiring extensive collaboration between the public and private sectors and non-profit organizations. Such collaborative community efforts produce a coordinated service delivery system that minimizes unnecessary service duplication and gaps in service, facilitates tracking of participant success and evaluation of individual programs as well as the system as whole, and enables the implementation of the cornerstone of workforce development services—work experience–on a large scale. Through the primary research, we found that the system in Charlotte is far from this model. First, these programs, overall, do not serve truly disconnected youth, the individuals who are most in need of employment services. Two populations, although relatively few in numbers, are of particular concern: youth aging out of foster care and youth completing incarcerations. Second, there is very little collaboration among these service agencies in Charlotte. Third, the effort to track the fate of program participants is minimal to non-existent among these agencies, making evaluation of these programs' individual and collective success difficult if not impossible. Finally, these programs are, as a whole, failing to provide meaningful work experiences for their young participants.

Goodwill's YJC program is a respectable start but needs improvement.

One of the key findings that emerged from the youth survey and focus groups is that, like many of the other related programs in Charlotte, Goodwill is not serving truly disconnected youth through this program. However, it *is* serving youth put at-risk by poverty, a family headed by a single mother, and their status as a racial minority (primarily black). Disconnected, at-risk, or not, the vast majority of these individuals are in great need of employment services and are grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Goodwill program.

> "There is a lot of fragmentation. These youth are being served by multiple program areas that are not connected. We need to coordinate our work so youth are served with comprehensive programs without duplication of service."
>
> - Barb Pellin, Assistant Superintendent, CMS

In talking to the youth participants, their parents, and the program staff, we found that the greatest strength of this program is its friendly, passionate, and dedicated staff. The feedback on the classes and curriculum was less enthusiastic, and the general opinion is that this area could use an overhaul that would result in shorter classes with fewer PowerPoints and more interactive activities. The weakest element of this program proved to be the work experience component. Few of the participants we talked to had obtained jobs through the program (and many who did worked at a Goodwill store or in the corporate office). Further, despite extensive efforts, we had a difficult time getting feedback from employers who had hired YJC participants in the past or employers that might be interested in participating in the future, underscoring the weakness of this component in this program as well as the larger system.

Other particularly valuable feedback on the program included the following.

- The single, centralized Freedom Drive location of the program is inconvenient at best and a deal-breaker at worst for many participants and their parents.
- The program needs to be advertised more effectively.
- For most teenagers, the name "Goodwill" conjures images of poor people rummaging through second-hand clothes and causes them to think twice about participating in the program (if they even know it exists in the first place).

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Using the systemic and programmatic findings of this study as a guide, we have developed a number of recommendations for Goodwill and the Charlotte community as a whole to improve the workforce development services available to at-risk and disconnected youth in the community. The following four key recommendations provide avenues for addressing this challenge.

1. Goodwill can and should be one of the coordinators/leaders of a new, community-wide initiative for youth workforce development.

Out of the best practices research, we developed a model to illustrate how a community should address the problem of disconnected youth. This model consists of six pillars that represent the service areas needed to support the development of at-risk and disconnected youth in a community:

passionate champions within local government; an effective workforce development board; a network of youth employment service providers with strong private and public partnerships; education partners with innovative approaches; engaging social services and law enforcement; personal development and faith-based initiatives for emotional maturity. Each pillar provides a unique, critical support, and when one is missing or weak, it is difficult if not impossible for a community to decrease the numbers of disconnected youth in a significant way.

> "Young people need life skills and professional skills that go beyond individual job skills. They need to learn accountability, planning, and having a good sense of what they want to accomplish in life."
>
> - Reggie Isaac, Senior Director, Microsoft Charlotte Campus

Through the primary research, we found such a collective, community-wide approach to the disconnected youth issue has not occurred in Charlotte; few of the necessary pillars are as strong as they need to be, and interaction between pillars- a critical element of the model- is severely limited.

While there is clear interest in promoting a community-wide response to the many issues confronting youth in Charlotte (for example Mayor Foxx's recent efforts to focus on "The Future of Youth in Charlotte" and the creation of The Larry King Center of the Council for Children's Rights), there is still a void in leadership specifically focused on the employment of at-risk and disconnected youth. When this gap was noted by several community leaders involved in this study, they also pointed out that the interest among the key youth organizations in working together is at an all-time high. In order to start building a strong community workforce development initiative for youth in Charlotte, some person or organizations must take the lead and bring all of the stakeholders to the table. We believe one of those organizational leaders could and should be Goodwill. Finally, we recommend that Goodwill continue to implement best practices in its youth programs and play a coordinating role to promote the community-wide adoption of these workforce development initiatives for disconnected youth.

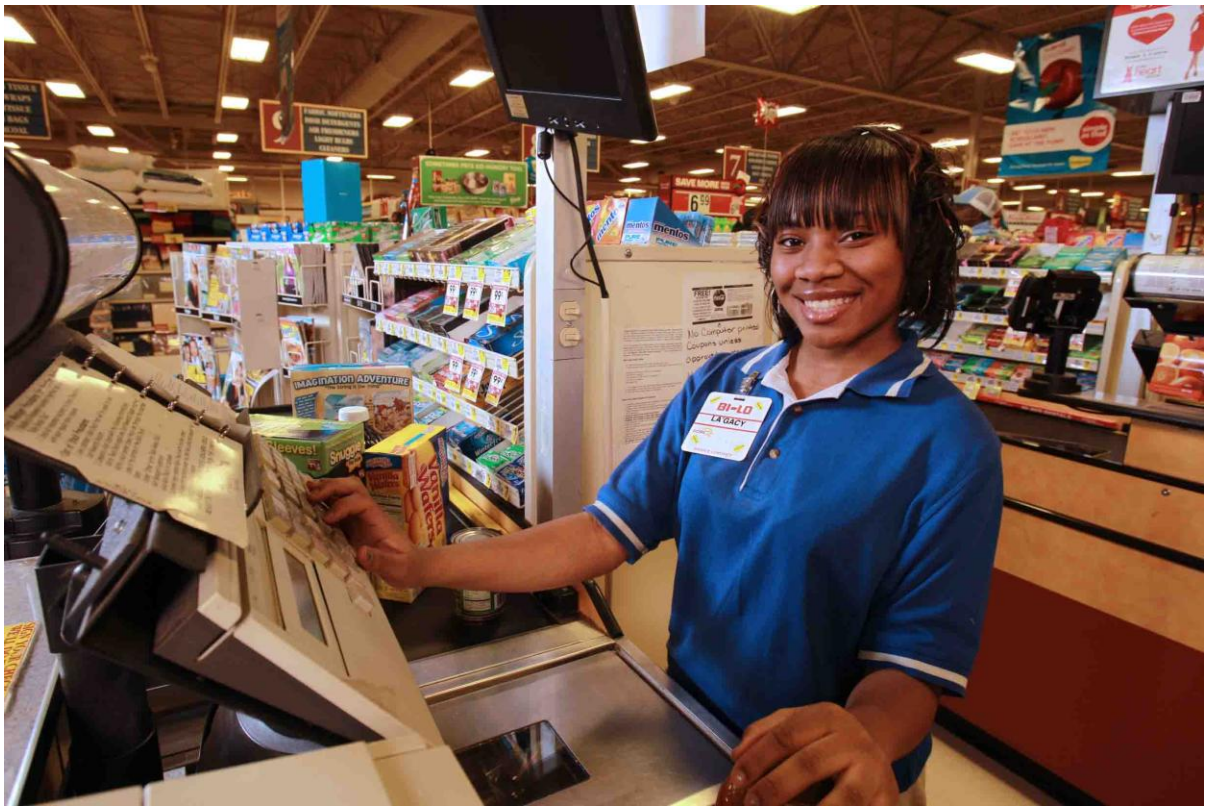
2. Work experience is crucial and can happen through intensive/extensive public, private, non-profit collaboration.

An integral part of the community's youth workforce development initiatives must be providing at-risk and disconnected youth real work experience. In order to do this in a significant way, there must be a collective effort from both the public and private sectors and a true commitment among all stakeholders to this disconnected youth initiative. Resources will need to be allocated in order to provide financial incentives for employers, stipends for youth, and job developers and work support specialists to find and maintain job opportunities and provide close supervision for youth filling the positions. The concept of work experience will also need to be widened from traditional part- or full-time jobs to include the full range of valuable work and work-like experiences, which encompass such activities as mentoring, job shadowing, internships, and apprenticeships.

> "We need to find better ways to use public and private resources to find work experience for youth."
>
> - Anthony Foxx, Mayor, City of Charlotte

Goodwill could model best practices for the development of an effective work experience component with the goal of recruiting other service providers and public

and private employers into a county-wide job development and placement center over time. Mentoring activities could build upon the GoodGuides initiative Goodwill began in 2010, which is aimed at helping youth build career plans and skills and prepare for school completion, post-secondary training and productive work by providing structured and supportive relationships with trusted, caring adult volunteer mentors.



3. The success of program participants should be monitored and tracked.

In talking to community leaders and service providers, we found that few of the existing youth workforce development programs track the fates of their participants (whether they find jobs, whether they end up in jail, etc), and the few that do only follow participants up to 6 months after leaving the program, which is not long enough to determine if any significant impact was made. Thus, we recommend that a comprehensive, uniform strategy to track participants through program completion and beyond be designed (using a best practices as a guide) and implemented for the collective youth workforce development system and the individual programs within it. Such a system would attempt to monitor a pre-determined set of outcomes (employment status, poverty status, legal status, etc) for program participants on a regular basis for a period of two to three years after completing the program.

Like the work experience piece, in order for a tracking system to be effective, it will require a collective effort among the many youth workforce development programs in the community. An

effective system will also require a significant financial investment in order to provide incentives needed to entice youth to continue providing the desired information year after year and to support staff positions dedicated to this function.

4. Offer two programs: one for young adults, the other for in-school youth.

Goodwill's Youth Job Connection program currently targets youth between the ages of 14 and 21. This population is difficult to address through a single program because it contains two distinct populations—youth and young adults—which have different needs and require separate approaches. It is our recommendation that Goodwill continue to serve both of these populations, but that it should do so with two unique programs.

Young Adult Program

First, we recommend that Goodwill serve the young adults (18–24) through a variation of its existing adult services. As legal adults, Goodwill's GED preparation and workforce development services are already open to these individuals but are not necessarily appropriate for them. As young adults, these individuals are not as mature as the adults Goodwill usually serves, and most do not know what they want to do or can do for a career. Therefore, Goodwill should tailor this program to reflect that difference and focus more on emotional development, work readiness, and career exploration. This program could focus on youth who are no longer viewed as being "at risk", but who have become truly "disconnected".

Youth Program

To serve the youth demographic (14-18), we recommend that Goodwill partner with Communities In Schools (CIS), a drop-out prevention program that operates in 44 elementary, middle and high schools in the County, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) to offer a school-based vocational curriculum. Such a program would begin in elementary school teaching youth about the wide range of careers available outside of the world of sports and entertainment. It would expand through middle school with continued emphasis on career awareness and exploration and the addition of soft skills training. The program would culminate in high school with significant soft skills training as well as connecting students to expanded options for vocational training and job shadowing or internships. In the beginning, the program would occur after school at the schools in which CIS has a presence but could eventually become integrated into the school day and curriculum of all schools in CMS.

> "We need to find a way to expose eighth and ninth graders to meaningful work experiences, somehow show them examples or possibilities of careers that will make their school work seem meaningful – a means to an end."
>
> - Eric Davis, Chair, CMS Board of Education

This concept reflects many of the best practices we found in our research (intervene early and emphasize the relevance of what youth are being taught to keep them engaged in school through graduation, cultivate realistic career goals and role models, provide experience in a work setting, etc.). Offering the program in CIS schools also solves many of the problems we found with the existing program by decentralizing the services greatly and easing the transportation burden currently on parents; distancing the program from the larger Goodwill organization and reducing the

stigma the name Goodwill brings; and increasing awareness of the program and widening the pool of participants. This approach would focus on youth who are "at-risk" and help prevent them from becoming "disconnected".

CONCLUSION

The recommendations presented in the preceding section include approaches that Goodwill could incorporate into its own programs and then make available to other service providers for replication. A second and even more challenging step would be for Goodwill to assume a significant coordinating function for all of the providers of services to the 14 to 24 age group. Research identifies a clear need for coordination and collaboration, yet little is being done by any of the entities involved in delivering youth services in Mecklenburg County. Goodwill could build a foundation for a collaborative system through the development of a model curriculum, a partnership with CIS and CMS, and by tackling two of the most glaring shortcomings in the programs currently in operation—tracking program participants and developing work experience opportunities.

The barriers preventing many youth from making a successful transition to adulthood have existed for decades and have persisted in many communities despite repeated efforts to eliminate them. The communities that have successfully served at-risk and disconnected youth have done so through the establishment of a comprehensive community-wide approach to the allocation of resources and the delivery of services. While this report has offered many recommendations on ways Goodwill can maximize the impact of its programs for youth, it is hoped that Goodwill will set a long-term goal of facilitating or supporting a collaboration between all stakeholders in Mecklenburg County.

While the steps recommended for Goodwill lead toward such a system, deliberate actions to involve other programs and resources will need to be initiated by Goodwill and by other major partners like CMS, elected officials, and public and private employers. A comprehensive tracking system would be invaluable in securing this support through the provision of data on the youth that are and are not being served. It would document the extent of the problem and underscore the necessity of a unified approach. Such data would likely show that while at-risk youth are involved in programs, they are still sadly underserved. Even more tragic are the disconnected youth who continue to fall between the cracks altogether.

It is an obvious conclusion that it will require the collective resources of many public and private entities working together to begin to offer significant opportunities for a better life to these young people. The need is critical and the resources to tackle this community crisis are available. We hope that this report serves as a "call to action" for leadership and a county-wide collaboration to ensure our youth the future they deserve.

INTRODUCTION& METHODOLOGY

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Introduction

In September 2009, Goodwill Industries of the Southern Piedmont commissioned the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute to assess the needs of youth in Mecklenburg County, NC, focusing on issues relating to youth workforce development. As stated by Michael Elder, President and CEO of Goodwill, the organization plans " to use the findings to guide and inform the design and delivery of our services to at-risk youth in our community to ensure that we are making the greatest long term impact possible while effectively leveraging available resources."

The research provides an overall picture of youth aged 14–24. This picture is enhanced to focus on youth that are considered to be disconnected or at-risk of failing to transition successfully to adulthood and into meaningful careers. This includes youth that are:

- Not in school, not employed, and lacking a high school diploma
- Pregnant or parenting teens
- Adjudicated
- Living in or aging out of foster care
- In alternative schools
- Homeless
- Living in poverty
- Struggling with substance abuse

The Institute began its research by developing a data-based description of youth in our community including factors that are associated with disconnection in studies that have been conducted around the country. Simultaneously, the Institute reviewed examples of program approaches that are considered to be "best practices" in cities throughout the nation. The findings from the data and strategies applied in other areas were used to formulate questions to pose to youth and stakeholders. The Institute conducted interviews with civic and business leaders, employers, school officials and individuals that provide services to youth throughout the community. As part of the study, the Institute conducted focus groups with youth, parents of participants, Goodwill staff, and community youth service providers. On-line surveys were administered to youth, employers, and school professionals. Through the interviews, focus groups, and surveys, the Institute received feedback from over 350 individuals on the nature of and community responses to the needs of our youth. By analyzing the data, best practices, and feedback from the surveys, interviews and focus groups, a detailed picture of challenges facing Charlotte's youth, the community's response to these challenges, and recommendations for new and/or improved approaches to open meaningful opportunities to our young citizens was developed.

While Goodwill charged the Institute with conducting research that would guide them in their effort to better serve youth through Goodwill programs and services, they also mandated that the work be designed to support other programs in the community that try to help youth become successful adults. Goodwill's commitment was expressed by President Michael Elder as follows: "No individual lives successfully in isolation and no organization operates effectively in a silo. Now more than ever, we recognize, that an integrated and comprehensive approach is required to support at-risk youth in successfully transitioning to adulthood". This strategy is based on the realization that the entire community has a vested interest in helping youth, particularly those who lack connections to school, work, and a caring adult, travel toward a positive future by ensuring that they have access to education, job training, and other critical services. A strong support system throughout the entire community is necessary to build the foundation for future economic growth, safer and stronger neighborhoods, and opportunities for all young adults. Collaboration between the City, County, schools, and private institutions is essential to address the many barriers preventing youth from succeeding in life.

Therefore, while the following report provides recommendations specific to Goodwill, the research findings will support policy development and the many programs in the community that target youth. The findings include:

- A discussion of disconnected youth—who they are, the issues they face, and the challenges they pose for our society;
- A detailed picture of youth in Mecklenburg County based on secondary data;
- Examples of best practices nationwide designed to combat disconnection;
- A catalog of services in Mecklenburg County that help prepare youth for jobs;
- Responses from individuals throughout the community—youth, parents, civic leaders, employers, service providers and school professionals; and
- Recommendations for Goodwill and for the overall system of youth services in Charlotte.

In addition to sharing the information listed above, Goodwill has contracted with the Institute to keep the secondary data on youth and the information in the Youth Services Catalog up-to-date following the completion of this study. This information will be available to the public on both the Goodwill and the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute websites in the coming year. The interest and commitment demonstrated by Goodwill in supporting this study and in sharing the results with the community and the enthusiasm with which the stakeholders responded to the opportunity to participate in the research certainly offer hope for a brighter future for all of our young adults.

Methodology

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH DESIGN

RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this project was two-fold: 1) to assess the needs of Charlotte youth in terms of workforce development; and 2) to assess Goodwill's newly-launched youth employment services in order to help Goodwill determine what their role should be in Charlotte's youth employment service arena. To accomplish this, the Institute's research team used a multi-faceted approach that focused on a particular youth population with the greatest need for workforce development services- at-risk and disconnected youth.

The first phase of the research involved the examination of secondary data to develop a picture of youth in our community, the compilation of an "inventory" of youth service providers in Mecklenburg County, and the review of published reports on best practices in workforce development services for at-risk and disconnected youth from around the country. A collection of secondary quantitative data was drawn from published federal, state and local sources. These data were analyzed to yield a detailed perspective of area youth including snapshots of segments of youth that are considered to be at-risk or disconnected. A catalog of services that are relevant to Goodwill's Youth Job Connection (YJC) program was compiled from information gathered through in-person interviews with program associates throughout the County. This process yielded information that will be useful for individuals seeking services as well as providing a basis for recommendations on ways to strengthen partnerships and/or to develop complimentary services as needed. A review of national models and best practices that would complement and enhance the GISP services in Mecklenburg County was also conducted.

The information gathered from the preliminary research provided the basis for the development of the instruments used in the collection of primary data, which focused on gathering information from youth and those whose work has an impact on the youth in our community. At the center of this process were the experiences and opinions of Mecklenburg County's youth ages 14–24 and the service providers and organizations that work to meet their needs. The primary methods used to gain attitudinal data from youth, service providers, school professionals, employers and community leaders consisted of online surveys, focus groups, and informant interviews. Overall, a total number of 367 individuals participated in this study through the various methods employed.

The multiple layers of information were collected in stages such that each new data piece informed the issues and questions that subsequently were added to the research. The following listing summarizes the data collection and analytical methods and tools used to prepare this study. For a more detailed description of the methods used in this study, refer to Appendix P.

Profile of Youth in Charlotte

Using federal data sources, supplemented by state and local government information, a geographic and demographic profile of Mecklenburg County's at-risk and disconnected youth was prepared. This review of secondary data also focused on issues affecting youth in the community, such as educational attainment, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, employment, unstable home life, and poverty. Neighborhood level data from the City of Charlotte's 2008 *Charlotte Neighborhood Quality of Life Study* were analyzed and mapped for illustrative purposes in this report. For a full list of data sources, refer to Appendix Q following the body of the report.

Inventory of Youth Service Providers and Best Practices

An "inventory" of agencies and programs in Mecklenburg County that provide services to youth was compiled. This inventory, or service catalog, includes the agency's contact information, mission statement, a listing of the specific population of youth served, programs, geographic locations, and service area. For the complete service catalog, see Appendix A. In addition, the project team identified successful national models, including best practices/program design/process and outcomes, infrastructure, and funding through an extensive review of related literature.

Survey of Youth

An online survey targeting youth who are participants of the YJC program was administered to them during their orientation for the program. The survey measured attitudes and perceptions surrounding various issues. The findings from this survey were analyzed and the results were then utilized as part of the larger study to provide information on at-risk Mecklenburg youth that is not available through published sources.

Survey of School Professionals

The project team surveyed two groups of school professionals (staff of Communities In Schools and Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools career development coordinators) to ascertain what services are currently offered to at-risk youth at the school level, as well as to identify problems youth face as they seek to continue their education and/or find employment.

Survey of Employers

Two groups of employers were surveyed for this project: previous employers and potential employers. The first group ("previous employers") involved employers who had participated in the YJC program by hiring youth from the YJC program for summer internships. The second group of employers surveyed is what the project team termed "potential employers" since this group did not participate in the YJC program but are certainly gatekeepers of employment opportunities that Goodwill might wish to engage in the future. The survey findings were compiled and analyzed separately, and the information was incorporated into other research activities.

Focus Groups

Working with the Goodwill staff, the research team conducted a series of focus groups with youth participants (including a separate focus group of youth in the Goodwill Youth Advisory Council), a group of youth from another community program, parents of youth participants of the YJC program,

youth service providers, and staff from Goodwill. The purpose of the focus groups was to get feedback from these various groups to develop a more complete picture of youth needs and available services and to identify any additional service needs that are currently not being met either by Goodwill or other organizations in the community. In particular, the focus group sessions examined the needs of youth as well as expectations and attitudes regarding their preparedness to enter the workforce.

Key Informant Interviews

As part of the various strategies employed by the Institute, a series of key informant interviews was arranged. The informants included community youth service providers, school professionals, and business and political leaders within the community. Interviewees were asked questions regarding their opinions on the issues surrounding employability of at-risk and disconnected youth. The interviews, conducted by Dr. Bill McCoy, were semi-structured so that a group of questions was consistently asked across groups but flexible enough to permit open discussion.

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DISCONNECTED YOUTH: NATIONALLY & LOCALLY

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Disconnected Youth

FRAMING THE PROBLEM

The majority of American youth spend their teenage years dreaming of the future—a time when they will no longer be encumbered by strict school schedules and adult supervision and will be their own bosses, making their own money and living by their own rules. For most, this transition between adolescence and adulthood is a successful one. Connected by multiple networks of caring individuals (family, friends, teachers, neighbors) and structured activities (school, sports, music and art classes, church activities, etc), these youth have extensive support systems to help carry them through high school. Most go on to college, community college, or technical/vocational programs, where they receive continued financial, emotional, and occupational support and cross the post-secondary bridge to adulthood and meaningful careers.

However, for a segment of the population, this transition does not occur smoothly and often produces a starkly different result: adults who have difficulty finding stable jobs or never work at all and exist outside mainstream society, impoverished and isolated. Instead of checking off the traditional milestones of high school and, for many, college graduation before entering the working world, many youth disengage from the social institutions of school and work, essentially becoming "disconnected" from their community and society.

The Extent of the Problem

Numerous studies have attempted to estimate the number of disconnected youth in America, each producing a different number from the last. These estimates range from 200,000-300,000[1] to 2.8 million[2] to over 5 million[3]. This variation, however, is not surprising given the lack of consistency in how the population in question is defined. The age range used to define disconnected youth, for example, is 14 to 24 in some studies, 16 to 19 in others, and everywhere in between. In addition, there is no single data source that combines the education, employment, and social characteristics associated with disconnection into a single measure, which further complicates the estimates.

Despite the variation in the precise figures, all such studies reach the same conclusion: the number of disconnected youth in this country is significant and will continue to grow unless definitive measures are taken to keep youth engaged and invested in their futures. Although communities across the nation are struggling with the issue of disconnected youth, those in the South are bearing the brunt of the problem. While the South is home to just over a third of the nation's 14-24 year olds, it contains approximately 45% of America's disconnected youth, which is more than the West and Northeast combined. [4]

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[1] Wald, W., & Martinez, T. (2003). *Connected by 25: Improving the Life Chances of the Country's Most Vulnerable 14-24 Year Olds*. Menlo Park, CA: William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

[2] MDC, Inc. (2008). *Disconnected Youth in the Research Triangle Region: An Ominous Problem Hidden in Plain Sight*. North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation.

[3] Hair, E.C., Moore, K.A., Ling, T.J., McPhee-Baker, C., & Brown, B.V. (2009). Youth Who are "Disconnected" and Those Who Then Reconnect: Assessing the Influence of Family, Programs, Peers, and Communities. Washington, DC: *Child Trends*. (37).

[4] Wald & Martinez (2003).

The Cost of Disconnection

Disconnection not only hurts the disconnected individuals but also has broader economic and social implications for entire communities. As our economy becomes increasingly knowledge-based, the proportion of new jobs that require higher levels of education will continue to grow. Without even the most basic educational accomplishment of a high school diploma, disconnected youth are poorly equipped to enter the labor force if and when they do attempt to reconnect with society. If their numbers continue to grow, they could undercut communities' abilities to furnish a competitive workforce and experience economic growth into the future.

The social cost of disconnected youth, although more difficult to measure, is no less corrosive. With no connection to school or employment, these individuals often struggle to make ends meet on their own and, instead of contributing to the economy and tax base of their community, put increasing stress on thinly stretched public services. Some sink even further by engaging in criminal activity—out of boredom or economic necessity—jeopardizing public safety and general well-being.

Identifying At-Risk and Disconnected Youth

For many youth, one or more factors in their lives (such as poor choices they have made and/or environmental conditions outside of their control) weaken their support system and increase their risk of becoming disconnected from society. Studies consistently cite four factors that put youth at the greatest risk of disconnection:

- Not finishing high school
- Teen pregnancy and parenthood
- Prolonged involvement in the criminal justice system
- Placement in the foster care system

Not having a high school diploma is one of the most crippling barriers to successfully connecting with long-term employment. Youth who do not finish high school are at great risk of becoming disconnected. Many studies have illustrated the effect the lack of a high school diploma has on employment. Although the severity may vary between them, all the studies convincingly show that individuals without a high school degree experience greater unemployment or receive lower wages than those who completed high school. One study found that 80% of a particular group of high school dropouts were unemployed for at least a year and half were unemployed for 3 years or longer. [5] Another study found that only half of all dropouts are employed at any point in time. [6]

Also at risk are youth that make it through high school but do not go on to a 4-year college, community college, or vocational/trade school. Youth that enter some sort of post-secondary program not only receive training that will help them in the job market, but also have significant support systems that help them develop during their young adult years and are not released into the "real world" until they are in their early to mid-twenties. For those who do not enter a post-secondary program, however, there are no structural institutions to support them through young-adulthood, leaving them to fend for themselves in starting their career at 18 or 19. While those in college are learning new skills and getting career counseling, as well as subsidized housing and health care, these young adults are trying to connect to the

[5] Brown, B. (1996). Who Are America's Disconnected Youth? Washington, DC: *Child Trends*.

[6] Wald & Martinez (2003).

labor market on their own, equipped with a high school diploma and what little career direction and training they received in high school.

Teen mothers are also at significant risk of becoming disconnected. Not only are these women faced with the stress of being responsible for another life when many can barely handle their own, they often sacrifice their education along the way. One in three teenage moms does not finish high school, which drastically limits employment and earnings potential. [7] Even those who manage to earn their diploma often struggle to make ends meet. These young women begin their working years behind their peers; many never catch up and some just give up, resigned to a fate of life on welfare and other public assistance programs.

Youth in the custody of the juvenile justice system and young adults in or recently released from prison exemplify the concept of disconnection while they are incarcerated and are at great risk of becoming disconnected for the long term after they are released. Once back in the fold of society, these individuals often have a very hard time finding work—first, because their criminal record severely limits their employment opportunities, and second, because they, like teenage mothers, often do not complete high school. Some will commit additional crimes and spend their lives shuffling in and out of prison or remain there permanently.

Youth in or aging out of foster care are another group that is especially at-risk of disconnection. Among the many hardships these youth face, they often lack the most important element of support growing up—a caring adult—and often have little support at all in the transition to adulthood. [8] Several studies have shown that after they leave foster care, these youth have difficulty gaining and keeping employment. Many become parents themselves while still in their teens or early twenties, have run-ins with the law, and even become homeless. [9]

Numerous other factors are also linked with putting youth at-risk of disconnection. Many of these are characteristics of the environment in which youth grow up. The environmental factor with the widest reach is poverty. The risks associated with poverty are multiplied when combined with certain family situations like single-parent households or parents with low education levels and/or parents who are unemployed themselves. [10] Youth in families that are occasionally or chronically homeless—poverty at its most extreme—also face considerable danger of becoming disconnected.

Youth with learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral problems, and issues with substance abuse often have difficulty finishing school or keeping a job, putting them at-risk of disconnection. Many of these youth end up in alternative schools, which are often ill-equipped to help them to graduate, before dropping out entirely.

The problem of disconnected youth is clearly a significant one for our nation—one that, if left unattended, will only continue to grow. What is the extent of such a problem in the Charlotte community? The following section addresses that very question by identifying the youth in Mecklenburg County that are at-risk or already disconnected and the neighborhoods within the County that have the greatest concentrations of these youth.

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[7] Wald & Martinez (2003).

[8] Wald & Martinez (2003).

[9] Wald & Martinez (2003).

[10] Hair et. al. (2009).

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At-Risk and Disconnected Youth in Charlotte, NC

THE NEED FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

An important component of any needs assessment is developing a profile or snapshot of the population in question. In this section, the target population for youth employment services in Charlotte is quantified by first describing the youth demographic and then establishing the extent of the problem of disconnected youth and those at-risk of becoming disconnected in Mecklenburg County.[11]

Most similar studies define disconnected youth as young people in a variety of age ranges (anywhere from 12 to 25) who are not in school, are not working, and do not have a high school diploma. These studies also acknowledge that youth in certain circumstances (such as youth living in poverty in single-parent families, youth in or aging out of foster care, adjudicated youth, pregnant or parenting teens, etc) are highly vulnerable to becoming disconnected. This study attempts to include both youth who are disconnected as well as those at high risk of becoming disconnected in the future, and thus defines disconnected and at-risk youth as young people between the ages of 14 and 24 who fall under one or more of the following categories:

- Youth not in school, not employed, and lacking a high school diploma
- Youth in alternative schools
- Adjudicated youth
- Pregnant or parenting teens
- Youth in or aging out of foster care
- Homeless youth
- Youth struggling with substance abuse

Included in all of these categories is poverty.

[11] The data used to construct this profile will be available at http://ui.uncc.edu on the Goodwill data partner portal.

Data Caveats

Due to the nature of the available data, it is not possible to calculate a precise number of youth who are disconnected or at-risk in the community. In most cases, the only data available is the number of individuals in this age-range (or a variation of it) that fall into a particular category, such as high school dropouts or youth in foster care. The data necessary to calculate a precise figure would need to indicate the number of high school dropouts who are also unemployed teen parents living in poverty. Thus, any attempt to add these categories would inevitably include duplicates. Such an attempt is also problematic because many of the data reported are point-in-time counts, not cumulative estimates. High school dropout data, for example, report the number of students who drop out in a single school year, while the total number of dropouts (from multiple school years) between the ages of 14 and 24 would be needed. This particular age range adds an additional layer of complexity, in that it includes both juveniles and young adults at multiple stages in their education, career, and living arrangements. Given this wide range, the researchers have separated, where possible, youth (14-17) and young adults (18-24).

Considering these constraints, this study has not attempted to estimate the number of disconnected and at-risk youth in Mecklenburg County. Instead, the following sections describe the county's youth demographic as a whole (comparing to the state and nation when appropriate), estimate the number of youth that fall into each category included in our definition of at-risk youth in the county, and map where within the county at-risk and disconnected youth live using the most recent data available. For a detailed account of the methodology and data sources used, refer to Appendices P and Q.

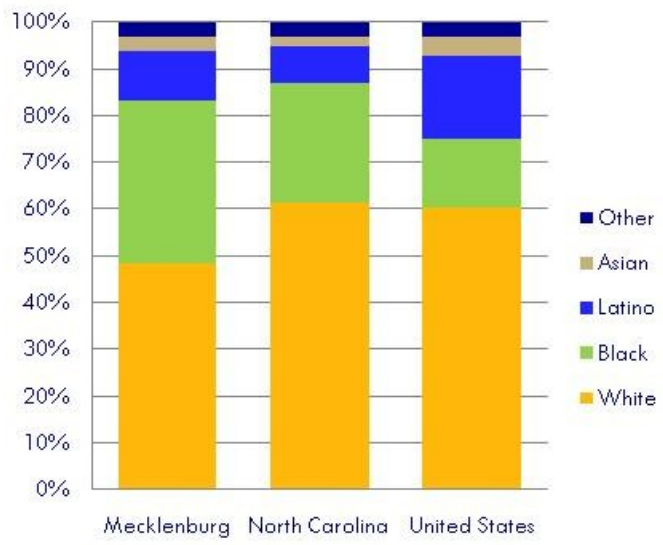
YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS IN MECKLENBURG COUNTY

Demographics

In 2008, there were nearly 116,000 individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 living in Mecklenburg County, accounting for 13% of the overall population in the county. Around 36,000 were youth aged 15 to 17 and around 80,000 were young adults aged 18 to 24.

Of the 15 to 24 population, just over half (52%) were male and the remaining 48% female. In terms of race and ethnic background, just under half of the population in this age group (48%) were white (non-Hispanic), over a third (35%) were black, 10% were Latino, and 3% were Asian (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. RACE/ETHNICITY OF YOUTH (15-24) POPULATION



Data Source: American Community Survey, 2008.

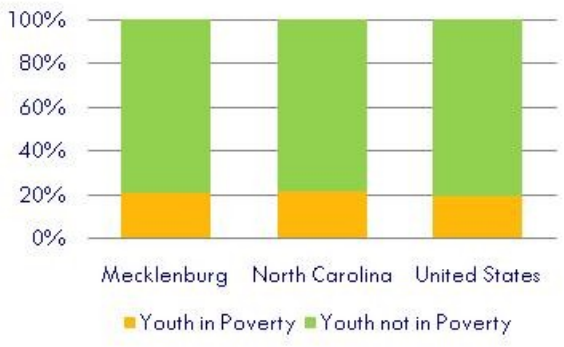
Income and Poverty

In 2008, well over 22,000 15 to 24 year olds in Mecklenburg County were living in households with incomes below the poverty line, accounting for 21% of this age group. For comparison, this percentage nearly matched those at the state and national levels (see Figure 2).

Some of these youth were living with their parents, and others were living on their own. Of all families with children under 18 years of age in Mecklenburg County, approximately 14% fell below the poverty line. The poverty rate was considerably greater for young adult households (households where the householder was under 25), with 29% living in poverty.[12]

For young adult households in Mecklenburg County, the median household income in 2008 was $28,000. Over 42% of these households had an income of less than $25,000 a year, around 36% earned between $25,000 and $50,000, 19% made between $50,000 and $100,000, and less than 3% earned over $100,000 for the year.

FIGURE 2. YOUTH (15-24) IN POVERTY



Data Source: American Community Survey, 2008.

Education

The vast majority of Charlotte's high school-age youth are still in school. As of 2008, 95% of 15 to 17 year olds in Mecklenburg County were enrolled in school.[13]

The vast majority of these students plan to go on for further education. Of the 6,000 plus members of the 2007-2008 senior class in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, 90% planned to pursue post-secondary degrees of some sort, 2% intended to join the military, and 4% planned to find employment directly following high school. Of those with further education plans, 2/3 were headed for 4-year colleges and universities.[14]

The education picture for young adults aged 18-24 in Mecklenburg looks a bit different. Only about 48% (38,000) of this age group were enrolled in school in 2008. In terms of educational attainment, around 18% of young adults in Mecklenburg County have not completed high school, 24% finished high school (or got a GED) but went no further, 35% finished high school and began college but have not yet finished. The remaining 23% have received post secondary degrees; 6% with an associate's, 16% with a bachelor's, and less than 1% with a graduate or professional degree.[15]

[12] U.S. Census Bureau, *2008 American Community Survey*.

[13] U.S. Census Bureau, *2008 American Community Survey*.

[14] North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. *2008-2009 4-Year Cohort Graduation Rate Report*.

[15] U.S. Census Bureau, *2008 American Community Survey*.

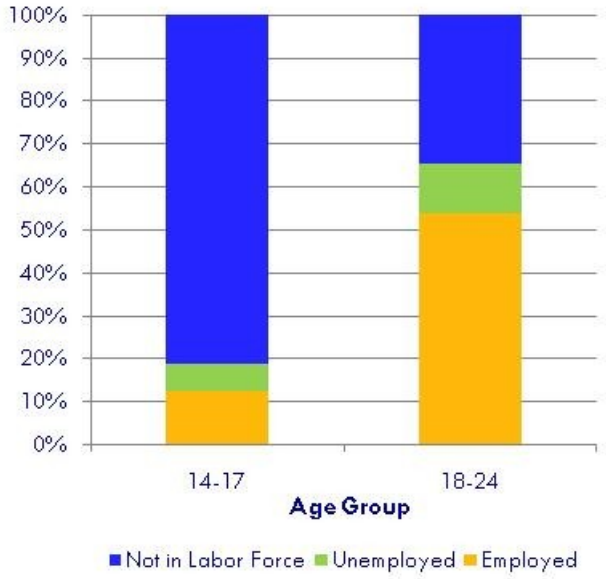
Employment

As of May 2010, around 1/3 of 14 to 24 year olds in Mecklenburg County were employed. A full 60% were not in the labor force (meaning they were not actively looking for a job). Of those who were in the labor force, nearly 18% were unemployed (meaning they did not have a job but were actively looking for work or waiting to be called back to a job from which they had been laid off).[16]

The employment picture for youth and that for young adults in Mecklenburg County look quite different, see Figure 3. Since most youth are in school, a much smaller portion of this population have jobs or are even looking for jobs. Only about 13% of 14 to 17 year olds in Mecklenburg County had jobs as of May 2010, and over 80% were not even in the labor force. However, the unemployment rate for this age group was nearly 34%, quite a bit higher than the 14-24 age group as a whole.

Over half (54%) of the young adults aged 18-24 in the County had jobs as of May 2010.

FIGURE 3. YOUTH EMPLOYMENT



Data Source: Current Population Survey, May 2010.

Although a much lower percentage of young adults were not in the labor force compared to youth, the young adult employment rate was also quite a bit lower, hovering around 18%.

Household and Family Structure

Since the 14 to 24 age range includes high school, college, and post-college age youth, this population encompasses a variety of living arrangements. Those on the younger end tend to live with their parents, while those on the older end often live on their own—some with unrelated roommates and others with families of their own.

Household and family structure data do not distinguish specific age groups, so to find such information for youth in the age range of interest (14-17), the researchers had to look at all youth under 18. In 2008, there were over 233,000 families with children under 18 in Mecklenburg County. Over 68% of these were married couple families, around 25% were families headed by single mothers, and the remaining 7% were headed by single fathers.[17]

The structure of young adult households, however, looks quite different. Of the 23,000 young adult households in Mecklenburg County (those headed by individuals under 25), the majority (64%) were non-family households. Only around 11% were married couple families, 15% were female-headed with no husband present, and 10% were male-headed with no wife present.

[16] U.S. Census Bureau, *2008 American Community Survey*.

[17] U.S. Census Bureau, *May 2010 Current Population Survey*.

AT-RISK AND DISCONNECTED YOUTH IN MECKLENBURG COUNTY

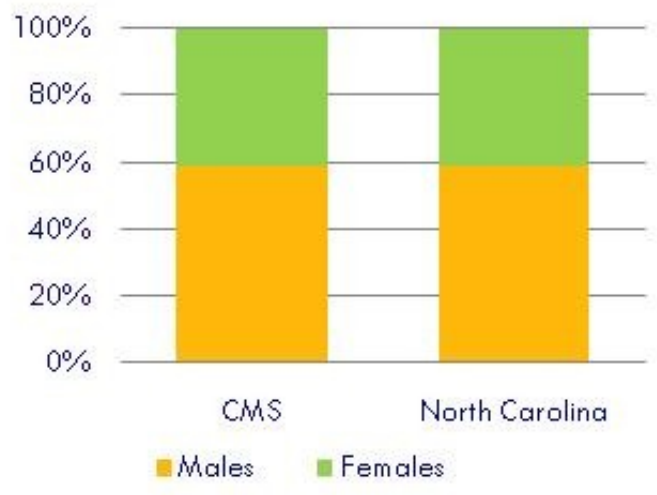
Who are Charlotte's At-Risk and Disconnected Youth?

High School Dropouts

Dropping out of high school is consistently cited as the number one factor leading to disconnection. Although some studies have found that a high portion of those that drop out eventually return for their GED, employers and service providers alike agree that a GED is not the equivalent of a true high school diploma. So those who drop out are likely to struggle with finding stable employment.

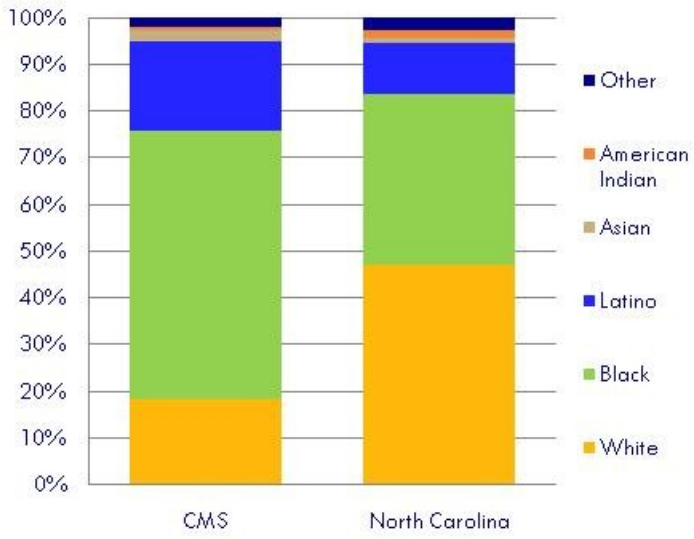
In the 2008–09 school year, 2/3 of the CMS students that entered 9th grade in 2005-06 graduated.[18] During that same year, over 2,000 students dropped out. These dropouts were predominantly male (nearly 60%) and black (nearly 60%) (see Figures 4 and 5). Although the gender distribution of dropouts in CMS closely resembles that of North Carolina (Figure 4), the racial distribution does not (Figure 5). This is not surprising given the greater representation of blacks in CMS than North Carolina overall. However, blacks are still overrepresented in the dropout population, when compared to the district's student population as a whole. In addition to these recent dropouts, over 14,000 young adults (18-24) in Mecklenburg County did not have a high school diploma as of 2008, representing a considerable pool of individuals with limited employment options.

FIGURE 4. HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS BY GENDER



Data Source. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2009

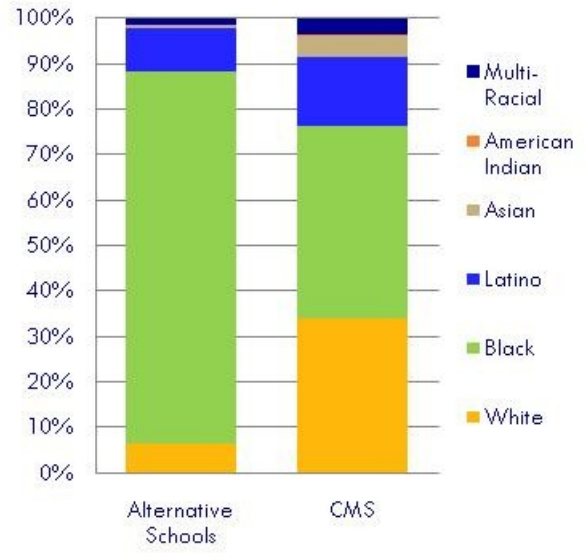
FIGURE 5. HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS BY RACE/ETHNICITY



Data Source. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2009

[18] North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. *2008-2009 4-Year Cohort Graduation Rate Report.*

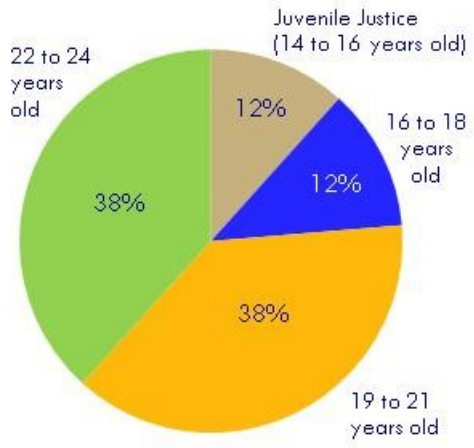
FIGURE 6. SCHOOL POPULATIONS, RACE/ETHNICITY



Data Source: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, 2008.

Over 60% of these students were male, and over 80% were black—clear overrepresentations given the even gender distribution and much smaller (40%) proportion of black students in CMS as a whole, see Figure 6. In addition, a greater proportion of these students received free or reduced-price lunch than the district at large, see Figure 7. On average, less than half of the starting freshmen at these alternative schools will graduate.[19]

FIGURE 8. AGE DISTRIBUTION OF ADJUDICATED YOUTH

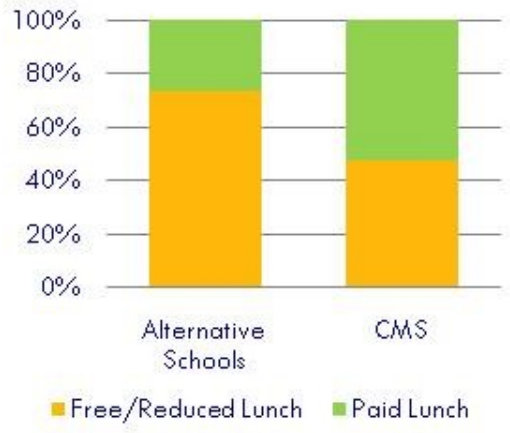


Data Sources: North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2009; North Carolina Department of Correction Office of Research and Planning, 2009.

Alternative School Population

Alternative schools are often the last stop for troubled students before dropping out. Students in these schools are either assigned to them after exhibiting attendance, academic, or behavioral problems in traditional schools or choose to attend due to life circumstances (often teen mothers who cannot comply with traditional school rules and schedules but still wish to finish high school). Thus, these students are at very high risk of dropping out of school completely and disconnecting. There are two alternative schools in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) district: Hawthorne High School and Turning Point Academy. As of 2008, these two schools had a collective student body of approximately 750 students. These students are predominantly black, male, and low-income.

FIGURE 7. SCHOOL POPULATIONS RECEIVING FREE AND REDUCED LUNCH



Data Source: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, 2008.

Adjudicated Youth

Youth involved in the criminal justice system are truly disconnected while incarcerated and are at considerable risk of long-term disconnection upon release. At the end of 2009, over 3,200 youth aged 14-24 in Mecklenburg County were entangled in the criminal justice system. Around 375 of those were 14, 15, and 16 year-olds involved with the juvenile justice system. The majority, however, were 16-24 year-olds, with the older end of the age group comprising most of the offenders, see Figure 8. Of the approximately 2,850 16-24 year old offenders, nearly 77% were on probation, around 21% were in prison, and less than 3% were on parole.

[19] North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. *2008-2009 4-Year Cohort Graduation Rate Report.*

Pregnant and Parenting Teens

Over 1,300 women in Mecklenburg County between the ages of 15 and 19 gave birth in 2008, resulting in a teen birth rate of 44.8 per 1,000 women aged 15-19. This is slightly higher than the national teen birth rate of 41.5 but lower than that for the state of North Carolina, which was 48.2 in 2008. [20]

Although teen mothers are often cited as being one of the highest risk groups, single mothers between the ages of 20 and 24 are also at-risk. At a time when most young women are in college or starting their careers, these women are either putting those endeavors on hold until their children are in school or are trying to balance school and/or work along with raising their children without the income or help of a spouse. In Mecklenburg County, around 2,100 unmarried women between the ages of 20 and 24 gave birth in 2008. [21]

Foster Children

Youth in and aging out of the foster care system are another group at high risk of becoming disconnected. In the 2008-2009 fiscal year, 455 youth between the ages of 13 and 18 were in the foster care system in Mecklenburg County. During this same time period, 46 youth "aged out" of the foster care system, and were setting out to live on their own for the very first time. As a whole, these youth have struggled to find employment. Of the 46 that aged out of foster care, only seven reported some form of earnings within 3 months of leaving foster care.[22]

Homeless Youth

Youth without stable home environments are among the many groups considered at-risk of disconnection; youth with no home at all face even greater barriers to finishing high school and finding employment. As of May 2010, over 3,000 youth in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools were homeless. Nearly 60% of these homeless youth were in elementary school, just over 20% were in middle, and another 20% in high school.[23]

Youth Substance Abuse

Youth with substance abuse problems are also at-risk of disconnection. Although many youth experiment with drugs and alcohol, those who abuse these substances in their high school years will likely struggle to finish school and find a job. According to the 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, one-third of CMS high school students had consumed alcohol in the month surveyed. About 14% had participated in binge drinking during that month. Around 20% of CMS high school students had smoked marijuana in the past month. All of these percentages are consistent with those for North Carolina as a whole.[24]

Where are Charlotte's At-Risk and Disconnected Youth

Like so many other populations in Charlotte and cities across the nation, the population of at-risk and disconnected youth in Charlotte is not evenly distributed across the city. Instead, as the following maps clearly illustrate, a handful of neighborhoods are struggling with this problem more so than others.

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[20] http://www.cdc.gov/Features/dsTeenPregnancy/

[21] North Carolina Department of Health & Human Services State Center for Health Statistics. *2008 Mecklenburg County Resident Births.*

[22] Duncan, D.F., Kum, H.C., Flair, K.A., and Stewart, C.J. (2010). Management Assistance for Child Welfare, Work First, and Food & Nutrition Services in North Carolina. Retrieved from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Jordan Institute for Families website. URL: http://ssw.unc.edu/ma/

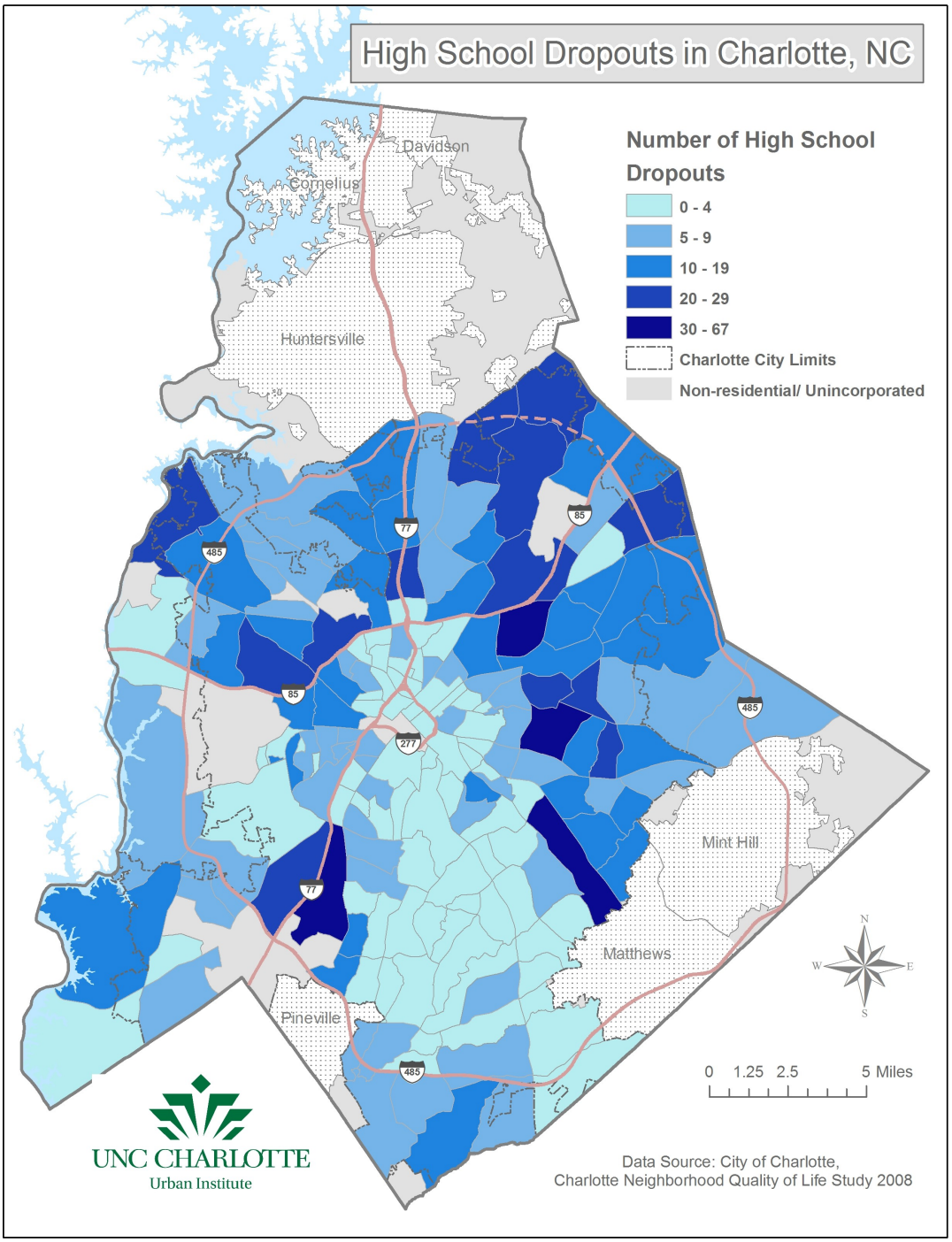
[23] McKinney-Vento Summary 2010

[24] Mecklenburg County Health Department. (2010). *Youth Risk Behavior Survey: 2009 Highlights, Charlotte-Mecklenburg High School Students.*

High School Dropouts

The neighborhood that experienced the greatest number of high school dropouts in 2007 was Hidden Valley in northeast Charlotte, with 67 high school students dropping out over the course of the year (Figure 9). The Montclaire South neighborhood in southwest Charlotte was not far behind with 52 dropouts. The other two neighborhoods that stand in the top category for high school dropouts are Windsor Park and East Forest neighborhoods in east Charlotte with 33 and 31 dropouts, respectively.

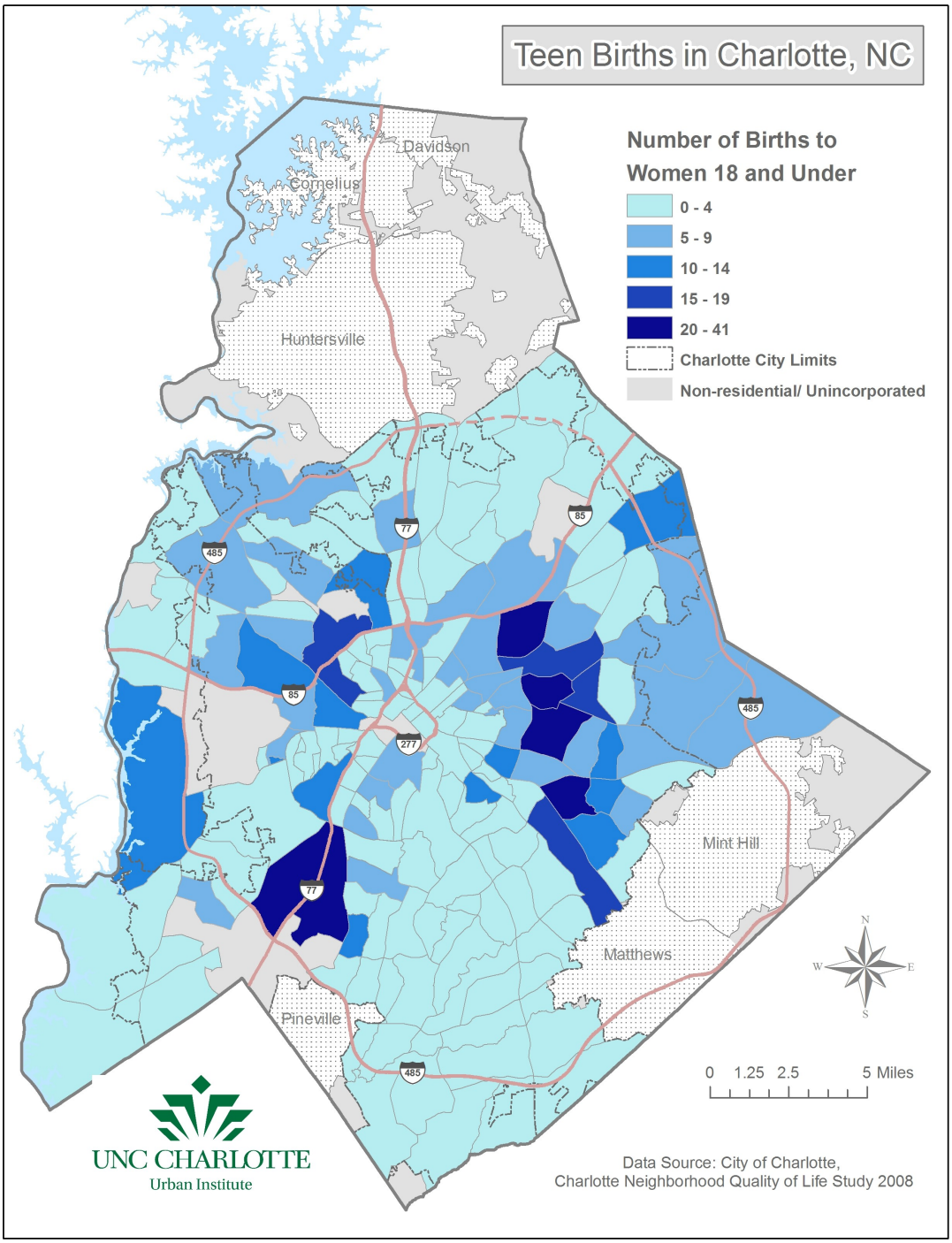
FIGURE 9. HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS BY NEIGHBORHOOD



Teen Births

The neighborhood that experienced the most teen births in 2007 was the east Charlotte neighborhood of Windsor Park with 41 teens giving birth that year, see Figure 10. Other neighborhoods in the top tier for teen births include Hidden Valley in northeast Charlotte with 30, the southwest Charlotte neighborhoods of Montclaire South and Yorkmount with 31 and 20 respectively, and the North Sharon Amity/Reddman Road and Shannon Park neighborhoods in east Charlotte with 20 each.

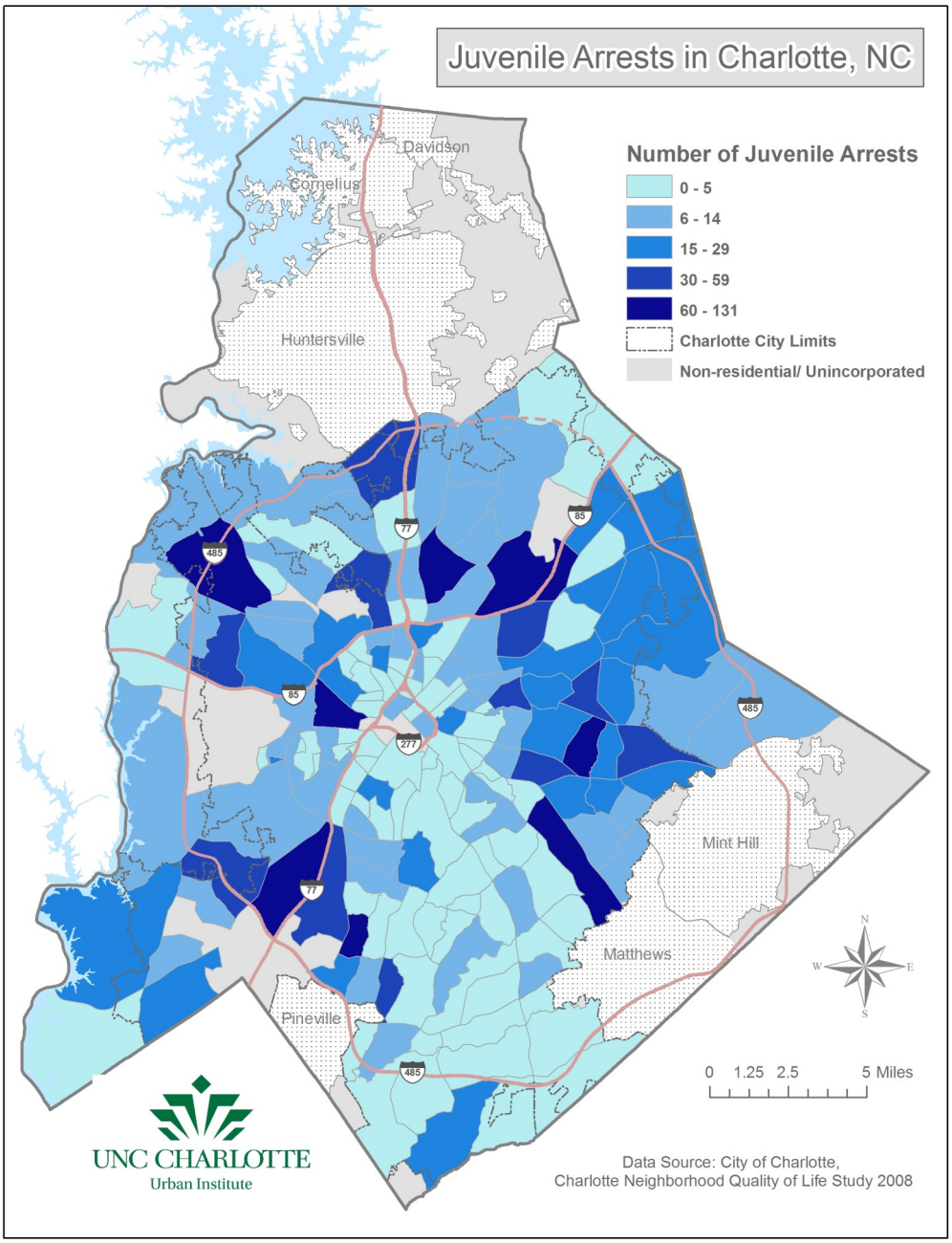
FIGURE 10. TEEN BIRTHS BY NEIGHBORHOOD



Juvenile Arrests

The neighborhood with the highest number juvenile arrests, by far, was the East Forest neighborhood in east Charlotte with 131 juvenile arrests in 2007, see Figure 11. Other neighborhoods with notably high numbers of juvenile arrests include the southwest Charlotte neighborhood of Starmount Forest with 87, the Mineral Springs/Rumble Road neighborhood in northeast Charlotte with 84, and the Nevin neighborhood in north Charlotte and Ashley Park neighborhood in West Charlotte, each with 78.

FIGURE 11. JUVENILE ARRESTS BY NEIGHBORHOOD

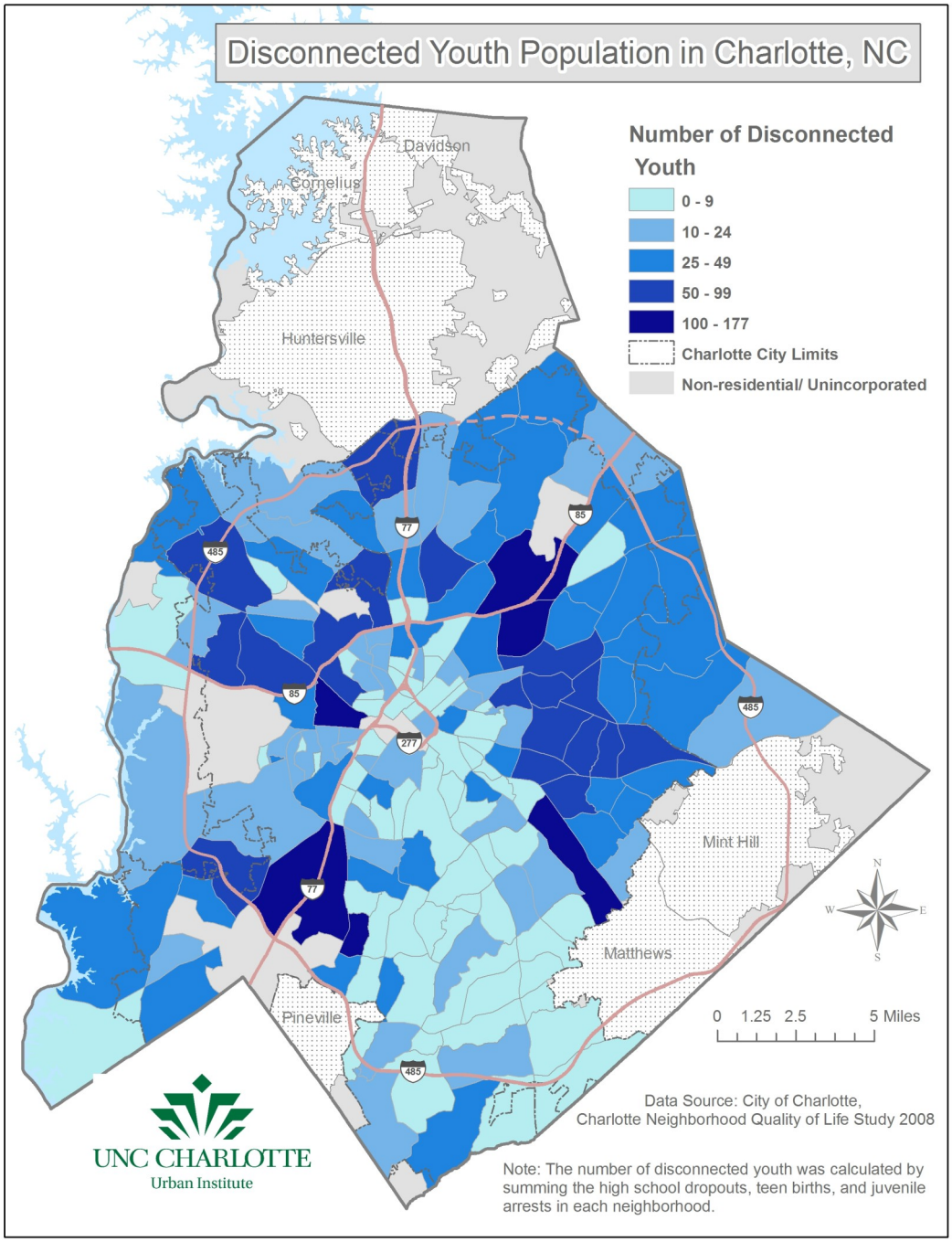


Note: The juvenile arrest data indicates where the young person was arrested, not necessarily the neighborhood where he/she lives. However, these data are still relevant because knowing where youth commit crimes is also a good indicator of areas to target certain preventative services. Also, it is likely that many of these youth do live in the neighborhood they were arrested.

Disconnected Youth Index

Several neighborhoods stand out as having high incidence of all three of these major risk categories that often include disconnected youth. The researchers created an index that combines all three factors into a single disconnected youth value. The resulting map, Figure 12, highlights several of the neighborhoods that stand out in the previous maps. The neighborhood with the largest number of disconnected youth is East Forest in east Charlotte, with 177.

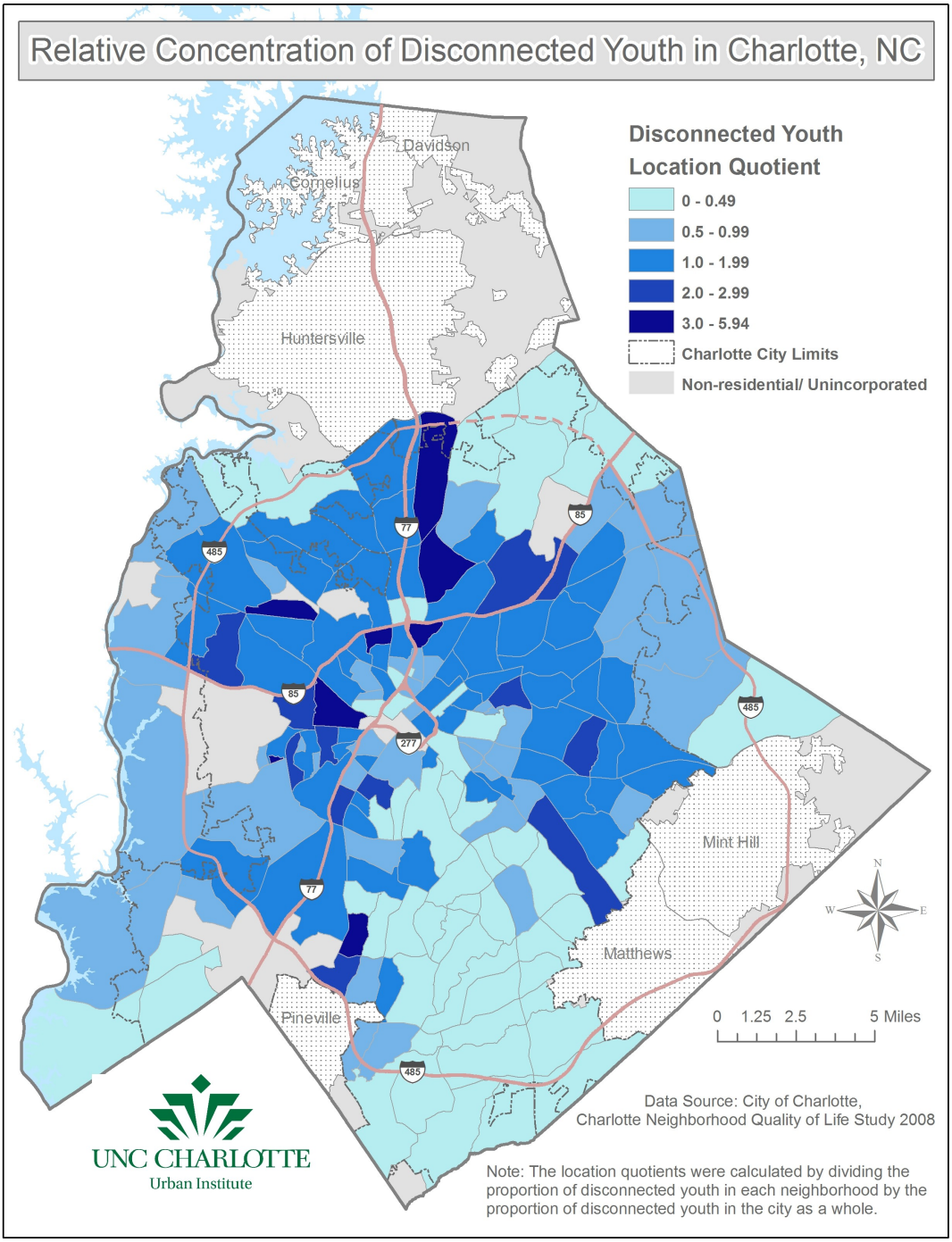
FIGURE 12. DISCONNECTED YOUTH POPULATION BY NEIGHBORHOOD



Note: It must be noted that this effect is likely overstated a bit, considering the fact that both new teen mothers and youth that have been arrested (particularly those who are detained in juvenile detention facilities) often become high school dropouts as well. However, these neighborhoods are still worth noting as having high numbers of disconnected youth.

Other neighborhoods with notably high values include the Hidden Valley and Mineral Springs/ Rumble Road neighborhoods in northeast Charlotte, the Ashley Park neighborhood in west Charlotte, and the Montclaire South, Starmount Forest, and Yorkmount neighborhoods in southwest Charlotte. The lowest values appear in neighborhoods in south Charlotte. It is important to note here that this map only includes data for neighborhoods within the City of Charlotte and does not include data for unincorporated areas, non-residential areas, or the surrounding towns. The areas in the northern and southeastern parts of Mecklenburg County, like the south Charlotte neighborhoods, would probably have small numbers of disconnected youth.

FIGURE 13. RELATIVE CONCENTRATION OF DISCONNECTED YOUTH BY NEIGHBORHOOD



When looking at the spatial distribution of a population, it is also important to look at the relative concentration of that population in specific neighborhoods compared to the city at large. The researchers achieved this by using the location quotient method. The resulting map (Figure 13) shows which neighborhoods have greater concentrations of disconnected youth than the city overall and which have lower concentrations.

For example, a location quotient value of 2 would indicate that a neighborhood has twice the concentration of disconnected youth as the overall city, while a value of 0.5 would indicate a neighborhood with half the concentration of disconnected youth as the city.

The neighborhood with the highest concentration of disconnected youth is J.T. Williams in north Charlotte, with almost six times the city's average concentration of disconnected youth. Other neighborhoods with notably high concentrations include the Henderson Circle, Nevin Community, and University Park neighborhoods (also in north Charlotte), the Todd Park, Ashley Park, and Boulevard Homes neighborhoods in west Charlotte, and the Starmount Forrest neighborhood in southwest Charlotte. The lowest concentrations of disconnected youth appear in south Charlotte.

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BEST PRACTICES FOR YOUTH WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

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Best Practices

COMMUNITY AND PROGRAMMATIC STRATEGIES

Disconnected youth often experience extremely complex circumstances that lead them to stray from the traditional paths to adulthood. There is no simple way to confront the comprehensive and far-reaching challenges presented to the community by disconnected youth, no matter how well executed.

[25] Consequently, the issues that youth face at this stage of their lives have permeated society for decades. While many critical issues remain unresolved, the extensive resources that have been applied to this problem throughout the country have yielded many effective approaches to helping youth that can serve as models to the community.

Any strategy to create or improve youth employment programs should be informed by the nation's best practices to build on the lessons learned in other communities. For this section, the Institute examined the experiences of communities with the most effective youth employment programs and found that they all have strategic, comprehensive, and coordinated community initiatives that involve all of the stakeholders that engage with disconnected youth. These collaborative community-wide approaches reflect years of persistent planning, programming, and evaluation efforts.

Given this perspective, the information in this section is presented at two levels. The first is at the community level and presents strategic and comprehensive initiatives which require systemic changes and coordinated responses. The second reflects an analysis of best practices for youth employment program components with recommendations that are applicable at the agency level.

Information used to compile this presentation of "best practices" was gleaned from an extensive literature review of resources directed to serve disconnected youth, focusing on youth workforce development programs. Programs were analyzed according to their success in achieving the following outcomes:

- Reconnecting youth to pathways of education, employment, and personal behaviors leading to independent, productive lives
- Strategic and coordinated approaches
- Effective utilization of data, measurement, and evaluation
- Sustainability

[25] National League of Cities. The Institute for Youth, Education and Families. (2007). *Beyond City Limits: Cross-System Collaboration to Reengage Disconnected Youth.* Washington, DC: Author.

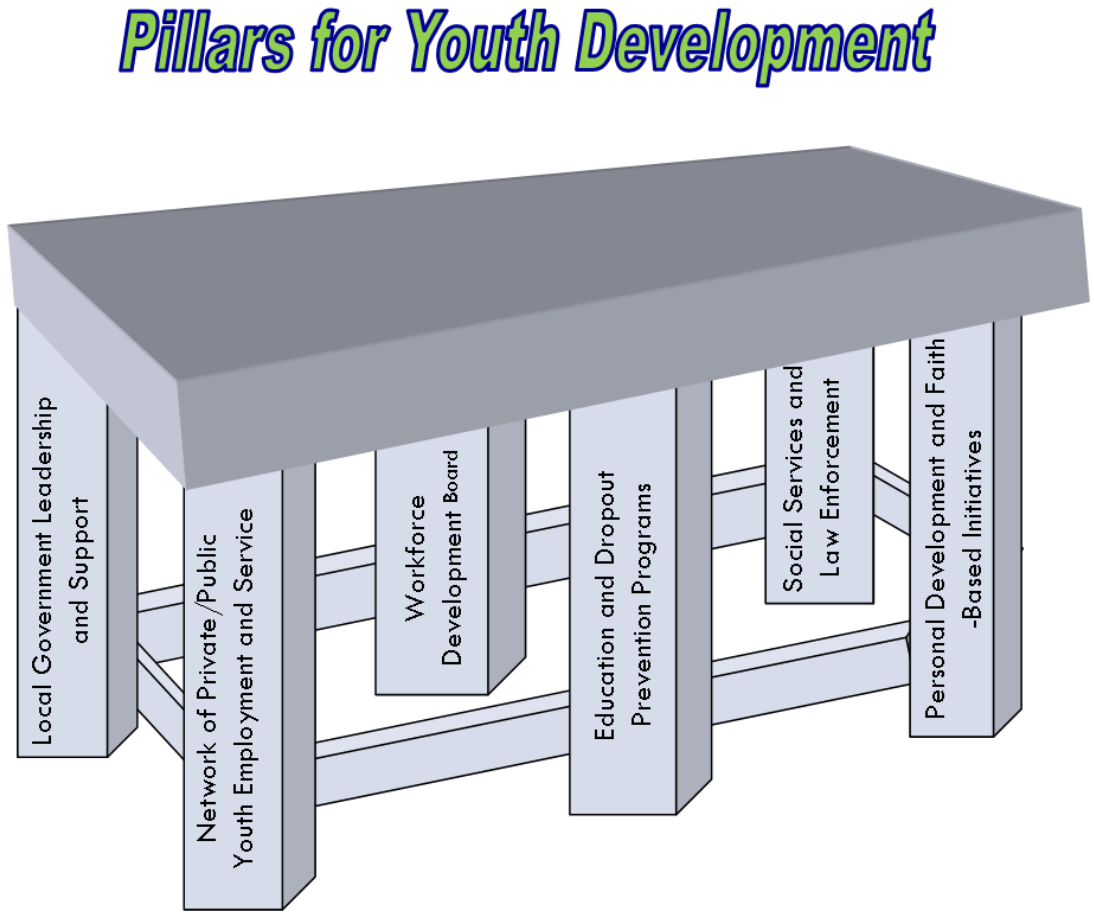
BEST PRACTICES: COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO DISCONNECTED YOUTH

Following the review of the literature related to best practices in dealing with disconnected youth in communities across the nation, the researchers developed the following model. This model depicts the pillars of a strong, collaborative, and systemic structure that supports youth workforce development at the community level. The pillars represent the service areas that support a platform on which disconnected youth can stand and grow toward becoming independent working adults. Each pillar provides a critical support for disconnected youth. When one of the pillars is weak or non-existent, the whole structure is weakened. When there are missing pillars, other pillars (collaborators or service areas) often try to bear the extra weight left by the weakness in these service areas. Regardless of how it is achieved, the best systems designed and built to serve disconnected youth incorporate all of these resources into their strategic approach.

Furthermore, the best programs leverage a systemic approach to maximize resources and build capacity. This includes:

- A unifying vision and plan
- Coordinated management, business, technology, and development services
- Consolidated case management
- Co-location and shared spaces in accessible sites
- Shared staff
- Common points of access
- Systematic and unified measurement and evaluation

Currently in Charlotte, few of these best practices have been utilized. Where these practices are implemented, they are within one program area and not across the system. Movement toward applying these strategies often involves overcoming turf issues and promoting or creating incentives for individual agencies to give a little in some areas in order to provide more and better services to youth overall. A model of best practices to inform this process is presented below. Program examples of the practices described for each Pillar are presented in Appendix D.



Pillar 1: Passionate Champions within Local Government

Successful programs for disconnected youth require passionate and knowledgeable government champions to take up their cause.[26] In most examples, this champion is the Mayor, but models do exist where City Council members, Commissioners, and Department Directors lead the charge for serving disconnected youth. As champions and change agents, these elected and appointed officials present their commitment to this issue as a cornerstone of their administrations and use the successes generated from the systemic approach as evidence of effective and efficient government addressing complex social challenges in the community.

Acting as change agents, passionate champions within local government use their power and position to educate the community about the societal consequences that result when youth disconnect from the traditional pathways to adulthood. Using data, government leaders raise awareness by making the case for a systemic response through the analysis of the costs to the community for failure to respond comprehensively to the needs of disconnected youth.

[26] National League of Cities. The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families. (2005). *Reengaging Disconnected Youth for Municipal Leaders.* Washington, DC: Author. (7).

Government leaders set high community goals for increasing graduation and youth employment rates and reducing youth crime rates. Utilizing existing networks, government champions engage key agencies and important players, like private employers and civic groups including the Chamber of Commerce, in reaching these community goals.

Passionate government leaders often want to design and create innovative programs that are supported, at least in part, by local government funding. In these cases, the successful initiatives that are created in communities are collaborative, not competitive or duplicative. In communities where strong programs already exist, rather than funding specific programs, government leaders support important programmatic elements. Collaboration is encouraged through grants in such areas as youth stipends, transportation services, child care, and systems and reporting mechanisms for measurement and evaluation. By funding these elements, governments are building the capacity for established agencies to address the needs of disconnected youth collectively.

Because of this oversight role in the community at large, government leaders are also in the unique position to advocate for reform when public policies are barriers to achieving successful, independent, employed lives. Examples of such barriers include zero tolerance discipline policies, mandatory sentencing, and inflexible graduation requirements.

Pillar 2: Effective Workforce Development Boards

Communities with successful comprehensive programs for disconnected youth share another common stakeholder: a strong and viable Workforce Development Board.[27] Utilizing the national networks provided by the Workforce Development Boards and the Department of Labor, strong Boards lead comprehensive initiatives by providing leadership on best practices and innovative approaches. Workforce Development Boards use Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funds to create programs that are systemic and collaborative and that leverage resources. These Boards show leadership and support not only to youth employment service providers but to other service providers that support employment success like education and personal development organizations. These Boards also help their communities identify and fill any gaps in essential support services like transportation and child care. Effective Workforce Development Boards offer highly profiled and desired opportunities for community service, similar to United Way Boards.

In many successful communities, effective Workforce Development Boards play the critical role of convener. The Boards bring together influential leaders from across the community to address the issue of disconnected youth, attracting members from private and public organizations. In the role as convener, Workforce Development Boards often coordinate and report comprehensive systems of measurement and evaluation for disconnected youth initiatives. This also puts the Board in the powerful position of having the knowledge to design policy reforms and make recommendations to local, state, and federal policy makers.

Pillar 3: A Network of Youth Employment Service Providers with Strong Private and Public Partnerships

Communities with successful programs for disconnected youth have formal networks of youth employment service providers, including private employers, civic organizations, trade groups,

[27] Harris, L. (2006). *Learning from the Youth Opportunity Experience: Building Delivery Capacity in Distressed Communities.* Washington, DC: The Center for Law and Social Policy.

professional organizations, non-profit agencies and government agencies that provide employment support like workforce training, mentoring, job referrals, and employment programs. In this network, there are formal partnership agreements, by-laws, established goals, regular meetings, and strategic approaches to leveraging resources like sharing staff, consolidating management and business functions, co-locating, avoiding duplication of services, and sharing measurement and evaluation systems. This network also serves as a channel for members to share information, case management, and job referrals.

Multi-year private and public partnerships are highly valued, especially a visible and engaged Chamber of Commerce with a clear commitment to encourage employment support for disconnected youth. All best practices indicate that work experience for disconnected youth is critical. But disconnected youth often lack the job readiness skills and maturity (in addition to the fact that their lives are complicated by barriers associated with poverty) to get that all-important first job and hang onto it long enough to benefit from the experience. Thus, successful programs in this area engage employers who make long-term commitments to hire disconnected youth and to work with them to overcome their circumstances and lack of maturity. These private partners make commitments to provide jobs, internships, mentors, stipends, training, facilities, equipment, and advocacy with support, counsel, and encouragement from other agencies.[28] Best practices indicate that strong, private employer partnerships are profoundly sustaining for the system. Cultivating and sustaining private employer relationships requires dedicated staff and accountability at the highest levels of all agencies involved.

Pillar 4: Education Partners with Innovative Approaches

Strong networks of youth employment providers also know that their success is ultimately limited by the education and maturity level of the youth they serve. Therefore, successful youth employment programs are deeply integrated with education and life skills programs. As noted before, education is the developmental highway to independent success as an adult. As disconnected youth mature, most come to understand the necessity of a high school diploma or equivalency for a successful life as an adult, and the majority of youth who drop out of school eventually reconnect to education through a GED, alternative high school, or traditional high school program.[29] Education programs need to work closely with personal development and employment support programs to help prepare at-risk and disconnected youth as early as possible through the development of the motivation and skill sets required for work and for academic and vocational success.

Communities with strong systems that support disconnected youth value vocational education, inside and outside of the public school setting. Comprehensive programs have closely knit employment and education programs that integrate work or vocational learning and experience *directly* into the curriculum. There is a strong connection between education, work, and life skills. These services may be provided by different agencies, but the delivery experience is seamless from the participant's perspective.

Communities with strong disconnected youth initiatives also have alternative education options (charter schools, performance management schools, and vocational programs) with easy access, admittance,

[28] Harris (2006).

[29] Wald, W., and Martinez, T. (2003). *Connected by 25: Improving the Life Chances of the Country's Most Vulnerable 14-24 Year Olds.* Menlo Park, CA: William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

and re-admittance. The curriculum is flexible, individually designed, easily accessed in non-traditional settings during non-traditional hours and incorporates progressive steps towards success. Some systems even offer alternating days of work and classroom attendance to selected students. Educational programs like these must be available for students who have had numerous false starts.

Pillar 5: Engaging Social Services and Law Enforcement

Youth in foster care, adjudicated youth, and young parents represent distinct but sometimes overlapping populations of disconnected youth. Because of the special challenges and barriers to a successful transition to adulthood resulting from these circumstances, communities with strong disconnected youth initiatives have specialized, yet integrated, services for these youth as a part of the broader comprehensive plan.[30]

Given the workload and inadequacy of resources available to Social Services and Law Enforcement agencies, it can be challenging to get individuals with decision-making authority to the table. Engaging government champions (Pillar 1) in this process is essential. It is also important to ensure that the goals of these agencies, like lower crime rates and educational and vocational attainment for these populations, are included in the community-level goals for comprehensive support and participation of foster and adjudicated youth.

Pillar 6: Personal Development and Faith Based Initiatives for Emotional Maturity

Maturity and the capacity to make positive choices, especially in the face of difficult circumstances, are critical to the successful transition to adulthood. Maturation is a long and difficult process which is greatly enhanced by personal development programs. Communities with strong initiatives for disconnected youth include personal development programs based on the principles of positive youth development in their comprehensive system. These personal development programs address a wide array of topics including leadership, financial literacy, interpersonal skills, character development, social tolerance, exercise, sports, wellness, goal setting, community service, civic participation, arts appreciation, and spiritual growth. Such programs are considered to be of equal importance with education and employment programs and are generally not considered to be elective.

[30] Harris (2006).

BEST PRACTICES: PROGRAM APPROACHES FOR DISCONNECTED YOUTH

As indicated in the Pillar model for a successful transition from youth to adulthood, a network of youth employment service providers with strong public and private partnerships is critical in addressing the needs of disconnected youth. Charlotte certainly has a number of workforce development programs, but as this study indicates, the programs operate independently from each other, with little transparency or coordination and without common goals, shared resources, integration, measurement or evaluation. The existing resources support a patchwork of independent players with varying degrees of capacity, operating with minimal understanding of the collective impacts or outcomes these services provide to the community. When compared with best practices in other cities, this area's youth employment program "Pillar" is not as strong as it could be. Fortunately, there are models of youth workforce development programs that utilize best practices which can be adopted to build effective individual programs that collaborate to form a network of services for the community.

Best Practice # 1: A Youth Development Approach

Long-established research on youth and the transition to adulthood indicates that responsibility, independence, interpersonal skills and the ability to make good decisions in the work environment are developmental skills learned over time. Furthermore, there are basic youth needs that have to be addressed for adequate youth development to occur. These include safety, shelter, health, nutrition and supportive relationships with adults and peers. Fortunately, society has different expectations for youth and adults regarding the relationship between basic needs and work. Adults are expected to work to provide for their basic needs. Conversely, youth development research indicates that in order for youth to be good workers, they need to have their basic needs met. Addressing basic needs must be a first step for any youth program; otherwise, research indicates that most youth will fail to acquire the skills needed to be successful adults.

Beyond basic needs, youth development research indicates that young people need the following for successful engagement:

- Meaningful opportunities for involvement and membership
- Challenging and engaging activities and learning experiences
- Healthy relationships with strong interpersonal communication
- Involvement in a community—a feeling of belonging and contributing

These criteria should be integrated into the curriculum, and youth programs should be audited to ensure that they consider these needs in the design of program components. In many cases, youth employment programs work with community partners who have expertise in designing programs for personal development that build emotional maturity. Programs utilizing youth develop strategies consider personal development to be a critical focus of the curriculum.

Youth employment programs can assess their curriculum's integration of positive youth development strategies by answering the following questions.

- Does the program teach economic self-sufficiency?
- Does the program teach youth to be productive and learn what it means to work?

- Does the program teach youth how to connect or interact with people in a professional manner?
- Does the program teach youth how to make good choices, especially in the workplace?

Practically, integrating youth development strategies into the program means the following:

1. Youth programs address the basic needs of participants before progressing into a specific workforce development curriculum.
2. Programs are tailored to the developmental stage of youth. A developmental needs assessment should be prepared from a robust application, intake, or interview process.
3. Youth programs allow time (a year or longer) for young people to develop, learn, and grow in the lessons taught in the curriculum.
4. Programs invest in staff that understand and care about youth, building in significant time for staff to develop relationships with each participant.
5. Programs have frequent and progressive levels of success. Through workshops, vocational or academic lessons are tied closely with experiential lessons.
6. Youth workforce development programs use work experience in incremental amounts as motivation to complete other components of the program.

Best practice #2: Youth Leading Youth

The youth workforce development programs with the best outcomes for disconnected youth give power to participants through opportunities for leadership, peer mentoring, teaching, coaching, and advocacy. Offering opportunities to become involved in programming creates a better sense of the demands and issues facing the community, builds an increased community presence, and allows dedicated youth to develop leadership skills and earn credentials for future educational and occupational achievement. Studies show that mentors who allow young people to influence activity choice form the closest and most emotionally supportive relationships. Youth are more satisfied with their relationship, and relationships last longer when staff take into account the needs and goals of those they are teaching.[31]

Many employment programs accomplish youth leading youth interaction through a youth council. Youth councils are formal bodies made up of youth (typically ages 16-18) that give youth a meaningful role in policy and engage them in the decision-making process. A permanent youth council provides organizations with an easy way to solicit input from youth to tailor program offerings to their interests and needs, to provide opportunities to contribute to the program and community, and to provide structured leadership experiences.

Furthermore, participants and alumni can serve an important role as a prime marketing tool. Youth and staff can take recruiting efforts to the streets by going door to door telling stories to their neighbors. Youth employment programs frequently include youth incentives for participant referrals,

[31] Jekielek, S., Moore, K.A., & Hair, E.C. (2002). Mentoring Programs and Youth Development: A Synthesis. Washington, DC: *Child Trends*.

or make finding a new recruit part of a graduate requirement. In these programs, former program participants can return to show their pay stubs and talk about their success. Youth can also have a role in developing flyers, posters, and other advertisements for the program.

Best Practice # 3: Employer Partners

In strong youth employment programs, the employers are enthusiastic and committed to serving at-risk youth. Often times, this requires identifying employers who are willing to accept less than perfect behavior from the youth and are willing to give the youth the opportunity to grow and improve. Not every employer who hires youth is successful when employing disconnected youth because positive youth development strategies need to be applied. Some workplaces are conducive to youth development strategies and some are not.

The best youth employment programs spend as much time cultivating and training employers in youth development strategies as they do recruiting youth. The work experience and job site is viewed as an extension of the curriculum, an experiential learning component. This strategy has two major benefits: 1) the employee and employers acknowledge that the young person is still learning, growing, and developing; and 2) it asks that the employer act as another caring adult in the life of the disconnected youth. The best employers offer their own development and educational programs, including internships, job shadowing, apprenticeships, mentoring, tutoring, and classroom education within the workplace.

Another best practice involves engaging employers in the youth training process. This approach includes inviting employers to provide instructional staff, training facilities, and assistance in developing the curriculum. This can also involve engaging employers in active roles such as steering committees and advisory councils. Employer involvement in defining the policies and expectations for skill competencies is critical in developing a local credential that designates youth as being truly work-ready.[32]

Best Practice # 4: Strong Community Presence and Outreach

Successful youth employment programs for disconnected youth create a presence in the communities they serve through conscious efforts to build community awareness of their work. The best programs are highly visible and evidence of community awareness about services is found within neighborhoods. Many youth employment programs have a clearly articulated outreach strategy. Models include a headquarters in a highly visible building with co-located service partners (educational, vocational, social service, or personal development) while maintaining other access points throughout the community with the help of community partners like schools, community centers, police stations, parks, and churches. Having a neighborhood presence builds trust, and leveraging this trust with communities, schools, and youth makes for a successful recruiting strategy for disconnected youth.

Strategies to find and develop community partners include identifying credible adults (clergy, coaches, etc.) in the community and having them publicize the program, developing a relationship with

[32] DeCoursey, J., & Skyles, A. (2007). *Making Connections: Engaging Employers in Preparing Chicago's Youth for the Workforce.* Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. DeCoursey and Skyles' work, one of the first studies focusing on the role of employers in youth workforce development, is based upon fifty-eight interviews conducted in 2003 and late 2005 with youth program providers, educators, employers, and policy experts.

and giving information to military recruiting offices, sponsoring community celebrations, partnering with recreational centers, and placing an ad on the movie screen at the local theater. These strategies are based on flexible missions that value cost sharing, finding common ground for a shared vision, giving recognition to partners, and being creative in scheduling meetings to maximize partner participation.[33]

Best Practice # 5: Professional Development Opportunities for Staff

Successful youth employment programs openly encourage the professional development of their permanent staff. These programs inform their staff of training opportunities and require attendance at a certain number of conferences or workshops a year, or at least offer flexible scheduling for staff who are participating in certification programs and courses. Some offer internal training in adolescent development, leadership, technology, mentoring, mental health assessment, and shadowing programs in which staff can learn from and evaluate each other.

The best youth employment programs have their staff participate in professional organizations that serve disconnected youth and promote positive youth development. Staff make presentations at conferences and lead workshops. This serves to increase the professional development of staff and raise the visibility of the program among other peer agencies. This also becomes a forum to share best practices and develop innovative solutions.

Best Practice # 6: Long-term Support and Tracking of Participants

It is important to have a mechanism for following up with youth after they have received a job, staying in touch to bridge the critical early months of employment by keeping youth attached to the network of youth service providers. Programs highlighted for best practices generally offer 12 months of follow-up services, getting in touch with youth once a month. Follow-up can include one-on-one meetings between staff and youth or phone calls with staff and the youth or their parents. Follow-up services provide young people with the opportunity to continue the relationships they have formed with the caring and knowledgeable adults in the workforce development programs.

Some programs employ a Transition Specialist to administer follow-up. The specialist aids the youth with job leads, job searching, updating resumés, counseling and support to maintain a job, and referrals to agencies for medical, legal, housing, and other needs. Transition specialists also direct youth to "brush up" training to improve skills and provide job-placement assistance for youth who lose their jobs.

Long-term support can also be provided by keeping youth involved with the program through continued structured activities offered to former students. These include job clubs, special education or employer-related presentations, annual open houses, and involvement of former participants as tutors, mentors, and presenters. Continued open access to resources like computers can also keep employed youth in contact with the organization.

Long-term support is also significant for collecting data on instructional approaches, measuring the program's impact on the community, and measuring customer satisfaction. Surveys and direct contact

[33] WIA Learning Exchange for Youth Systems. American Youth Policy Forum August 1, 2002 – September 30, 2003. Retrieved from http://www.aypf.org/publications/wia%20final%20report.pdf

allow the program to measure each young person's progress and growth against their individual development plans. This information also allows the program to measure its success in leadership development.

Best Practice # 7: Personal Intake and Placement

The best youth employment programs devote a significant amount of time to the intake process. The basic application and orientation can be completed online followed by an extensive one-on-one interview which helps determine the appropriate developmental placement of each participant. The interview and placement process can require two to four meetings with the young person, including at least one meeting with the parents.

Best practices for intake also suggest using the work readiness and life skills class component as a forum to assess and provide feedback to youth. For example, Changing Tomorrows, a youth employment program run by Goodwill Industries of North Central Wisconsin, began using a two-week, 60-hour class in work readiness/life skills to assess youth motivation and willingness to participate and to determine the strengths and weaknesses of each young person. Areas of concern were noted and shared with the participant and other program staff. Since implementing this strategy, the number of early negative program terminations has decreased dramatically.

Best Practice # 8: Programs for Parents

Studies have found that employers view involved parents as one of the leading contributors to a positive experience between employers and their young employees. Employers find that youth with involved parents are more prepared for work. Indications of involved parents can include inquiries for program information, communication of concerns about their child's experience, contacts with employers to find out more about their child's progress, and notification of employers if their child is sick or absent.[34]

Effective youth programs offer structured opportunities for parents and other significant adults in the youth's life to engage in the participant's program experience. These include inviting parents to orientation and a ceremonial graduation and opening program activities to adults. Clear credentials also provide evidence of competency and achievement that can be shared with hesitant parents. Enlisting parents as volunteers in program activities and opening up advisory opportunities for parents can expand parental involvement. Outreach to parents includes providing home visits or arranging one-on-one sessions with parents. Implementing a "bring your parent to work" day with willing employers will provide feedback opportunities for family members on the youth's progress.

Youth employment programs serve as a conduit to resources like workshops, materials, services, and advocacy for parents. Connecting parents to adult programs and inviting parents to use the organization's referral network increases parental engagement.

[34] DeCoursey and Skyles (2007).

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KEY FINDINGS FROM PRIMARY RESEARCH

This study included primary research from numerous stakeholder groups, including leaders in the community, agencies that serve at-risk youth, school professionals, employers, the youth themselves, parents, and Goodwill staff members. This primary research was conducted through an array of surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews. This section presents the key findings from each of these groups.

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Community Leaders

INTERVIEWS

Ten prominent individuals in Charlotte's civic and business community were interviewed to capture their opinions on the disconnected youth problem and the related youth employment service community in Charlotte. These individuals included elected officials as well as leaders in the education and business communities. As leaders in Charlotte, these individuals provided a unique perspective on the issue of disconnected youth, especially at the policy level.

DISCONNECTED YOUTH IN CHARLOTTE: PROBLEM AND SOLUTIONS

All of the interviewees believed that engaging at-risk and disconnected youth is an important issue for Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, and several felt it is the most important issue the community faces.

To address this problem, the respondents emphasized the need for a holistic approach that emanates from changes at the societal level and addresses the total environment in which youth grow up. More specifically, the two most important conditions they cited in preventing at-risk youth from disconnecting are 1) to engage youth in preventative programs at an early age (middle school at the latest) to keep them in school; and 2) for youth of all ages to have a relationship with at least one caring adult- the more of these relationships youth have the better.

Reducing High School Dropouts

All respondents spoke of the importance of a high school diploma to youth's employment opportunities and the importance of reducing the number of students that drop out of school to the well-being of the community at large. When asked for specific suggestions of how to do this, the responses largely centered on time-honored ideas; most of which would be difficult, if not impossible, to implement unless the current measures of success for children and their teachers change.

Responses included:

- A more flexible approach to education that treats students as individuals with their own learning styles, abilities, and needs
- Abundant recognition of success and the worth of each individual
- Increased emphasis on creative thinking
- More project-based curricula
- Making education more fun and relevant
- Increased career exploration and vocational opportunities earlier in the educational process
- Identifying and engaging potential dropouts long before they reach 14 or 16 (the age when they can legally drop out)

> "We need to change the delivery model. We are using the same framework that my grandparents experienced. We need small groups, self-pacing, with technology integrated to encourage creative thinking."
>
> - Eric Davis, Chair, CMS Board of Education

Employment Opportunities

The interviewees all agreed that gaining some sort of work experience during their teen years, even in the "dreaded fast food industry", is critical for at-risk youth to reach the next level of employment opportunities. Given the value they place on work experience, the respondents believed that work experience was the most important component of youth employment programs. In their opinion, many of the youth likely to be in these programs may have derived limited or no knowledge of what the world of work is really like from their home environment and, thus, need to be placed in a work environment to learn the routine and value of work. Ideally, this work experience would be an actual job with standard job expectations, but it could also include working with mentors, job shadowing, short-term work experiences, and apprenticeships. The Goodwill GoodGuides program is an example of the expanded mentoring focus.

> "We have this stigma that bagging groceries is beneath all of us, but if a young person is looking for a way to make a little money, what is wrong with washing dishes or mowing grass or bagging groceries or working at the local McDonald's? Kids have been doing these jobs for years. This is how you start in the world or work."
>
> -Bob Morgan, President & CEO, Charlotte Chamber of Commerce

In order for youth employment programs to provide this experience, the respondents stressed that the community must come together—that neither Goodwill nor any other individual service provider could make this happen without the full cooperation of the government and business community.

Goodwill's Role in Youth Employment Services

The overwhelming opinion expressed by the interviewees was that Goodwill, because of the respect that it has in the community and the success of its adult programs, is well-positioned to provide youth employment training but that they cannot act alone. Goodwill has a distinct opportunity to take a leadership role in the community's response to the need for training youth in this demographic. Leadership is also needed in providing a central agency that would serve as the coordinator for all other agencies providing services to this population group. That leader could be Goodwill.

> "It would be a natural fit for Goodwill to talk to these kids just about basic workplace soft skills."
>
> - Bob Morgan, President & CEO, Charlotte Chamber of Commerce

In terms of programmatic elements, everyone agreed that the program should emphasize soft skills, such as positive attitudes, résumé writing, interviewing skills, how to dress, punctuality, customer service, personal financial training, how to be "nice" to employers, team members, and clients, and other such related skills. Two other components the interviewees feel are important for the program to include are work experience of some kind and tracking of the youth completing the program in order to be able to gauge success.

Youth Service Providers

INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUP

One of the key elements of this project was the development of a current, and easily updated, Youth Services Catalog, compiled through interviews of individuals at 17 youth service agencies in the Charlotte community. In addition to the information for the catalog, a number of common themes about the collective youth service community in Charlotte emerged.

CHARLOTTE'S YOUTH SERVICE COMMUNITY

The 17 agencies that comprised the youth employment service community in Charlotte collectively served an estimated 26,000 youth in 2009.[31] Nearly half were served by two programs: Communities In Schools and the YMCA. Together, the youth employment services community spends about $25 million a year on these services.

Service Duplication and Gaps

In the Charlotte youth services community, multiple agencies serve youth that failed to complete high school. However, there is inadequate service availability for youth facing other barriers to employment. A number of programs essentially do the same thing: provide GED preparation for high school dropouts. Although this apparent duplication of services might be a necessary geographic distribution of these programs driven by an inadequate public transportation system, this over-emphasis on GED preparation has left a gap in other critical employment services for at-risk youth.

The clientele for these employment programs is largely African American youth. Although there are Latino and Caucasian youth needing these services, few are enrolled in these programs. Most of these programs target the 14 (and maybe younger) through 18 year old segment of this population. While individuals that are 18 and above are eligible to enter the adult training programs in the community, the 18 to 24 group (young adults) are generally overlooked.

Overall, these programs do not serve the severely disconnected youth. Although most programs claim that they are open to anyone needing the provided service, most have some criteria for inclusion—some level of academic skills, motivation to do the program, lack of mental health issues, and having no criminal record, for example. Participation in any of these programs is voluntary; therefore, those who are most in need of employment services are not likely to participate in these programs. Two populations, although relatively few in numbers, are of particular concern: youth aging out of foster care and youth completing incarcerations.

Little Collaboration Among Individual Agencies

Most agencies claim to cooperate and collaborate with other agencies providing the same or similar services. However, when asked which agencies they collaborate with most frequently, the agency

[31] It must be noted here that there is possible duplication in this number because some individuals may be enrolled in more than one program.

representatives had a difficult time naming any agencies other than the ones with which they have some sort of contractual relationship.

Although many of these agencies provide similar services, no attempt has been made to use a common curriculum for most of the key activities such as vocational assessment, consumer training, job readiness, financial education, or life skills.

When asked to name other agencies that are doing a good job of providing services to the 14 to 24 at-risk and disconnected age group, the respondents were either reluctant or unable to come up with names readily. Overall, the agency most frequently named as a "good" provider of services was Communities In Schools. Most of the agencies that were in our sample, and some rather large organizations at that, were not named by another agency as a "good" agency.

SHORTCOMINGS OF YOUTH SERVICE AGENCIES

Tracking and evaluation

One of the most glaring shortcomings that emerged was the fact that none of these agencies have an effective way of tracking the youth who complete their programs, making evaluation of their programs difficult at best. Some programs attempt tracking, but most of them are based on self-reporting by those who completed the program, and thus, have unreliable results.

> "How do they (service providers) know what they have done is working? Often they don't. And I don't mean that in a critical way. I just mean that for any of us, if we do not have the data to support our actions, we are not able to determine what our outcomes are. And if you don't know what your outcomes are you cannot do program planning for sustainability."
>
> - Barb Pellin, Assistant Superintendent, CMS

Work experience

Another serious weakness identified through this group was the failure of these programs to provide any sort of work experience for the participants. Although all of the interviewees agreed that having the opportunity for some sort of work experience was, perhaps, the most important thing that could be provided for youth in these programs, few of these programs actually do that. Everyone concerned recognized this fact but felt unable to do anything about it.

Retention

Retention is an especially poignant problem for programs that serve high school dropouts. Having already quit one difficult activity in their life (high school), many begin a GED or employment program only to stop showing up when they get frustrated or bored. A fairly common estimate from the agency representatives who were willing to be candid about the retention problem was that only about one-third of those who enrolled successfully completed the program.

School Professionals

SURVEY

> "A high school diploma is not enough to ensure lifelong work. In the fifties, a high school diploma had you set for work."
> - Anthony Foxx, Mayor, City of Charlotte

School professionals are in a unique position to comment on the needed support for at-risk youth in our community. Members of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools System and members of Communities In Schools were surveyed to ascertain what services are currently offered to at-risk youth at the school level, as well as to identify problems youth face as they seek to continue their education and/or find employment.

BARRIERS YOUTH FACE IN GAINING EMPLOYMENT

The greatest barriers the respondents believed at-risk youth at their school face in gaining employment were

- Lack of motivation
- Lack of support from family
- Low grades
- Transportation

> "Public schools claim that junior/community college has the vocational role. We disagree. This role must start in high school. It allows students to find out what they want and to realize how they can use their curricular skills. Summer camps can also serve this function, even before high school."
>
> - Sandy Cranford, Director of Human Resources, Carowinds

EVALUATION OF SCHOOL SYSTEM'S ABILITY TO PREPARE YOUTH FOR THE WORKFORCE

The chief problems respondents reported in their schools included poverty, lack of parental involvement, low achievement, absenteeism, and emotional disconnection.

In general, the respondents felt that the public school system in Charlotte is not doing a good job of preparing at-risk youth for the workforce and was failing to get at-risk youth into college, other post-secondary training programs, and internships. Despite their dissatisfaction with the school system, the respondents believed that local organizations (like Communities In Schools) are doing a better job with this group. Although respondents cited increasing at-risk youth's chances of graduating as the greatest challenge of the public school system, they thought that local organizations had more success in this.

Youth needs and school services

The areas in which respondents believed youth need the most help included:

- Life skills
- Homework/tutoring
- Work readiness
- Career awareness and exploration

The areas in which respondents believed the schools are providing youth the most help were:

- Homework/tutoring
- Basic education skills
- Physical and mental health
- Career awareness and exploration

Gaps

Looking at the balance of at-risk youth's greatest needs and the services available to them at their school, several gaps clearly need to be filled either by the schools themselves or by other organizations in the community. The two primary areas to be addressed are life skills, such as personal finances, and work readiness training. Respondents indicated that they would like to see their school offer services in both of these areas including financial education, job referral/ placement, vocational assessment, and job readiness training.

> "Vocational training needs to be revamped to train students to work in fields that have jobs."
>
> - Brian Collier, Senior Vice President, Foundation For The Carolinas

Despite these gaps and the self-acknowledged failure of the school system to prepare at-risk youth for the workforce, the respondents reported making few referrals of students to youth employment programs. Of the few made, Goodwill was named as the organization which received the most referrals.

Employers

SURVEY

Two groups of employers were surveyed: those who had participated in the Youth Job Connection program by hiring a young participant and those who had not participated. Both groups were asked to comment on the qualities and qualifications they look for in hiring youth. Those that had participated in the YJC were also asked to give feedback on the program and the youth they had employed.

LITTLE RESPONSE

One of the main observations from this component of the research is how little input and response the researchers received from employers. Only six of the 24 participating employers contacted responded to the survey, and 67 of the more than 600 potential employers contacted responded. Although this lack of response was a frustrating aspect in conducting the research, the researchers believe that it underscores the difficulty Goodwill and other youth employment programs face with the work experience component, especially considering the current state of the economy.

When the economy is in turmoil as it is today, employers are hiring fewer people. For the few open positions they do have, they have an abundance of qualified and even over-qualified applicants. Consequently, employers do not even consider at-risk and disconnected youth because there is no need to do so.

In addition, Goodwill does not have a large base of employers who have participated in their program, and does not have direct lines of communication with the few that have participated, making it difficult to contact them for feedback.

Thus, the researchers have drawn additional findings from other components of the research, the community leader interviews in particular, to complement the survey responses and further inform this section.

> "Do I have employers call me and say that I am unable to find the workers that I need because those available are dropouts, young, unskilled workers with no job experience? No. Since the economy is currently weak, employers have much less turnover than they did when the economy was robust. Also, Charlotte continues to be a destination for well-trained workers from other parts of the country and the world."
>
> -Bob Morgan, President & CEO, Charlotte Chamber of Commerce

JOBS AVAILABLE FOR YOUTH

Employers, youth, and parents alike commented repeatedly that jobs for youth have been increasingly difficult to come by in today's gloomy economic climate. Few employers, other than fast food franchises, depend on young employees. Now, even these stalwarts of youth employment are faced with increasingly large applicant pools for fewer jobs. Employers are often opting for skilled adults who have been laid off and are desperate for work, putting youth with no employment experience in

direct competition with qualified (and often over-qualified) adults with years of experience for even the lowliest jobs.

Only half of the employers responding to the survey reported hiring youth. About 45% of the jobs those establishments had for youth were office jobs (administrative, data entry, reception, etc), illustrating that there *are* options for youth outside of the fast food arena. Still, the remaining 55% were non-office jobs, which included those in fast food, retail, and others.

> "There were between 5,800 and 6,000 applicants before the economic turn. This year there are already over 15,000 applicants. Last year we took over 18,000 applications. This year 650 people showed up to be re-hired. Last year 350 people showed up."
>
> - Sandy Cranford, Director of Human Resources, Carowinds

WHAT EMPLOYERS WANT IN YOUNG EMPLOYEES

Employers are looking for employees who are ready to work. In a full employment economy, which the area enjoyed for about twenty years before the recent recession, employers were willing to teach their new employees how to do the job. Today, the expectation of a new employee is that he/she arrive ready to do the job and become part of the team. Few of the employers surveyed reported any training or support systems to help youth develop professionally, making the hiring of youth, let alone at-risk youth who need extra help in these areas, even less likely or feasible.

In terms of specific skills, employers responded that they expect incoming employees to have reasonable verbal and written communications skills, at least an average reading ability, some technology skills, the ability to work with a team, enough math skills to make change, and general customer service skills. In addition, they prefer those with strong soft skills such as being punctual, dressing appropriately, being responsible, acknowledging supervisory roles, and accountability.

In terms of particular qualifications, many employers indicated that they would not consider any applicant who did not have a high school diploma or the equivalent GED accreditation. Employers are reluctant, particularly in this economic environment, to hire anyone with any criminal record. Although somewhat more forgiving of misdemeanors, employers consider youth with felonies on their record practically unemployable.

YOUTH JOB CONNECTION FEEDBACK

Overall, the employers that had participated in the Youth Job Connection reported that their experience had been positive. They were pleased with the staff and the program as a whole. They were less pleased, however, with the youth that they employed. Only two of the six respondents said they would provide positive references for their young employees in the future. Similarly, the majority of these employers believed that Goodwill needs to increase the amount of training for the youth that come through this program. It is important to note that these findings are based on a small number of responses.

Youth

SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS

Listening to the youth themselves was a major component of this study. This group was reached through a survey and three focus groups. The survey was administered to participants of the Youth Job Connection program and focused on information about the participants (demographics, home life, education, etc), what barriers they face in finishing school and/or finding a job, and what they need in terms of employment services. The focus groups included members of Goodwill's Youth Advisory Council, participants in the Youth Job Connection program, and youth who are not involved with Youth Job Connection. The two focus groups involving Goodwill participants were intended to get feedback from the youth on the Youth Job Connection program and to identify unmet needs and barriers the participants face in trying to get a job.

It should be noted here that none of the means used to elicit feedback from youth really tapped the severely disconnected. This group is almost a ghost: we know they exist but because they do not volunteer for any of the support programs, they never appear in the existing system and their feedback is very difficult to capture.

PORTRAIT OF YOUTH JOB CONNECTION PARTICIPANTS

One of the key findings the survey revealed is that, in general, the participants of the Youth Job Connection program were not disconnected youth, and most were at fairly low risk of becoming disconnected. Only a small percentage were dropouts or attended an alternative school, had children, lived in foster care, had run-ins with the law or problems with drugs/alcohol or gangs (the highest risk factors for or indicators of disconnection).

Instead, the greatest risk factor in most of these respondents' lives was living in a low-income family that is headed by a single mother. A full three-quarters of the respondents received free or reduced lunch, a well-used indicator of poverty, and 42% lived in families headed by their mother alone. Although this percentage was not a majority, when compared to the numbers for the County overall (2/3 of children lived in married couple families, and only 1/4 lived in single-mother households[32]), this group was clearly over-represented. The majority of these participants were in school and intended to stay there until they graduated, were reasonably good students, had positive attitudes about work, and would like to find a job soon.

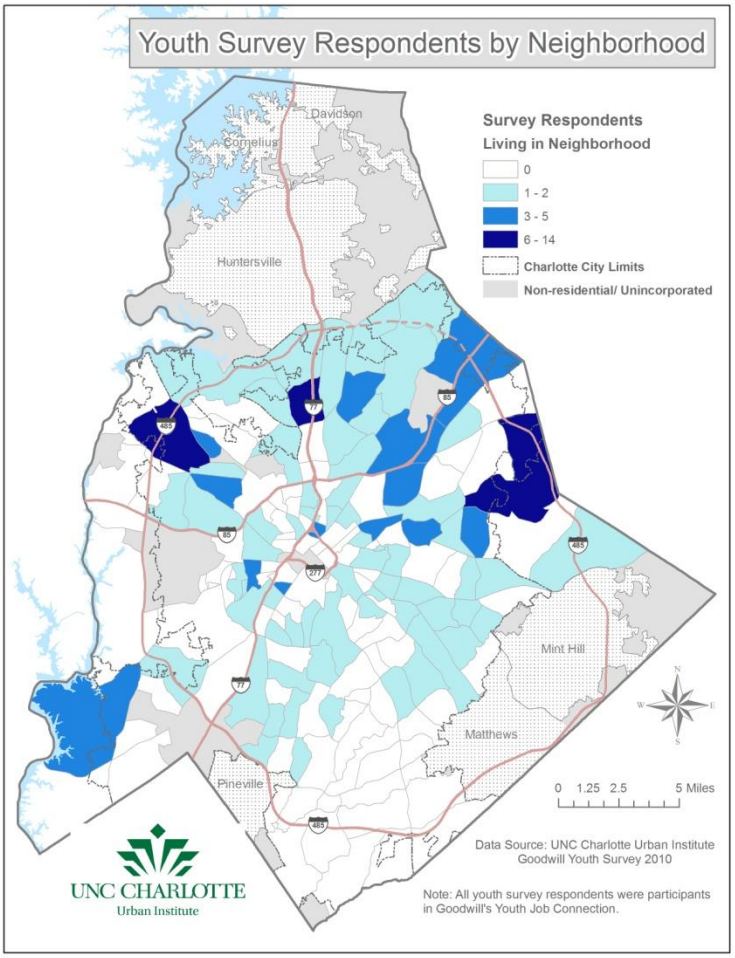
Demographically, the majority of participants (85%) were black and in the middle of their teen years (almost 2/3 were between the ages of 14 and 16). Geographically, the respondents were fairly dispersed, with the largest number in the Beatties Ford/Trinity neighborhood of North Charlotte (Figure 14). When examining the geographic distribution by the school respondents attend, West Mecklenburg and West Charlotte high schools stand out as having the most participants (Figure 15).

[32] U.S. Census Bureau. 2008. American Community Survey.

NEED FOR EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

Although these youth were doing well in school and generally would not be considered disconnected or at high risk of becoming disconnected, this survey illustrates that they still had a clear need for employment services. The number one goal listed by the respondents for the coming year was to find a job, and nearly 2/3 reported spending at least some time looking for a job during a typical week. However, less than 10% currently had a job (part-time, full-time, or temporary), and nearly 80% had never had a part-time job.

FIGURE 14. GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF YOUTH SURVEY RESPONDENTS BY NEIGHBORHOOD



These participants not only indicated that they need help gaining work experience, as illustrated in the previous paragraph, they want and are actively seeking this help. The area in which the participants said they needed the most help was looking for a job, followed by career exploration (knowing more about what careers are out there and which ones they are interested in). In addition, almost half of the respondents reported receiving help looking for a job and/or participating in a job training class in the past month.

BARRIERS YOUTH FACE IN GAINING EMPLOYMENT

Lack of Experience

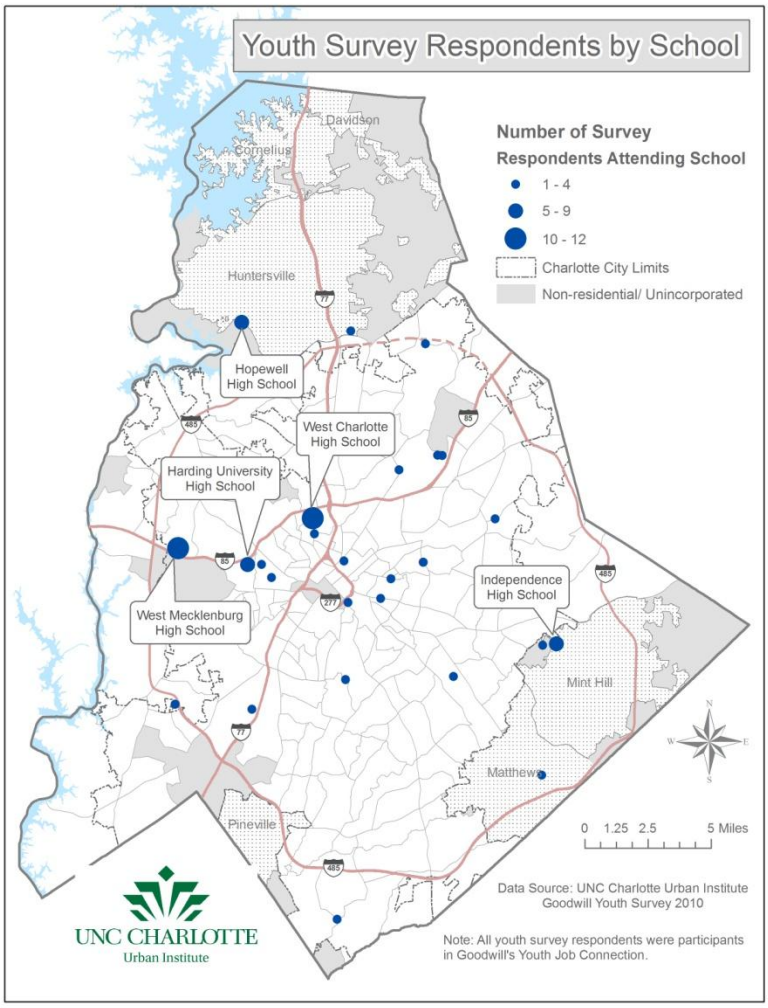
The chief barrier survey respondents felt would keep them from achieving their employment goals was a lack of experience. Just over half of the youth who took the survey cited lack of experience as a barrier for them. This opinion was supported by the fact that nearly 80% of the respondents had never had a part-time job.

Transportation

Nearly all of the focus group participants reported that transportation was the number one barrier to getting the job they wanted. Without a car of their own, or even a driver's license in many cases,

these participants were completely reliant upon their parents for transportation. For many, public transportation was not a viable option because they did not know how to navigate the complex bus system or refused to ride it altogether. Having to rely on their parents to drive them was a serious problem for these teens. Several declared they would not be able to take a particular job because their parents would not be able to get them there.

FIGURE 15. GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF YOUTH SURVEY RESPONDENTS BY SCHOOL



Age

For a number of focus group participants, their age was a significant barrier keeping them from getting a job. Most employers considered those aged 13, 14 and 15 as too young to hire. However, some of these young participants discussed participating in more informal jobs like babysitting and pet sitting while they waited to turn 16 and become more employable.

Motivation

A few participants admitted they had not received jobs yet because they were not motivated and were not looking hard enough. When asked how this barrier could be overcome, they remarked that going after jobs that they really wanted and were interested in would make them try harder than just going after any job they could get.

YOUTH JOB CONNECTION FEEDBACK

All focus group participants spoke positively about their experience in the Youth Job Connection program. They found it easy to apply to and get into the program. They raved about the friendliness and dedication of the staff, and those that had jobs had good things to say about their employers. They were, however, less enthusiastic about the classes, describing them as boring, too long, and negatively reminiscent of school. As one participant put it, "After you get out of school, you want a break, not another long class."

Suggestions for improvement

Focus group participants offered a number of ideas on ways to improve the classes as well as the program as a whole, including:

- More job connection locations
- Shorter class sessions that occur more often
- More interactive elements in the classes like games, role playing, and mock interviews
- Use of popular teen online job search engines to advertise for the program
- Greater racial/ethnic diversity in program participants

Additional Services

When asked about additional services they would like Goodwill to offer, the responses were mixed. Members of the Youth Advisory Council felt that the program should improve the services it already offers rather than adding new ones. The participants in the Youth Job Connection Participant focus group, however, named a number of services they would like Goodwill to offer:

- Transportation assistance or at least a tutorial on how to use public transit
- Additional career-specific classes (cooking classes, music classes, fashion design classes, etc)
- Serving as a hang-out spot for teens on the weekends

Parents

FOCUS GROUP

> "Every youth needs a caring adult and someone in their lives that makes them say, 'I want to be like you.'" - Eric Davis, Chair, CMS Board of Education

A focus group was held with the parents of Youth Job Connection participants to get their feedback on the program as well. Eight parents participated in this focus group, and their comments are presented below.

BARRIERS YOUTH FACE IN GAINING EMPLOYMENT

Age and Lack of Experience

When asked to list some things that make it difficult for their children to get the job that they want, the most common response was age. Parents indicated that very few companies hire those who are under 16 years old. Although the age barrier is solved inevitably by time, the related lack of work experience barrier is not. This is particularly problematic for youth who are just entering the workforce because most employers look for experience as a criterion for hiring. As countless young people have asked in frustration, "How can I gain experience if no one will hire me because I have no experience?" To end this cycle, the parents suggested Goodwill provide more job opportunities for youth within Goodwill so they can gain first-hand work experience. Another way to solve the age-experience dilemma is to create partnerships with local employers to reserve some positions for youth.

Transportation

Another barrier mentioned by parents was transportation. Even if their children were to find a job, some parents would be responsible for getting them to the job, especially if their child is not of driving age. A challenge for Goodwill and youth program participants is to find jobs that are within walking distance of their home or school or are accessible by public transportation.

YOUTH JOB CONNECTION FEEDBACK

Overall, parents had many positive things to say about the youth program and the Goodwill organization as a whole. The most reoccurring positive comment was the friendliness and great customer service from the staff. Parents also had positive things to say about the classes offered to youth in the program, particularly the broad curriculum. For the most part, they could not comment on the employers because their children had not been employed.

In general, parents felt that Goodwill has done a good job connecting with parents. Still, these participants described having limited experience with Goodwill. Only one had volunteered with the organization, but several had previously donated to Goodwill stores. The participants also felt that Goodwill could do a better job advertising their services to the public and "selling the image" of Goodwill, particularly for youth who may only be familiar with Goodwill stores.

Suggestions for improvement

Participants offered a number of suggestions Goodwill could implement to improve the services it currently provides through the program, including:

- More job connection locations
- More opportunities for real work experience
- Better advertising of employment services
- Sell a different image to youth that separates YJC from Goodwill stores

Additional Services

They also offered suggestions on additional services they thought Goodwill should be providing, such as:

- Job placement
- Training for parents on how to help their youth in their job search
- Group therapy sessions for youth to discuss issues they aren't comfortable talking about with their parents or at school
- Personal finance classes

Goodwill Youth Services Staff

FOCUS GROUP

The final key stakeholder in this study was the staff of the Youth Job Connection program. Their intimate involvement with the program and its participants puts them in a unique position to provide informed feedback on the operation of the program. Comments were captured through a focus group discussion that included six Goodwill staff members of varying ages and levels of experience.

YOUTH JOB CONNECTION FEEDBACK

In the first year of this program's operation, the staff was overwhelmed by the demand for their services. For the first several months, the staff did all they could to get a handle on the overwhelming number of applicants and youth moving through the classes. Now that they are better equipped to handle the number of participants and have some time to reflect, they determined that the program needs to scale back. The staff want to help as many youth as possible, but at the same time, they want to hone their focus so they can spend their limited resources on doing a few things well.

Through their involvement in the program, the staff have come to realize that some youth who participate in the program are just not ready to have a job. The staff expressed frustration at their inability to meet the needs of all youth that come through their door, but also realized that serving these individuals takes time and resources away from those participants who are ready for a job and are motivated to get one.

The remaining feedback from staff concerned the program's strengths, areas needing improvement, things needing to be considered in order to keep the program on track, and suggestions for improvement.

Strengths

- Customer service and dedication of staff
- Resources available through Goodwill
- Large number of youth served
- One-on-one job counseling sessions

Areas Needing Improvement

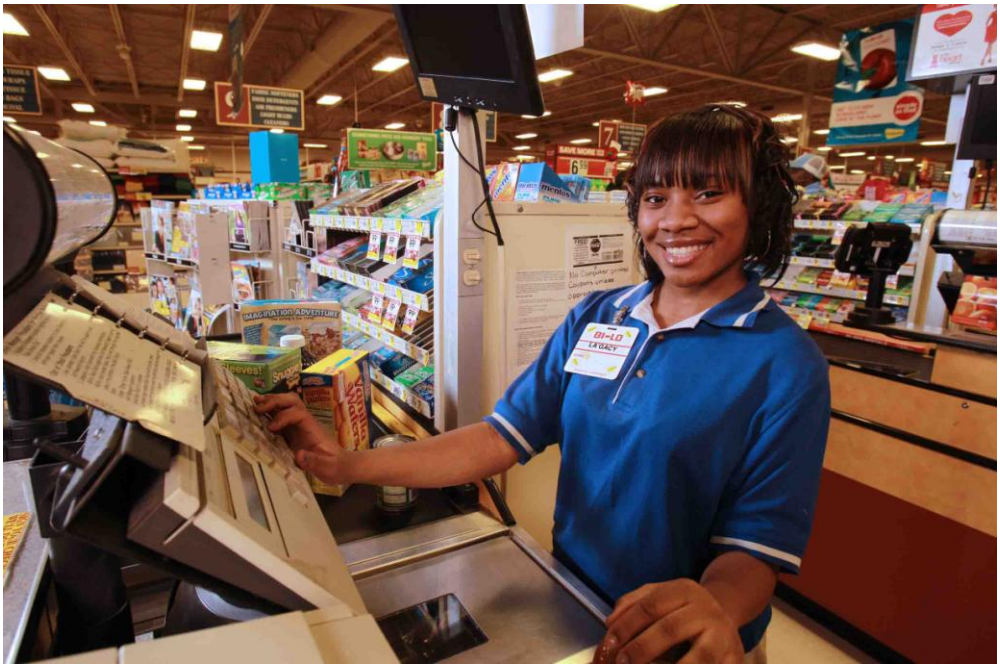
- Quality of services
- Curriculum is not broad or deep enough

To keep the program on track

- Ensure that volunteers are engaging teachers and know the material they are teaching
- Nurture relationships with employers
- Do not expand too quickly
- Identify employers that are not just looking for free labor, but want to help youth and understand that there will be challenges in employing at-risk youth

Suggestions for Improvement

- Focus on youth who are ready and motivated to participate, referring others to appropriate services
- Offer orientation for parents so they have realistic expectations and understand how they can be supportive
- Revamp curriculum to cover more topics in greater depth, focus on soft skills and workplace etiquette, and offer a second level for those who want to learn more
- Remain open to youth as a safe haven even after they have completed the program
- Increase staff knowledge of other programs to facilitate referrals



RECOMMENDATIONS

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Recommendations

STRATEGIC AND PROGRAMMATIC

Many 14 to 24 year old youth make it through high school, receive a high school diploma and continue their education and training by going to community colleges, four year institutions, specialized training programs, or the armed services. Members of this group may need some extra support along the way. However, for the most part, they are able to successfully navigate the educational opportunities that are available and become productive, employed adults. Simultaneously, many 14 to 24 year old youth drop out of high school or graduate without the knowledge and skills needed to transition to additional training and/or to participate successfully in the workforce. These youth essentially become disconnected from society, destined for a life of poverty and dependence on inadequate public services and even criminal activity that threatens the well-being of the community.

While there is general understanding of the factors that contribute to the failure of these youth to transition successfully to adulthood, and there are numerous programs and services in place to help young people get back on track, the number of youth that are at-risk or disconnected remains significant and unacceptable. While Goodwill's Youth Job Connection (YJC) program currently serves a number of at-risk youth, it does not serve those who are most in need—those who have become disconnected. This assessment has identified a number of service gaps and ways to improve existing programs for both at-risk and disconnected youth that should be considered by Goodwill as well as by other service providers and stakeholders in the community. If Goodwill decides to reach out to this most challenging and needy group, specific recommendations for including disconnected youth as a target group are incorporated in the recommendations below.

The following recommendations to improve workforce development programs for at-risk and disconnected youth are based on a review of best practices and the analysis of the primary research which included youth, parents, YJC staff, staff from other local youth programs, employers and community leaders.

The presentation starts with strategic steps that Goodwill could take to improve its overall youth program delivery system that could then serve as a model for other programs in the county. It also suggests actions for Goodwill to take as a leader in creating specific partnerships that would greatly enhance the programs and services available to Mecklenburg's at-risk youth. Collectively, these strategies could spur the formation of a coalition of effective community partners necessary to support a comprehensive workforce development system for the community.

The strategic recommendations are followed by specific program recommendations for Goodwill that address work experience, program curriculum, support services, and outreach. This list of recommendations is extensive and Goodwill will need to consider carefully which, if any, of the changes to incorporate in their delivery system.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Goodwill was identified by employers, youth service providers, and community leaders as a leading candidate to take a leadership role in building a system of programs and services that effectively addresses the workforce development needs of Charlotte's youth. Goodwill could approach this challenge by first directing its resources toward closing gaps in the current delivery system through the

improvement and expansion of Goodwill services that will directly support many at-risk youth and include disconnected youth as well. By establishing a strong program, Goodwill would provide examples of effective program components and related data support systems that could be adopted by other programs throughout the County. While the recommendations presented in this section were developed with the Goodwill program in mind, most of them would also be applicable to other youth programs in the County. As Goodwill continues to develop its model program, it should begin to take a leadership role in drawing the numerous programs throughout Mecklenburg County into a collaborative partnership that would form a comprehensive approach to helping youth in this community. Recommendations on possible first steps toward building a systemic approach are described below.

Establish Two Programs for Youth

Currently, Goodwill's Youth Job Connection program targets youth between the ages of 14 and 21. The researchers have found that this population is difficult to address through a single program because it contains two distinct populations—youth and young adults—which have different needs and require separate approaches. It is our recommendation that Goodwill continue to serve both of these populations but that it should do so with two unique programs and expand its services to youth until they reach the age of 24.

1. Partnership with Goodwill, CIS, and CMS

First, Goodwill could address the dire need for vocational education and soft skills training for youth that are still in high school. To accomplish this, Goodwill could join with Communities In Schools (CIS) and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) and provide vocational and soft skills training. This training could be provided initially in the schools that are in the CIS network. This approach would encourage at-risk and some potentially disconnected youth to stay in school, achieve a high school diploma, and have vocational training that would help them secure worthwhile employment upon graduation (the track is widely recognized as preferable to any outcome associated with dropping out and even with acquiring a GED). While CIS and CMS are recognized as the major organizations serving at-risk youth, neither of them provide the level of vocational exploration or soft skills training needed for youth to enter a career path directly from high school. Goodwill has a strong relationship with CIS and the expertise to fill this gap and is already serving many at-risk 14 to 16 year old youth through YJC.

This strategy would also have other positive impacts. If the training were provided after school in the school buildings, the transportation barrier would be reduced and youth would be provided with several additional hours of safe haven every day. Offering the program in CIS schools would also distance the program from the larger Goodwill organization, reducing the stigma this population associates with the name Goodwill, as well as increase awareness of the program and widen its reach.

2. Tailor Adult Services for Young Adults

Goodwill could also address the significant workforce development needs of young adults (18-24) through a variation of its existing adult services. This age range is often a nebulous time in life, when individuals are no longer youth but not yet adults either. As a result, this group is often overlooked and underserved. GED programs, for example, are readily available to Charlotte youth up to age 18 and then for the adult population, but 18 to 24 year olds often find it difficult

to receive appropriate instruction. As legal adults, Goodwill's GED preparation and workforce development services are already open to these individuals but are not necessarily appropriate for them. As young adults, these individuals are not as mature as the adults Goodwill usually serves, and most do not know what they want to do or can do for a career, so Goodwill should tailor this program accordingly and focus more on emotional development, work readiness, and career exploration. In addition, this young adult program could be a good avenue for Goodwill to reach out to those young adults with particularly high needs, such as those who are aging out of foster care or out of juvenile detention.

Tracking

Goodwill could take the lead in developing a tracking system for all youth who complete workforce development programs in Mecklenburg County. A basic tracking system could attempt to track individuals as they complete the programs at regular intervals for a specified period of time, two years perhaps. It would seek to verify work history and to identify other support services that were used during this time. An alternative approach would be to identify a group of participants selected from all graduates that agree to be available periodically to provide follow-up information. Incentives would be needed to ensure participation as agreed upon in a contract between the tracking agency and the participant. A new group would be started on a regular basis, and tracking under this approach could run from two to five years. (This approach is used successfully in health and in product marketing research.)

This system would also include a list of all youth that are currently participating in programs to identify enrollment in more than one program. In order for the system to be effective, it would need support from the various programs in Mecklenburg County through a commitment to provide the information required by the system and, possibly, to contribute to the cost of running the system. The REACH program in Tacoma, Washington is currently developing a tracking tool and has a system for monitoring the activities of individuals that are in their collaborative system. These instruments will soon be available for adaption and replication.

An effective tracking system would require the employment of staff dedicated to this function either within Goodwill or through a contract with an outside provider. This would be costly, and an incentive system would likely be needed to maximize productivity. While tracking is difficult, expensive, and often viewed as a competitor with service delivery resources, it is essential for the evaluation of the system and the programs within it. Other program operators in the County should see the value of this information for improving their services and, therefore, should provide the information necessary to inform the tracking system.

Work Experience Opportunities

The provision of a sufficient number of meaningful and appropriate work experience opportunities to this particular population is perhaps the greatest challenge of all. It is particularly difficult to develop work opportunities given the current weak economy (which is expected to linger for five or more years) and the fact that those who are enrolled in the programs are the least likely to secure employment under any economic circumstances.

Given that employers have an excess supply of qualified and even over-qualified applicants in need of jobs, youth workforce development programs need to consider a range of types of work

experience including mentoring, shadowing and apprenticeships. Goodwill has already encouraged mentoring with the launch of the GoodGuides Youth Mentoring Program in 2010. Financial incentives to employers as well as stipends for the students while on the job will likely be necessary to develop and maintain the number of opportunities that are needed to address the pool of youth in need of work experience.

Interviews with community leaders confirmed that the creation of work experience opportunities will require a strong collaboration between the public and private sectors. Resources will need to be allocated for job developers and work support specialists to find and maintain job opportunities and provide close supervision for those filling the positions. Goodwill could model best practices for the development of an effective work experience component with the goal of recruiting other service providers and public and private employers into a county-wide job development and placement center over time.

PROGRAM COMPONENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Work Experience

Work experience was identified by participants and their parents as the reason they came to YJC. Getting youth a job was stated as the measure of success for YJC staff. The lack of work experience was identified by employers as a major barrier to long-term employment and the successful negotiation along a career path. Despite the importance all stakeholders placed on this activity, work-experience opportunities are either inadequate, both in number and type of jobs, or missing altogether.

To develop an adequate work experience component, the concept must be expanded beyond paid employment to include apprenticeships, internships, shadowing, and volunteer opportunities. At the same time, younger teens—13, 14, and 15 year olds—who are too young to be hired by many employers, need to learn how to tap into informal systems for jobs like babysitting or pet sitting. This informal system needs to be strengthened by the participation of community organizations like churches working with youth programs. The creation of opportunities in each of these areas will require community–wide support from the public and private sectors. It will also require creative thinking (for example, by creating corps of volunteers to deliver public services such as helping in the parks or libraries to alleviate shortages created by budget cuts).

A number of specific recommendations relating to the work experience component resulted from the feedback from youth, employers, service providers and community leaders and are detailed below.

- **A CLEARINGHOUSE FOR WORK EXPERIENCE OPPORTUNITIES** could be developed and available community-wide. This clearinghouse should include a list of up-to-date work experience opportunities, the type of positions available, which positions are accessible by public transportation, the criteria for employment/participation, and the participation record of each employer. The participation criteria should include information such as necessary reading or math skills and whether youth with a criminal background would be automatically eliminated from consideration. It should also serve as an internal database of employers with up-to-date contact information as well as information relating to the employer's participation history, such as the number of youth placed, the length of employment and the reason for

termination. This information could then be used to identify the best matches between employers and youth prior to referral.

- **WORK EXPERIENCE STAFF NEED TO BE DIVIDED INTO TWO SPECIALTIES: JOB DEVELOPMENT STAFF AND YOUTH PLACEMENT STAFF.**

  Job development staff would be responsible for the employer side of the operation—recruiting employers to participate in the program, offering orientation and support services to employers to help them understand the challenges associated with hiring at-risk youth, and serving as the liaison between employers and Goodwill. In order for the work experience component to work on a large scale, Goodwill must form and maintain strong relationships with many employers. Having a set of staff members dedicated to those relationships would allow Goodwill to achieve this without compromising the level of attention given to the youth. These employer relationships could be cultivated further by inviting employers to provide instructional staff and training facilities, to assist in developing curriculum, and to become involved in advisory boards.

  Youth placement staff would be responsible for the youth side—working directly with youth participants through one-on-one job counseling sessions. These specialists would find out (and help youth discover for themselves) the skills, career interests, and goals of each young participant as well as counsel them on issues as appropriate, such as handling family responsibilities while employed or making sure adequate transportation arrangements are in place. These staff members need to be responsible for approving all referrals and for resolving issues that might arise between youth and the employers. These specialists should also be available to youth who have left the program to continue to assist with job searching, updating résumés, counseling to maintain a job and to direct youth to training to improve skills as needed. They could even establish a job club to keep former participants in touch with the program.

  These two classes of specialists would then work closely together to connect youth with available opportunities that match their skills and goals and to resolve conflicts that may arise between youth and their employers.

- **SUBSIDIZED EMPLOYMENT** with contracts covering expectations for both the youth and the employer should be considered to open placement opportunities in expanding occupational fields. Goodwill could also consider helping its adult participants establish their own business with the expectation that they would in turn provide work opportunities for YJC participants. A wage subsidy could assist these entrepreneurs in holding down costs during start-up.

Curriculum

There is general recognition that many youth leave high school with little interest in going to a four-year institution of higher learning and prefer to go directly to work. If they have dropped out and even if they received a diploma, youth are not prepared to go directly to work due to the dearth of vocational training in the public schools and the lack of job readiness skills.

Before making any specific curriculum decisions, Goodwill must first review the demographics of the young people that it currently serves, as detailed through this study's youth survey, and decide if it is going to expand its target group to include disconnected youth and youth up to age 24. At that point, staff can assess and make decisions on the appropriateness of the existing curriculum and consider which of the following recommendations to incorporate in their program.

A curriculum designed for Goodwill's target group should focus heavily on soft skills and cover such topics as career exploration, consumer skills, job readiness, and life skills. The researchers received numerous recommendations from youth, parents, agency staff, employers and community leaders on each of these topics that should be considered for the Goodwill curriculum and that would apply to most of the other programs in the system as well. The following recommendations reflect those suggestions and would be applicable to both the youth and young adult programs discussed in the strategic recommendations should Goodwill decide to implement that strategy.

- **APPEALING CLASSES AND FLEXIBLE SCHEDULES** should be designed so that they are not just like school. The participants in the youth program will have just come from school and are not going to be interested in sitting through another school-like class. Participants in the young adult program, especially those who dropped out or were expelled from school, are also not likely to stick with the program if they feel like they are back in school. For example, YJC participants recommended that the customer service class be revamped to include fewer PowerPoints/videos and to add more interaction like the current Goodwill financial training class that incorporates the use of games and a cash register. Goodwill staff suggested adding a second level to the curriculum for youth who want to explore a topic in more depth. The schedule of classes also needs to be flexible for both of these groups. Alternatives to after-school classes should be explored for youth whose schedules would not allow them to attend at such a time. Online classes should also be available for select classes.

- **CAREER EXPLORATION IN CONTEMPORARY FIELDS** needs to be readily available in both the youth and young adult programs. Youth and young adults alike need to be exposed to a wide array of jobs, with particular attention to those that are likely to be of interest to them and that are likely to have employment opportunities for the foreseeable future. More vocational training geared toward careers that are in demand and in growing fields (for example green jobs), and workplace career exploration is needed. Opportunities in these fields should be developed whenever possible. Staff also need to be trained to deal with unrealistic career expectations on the part of young people.

- **JOB READINESS TRAINING** needs to focus on soft skills and include topics like appropriate dress, communication skills, résumé writing and interviewing, dealing with supervision, meeting employer expectations, sexual harassment education, computer literacy and adapting to company cultures. The curriculum for these training courses should be developed with the consideration that young people enjoy role-playing, mock interviews, and discussions on workplace etiquette and dress and should be reviewed by employers who are participating in Goodwill advisory groups. Program involvement should continue long enough to allow

participants to learn what work readiness really means. One year is often recommended as a best practice.

- **VOLUNTEERS** are integral to these programs and should be treated as such. There should be orientation sessions specifically for volunteers that include communication and building relationships with youth. A database could be kept on volunteers to include evaluations by participants, staff and the volunteers themselves. Recruitment could target volunteers with experience in assisting youth. Participating employers with job opportunities in areas of demand should be approached to see if they are interested in volunteering as instructors or as mentors in GoodGuides.

- **PARENTS** of participants in the youth program also need support. Orientation sessions for these parents should be available and should explain which options are available to youth through YJC and advise them on ways to be supportive of youth as they participate in Goodwill programs. Goodwill should also provide parents information on how to help their child find and keep a job, information on the various support services available for youth in the community, and information on Goodwill's adult programs.

- **A CLASS MODEL** should be considered to promote camaraderie, increase investment in the program, and discourage dropping out. Using such a model could help bring class members together and encourage them to identify as a unit. It would also provide a structure for offering awards for members who participate in tracking following program participation, if such a system is introduced.

Support Services

Agency personnel, parents and community leaders emphasized the importance of addressing the often overwhelming array of unmet needs that prevent youth from transitioning to independent adult lives. These problems have contributed to youth dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy, juvenile records, etc. and will continue to be lifelong barriers to success if they are not addressed. Many youth are unaware of problems they have or are unable or ashamed to talk about the things with which they need help. There was wide-spread acknowledgment that no single agency could tackle these many service needs alone, and yet, there is no comprehensive system linking programs that addresses all of these needs. Similarly, there was general agreement that Goodwill should not attempt to provide such support services in-house but should instead have a rich network of organizations for referrals.

Youth service providers commented that many support service providers were unaware of the range of workforce development programs available to youth in Mecklenburg County. Goodwill staff also lamented their lack of knowledge of the organizations and programs available to youth in the community. Both of these groups expressed great enthusiasm about the prospect of having the upcoming Youth Services Catalog as a reference for themselves and their organizations. The catalog represents a first step toward educating the community on the resources available to youth, and the service providers called for the development of a similar reference catalog for support services that they could use for referrals.

- **A CASE MANAGEMENT APPROACH** could be introduced to help participants identify their needs for support services (medical, housing, legal, etc.) and to provide referrals for appropriate assistance. Parents should also receive information on support services that are available in the community to help their children. Case managers would follow up to see if the referrals are successful and continue to consult with youth for a period of time after they leave the program, or at least during work experience. Goodwill staff would need training on the availability, eligibility criteria, and specifics for referrals to each agency. Goodwill could explore partnerships with area colleges and universities to recruit Masters of Social Work candidates who are interested in providing support counseling to participants as a volunteer or intern.

- **RELATIONSHIPS WITH CARING ADULTS** could be promoted for selected young people through referrals to community mentoring programs or to the Goodwill GoodGuides program. Also, Goodwill could publicize information on positive youth activities that are available in specific neighborhoods, such as church programs and community youth organizations that would provide the opportunity for interaction with positive role models. Goodwill could also encourage more local colleges and churches to participate in the GoodGuides program.

Outreach

Youth and their parents suggested ways that Goodwill could attract more participants to their programs. While community leaders did not offer specific methods for recruitment, they did identify groups they believe should be targeted for services. As noted in the analysis of the characteristics of the participants currently served by YJC, even youth who are still in school are considered to be at-risk due to their poverty status and being raised in households headed by a single mother. If Goodwill wants to expand its focus beyond at-risk youth to include youth that are truly disconnected, several of the outreach methods listed below should be tailored to reach such groups as dropouts, teen parents, adjudicated youth, and youth in foster care.

- **DECENTRALIZATION OF YJC SERVICE LOCATIONS** throughout the community would address such barriers as transportation and time required to commute to and from the program. Neighborhood demographic profiles should be analyzed to identify specific areas in which to target recruiting efforts, and locations should be selected so that they are readily accessible to the young people Goodwill hopes to reach (see Appendix C for maps that identify neighborhoods with high numbers and concentrations of disconnected youth). These neighborhood profiles could help Goodwill reach more youth from Latino, Caucasian, and Asian backgrounds to add diversity to the program enrollment—a suggestion of youth participants who were concerned that the segregated nature of their lives (neighborhoods, church, and schools) is very different from the diversity they will encounter in the workplace.

- **COMMUNITY PARTNERS** should be nurtured in selected neighborhoods. Examples of partners include clergy, athletic coaches, library and recreational center staff, and proprietors of businesses that youth frequent. These partners could be asked to help publicize the program and perhaps to help with follow-up on participants during and after program participation.

- **PUBLICITY ORIENTED TO YOUNG PEOPLE** should be developed with the advice of YJC participants. Parents learn about programs through newspapers and magazines, TV, and radio; however, different strategies need to be applied for youth. Flyers, school newspapers, school morning announcements, and job search websites are effective means of reaching youth. A web site just for youth should be created to provide information on work experience and related services (see http://mypyn.org/workReady.html for an example from Philadelphia). Youth could also assist with recruiting efforts by sharing positive experiences at Goodwill with their parents, neighbors and peers. Incentives could be offered for referrals who successfully complete the program.

- **A CAMPAIGN TO ENHANCE GOODWILL'S IMAGE** among young people, many of whom view Goodwill as place for "poor people to get clothes", would increase interest among youth as well as referrals to the program. An enhanced campaign to inform youth, parents, service providers and the community of the extensive workforce development opportunities that are available from Goodwill would be particularly helpful at this time since services to youth are a recent addition to Goodwill's programs.

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Conclusion

FINAL THOUGHTS

The recommendations presented in the preceding section include approaches that Goodwill could incorporate into its own programs and then make available to other service providers for replication. The enhancement of its curriculum including a focus on 18 to 24 year old youth, the inclusion of disconnected youth, the creation of a tracking system, and the establishment of a strong work experience network would enable Goodwill to maximize the impact of its resources. These elements would, in turn, provide invaluable tools to the community through models for common curricula, a tracking system to gauge the cumulative effects of the resources applied throughout the County, and a clearinghouse for work experience placements. A partnership with CIS and CMS could help encourage youth to stay in school, provide expanded opportunities for vocational and soft skills training, and, thereby, equip youth to enter employment upon graduation.

A second and even more challenging step would be for Goodwill to assume a significant coordinating function for all of the providers of services to the 14 to 24 age group. Research identifies a clear need for coordination and collaboration, yet little is being done by any of the entities involved in delivering youth services in Mecklenburg County. Goodwill could build a foundation for a collaborative system through the development of a model curriculum, a partnership with CIS and CMS, and by tackling two of the most glaring shortcomings in the programs currently in operation—tracking program participants and developing work experience opportunities.

The adoption of best practices community-wide modeled on the Goodwill program could be encouraged through the establishment of a meeting structure so that all training agencies could gather on a regular basis to discuss what is happening in the field and possible ways to make their programs more effective. Such a process is in place through the Tacoma REACH program where the monthly meetings are enhanced by the availability of data produced by their tracking system. The REACH system includes programs from throughout the city that have united to provide a "one stop shop" for youth in a facility that has been donated by Goodwill. This strong example of a system comprised of many independent operators that contribute both staff and financial support was four years in the making. Lessons learned from this process and program approach and tools available from the efforts of the many effective workforce development programs across the country could certainly guide Goodwill and its partners towards an effective system for Charlotte.

It is important to re-emphasize that the barriers preventing many youth from making a successful transition to adulthood have existed for decades and have persisted in many communities despite repeated efforts to eliminate them. The communities that have successfully served at-risk and disconnected youth have done so through the establishment of a comprehensive community-wide approach to the allocation of resources and the delivery of services. While this report has offered many recommendations on ways Goodwill can maximize the impact of its programs for youth, it is hoped that Goodwill will set a long-term goal of facilitating or supporting a collaboration between all stakeholders in Mecklenburg County.

While the steps recommended for Goodwill lead toward such a system, deliberate actions to involve other programs and resources will need to be initiated by Goodwill and supported by other major partners like CMS, elected officials, and public and private employers. A comprehensive tracking system would be invaluable in securing this support through the provision of data on the youth that are and are not being served. It would document the extent of the problem and underscore the necessity of a unified approach. Such data would likely show that while at-risk youth are involved in programs, they are still sadly underserved. Even more tragic are the disconnected youth who continue to fall between the cracks altogether with little hope for the future. It is an obvious conclusion that it will require the collective resources of many public and private entities working together to begin to offer opportunities for a better life to these young people.