

THE HARD PART: ENFORCING THE MINIMUM WAGE • HOW BROOKLYN SOARED WITH THE EAGLE

# CITY LIMITS

NEW YORK'S URBAN AFFAIRS NEWS MAGAZINE



## COMING UP SHORT

They need jobs.  
They need skills.  
200,000  
New York  
youth have  
neither.

How will the next  
generation make it?

# The **Young** and the **Jobless**



**One in five of the city's young adults  
are out of school and out of work.  
What can New York do about it?**

**By Tracie McMillan  
Photographs by Casey Kelbaugh**



**Jamal Troutman, Christopher Valentine  
and Jackie Cruz are making a last-ditch  
effort to get a diploma.**

## ONE IN FIVE.

That's how many of New York City's young adults, ages 16 to 24, are not working and are not going to school. Only a few of them are even looking for jobs. There are 200,000 in all—the approximate population of Richmond, Virginia.

There have always been young people for whom high school failed, and work was out of reach, but the sheer numbers have never been greater, according to new research from the Community Service Society of New York. The problem is not New York's alone: The number of young adults whom policymakers call "disconnected" is surging nationwide. Today, 5.7 million young people have left school and work behind them, compared to 4.8 million in 1998, according to the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University.

Why so many? Why now? The reasons aren't complicated. There are fewer and fewer jobs for workers without specialized training, while there are more and more workers competing for them. At the same time, resources to help striving young people get skills have largely vaporized. Federal funding for workforce development and job training last year, adjusted for inflation, was less than a tenth of what it was in 1979.

There is a very large price to pay—and it only begins with the young people themselves. "They're costing everyone a ton of money, because they're not earning money and they're not paying taxes," says Jack Wuest, executive director of the Alternative Schools Network of Chicago and an expert on education and youth development. Instead, says Wuest, "we're paying through the nose for prisons—and a lot of lost dreams, a lot of lost taxpayer dollars, and a lot of lost human capital to companies."

A new generation of residents living outside the formal economy poses a threat to New York City's economic health. "It's not just that we need to do more because we're losing these kids," says Margaret Stix, associate director of the New York City Employment and Training Coalition, a trade group for service providers. Between the job growth expected in the city and the baby boomers set to retire, says Stix, "our economy depends on having these kids in the workforce."

**Jackie Cruz would love to be working.** Now 21, she dropped out of ninth grade when she was 15. She found out she was

pregnant, but kept going to classes. Then she miscarried. The experience threw her, and, she says, "I really am the type to hate school." She dropped out shortly thereafter. At 17, she had her son Tyson, who is now 3.

Last fall, she started working on her GED for the second time. It's not an academic thirst for knowledge that got her back in the classroom. She just wants a job. "Before, I wasn't thinking about [school], but now, as I'm getting older, it's like, *I need a job, I need a job, I need a job,*" says Cruz. "There are a lot of things I'd like to get into, but I don't have a high school diploma."

Getting that all-important diploma has become increasingly difficult, at a time when it's more necessary than ever. In New York, students have to pass five rigorous Regents exams in order to graduate—one of the highest standards in the country.

New York also has a generation of young people who, faltering academically, were "pushed out"—strongly encouraged to leave school for GED programs, usually by administrators and guidance counselors. The practice was forbidden last year by the Department of Education only after advocates brought several lawsuits contesting it. "We do have a sense that people know they're not supposed to do that anymore," says Elisa Hyman, deputy director of Advocates for Children, the organization behind the lawsuits. Though not convinced that the problem has been solved, Hyman says the city is making headway. "We're not getting as many calls [about pushouts] as we used to," she says.

The city's education department has recently begun a series of new initiatives to reach out to struggling students—and to bring dropouts back into the fold [see "Dept. of Ed Stands on Its Head," page 24]. But the damage may have already been done

for people like Cruz. At 21, she's no longer the responsibility of the Department of Education, which is charged with educating New Yorkers through age 20. Neither is she unusual: Nearly three-quarters of the city's disconnected youth fall between ages 20 and 24.

Without a high school diploma, Cruz's chances of getting a job are slim. She's hopeful that she'll pass her GED this time, but she's anxious about taking the test; she dropped out of school before taking any Regents exams, and she failed the math section on her last GED attempt. Cruz has also been trying to gain new skills. Too old for the Department

### WHO ARE THE DISCONNECTED?

*170,000 of the city's young adults are not in school, not working, and not looking for work. Who are they?*

#### **They are in their early 20s**

72 percent are ages 20-24.

**Why:** Younger students can still attend school and youth job training programs. But only those 20 and younger can attend public schools; youth job training stops after age 21.

#### **They have little post-high-school education**

50 percent don't have a high school diploma, while one-third completed only high school.

**Why:** College prep standards have made it harder than ever to get a diploma, and affordable post-high-school training is scarce.

#### **They have little work experience**

72 percent haven't worked in the last year; 55 percent haven't worked in the last five.

**Why:** The low-skill labor market is flooded with former welfare recipients, recent immigrants and recent college graduates.

#### **They are disproportionately black and Hispanic, and increasingly male**

42 percent are Hispanic; about 29 percent are black. Half are men—much higher than in the past. No longer are girls more likely to leave school and less likely to pursue jobs.

**Why:** Job opportunities are growing in service fields dominated by women, while shrinking in manufacturing.

Source: Community Service Society of New York analysis of 2003 Current Population Survey Data.

of Education's programs, Cruz got herself into a free, 12-week youth training course that's run under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), the primary source of federal job training dollars. She's one of a lucky few. The child care training program she attended, YouthWorks, run by St. Nicholas Neighborhood Preservation Corporation, gets 70 inquiries a week but can serve just 40 to 45 students per session. Says Deborah Sommé, YouthWorks coordinator: "There are more persons in need of training than there are places in training programs."

A decade ago, Jackie and young women in her situation would have been much less likely to look for training, or jobs. In New York City in the 1990s, one in four young women wasn't in school, working or looking for work. By 2003, the ratio had dropped to one in six—the same as the boys.

What happened? Work requirements tied to welfare have pushed more young women to seek employment. At the same time, job opportunities have expanded in sectors dominated by women, including education and health services. (At the same time, the proportion of young men who are neither working nor in school is increasing.)

Cruz finished her training in January, so now she's looking for a job. It's been frustrating. "Sometimes I get down on myself," she says quietly. "I don't know too much, but if somebody was to teach me, I'd pick it up." When she was practicing job interviews in her class, says Cruz, she would

**Jackie Cruz, here with son Tyson, found a scarce job-training slot—but so far, no job.**



sometimes get so nervous she'd start to cry.

For those lacking a diploma, there aren't many options for acquiring job skills. Cruz had looked into a few private programs, but medical assistant training cost money, and a security guard program required a GED, placing both out of her reach.

Most of the city's young people who don't have jobs and are not in school aren't getting any training at all. Civic Strategies, a Boston-based think tank that plans to release a comprehensive survey on disconnected youth this winter, found that out of New York City's 200,000 young adults in the city neither working nor going to school, fewer than 11,000 are getting employment help of any kind.

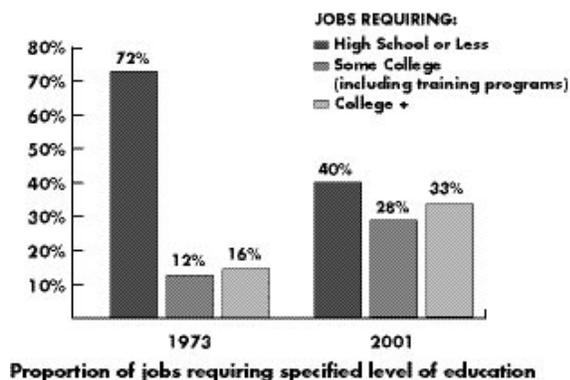
**Competition for work** is tough all around, but it's perhaps roughest at the bottom of the job market. That's where young men like Omar White find themselves. School didn't catch his interest, says White, so he left without graduating in 11th grade. "It was like a fashion show, all about who got the right clothes," says the 20-year-old, sporting his own stylish parka on the Fulton Mall. He doesn't have much work experience, either, just a stint doing maintenance work while on probation for assault. For now, says White, "I hang out with my friends, go to parties." An aspiring rapper, he's quick to add that he's trying to sign up for a GED class, and that he'll take work if he can get it.

White's chances of finding a job are sinking fast. For one thing, he's competing against a sea of desperate would-be workers. "Anyone coming off public assistance with low skills—the teenage dropout, the laid-off Rust

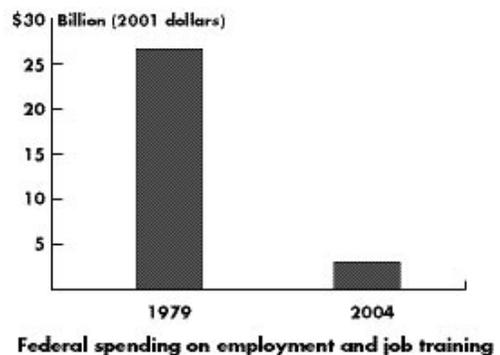
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## TRAINING WANTED

**There are plenty of jobs for young people, if they can get the training after high school...**



**...but there's insufficient money to train them.**



Belt manufacturing worker, the recent immigrant—they're all fighting for the same jobs. Everyone's getting pushed into one pool," says John Twomey, president of the National Workforce Association and executive director of the New York Association of Training and Employment Professionals.

The number of low-skill jobs, particularly those that pay a decent wage, simply hasn't kept up with the number of workers seeking them. Manufacturing work continues to disappear. Automation has replaced jobs like toll-booth and airport-counter attendants with scanners and kiosks. And many of the jobs that baby boomers walked into straight from high school now require much more advanced skills—skills that the boomers themselves gradually gained over the course of their careers. When it comes to making a living, asks Twomey, "How many jobs can there be with high school only?"

Not many, says Anthony Carnevale, a senior fellow at the National

Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) and an advisor to the Clinton administration on workforce issues. If you take a look at jobs now compared to 30 years ago, he notes, "the jobs that are declining are the ones that do not require some college."

Jobs requiring education past high school, on the other hand, are poised to keep growing. By 2010, nationwide, there will be 5 million more high-skill jobs than trained workers to fill them; in 2020 the number will be 14 million, according to an analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics and Census data by NCEE. The need will be so great, says Twomey, that "anyone we can get skilled, we can get a job."

Nearly 370,000 new jobs will open in New York City between 2000 and 2010, about 70 percent of them "replacements"—new workers moving into preexisting jobs, many of them vacated by retiring baby boomers. Nationwide, the biggest growth has been in jobs that require

## DEPT. OF ED STANDS ON ITS HEAD

If prevention is the best medicine, the city's public high schools have long been terrible doctors. With a graduation rate hovering just above 50 percent and a recent history of pressuring low-performing students to leave school, the city Department of Education has built a reputation as being a big part of the problem.

But that, say observers, may be starting to change. "There's been a refreshing transparency, [admitting] that these kids are here and they're not getting served," says Jim Marley, director of Pius XII Youth and Family Services in the Bronx.

The biggest change of all? Several new Department of Education initiatives intended to bring low-performing students and dropouts back into the fold. Two—Young Adult Borough Centers and Diploma Plus high schools—were rolled out last year, while the third, Learning to Work, is slated to start this fall.

A Young Adult Borough Center gave Christopher Valentine a second chance. A year and half behind in his course credits, the 18-year-old entered a YABC run by Good Shepherd Services in Brooklyn at the behest of his guidance counselor last fall; he expects to graduate in 2006. "She was saying, 'This is your last chance,'" says Valentine, who fell behind after cutting classes. "If you go to school, it's easy to pass. I was just going to do it later."

The initiatives are winning high marks from youth advocates and city educators alike. With a focus on small campuses—130 to 400 students each—and close partnerships with community-based youth organizations, the schools offer tight-knit, intensive supports for their students.

The downside: They barely even begin to serve the number of people who've left the education system but are still young enough to attend Department of Education programs—an estimated 47,000 in all. The new initiatives will serve just 6,000—and many of those will come straight from school, not the street. "What we have is an attempt to grapple with this problem," says Marley. "But it's by no means done."

### Diploma Plus High Schools

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Modeled after efforts in Boston, the city's four Diploma Plus high schools get most of their 550 students the hard way: recruiting. School administrators mail letters and cold-call students who have dropped out, or who have skipped school so regularly they might as well have. Principals pride themselves on bringing back students who might never have returned. The schools accept 15- and 16-year-olds who have fallen behind in their credits and offer a full day of classes, including courses that count for college credit.

### Young Adult Borough Centers

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Evening schools are nothing new for troubled youth, but the city's nine Young Adult Borough Centers bring an important innovation: comprehensive job and higher education counseling for students between ages 17 and 19. One useful distinction: the YABCs are programs, not schools in and of themselves. Though classes are taken at the YABC, diplomas are awarded through the students' original schools.

### Learning to Work

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Finding a job is increasingly as much a matter of obtaining training and skills as it is about earning a diploma, and that's perhaps even truer for students entering adulthood. The Learning to Work program, slated to begin this fall, is trying to take that seriously. Intended for students between the ages of 17 and 21, the program will reach out to dropouts and students who are old enough to be upperclassmen but only have enough credits to be freshmen or sophomores. Curricula are still being developed, and will blend work readiness and job skills with courses leading to a diploma or GED.

—TM

four-year college degrees, but employment opportunities for workers with specialized vocational training have also been rising. Indeed, jobs requiring “some college”—a classification that includes job training—have grown faster since the 1970s than those requiring a four-year degree or more [see chart].

Significant growth is expected in health care, food service, and training and education. Construction is also set to boom in New York City, fed by the Bloomberg administration’s ambitious development plans. In January, the mayor announced a Commission on Construction Opportunity, intended to link youth and veterans with an anticipated 230,000 jobs in the building industry over the next decade.

A limited number of job-seekers can get some help paying for job training through the federal Workforce Investment Act, which in New York City provides a \$2,500 voucher to pay for training at a private institution.

But is it really so simple—train them and the jobs will come? Not exactly, says Carnevale. Anticipated labor shortages often don’t materialize, because the federal government takes steps to prevent them. Open immigration floods the labor market before a shortage accumulates; outsourcing sends jobs away before we run out of workers to fill them. Training workers in the U.S. to do the job would solve the problem, but it’s far more expensive than paying third-world wages to workers who have already been educated elsewhere. As for the young people here who get caught in the gulf, says Carnevale, “they don’t really live in America as we know it. They kind of live underneath it.”

And so they do. When formal work isn’t available, most kids find a



**Jamal Troutman does some gigs as a nightclub bouncer.**

way to keep busy, in ways that don’t show up in labor statistics. Cruz has picked up cash caring for neighbors’ children, for instance; most of the young women interviewed for this article had done the same. Jamal Troutman, a burly 19-year-old with a quick smile, has done some stints as a club bouncer, for \$75 a night off the books. He’s also found occasional work handing out flyers at parties for hip-hop promoters.

Now he’s working on his diploma at night, and Troutman’s got a fierce determination to finish. His mother died last year. But before she did, she made him promise that he’d finish high school. He promised. And so he signed up and attends class through a second-chance program, even though he still has no idea how he’ll move on from there. Maybe he’ll go to college, as his teachers are encouraging him to do. If not, he imagines, he’ll be a security guard, make \$7 an hour.

But for his friends it’s a whole other story. The hustle is a way of life—petty bootlegging of cigarettes and DVDs at one end of the spectrum, peddling drugs at the other. “Maybe 25 percent is in school,” he says slowly. “The other is all, ‘School ain’t for everybody.’ Everybody’s looking for the fast way, thinking hustling is it.” Both, of course, offer the risk of entanglement with the criminal justice system—a curse for any future employment prospects. “Most of my friends, when they come outta jail, they can’t get jobs.” He pauses and thinks, then remembers how he knows some of them: “The most they probably get is a job at a club, a bouncer, off the books.” ●

## A HELPFUL FUNDING FLIP?

Want to know the easiest way to get job training as a young adult? Stay in high school. The primary source of youth job training money, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), requires that 70 percent of New York’s \$35 million grant be set aside for high school students. Last year the money helped the city fund more than 33,000 summer jobs and about 7,000 year-round positions, according to the city Department of Youth and Community Development, which administers the federal funds. That leaves just 1,800 slots in training programs for the 200,000 young adults who have already left school.

But priorities could change this year when the WIA comes up for reauthorization in Congress. In the last round of negotiations, in 2003, the Bush administration proposed dedicating all WIA youth funds to out-of-school youth. “That makes some sense,” says Mark Levitan, senior policy analyst of the Community Service Society of New York and author of a recent report on disconnected youth. “Many people argue that spending WIA funds on in-school youth is duplicative of funding from the Department of Education.”

In Congress, the House proposed to swap the proportions, spending 30 percent on in-school youth, 70 percent on out-of-school, while the Senate suggested a 60/40 split, favoring the in-school programs. “It’s widely believed that the final compromise would have been 50/50,” says John Twomey, president of the National Workforce Association and executive director of the New York Association of Training and Employment Professionals. “I would bet that, too.”

If the current WIA grants were split down the middle, funding for job training and other programs for New York City’s out-of-school youth would rise by roughly \$6.4 million, helping 550 more of them prepare to work.

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