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Building Better Cities



Houston's Opportunity:

Reconnecting Disengaged Youth and Young Adults
to Strengthen Houston's Economy

Executive Summary

Though the U.S. economy is gradually showing signs of rebounding, a group of young people known as Opportunity Youth and Young Adults (OYYA) continues to lag behind. Defined as young people ages 16 to 24 who neither work nor attend school, the OYYA population is growing both nationally and in the Houston area. This study aims to identify characteristics of the group and highlight the most successful practices to address its needs.

Background

An estimated 6.7 million individuals nationally and 111,000 individuals locally are categorized as OYYA. Given the obstacles they face at the individual, family and societal levels, as well as the often-cyclical nature of poverty, supporting Opportunity Youth and Young Adults in finding pathways to success can be a complex challenge. However, this is also a population that has numerous strengths that should be celebrated and even leveraged as assets. There is a critical need for communities to take steps to provide pathways to opportunity for this population.

The cost to the taxpayer for inaction is potentially vast—an estimated \$30 billion in the Houston area alone. A relatively modest investment in comparison in programs that lead to credentials with value in the labor market for this population would help open doors for OYYA and go a long way toward reducing the burden.

Methodology

Using Census data as well as the data from the Kinder Houston Area Survey, a team of researchers sought to quantify, locate and highlight characteristics of the Houston-area OYYA population. Researchers were also able to use data from the Health of Houston Survey to identify health characteristics of the population and calls from the 2-1-1 system to identify service requests and needs for this population.

The research team also conducted extensive interviews with service providers, as well as young people that are currently or were formerly members of the OYYA population, to better understand challenges facing the population as well as approaches to support them.

Finally, this report was informed by the national nonprofit Jobs for the Future to highlight case studies of successful service models.



Findings

Characteristics

- The population of Houston-area Opportunity Youth and Young Adults represents 14.2 percent of young people ages 16 to 24 in the area. Nearly one in seven young adults in the Houston area is neither working nor in school.
- Despite assumptions about “inner-city youth,” some of the largest numbers of OYYA in the Houston region are outside the city in areas near Angleton, Baytown, Cloverleaf, Humble and Texas City. In Houston, they are found in areas including Alief, Five Corners and Fifth Ward.

- Approximately 78 percent of this population has a high school credential or higher but is not in school or working; 22 percent do not have a high school credential. This suggests a critical need for on-ramps to postsecondary/training programs leading to credentials with value in the labor market.
- Despite difficulties securing employment, many OYYA are positive about their economic outlook. More than 1 in 4 members of the local OYYA population rate job opportunities as “poor,” yet 72 percent say they expect to be better off within three or four years, indicating the aspirations of this population to succeed.

Contributing Factors

- Interviews reveal that OYYA feel a sense of disconnection from the education system. Other challenges include limited guidance and family responsibilities that may hinder their ability to pursue work or school.
- Service providers and young people stated in interviews that criminal backgrounds can be a major obstacle to securing employment. There is also a disconnect between employers and the OYYA population, who may not be aware of training opportunities and pathways to middle-skills jobs.

Recommendations

- For service providers, the first interaction they have with an OYYA is critical. Actively reaching out to young adults and building relationship with them is the key to serve this population effectively. An “Opportunity Assessment Tool” can be used to facilitate the dialogue and help identify not only the barriers facing an individual but can also help determine his or her assets and aspirations.
- “Wrap-around services” that target multiple areas of need simultaneously may help the OYYA population navigate a fragmented social services system and keep them engaged. Forming cross-sector community-based partnerships may help ensure efficiency in resource allocation and service delivery, and increase social impact.
- Alternative credentialing and education programs, outside the typical high school environment, have been proven to re-engage students who are otherwise struggling.
- Innovative training programs such as the “Earn and Learn” model with enhanced mentoring and personalized curricula may fill a critical service gap.

Acknowledgements

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About the Sponsor

JPMorgan Chase & Co. knows that helping people gain the skills they need to compete in the labor market is a powerful strategy for expanding access to opportunity and promoting economic growth. Around the world, there are signs of renewed economic expansion, yet millions of aspiring workers are unemployed and an unprecedented share of the workforce is underemployed. At the same time, many employers are struggling to fill vacancies—especially for technical and skilled positions—that require more education and training than a high school diploma, but not a four-year college degree. To help address this gap, JPMorgan Chase & Co. developed New Skills at Work, a five-year, \$250 million global initiative to build employer-led talent-development systems. Through New Skills at Work, JPMorgan Chase & Co. is helping to address the lack of data that business, education and policy makers need to help close the skills gap.

About the Advisors

Throughout the project, the research was guided by an Advisory Committee that consists of researchers, service providers, business supporters, government agencies and community leaders. They provided generous support to the research team to ensure that the results meet the project's objectives. They also reviewed the report and provided valuable input. We are very grateful for their suggestions and advice. Listed below are those who have helped with this research endeavor.

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Endnotes

- 1 Belfield, et. al., 2012. "The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth."
- 2 Estimates for 1990, 2000 and 2012 are cited from PolicyLink and the USC program. The estimate for 2014 is based on our analysis of American Community Survey data.
- 3 Belfield, et. al. 2012. "The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth."
- 4 This is 9 percentage points below Bakersfield, California, which has the highest proportion of Opportunity Youth of any metro in the country, but it is 10 percentage points above the metro area with the lowest Opportunity Youth population, Madison, Wisconsin.
- 5 Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, 2014. "Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements through 2020."
- 6 JPMorgan Chase, 2014. "Preparing Houston to Skill Up: Addressing the skills mismatch to meet employer demand in high-growth industries."
- 7 National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2012. "A New Measure of Educational Success in Texas: Tracking the Success of 8th Graders into and through College." Note that data were not adjusted to account for certificates and degrees earned outside Texas.
- 8 We have focused on the youngest segment of this population due to data limitations, but this focus may also be beneficial because it is at this stage that programs can be most effective.
- 9 We focus on mapping the geographic location of the youngest segment of the Opportunity Youth population for two reasons. First, American Community Survey data are best suited for detailed mapping, but the available data cannot identify youth aged 20 to 24 who are not enrolled in school. Second, research suggests that programs designed to address the needs of disconnected youths, are likely to be most effective when they reach their target population at earlier ages—perhaps even before age 16—underscoring the value of directing resources toward the younger end of the OY population.
- 10 For 35 years, the countywide surveys have measured systematically the continuities and changes in demographic patterns, life experiences, attitudes and beliefs among successive representative samples of area residents.
- 11 The School of Public Health at the University of Texas conducted this survey in 2010. It was intended to provide locally relevant data to health agencies, service providers, non-profits and other community groups interested in assessing the area's health needs and developing strategies to meet them. Funded by Houston Endowment Inc., the survey reached a representative sample of the non-institutionalized population of adults and children in Harris County and was administered in English, Spanish and Vietnamese via telephone, web and mail.
- 12 United Way of Greater Houston also provides an online community resource directory that can be found at <http://referral.unitedwayhouston.org/>. Individuals can enter the ZIP code or select the city where services are needed to learn about available resources and information. The database contains contact information from 1,751 agencies with 5,333 services.
- 13 In 2015, 16- to 24-year-olds in the nine-county Houston metropolitan area made 59,900 calls to the service. That represents 8 percent of the total population of that age group (although the same individual may have made multiple calls).
- 14 Congressional Research Service report (2009).
- 15 To learn more about the YES curriculum, go to <http://yes.sph.umich.edu/>. Training is available for organizations that would like to adopt the YES program.
- 16 Zimmerman, M. A., Stewart, S. E., Morrel-Samuels, S., Franzen, S., & Reischl, T. M. (2011). Youth Empowerment Solutions for Peaceful Communities: combining theory and practice in a community-level violence prevention curriculum. *Health Promotion Practice*, 12(3), 425–439. Retrieved at <http://doi.org/10.1177/1524839909357316>.
- 17 The White House Council for Community Solutions, 2012. "Community Solutions for Opportunity Youth."
- 18 You can read more about this effort at <http://urbanedge.blogs.rice.edu/2016/08/03/data-sharing-efforts-aim-to-improve-child-welfare-juvenile-justice-outcomes/#V793HvkrKU>.
- 19 The White House Council for Community Solutions, 2012. "Community Solutions for Opportunity Youth."
- 20 In the past, the GED exam has been widely seen as providing a path to high school equivalency credentials for people who did not obtain a traditional high school diploma and needed a second chance. In recent years, in response to criticism and the changing workforce needs, the GED has been updated several times. The most recent change in 2014, shifting from a non-profit program to a for-profit business, has been the most controversial. More than a dozen states have either dropped the GED and switched to other alternatives, or added those alternative tests as additional options for those seeking a high school credential. In Texas, the State Board of Education voted in January 2016 to award contracts to three separate companies to provide high school equivalency assessments. The minimum passing score has also been adjusted. All these changes have made the GED less affordable and less valuable.
- 21 For more information about the program, go to <http://www.hccs.edu/adult-education/accelerate-texas-atx/>.
- 22 Data from the 2014–15 Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR). It can be retrieved at https://rptsrv1.tea.texas.gov/cgi/sas/broker?_service=marykay&year4=2015&year2=15&_debug=0&single=N&title=2015+Texas+Academic+Performance+Reports&_program=perfrep.perfmast.sas&prgopt=2015%2Ftapr%2Ftapr.sas&ptype=P&level=district&search=distnum&namenum=101903.
- 23 Corcoran, et. al., 2012. "Collective Impact for Opportunity Youth." Report can be retrieved at <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/collective-impact-opportunity-youth20120919.pdf>.
- 24 For more information about the program, go to <https://ded.mo.gov/BCS%20Programs/BCSProgramDetails.aspx?BCSProgramID=85>.
- 25 For more information about the program, go to <http://labor.ny.gov/careerservices/youth-tax-credit.shtm>.



Mission

The mission of the Kinder Institute is to:

- Advance understanding of the most important issues facing Houston and other leading urban centers through rigorous research, policy analysis, and public outreach; and
- Collaborate with civic and political leaders to implement promising solutions to these critical urban issues.