

# National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being

## No. 21: Disconnected Youth Involved in Child Welfare



Findings from the NSCAW Study

# research brief

In this research brief, disconnected youth are defined as 16- to 24-year-olds who are not in school and not employed 3 years after they were reported as a victim of child maltreatment. For many years, this vulnerable population's transition to adulthood has been a concern. Disconnected youth "do not move through the challenges of young adulthood in sync with their peers who attend college, who choose internships to build social capital, or who plan for the right time to get married or to have children" (p.3).<sup>1</sup> Disconnected youth are not linked to education, employment, or institutions that prepare them for successful adulthood. As a consequence, disconnected youth are vulnerable to a continuous path of failure and further disconnection from society that results in lifelong struggles.<sup>2</sup>

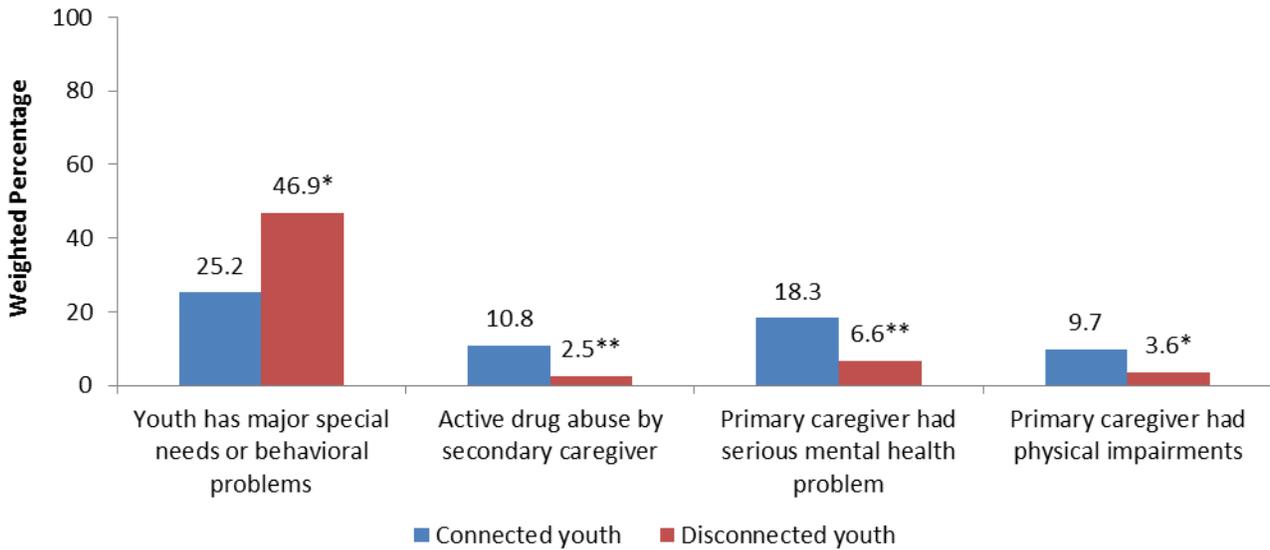
For youth who have been reported for maltreatment to the child welfare system (CWS), connectedness to educational and employment opportunities may be particularly critical in reducing negative consequences of maltreatment, including emotional and behavioral problems, early pregnancy, poverty, social and family disruption, and alienation. According to the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II),<sup>a</sup> 3 years after the index report of maltreatment, approximately 85% of youth 16 to 20 years old are engaged in school or work, with 46.6% enrolled in school or college, 18.6% working, and 19.9% both in school and working. Conversely, 15.0% of youth in this age group can be characterized as disconnected—neither in school nor working.

No significant differences by gender, race/ethnicity, poverty level, or placement setting at baseline (i.e., in home, kin care, foster care, residential care, or group home) were found in the proportion of youth who were disconnected. Significant differences were found by age, with the likelihood of disconnectedness increasing with the age of the youth. The percentage of disconnected youth was 1.3% at 16 years old, 10.7% at 17 years old, 15.9% at 18 years old; 24.7% at 19 years old, and 28.6% at 20 years old. These estimates are consistent with national data showing an increase in disconnection

with age.<sup>3</sup> Compared to the general population, however, youth reported for maltreatment have a higher rate of disconnectedness among 16- to 17-year-olds (5.4% disconnected compared to 3% in the general population) and among 18- to 19-year-olds (19.7% disconnected compared to 15% in the general population).<sup>3</sup> These rates indicate that youth involved with the CWS are more likely to be disconnected than youth in the general population, and that this disparity begins at the earliest age, with CWS-involved youth ages 16 to 17 approximately twice as likely to be disconnected than youth in the general population.

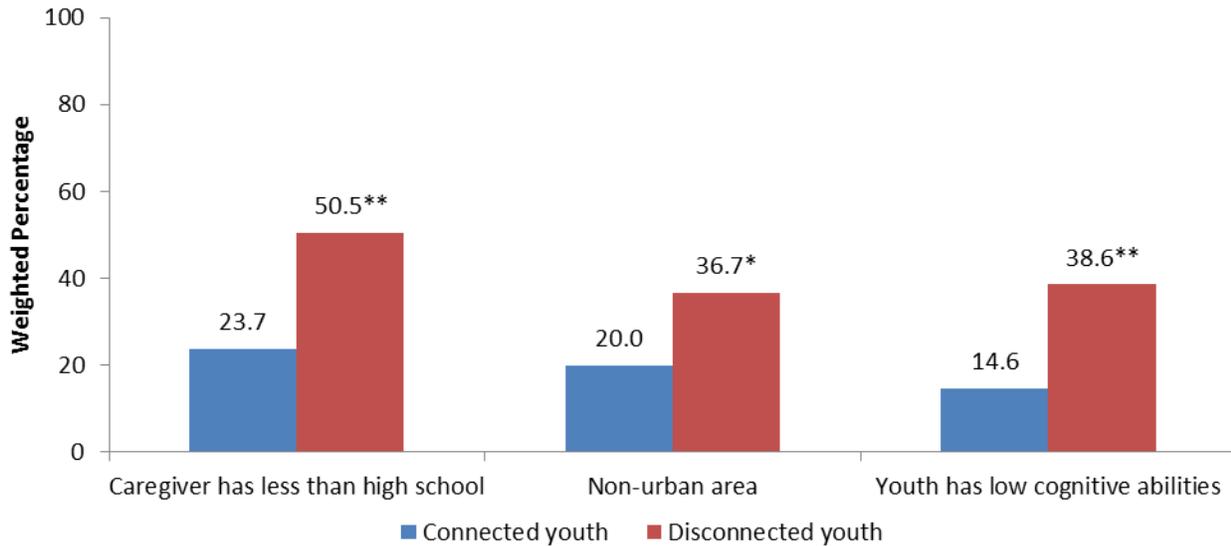
Figure 1 compares child and family risk factors identified by caseworkers at the time of the maltreatment investigation for connected and disconnected youth. Investigative caseworkers reported that almost half (46.9%) of youth who became disconnected had major special needs or behavioral problems, compared to 25.5% among youth who, 3 years later, were in school or working. The direct assessment of youths' cognitive status<sup>b</sup> (Figure 2) confirms caseworkers' perception of major special needs or behavioral problems: almost 40% of youth who became disconnected had very low cognitive abilities, compared to 14.6% among youth working and/or in school 3 years later (connected youth). Interestingly, connected youth were more likely to have a caregiver who had serious mental health problems (18.3%, compared to 6.6% among disconnected youth) or a caregiver who had physical impairments (9.7% of connected youth compared to 3.6% among disconnected youth), or had a secondary caregiver with active drug abuse (10.8% of connected youth compared to 2.5% among disconnected youth). It is possible that some youth view the challenges and associated suffering their primary caregiver has faced as a motivator to remain engaged with work and school, either as a way to secure their future, protect their caregiver, or stay connected to other adults that could provide support.

**Figure 1. Caseworkers' risk assessment at the time of index maltreatment among youth, by connected vs. disconnected status, when 16 and older 3 years later**



\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

**Figure 2. Youth and family characteristics at the time of index maltreatment among youth, by connected vs. disconnected status, when 16 and older 3 years later**



\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

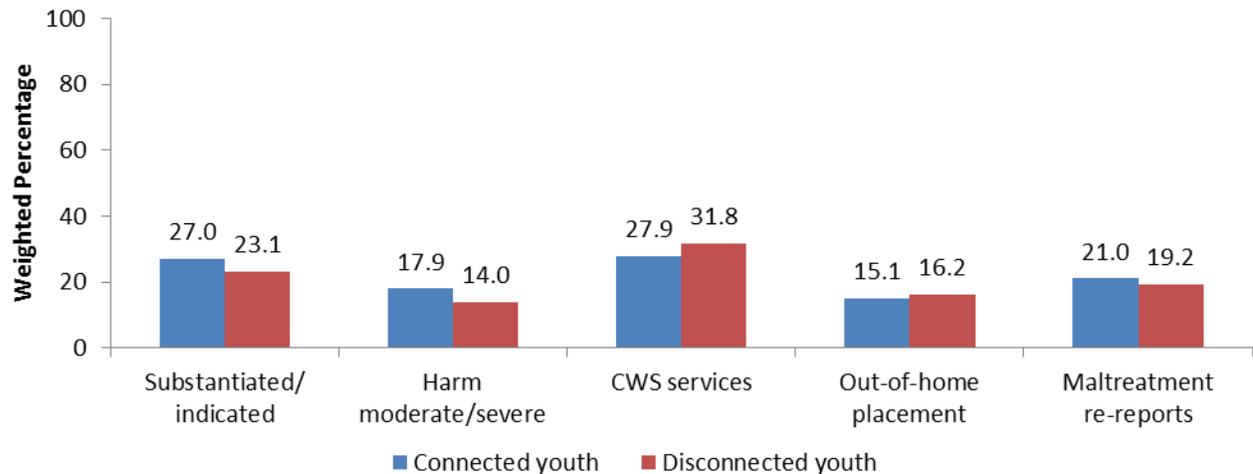
As shown in Figure 2, 50.5% of youth who became disconnected had a caregiver with less than a high school education, compared to 23.7% of connected youth. Caregivers with low educational attainment may have limited ability to give youth the support needed to navigate an educational and work system that is increasingly complex. The percentage of disconnected youth living in non-urban areas was almost double that of connected youth (36.7% compared to 20.0%).

No significant differences were found between youth who became connected vs. disconnected in the index maltreatment report being substantiated/indicated,<sup>c</sup> the severity of the maltreatment harm, the severity of risk,<sup>d</sup> receipt of CWS services, out-of-home placement,<sup>e</sup> or subsequent maltreatment reports<sup>f</sup> up to the time they reached 18 years old (Figure 3). The similarities between connected and disconnected youth's child protective services (CPS) profiles, as well as placement and safety outcomes, indicates that efforts to prevent youth from

being disconnected should go beyond the risk factors and characteristics of the maltreatment incident, expanding the focus to additional risk factors related to youth and family characteristics described here. The CWS can benefit from available information that

reviews and summarizes field programs, research studies, and specific strategies to enhance education, training, and work opportunities to better support disconnected youth.<sup>4,5</sup>

**Figure 3. CPS investigation characteristics, and placement and safety after the index report among youth, by connected vs. disconnected status, when 16 and older 3 years later \***



\* All comparisons between groups not significantly different, with  $p > .05$

### Footnotes

<sup>a</sup> Percentages are from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being II (NSCAW II). Baseline data collection began in 2008-2009. The study includes 5,872 children ranging from birth to 17.5 years old at the time of sampling. This report focuses on the subset of 559 who were 16 and older at the 36-month follow up. Information is based on baseline, 18-month, and 36-month follow up.

<sup>b</sup> Low cognitive skills: Cognitive skills were measured with *Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test (K-BIT)*. The K-BIT is a brief, individually administered screener of verbal and nonverbal intelligence; it is designed for individuals 4 years old or older.<sup>6</sup> It includes two subtests: Vocabulary (expressive vocabulary and definitions) and Matrices (ability to perceive relationships and complete analogies). NSCAW II used the standard score for Vocabulary, Matrices, and Total IQ Composite. Each is normed to have a mean of 100 and standard deviation of 15. Low cognitive skills were defined as a total score of 70 or less (-2 SD).

<sup>c</sup> Substantiation is CPS's statement about the legal status (proved findings) of a report of child maltreatment.<sup>7</sup> We classified children on the basis of caseworkers' responses as having a case substantiated or indicated (Yes/No).

<sup>d</sup> Levels of harm and risk: Caseworkers were queried about harm and risk regardless of the outcome of the investigation. Response categories were none, mild, moderate, and severe. Setting at baseline: The setting variable includes five levels—in-home, formal kin care, informal kin care, foster care, group home/residential

program, or other out-of-home care. *In-home* caregivers include living situations where the primary caregiver is either a biological, adoptive, or stepmother/father. *Formal kin care* includes situations where the primary caregiver has a kin relationship to the child and where the caregiver is receiving payments from the CWS. *Informal kin care* is where the primary caregiver has a kin relationship to the child, but is not receiving payments from the CWS. *Foster care* indicates that the child primary caregiver was identified as a foster parent. *Group home/residential program* indicates that a child was currently living in a group home or residential facility.

<sup>e</sup> Out-of-home placement: This variable uses information provided by caseworkers on the history of out-of-home placements (placement with adoptive or preadoptive parents, kin, foster parents, or in group/home residential treatment) for every child in the sample. A placement value of "0" indicates that the child was never removed and placed out of his or her original home (the residence the child had at the time of the index report).

<sup>f</sup> Re-report: A re-report was defined as the second, third, or subsequent report that alleges a child has been maltreated and that receives an investigation or assessment by the CPS agency regardless of the disposition. To be counted as a re-report, a minimum of 24 hours must have elapsed between the index report at baseline and the subsequent re-report. To estimate re-reports, two data sources were used: the first source was the caseworker interview at Waves 2 and 3. The second data source was the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). The

NCANDS re-report data were available for 3,859 of the baseline respondents, but cover a portion of the period (between the initial investigation and September 30, 2009).

## References

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- <sup>2</sup> Zweing, J. M. (2003). *Vulnerable youth: identifying their need for alternative educational settings*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute
- <sup>3</sup> Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. (2011). *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being 2011*. Washington, DC. (U. S. G. P. Officeo. Document Number)
- <sup>4</sup> Edelman, P., Holzer, H. J., & Offner, P. (2006). *Reconnecting disadvantaged young men*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.
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- <sup>6</sup> Kaufman, A., & Kaufman, N. (1990). *Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test (K-BIT)*. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.
- <sup>7</sup> Drake, B. (1996). Unraveling "unsubstantiated." *Child Maltreatment*, 1(3), 261-271.

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Available at: National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN), Cornell University, [ndacan@cornell.edu](mailto:ndacan@cornell.edu)

Administration for Children and Families (ACF, OPRE)  
[http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse\\_neglect/nscaw/](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse_neglect/nscaw/)

This is the 21st in a series of NSCAW research briefs focused on children who have come in contact with the child welfare system. Additional research briefs focus on the characteristics of children in foster care, adverse child events, use of psychotropic medications, the provision of services to children and their families, the prevalence of special health care needs, use of early intervention services, and caregiver instability.