

Examining Elevated Drop-out Rates Among Youth in Rural Western Massachusetts

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This report was prepared for the Mass Grad Task Force convened by the Partnership for Youth of the Franklin Regional Council of Governments in Western Massachusetts. The report is by Dr. Mary King. It was part of a grant funded program of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. For information contact: KAllen@frcog.org.

School drop-out rates in rural Western Massachusetts remain elevated. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education figures for district high schools during the year 2011-2012 include; Athol-Royalston at 5.7%, Greenfield 2.8%, Mahar 6.0% and Turners Falls 2.8% - compared to the state of Massachusetts average of 2.5%.

The findings from this research identify 18 interacting factors that relate to high student drop-out rates. The factors can be distilled into a pattern of commonalities that suggest 5 risk factors in the following order:

Economic Status: The primary variable that the majority of youth share is their economic status. Virtually all of the youth interviewed for this study came from low income households.

Absences: Youth who dropped out often had a high rate of absenteeism from school. This correlated with instances of transferring from school to school as their families moved or they were placed in different foster care homes. While absenteeism is not a cause of dropping out, it is an important indicator of a student in trouble.

Violence: Many students who dropped-out had a history of exposure to violence or neglect. Violence from school bullying is a problem in the region, as it is nationally.

Learning or Behavioral Disability: Many of the students in this study were identified as having a learning or behavioral disability. Such a designation is complicated by the way the drop-out risk factors interact. For instance, youth who do not have enough to eat often have difficulty concentrating. Moreover, some of the learning issues that young people face may be related to undiagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Supervision by State Agency: A great many of the youth fall under various levels of state supervision, whether through the Department of Children and Families foster care arrangements or through the Department of Youth Services CHINS case management.

Taken together, the risk factors contribute to a complex of determinants that lead to a student's decision to drop-out of high school. While each of these factors is individually significant, most are inter-related and occur at the same time in a student's school experience. This inter-relatedness indicates that effective approaches to the problem of student retention should be holistic and involve a coordinated effort between youth-serving agencies and schools. It also suggests a partnership approach.

Young people drop-out of high school for a number of reasons. It is often a pivotal event that prompts a student's decision to drop out, whether resulting from a fight with a teacher or being issued detention.

Most students in this study however, indicated that such events, though they prompted the actual act of dropping-out were not the real reason for leaving school. Students confirmed that they often were planning to leave anyway because of "stuff,"

going on at home. During the course of this investigation, it became apparent that certain terms had their own meaning. In the lexicon of the young people interviewed, the word “stuff” indicated disproportionately negative experiences of violence, neglect or abuse in the interviewee’s personal life.

The Ethnographic Research:

This study incorporated both qualitative and quantitative information and was compiled over a twelve month period. The research was culled from four school districts located in the Northern region of Western Massachusetts.

Participating districts included; Athol High School, Greenfield High School, Mahar Regional High School in Orange and Turners Falls High School. Interviews also included a small sample of students from other area schools, such as 1 student from Mohawk, 1 from Montachusett, 1 from Narragansett, 1 from North Star and a student who moved from Nebraska but decided not to enroll in Greenfield High School. Two interviews were excluded from the report for technical reasons. The sample involved over forty-six interviews with youth and 6 additional interviews with educators and youth service providers. Most of the youth were contacted through adult education programs, such as the Literacy Project, Family Learning Center and job programs like the Franklin Hampshire Career Center. Other youth were located, ‘on the street,’ so to speak, in their neighborhoods and hang-outs. Two teens were contacted with the aid of the schools. The sample was divided among 25 females and 19 males. Further details on the investigative techniques are included in the larger report.

Distribution	Female	Male	Total
Athol	2	8	10
Greenfield	6	2	8
Mahar	6	7	13
Turners/Montague	4	4	8
Other	4	1	5

The interviews were open ended and generally lasted between a half hour to forty five minutes. The interviews were carried out in a non judgmental way in neutral territory, such as at a community learning space or in a neighborhood bakery. Youth were given a consent form to sign and informed of their rights and confidentiality guarantees. They were also given a \$25. gift card for their time and participation provided by the Partnership for Youth. Each young person also devised a pseudonym to disguise their personal information.

PRIMARY FINDINGS

Most of the youth in this study experienced a ‘complex’ of factors that interacted to affect their school performance and behavior. Many of the factors are not causative in and of themselves. It was usually a combination of factors that resulted in the decision to drop-out. Identifying which factors are present in an individual student’s life may help to detect those students at-risk of dropping out.

Poverty - (At least 37 out of 44 of the youth in this study were from low income back-grounds equaling a percentage of 84%.

For local youth who drop out, the primary underlying variable that the majority share is their low income status. This figure tracks with national data. In a 2006-2007 survey, the National Center for Education Statistics contended that students living in low-income families were approximately 10 times more likely to drop out of high school than those in more affluent families (published in 2009).

For the purpose of this research, the term low income was determined by the youth’s references to their status during the interview process. Some references were more determinant than others, for example, many of those interviewed were on transitional assistance programs, such as cash assistance or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Interviewees like Kiara

and Beth received both forms of income assistance. Others, like Merry revealed that they qualified for free lunch while attending school. Several youth, such as Elmo and Alec had experienced homelessness. Such admissions were indicative of low income status and were therefore included in the un-adjusted percentage.

Drop Out Rate Factors	Number of Individuals	%	Adju %
Low Income	37	84	97
Absenteeism	29	66	
Frequent Moves/ Transfers	26	59	63
Other Programs	25	57	Not a factor
Violence	24	55	75
Neglect	24	55	70
Individual Education Plan (IEP)	22	47	51
Foster Care / CHINS	18	41	Under count
Bullied	19	43	
Post Drop-Out Pregnancy	13	30	
Health / Mental Health	13	30	Under count
Asked to Leave	11	25	
Substance Abuse	10	23	25
Racism	6	14	18
Homelessness	5	11	
Classism	4	9	11
Expelled	4	9	
In School Preg.	3	7	

*For more information on data see notes pg. 17

The figures derived for the adjusted poverty rate (97%) were extrapolated from suggestive remarks that the youth made, or from observational details discerned through the interview process. Such determinations included a reference by Sugar to the cost of her medical care and the delay in her

treatment resulting from a bad diagnosis that almost cost the young woman her leg. It was difficult to tell if youth like Sarah experienced serious poverty while growing up, however at the time of the interview she was working the night shift at a factory and could barely cover her housing and food expenses. Jackson had relatives in another county who were fairly well-off and occasionally provided assistance to his family, however the young man's father had been unemployed for a long time and his mother worked a minimum wage job. In determining status, I aimed to be as conservative as possible. Nevertheless, the adjusted figures may represent a more accurate picture than the un-adjusted total given the connection between poverty and the hardships that every one of the interviewees reportedly experienced.

The low income status of the youth in the sample reflects the demographics of the area. Statistics from the census reveal towns like Athol have a poverty rate of 14.4% while Greenfield has a rate of 17.2% compared to the overall state rates of 10.7%. The situation for poor youth is compounded when they do not have access to adult education and a means of completing the GED test.

The GED is necessary for students who have dropped out. Passing allows youth to attain higher education or land an entry level job. Yet, recent changes in how the GED test is administrated may further threaten the economic chances of local youth by raising the price of the test and changing to an all computerized format. Commenting on proposed changes to the GED test Barbara, a local youth had this to say:

"It seems kids are being held even further back. I feel like we keep everybody in their place and everyone in their cycles - keep the poor people poor and don't give them the shot that they need or the opportunity that they need to step out of it if they want to, or to even dream about it."

Despite their best intentions, low-income youth who drop out of high school often perpetuate their poverty, particularly if they become teen parents after leaving school. Delilah, a young woman with a three year old child made the connection between graduation and poverty when she explained to me her commitment to her son's schooling.

"I have a son so I want to set a good example for him. I want my son to stay in high school. I'll help him every night with homework. I'll call his school, see how he's doing. I'll do all that I can for my son to stay in school and graduate. And go off to college. And do things that I should have done when I was younger."

Young people from impoverished backgrounds like Delilah know they need role models and extra support to prevent them from repeating the cycle of poverty.

Programs aimed at supporting high educational expectations have a good chance at reducing the intergenerational tendencies associated with low-income status by helping youth to stay in school. Effective programs include outreach to families, instilling good learning habits, and providing tutoring in addition to flexible programming. In the event that a student drops out, free access to adult education and the general equivalency test (GED) go a long way toward improving life outcomes and reducing some of the more entrenched problems of ongoing poverty. (Jungeun, Hill and Hawkins, 2012).

High Absenteeism (29 of the 44 youth in this survey had high rates of absenteeism from school amounting to 66% of the group).

A number of the youth admitted to having many absences from school. While high absenteeism is associated with failing, it is not necessarily a cause of student drop-out rates. Rather, frequent absences are more symptomatic of underlying difficulties that may lead a student to drop out. Thus,

absenteeism is virtually - if not- always associated with one or more other factors. For instance, Ryan, Samantha and Sugar were absent because of their medical conditions. Abe, Antoine, Barry, Brittany and MJ were absent because they were frequently moved into different foster care arrangements. Merry, Nicole and Pantrid started missing school when they were bullied. Aly, Alec, Elmo and Jackson could no longer maintain their school work when they became homeless. High absenteeism in this study was the most prevalent early-warning indicator that a student is experiencing difficulty in their life.

Frequent Moves / Transfers (26 of the 44 youth said they moved frequently, equaling 59% of interviewees with an adjusted percentage of 63%).

Frequent moving was a primary factor in a child's difficulty staying in school. In this study, frequent moving meant having moved more than once while in high school. Moves were occasionally initiated by the child's family and many times involved short stays between towns or temporarily placing children with relatives during difficult times. In this way, moving directly relates to one's low income status. Quite a few moved around within the school districts encompassed in this study - for instance families frequently moved between Athol and Orange or Greenfield and Turners. Brattleboro also factored as a destination for family moves within the approximate district. Children were sometimes temporarily placed with relatives in nearby towns while personal family situations were resolved, such as divorce, job hunting and economic hardships. Volco moved between her mother and father's residences depending on which parent could afford to keep her at the time. These moves were usually between Greenfield and Dummerston, VT, but she also lived with relatives in East Hampton, MA and North Carolina.

The adjusted rate for frequently moved youth is (63%) including those who cited

living in foster care for a time, such as Khix who was taken out of her home when she entered high school. Young people like Aly also admitted to experiencing unstable living arrangements with her parents who had substance-abuse issues which caused her to move in with relatives. It is likely that each of these young women moved more than once in their high school careers but because they did not cite moving often as a factor it has been calculated into the adjusted percentage. Sociological research suggests that students who make even one move during the period between eighth and twelfth grade are twice as likely to drop out as students who remained in the same school throughout their high school experience. The maladjustment often precipitated by transferring is linked to other behavioral and academic difficulties. Findings suggest that the disengagement associated with student mobility is both a symptom and an important risk factor for dropping out. (Rumberger and Larson, 1998)

Each time a child moves, records may be lost, friendships broken and contact with supportive teachers severed. The frequent moving of children in foster care explains why they are at greater risk for poor educational performance, including lower MCAS scores and higher rates of repeating grades, absenteeism, tardiness and dropping out (Williams Mbengue, 2008).

Those most at-risk are youth in the custody of the Department of Children and Families who were frequently moved between households. Moving in and out of school districts is a common feature of state foster care. Compared to national statistics, Massachusetts foster children experience a higher than average rate of moves associated with school to school transfers. One third of Massachusetts foster children are sent to five or more homes during their custody period.

They also suffer nearly four times the abuse than the national rate. Massachusetts case-workers oversee almost twice the number of families than the national average. (Able, 2010).

A third class of moves involves youth who are sent away to other states to avoid being taken into protective custody. Given their difficulties with the law, Junior's parents moved the family around the state in a way that almost seemed calculated to circumvent DCF intervention in the hopes of avoiding losing custody of the children. However, some moves are initiated with the Department of Child and Family Service's knowledge.

Nike is a quiet, Asian American young man of 18, Nike dropped out of a local school after moving to Iowa and back again:

"I was involved in DCF, and they had told me that basically I was going to go into a foster home somewhere or I could go with my family out there."

In Nike's case, the move proved quite difficult as his living situation with 'family' in Iowa consisted of a young aunt, her boyfriend and a host of other people living in a one bedroom apartment. Nike was sent to work instead of school and his wages were appropriated by his new family. He was given very little to eat and no real place to sleep. Nike was sent back to Massachusetts only after his Iowa hosts were evicted from their apartment.

MJ's story is also significant in this regard. Of all the youth interviewed for this investigation, MJ's case was notable for the sheer number of times he was relocated.

"I went back and forth, you know. I repeated the 9th grade three times. I moved from foster home to foster home to foster home. And then finally I passed 9th grade when I was out in Ware. So, I started 10th grade but then I turned 18 and I'm like, "I'm not going to be able to do any of this." So, I just dropped out. I figured I'd try and get my GED or even a high

school equivalency or something, you know. I just tried to do what I could. I've been all the way over to Grafton, all the way to Pittsfield. I've been.... Uuummm, I think, the last time we looked at the paperwork it was 43 different homes, since 99. That's not including residential and lock up and

The affect of all the instability is evident when observing MJ. The youth is jittery, he talks very quickly and is unable to sit in one place for more than a few minutes.

Not only foster children, but any child that moves into a new school district is at risk for credit loss and the paperwork mix ups resulting from transfer disputes. Important school and personal information is often lost between moves (Rumberger and Larson, 1998).

Other Programs (57% of youth - or 25 out of 44 interviewees had been in other programs aside from regular classes while they were in high school).

Locally, there are several good programs that target youth who are struggling. Such programs are not considered as a drop-out factor and in many cases helped prevent or delay a student's decision to leave school.

The programs that young people were involved with varied. Abe, Jackson, Khix and Obama claimed to have been in, "lock up," for disciplinary infractions. Many youth, such as Dolphine, Merry and Hollister were in special programs designed to help them with their learning difficulties. Still others, such as John, Jordan, Barbara and TW took advantage of dual enrollment initiatives at the local community colleges.

In some cases, the availability of innovative high school programs were the key to student retention. For instance, Jordan claims he would have probably dropped-out if he had not been able to participate in Mount Wachusett Community College Dual Enrollment Program. Barbara and TW cite similar motivation for staying with the

Greenfield Community College Educational Transition Program until graduation. Jordan described his alternative program favorably:

"Its a school for kids that want to drop out but don't, who still want to get a good education and a high school diploma. They just take the most important things that you should have learned, like in math, history and English, and just teach those. They're smaller classes. And so its like really a lot of one on one learning. I love it."

Violence / Neglect (55% of youth in this study reported an exposure to neglect or violence equaling 24 out of 44 youth interviewed. The adjusted rate for violence is 75% while the adjusted rate for neglect is 70%).

The nature of the violence and neglect differed from in-school bullying to lack of basic care at home, sexual violation and physical harm. There is a possibility that the majority of such youth suffer from undiagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and this condition has strong implications for both their learning and the methods of teaching that are appropriate.

The prolonged stress associated with PTSD produces cognitive impairment.

Direct references to violence tended to be clear, as when Kiara spoke of her mother burning her with the lit end of a cigarette, or Elmo admitting that if DCF had not removed him from his mother's custody, he and his siblings would, "probably be dead." Sometimes youth did not care to elaborate on their experiences. Lincoln was very guarded when admitting that he had been sexually abused in foster care, lumping the events into a series of harm he characterized as, "Physical, mental, sexual, everything." Barbara and TW merely replied, "yes," when asked directly if they had any personal history with violence.

*** Bullying as a source of violence will be addressed in its own subject category.

The adjusted rate for reporting included references to violence 75% and neglect 70% respectively. The way these figures were derived was by extrapolation from information provided by the youth. For instance, Antoine and Barry had been moved several times from their home in the four years they were in foster care. Although they did not speak of it specifically, their removal into state protective custody and references to things going on in the family point to a likely history of neglect or violence meriting consideration in the adjusted rate category. John Doe was very protective of his family when he talked, careful not to implicate them in any maltreatment. However, his stated substance abuse, frequent moves and issues with anxiety may have resulted from a family dynamic that was less than ideal and in his words:

“dysfunctional, just arguing, chaotic, you know, the usual stuff.”

Youth exposed to neglect and violence often have multiple reactions that are associated with trauma. Although trauma is experienced on an emotional level, it also has physical, mental and behavioral manifestations. The nervous system responds to trauma by chemically suppressing certain regions of the brain and over-activating others. Youth who have been subject to violence or neglect often develop a hyper sensitive self-protection impulse. Even after returning to one’s “normal,” life, the physical, emotional, psychological and residual social responses can undermine learning.

Students who have been subjected to traumatic incidents may develop chronic learning issues that will follow them throughout their academic lives (Steele, 2007). At the same time, their behavior is easily misconstrued within a school setting, since witnessing other violent events like a fight in class may re-open old wounds and reactivate the trauma response. This was the case for Antoine, who felt threatened and shouted at a favorite teacher when he was

confronted about being late.

Impacts of Trauma Include:

- Impaired comprehension, and recall
- Increased absenteeism
- Inconsistent academic performance
- Impaired problem-solving
- Inability to plan effectively
- Sense of frustration
- Heightened anxiety

Safe spaces and low stimulation environments are important for youth who have experienced trauma and need a place to decompress and express strong emotions. Additionally, the subjects of poetry, music and art are important for students who have experienced violence as a means of expressing their trauma. Antoine regretted that he could not take music because the lessons conflicted with the remedial work he was required to finish. Many youth at risk are subjected to rote education because of their failure to pass the MCAS and this deprives them of artistic and intellectual pursuits for personal enrichment and their emotionally therapeutic benefits.

In the United States, it is common to conceptualize violence as a problem between individuals -between parents and their children or child against child. This framing perspective predisposes us to think of violence and neglect as a one on one phenomenon.

But violence is a community-wide problem. A child’s experience with neglect and violence not only affects a student’s performance in school, but all of their interactions with other students and staff, behavioral experts, special education instructors and social service providers.

IEP - (22 out of 44 youth had some form of Individual Education Plan in effect during their school tenure which amounted to 47% of the survey sample).

Having an IEP was not seen as a contributing factor leading to student drop out rates. Rather the students needing individual education accommodations face many challenges, including academic, behavioral, cognitive and emotional issues.

The adjusted rate equaled 51% for those youth who may have had an educational plan but did not site one specifically. One young woman, Beth said she had trouble paying attention in school:

"I have a short attention span. If there's a big group of people, I could be starring right at the teacher and not hear a word she's saying. I hate when teachers explain something and I don't really pay attention and they're just like, "do it." and then I'm like, "I don't know what to do." I get lost. My dad used to tell me I have ADD."

Even though she never received a formal diagnosis, Beth claimed that her school work improved when she was sent to alternative classes for misbehavior. Away from the distractions of a regular classroom, her grades improved and she was able to concentrate. Several youth like Beth claimed they may have had undiagnosed needs.

Foster Care / CHINS/ CRA (18 of the 44 youth surveyed had at some point in their lives been in the custody of the DCF, DYS, CHINS or state custodial arrangements equaling 41% of the study population).

Many of the youth who were interviewed fell under various levels of state supervision, including foster care under the Department of Children and Families, (DCF) or other custodial arrangements. Several youth, such as Abe, Elmo and MJ had been in both

foster care and in detention. Many of the youth were also being supervised through the Child in Need of Services act, (CHINS) in which the juvenile court becomes involved to help oversee youth who are court involved.

While 18 youth cited a history with the foster care system, this is likely an undercount since youth were sometimes reluctant to admit to having an experience with DCF. Verification of actual numbers however, were difficult to obtain in this study without violating the youth's trust and confidentiality.

Beginning November 5, 2012, the CHINS law was replaced by a new statute: the Child Requiring Assistance ("CRA") law. However, given their age, many of the youth in this study were subject to the previous CHINS statutes.

The person filing a CHINS petition (a parent, police officer or school official) is required to show that the child is in danger of a number of infractions including, running away from home, disobeying parents, truancy or failing to follow school rules. Sometimes when a school files a CHINS on a student, the parents are able to prevent their child from entering state supervision. Such was the case with Hollister II when she was summoned to juvenile court with her parents. Nike's parents were at a disadvantage because they were non-native English speakers. As a result, Nike felt his mother was, "tricked," in his words into signing a CHINS on him.

Of the youth in DCF custody, the foster care placements varied, some were moved within the region while others were sent farther away. Locally, there exists a rather high rate of licensed foster care homes. Because the area has lost manufacturing jobs, being a foster family has become a viable economic option for low-income households. The relative poor economic status of much of the region may make it seem like a legitimate location for sending foster youth, compared to higher income communities like Newton

or Lincoln, Massachusetts.

Anecdotally, young people sometimes noted that they were relocated to the region because of its remoteness, suggesting that some of the state’s most troubled cases are placed among the area towns. One young woman stated her social worker told her:

“We’re going to send you to Athol and Orange, out there for a little bit see how you do, away from everybody you know.”

The repeated moves associated with DCF custody in the North Quabbin are sometimes referred to locally as, ‘the Foster Care Shuffle.’ Brittany, a 19 year old girl who lived the majority of her life in Western Massachusetts was frequently moved from foster home to foster home. Brittany claimed the disruptions had an effect on her social life. They prevented her from maintaining normal friendships or joining clubs and sports programs at school. They made it difficult to retain ties with her family and kept her from forming new bonds with her foster families.

Any child that moves into a new school district is at risk for credit loss and the paperwork mix ups resulting from transfer disputes.

Students without complete records face many challenges when switching schools. Angel’s move from one school district to another caused a great deal of confusion over her grade status:

“I’m just a drop out. I’m supposed to be graduating. When I moved and switched, my school choice was denied and I got put as a freshman at _____. That was the main reason, because there’s like a five credit difference. I was in freshman classes, tenth grade classes, like, I took geometry and biology twice and then I was in 11th English and,

and then.. it was all over the place.”

Angel’s case is troubling because as conditions deteriorated in her home life, she depended on the free school lunch to obtain her meals. Without it, she was left alone in her house for days without adequate food. Her desire to school-choice therefore, was not frivolous. Being able to attend her previous High School offered a bit of necessary continuity and personal security. It meant continuing her connection to friends and the resources she depended upon. It also meant continuity as far as her grades were concerned and not repeating classes she had already passed. At Angel’s new school the situation became increasingly ambiguous. Her classes spanned several grade levels, while she felt the promised programs to help her make up credits never materialized.

Elmo’s situation is an example of how a dispute over transfer credits can lead to a teen dropping out and the consequences of that decision:

I left school at aged 18. I was in 11th. They kept me back. That’s why I left, mainly because I was doing good. I guess I didn’t pass classes and when I went back to classes the next year they didn’t bump me up a grade. And I was going all through the first quarter - the beginning of that year thinking I was a senior and then they suddenly pulled me out of nowhere and said, “Hey, you’re not a senior you’re in 11th grade again,” and I’m like, “Why couldn’t you guys tell me this?”

” They told me from the beginning that I was a senior so, my mentality went from wanting to stay in school to - Wow this school just screwed me over! I don’t want to be here any more. So, I missed a lot of days. W I was 18 I did move out of my house. So I was homeless. I bounced around - I was pretty much couch surfing with all my friends but, well, uh, that didn’t work out too well. I got sick.

After a while, my lung collapsed. Because I was homeless at the time I didn’t have anywhere to go. I was sleeping in a basement. It was during the winter, too. I was sleeping in a basement with like cats pissing on it and stuff and it was just like not a way to live. When

I went to the hospital I weighed like 90 pounds. I was in the hospital a month and a half, and a week.”

For Elmo, staying in school was a matter of life and death. When home life becomes untenable, school provides a measure of structure and sustenance to keep a child going, particularly if they are like Elmo and have aged out of the foster system.

Elmo’s story of an ‘autumn surprise’ was remarkably common in this study. The feelings of disappointment generated from such events are often a catalyst for dropping out. Moreover, students who drop out in a moment of frustration often report that the school will not allow them to re-enroll.

Many of the academic implications of foster care happen to students when they fall into varying states of limbo, either by their own accord or in their paperwork entanglements between the schools and social services. When credits are lost because of such mix-ups it is important that options are communicated effectively.

For young people in academic difficulty like Elmo, it is really important that they see themselves as moving forward, even if they are in danger of not passing. When clear measures are presented and the student can see that there is a path toward graduation it lessens some of the anxiety of their situation. This is essential in demonstrating that a measure of progression is taking place.

Students like Elmo tend to panic when confronted with the threat of staying behind. Young people may be able to withstand much in their lives but may also crumble in the face of bureaucratic obstacles. To the student at-risk, school accreditation systems seem overly impersonal, inflexible and present them with no options. For Elmo, it seemed that there was no end in sight and he was just stuck in a state of limbo over which he had no control. Being in limbo is in some cases worse than dropping out. Thus, Elmo decided to leave rather than being subject to

the ambiguity and unanswerable nature of the decision-making that relegated him to repeat a grade while not letting him know which steps could be taken to graduate.

The 11th and 12th Grade Transition Out of School:

One of the interesting findings of this research identified the difficulty of the 11th and 12th grade out-of-school transition as an important factor affecting whether a child drops out of high school. It is a time that is especially dangerous for some teens when many new stresses become apparent, especially between foster children and their host families.

Many studies point to the 9th grade year as critically important in students making transition to high school, including being adequately prepared and developing good study habits (Nelid, 2009; Bottoms and Timberlake, 2007).

However in this study, the transition to junior or senior year proved equally if not more important. This was especially the case for foster children since this period coincides with a changed economic status. Nearing 18 years of age, a youth may ‘age-out,’ of foster care or may have moved back in with their birth parents. Or, they may be on their own and in some cases at risk for becoming homeless.

The in-between period associated with leaving foster care proves most critical for students still matriculating. Both natal parents and foster families may either partially or fully abandon young people as they get older, as happened to Alec, Angel and Pink. Issues that arose in this study included not being able to get to school, living in an unsupportive home environment, the need to re-establish bonds with one’s birth family, an expectation that young people take-on family caregiver roles, the need to fend for themselves in terms of finding and preparing food and finding the

means to maintain heat and hot water to wash. The anxiety that comes from these challenges can be enough to throw a child off course.

For those youth who remain in foster care, they may face a tentative position in their households. Foster families sometimes have an economic incentive to move older children out of their care to avoid disruptions in income while they wait for another foster child to take the place of the one who just graduated to adulthood. That is what happened to Pink when she was asked to leave her foster family so that another youth could take her place. An adult youth of 18 or older may still be attending high school, but at the same time, the legal age distinction has little bearing on whether or not a former foster child can make it on their own.

Such youth often fall into a black hole in terms of meeting their basic living needs, like shelter and food. For a foster child like Pink, approaching the age of 18 is a time fraught with anxiety which may manifest itself in behavioral issues at school. Moreover, the complications of actually turning 18 may have traumatic implications that only they know about.

Bullying, (19 of the 44 students in the study said they dropped out because of bullying, representing 43% of the population).

Bullying is a significant reason why students drop out. Over 40% of students in this survey cited being bullied as a reason why they dropped out. Incidences of bullying may actually be higher since adolescent cultural codes, such as shame and fear of retaliation, cause youth to under-report cases of bullying.

Youth who are bullied often do not conform to the 'norms' of high school social acceptability (artists, outcasts, gay, lesbian or transgender youth, those with race or class

distinctions, and disabled youth).

Bullying stands out from the other factors in this study as being a singular cause. Those who dropped out after having been bullied were very clear in their attribution of bullying as being the primary cause of leaving school.

One young man named Pantrid described repeated incidences of physical abuse like the one recounted below:

“There was another time somebody else picked a fight with me but, you know, I learnt, what’s the point of fighting when you’re just going to get in trouble anyways so?”

You know, he came up to me or whatever and I knew what he was going to do. He threw a fist at me, but I, you know, dodged out of the way and it went by me. But as I was dodging, I ended up hitting my head off a wall. So, he took advantage of that. He punched me in the back of the head once or twice, kneed me in the stomach and then kicked me while I was on the ground.

It just was like a breaking point where like, “Ok, this is retarded, (slowly) you know, there’s no point. OK, I don’t defend myself and I still get the same consequences as what I would have if I would have defended myself.”

In Pantrid’s case, the bullying he experienced had a lasting effect, for instance he developed an aversion to crowds, a mistrust of authority and an inability to focus. Often, youth who are bullied have trouble focusing because they are trying to be prepared for an unexpected attack.

In addition to physical bullying, other youth reported experiencing verbal bullying. Eighteen year old Alex is a slight girl of mixed ancestry who dropped out of school when she was 16. Because she was a foster child, Alex was moved to different placement homes, over 30 times by her count. Moving

so much not only disrupted her academics, it also affected her social standing:

“I was picked on my whole life. Usually, by the kids that came from homes with parents. I was in foster care. And I’d get picked on because I didn’t have brand new clothes and I’d get picked on because I wasn’t wearing brand names. I’d get my clothes from thrift stores. I wouldn’t always have brand names. They’re expensive for one thing. And when you’re in foster care, you don’t get a lot of money. Your clothing check goes in for getting your school supplies and everything for the beginning of the year. So, can I go out and buy a \$50. pair of jeans? No, because if I do that I’m going to get one pair of jeans for the year... I’d get picked on because I usually brought my lunch to school. And I got picked on for everything and anything.”

Covert bullying is hard to detect because it mostly transpires behind a person’s back. It is intended to hurt a person’s reputation or cause humiliation and may entail spreading rumors, playing nasty jokes intending to humiliate, mimicking, or encouraging others to exclude someone while deliberately damaging a person’s reputation. Because she did not always know who was spreading rumors about her, Merry’s experience was one of covert bullying. She viewed the teasing she experienced as part of the problem of being perceived as different:

“You know, I didn’t enjoy going to school. I didn’t enjoy going to the nurses office cause everybody had to come up with a lie that I was pregnant, so I was in there too many times. Someone would go to the nurse and say, “Oh, I heard Merry was pregnant,” And she would take me out of class and ask me questions and I would be like, “I never said that.” So, people would make up lies just so that I would get taken out of class. People with special needs in the _____ Schools get picked on really bad. Everybody thinks were different. I mean, yes we’re different. Everybody’s different.”

A statistically significant phenomenon revealed in this research is that all of the students who cited bullying as their reason for leaving school - each reported that when it came to punishment, they felt they were treated more harshly than their tormentors.

In other words, in every case of bullying documented in this study, the victims felt they were more severely punished while the perpetrators of bullying were given lighter punishments or none at all. Students usually dropped out shortly afterward.

Consequences of Unaddressed Bullying:

Some students who are bullied consider suicide. Their frustration and sense of isolation are compounded when they seek help but do not find it, as in Sarah’s case:

“I told this one main teacher that was always helping me with some type of problem that I had. She just couldn’t help this one because she told me that, you know, “you have to deal with it on your own,” you know, “I can’t help you with what they’re doing,” .. “You have to talk to the principal about it.” I did! I just talked to him but they didn’t listen.

Like clearly, (I felt) almost, almost like those girls do, when they get suicidal. I was literally that close to doing it, (shows me an inch with her fingers) but I decided not to because its not worth it. And I feel bad for those girls, especially getting bullied by other girls or anybody else and just killing themselves because of it.”

The emotional responses to bullying include feelings of being singled out, alone and constantly afraid. The interviews for this research support the conclusions of a Harvard University study led by Katherine Newman suggesting that many youth who suffer from bullying may also have PTSD (2005). As a result, youth who are bullied

sometimes entertain violent fantasy revenge scenarios. Alec, a young man who was seriously bullied throughout his time at high school characterized his emotional state;

"I was always angry. Anyone that wanted to help I wouldn't let, I'd push away. I was always angry (pause) just I was angry."

"There were a few, there were a few, (times) I definitely wanted to cause pain on other people. But I just, I don't know, I see the stuff that people do on TV, and I just don't want to be labeled like that."

Another young woman, Pink admitted:

"I would never do it, but I talked about blowing up the school every day."

Some of the young people interviewed who reported bullying as a reason for dropping out expressed feelings of intense anger toward their schools. Youth like Sarah, Pantrid and Alex said they dropped out because they were afraid of coming to a point where they would harm others.

Pregnancy Post Drop Out (13 of the 44 youth interviewed in this study became parents after dropping out equaling 30% of the total group).

Pregnancy is a common occurrence shortly after dropping-out of school. Almost a third of the youth surveyed for this project became parents in the months following their leaving high school. This figure has strong preventative implications that merit further study. When youth are loosed from the routine of school life, it seems that boredom and lack of supervision lead to higher rates of unplanned pregnancies.

Health / Mental Health (13 of the 44 youth in this survey reported diagnosed medical or mental health conditions, representing 30% of the total sample).

In terms of mental health concerns, the figure is a conservative number. Many of the youth who seemed to have the most difficulty did not report having received treatment or counseling services.

Youth with medical issues often cited prolonged absences, falling behind and an inability to catch up with their peers after returning to classes. They also reported that sometimes accommodations were ineffectively delivered. For instance, when Nicole was out of school, she claimed her assigned tutor often cancelled appointments, was unprepared and did not know how to do the work she was supposed to be teaching.

In Ryan's case, his absences from school were due to a bacteriological infection that went undiagnosed for several months causing him to miss classes several days a week. Because his absences were sporadic, he did not receive tutoring. When he returned, he tried to get put in special classes, but reports he was told that his IEP status was no longer current. For Ryan, as with many other students, he did not have an advocate to help him obtain the services he needed. Ryan's mother was unable to assist her child because of health issues of her own.

Several youth in the survey reported having received mental health counseling while in school. Charlotte obtained extensive counseling related to her father's history of sexually abusing her. Jordan regularly met with a psychologist for treatment of his PTSD resulting from witnessing violence in the home. Sparkle had some counseling for her depression. Yet, while over half of the survey group reported experiencing neglect or violence in their lives, the majority of this group did not report having received mental health counseling.

Substance Abuse (Of the 44 youth interviewed, 10 admitted to some form of drug or alcohol use, representing 23% of the surveyed population).

The majority of youth did not admit to drug or alcohol abuse. For those who claimed to use substances, their admissions were fairly straightforward. For instance, Hollister admitted to “chillin,” “drinking,” and “partying,” while in school.

The adjusted rate for substance abuse was 25% and determined from inferences youth made. When talking to Nike, for example, he alluded to the fact that before school he would meet friends and smoke. But he also mentioned “hanging out or whatever,” a reference that he did not want to elaborate on. In the context of the conversation, I took this to mean that he may have smoked marijuana while on school premises.

Substance abuse is less of a factor for dropping out than an indicator that a youth is in distress. Although some of the youth claimed to have used drugs during the height of their problems, they also said the use generally declined as they got older. The majority of those interviewed did not admit to using drugs after they dropped out, part of the reason for these numbers may be because they became parents shortly afterward. Additionally, youth sometimes under-report instances of substance use, which may be the case in this study. The relatively low rate may also reflect the population interviewed for this study, since over half were enrolled in adult education or job training programs and making positive steps in their lives.

Asked to Leave (25% of the youth interviewed said that someone at the school recommended they leave school. This figure represented 11 of the 44 interviewed.)

Often these statements were forthright, as was the case with Jackson who remembers the principal telling him,

“What’s wrong with you? What are you doing here? It’s time to go.”

Similar comments were reported by a quarter of the youth interviewed for this study. For instance, Alex is a young woman whose difficulties at home were compounded by difficulties in school. Her sense of self-worth had been damaged when she was put into foster care by her mother. The negative comments she heard at school further hurt her confidence leading her to believe that she wasn’t capable of success:

“It was pretty much back and forth with family and then I’d be in foster care, then I’d be with family and then go back to foster care and then finally I was adopted. It’s kind of difficult. A lot happened. And, I just wound up not going to school for a while. And then I went back and then the school became very - I don’t want to say mean - they were just not nice to me. Like I got a lot of comments like, “Why don’t you just drop out?” and “Obviously, you’re not suited for regular high school,” and blah, blab, blab. So, I took their advice and I dropped out.”

When a young person is continually bombarded with negative criticism, they tend to internalize the worst comments. This has an affect on a teen in a number of ways. Teens like Alex who are subject to repeated negative comments lose their self respect. They also lose respect for others. This is because the negative words not only lower their own self esteem, they lower the teen’s evaluation of the person delivering the comments.

Race (6 of the 44 youth in this study cited a racist incident in their past, amounting to 14 percent of the sample with an adjusted rate of 18%).

Examples of racism cited by the youth included verbal insults or being treated unfairly because of one’s race. For instance, Junior said that while in school he was taunted by a youth saying:

“The ‘N’ word and they didn’t do nothing about it.”

In this case he was referring to another student who insulted him but when he reported the incident to his teachers, no action was taken. Kiara claims to have felt singled out and discriminated against when she was told she was not allowed to speak Spanish while at school.

The adjusted rate for racial stereotyping is 18 percent. This refers to youth who alluded to unfair treatment that could have been racially motivated but who did not use the word race specifically. An example would be Beth, who had, “a few friends,” most of whom were African American like herself but felt as though other students excluded her saying,

“They’d look at us like they’re better than us, you know what I mean?”

Beth was uncomfortable making this statement and in the context of other comments she made, I took it to mean that there may have been a racial component to her observation.

Race is a notable feature in student drop out rates among the school districts. Although the general population in the region is predominantly white, (meaning of Euro-American descent) fully, 25% (11 of 44) of the interviewed drop outs were non-white suggesting a figure out of proportion with the regional population.

The racial composition of the region often contributes to feelings of isolation among youth of color, particularly those who are relocated by DCF. Recent census information reveals the composition of the four towns to be fairly similar, with Athol reporting approximately 96% of citizens as white; Greenfield 93%; Orange, 96% and Turners Falls, MA recording 95% white. Junior acknowledges the effect that such homogeneity has had on his family:

“This town seems like, if you weren’t born here, you’re not welcome. We’re like stuck here basically. And, its pretty hard like to get up and move all so quickly when you don’t have the money.”

While race is not listed as a primary reason for students dropping out in the four school districts, it is part of the distributed matrix of factors that increase the chances that a youth will drop-out. The racial dynamics of dropping out are compounded by the remoteness of the region, the relative un-availability of youth employment options and the presence of social problems associated with poverty. Many youth feel trapped in what one youth who called himself John described as the, “dirty little towns.” There is a negative feedback loop between the environment of the town, a young person’s reputation in that place and the lack of entertainment, cultural and intellectual stimulation that most negatively affects at-risk youth.

Homelessness (5 of the 44 youth experienced homelessness in their life or were homeless at the time of the interview, equaling 11% of the 44 youth).

Elmo referenced his homelessness as a result of turning 18 and leaving his foster family in a misguided attempt at independence. Both Jackson and Alec lived on the street for a period. Pink was effectively homeless after her father died and her mother moved in with a boyfriend. MJ and Aly were “couch surfing,” at the time of the interview, attempting to evade being taken into custody by the Department of Children and Families.

Class (4 of the 44 youth interviewed reported some form of discrimination based on their class status representing 9% of the overall group with an adjusted figure of 11%).

It is worth noting that none of the youth claimed to have been discriminated against on the basis of their class. The determination of class bias was inferred from statements the youth made directly referring to their income or the negative perception of their families in town. For instance, Khix claimed that the assistant principal in her high school said,

“He told me that I should have quit school a long

time ago and he didn't know why I was still there cause, he said I'm a "piece of shit, just like my brother, and my whole family was."

Most references to class were made in regard to one's personal behavior or the reputation of one's family or friends locally.

The adjusted rate for class discrimination is 11% and is associated with teasing or negative comments about one's 'poor' clothing or personal hygiene. Merry was a girl that was repeatedly taken out of class when other children reported as a prank that she had lice or was pregnant. The references to lice, in addition to other remarks insinuating that she was unclean and poorly clothed were interpreted as an effort to single her out as "different," in her words, both because of her learning disability and her economic status.

In terms of class differences, many youth felt that teachers and administrators have an exaggerated amount of discretion when it comes to the treatment of individual students. This includes believing that they control their placement in courses or grades, whether or not to admit them through school choice, or to retain them after expulsion, whether they can be readmitted after dropping out and which curriculum a student is exposed to including their IEP determination.

While their perception of teacher's influence may be exaggerated, nevertheless it seemed very real to youth like Khix who claimed that school personnel routinely gave her, "dirty looks." Six youth referred to teachers as, "only in it for the money," while three others used similar words. These comments suggest that youth believe there are significant class differences between themselves and the professional staff of schools. This puts students and their families at a disadvantage when meeting with school personnel, making them feel they are working against rather than with the schools.

Class discrimination is a salient feature of life

in the small towns of the Upper Valley region however it is not usually talked about explicitly. In general, class issues are not well understood in the United States and often get hidden underneath pejorative characterizations of, "poor white trash," or "social deviance." While the adjusted rate for this study amounts to over ten percent of the survey group, it is possible that figure is low and that many more of the interviewees suffered from unfair treatment because of their class position. It should also be noted that virtually all but one of the interviewees fell into the population of the economic underclass.

Expelled (Of the 44 youth involved in the study, 4 admit to being expelled from school equaling 9% of the total population).

Getting expelled from school has a negative effect on an individual student's performance, particularly if the infraction involved fighting at school. Two students, Ashley and Pink claimed they were expelled for defending themselves when another student started a fight with them at school. Alex was expelled in a moment of anger when she threw the principal's papers onto the floor. Jr. was expelled after he was arrested over the weekend for a crime that was not committed on school property. While none of the infractions involved weapons or illicit substances, the four youth were dismissed, revealing the latitude schools have when determining whether or not to expel a student. Youth who are out on the street and not in class during school hours are more likely to come under the scrutiny of the criminal justice system.

Pregnancy in School (3 students of the 44 interviewed for this study became parents while still in high school amounting to 7% of the total).

While becoming a parent is related to the difficulties faced by youth in completing high school, it is not as significantly causal compared to other findings in this study. Rather, a larger percentage of youth (30%)

became pregnant shortly after leaving high school. This may therefore indicate a strong incentive for devising strategies that prevent students from dropping out.

Concluding Observations:

Most of the youth interviewed claim to have wanted to finish high school, said they liked school, appreciated the social environment and enjoyed some of their subjects. However, students sometimes expressed feelings of alienation and being ignored at school. These findings were corroborated by a Partnership for Youth survey of high school student's perceptions of their school climate which found that students who moved frequently often felt disconnected from their school (Voas, 2011). Nevertheless, many of the youth in this study also expressed affection for their teachers and frequently named specific educators who had made efforts to help them. The exception was the group of students who had experienced bullying. These students exhibited a great deal of distrust of the schools, teachers, administrators and the student body in general.

Given the professed desire to learn, and their propensity to stay in school to receive a diploma, what is extraordinary is not that students dropped out, but rather how long many were able to remain in school before life events became so overwhelming they were forced to leave. Indeed, the majority of youth in this study recounted their experience in tired, exasperated or sad tones when admitting that what was going on in their lives was, "overwhelming."

Despite their hardships, many of the youth interviewed for this study had a sense of what kind of assistance would have helped them remain in school. For instance, Beth, Brittany, Ryan and Jordan stated that they performed much better when they were taken out of regular classes to receive individual attention. These youth found it distracting to continually switch from class to class and they disliked block scheduling.

Pantrid claims that sometimes he purposefully got into trouble in order to receive in-school suspension so that he could catch up on his schoolwork. While alternative programs may have a high cost, they are less expensive than the social costs associated with dropping out of high school.

More pertinent, the skills that many youth at-risk possess are not easily recognized and are sometimes misunderstood as undisciplined and disruptive behavior. However, it often takes a good deal of self control to weather the multiple foster placements, neglect and violence that many young people have endured. The talents these students have developed are part of their survival strategies and may actually represent leadership skills if developed properly. Given the chance, many youth have valuable contributions to offer if provided the care and support they so rightly deserve.

Notes:

Figures for the percentages obtained were derived from the youth's definitive statements. For instance, if a youth claimed, "We didn't have a lot of money," the reference was calculated into the poverty percentages.

Figures for the adjusted percentages in each category were arrived at by inferences based on youth's suggestive remarks or observations. For instance, if I knew a youth was unemployed and living in a run-down apartment, I would calculate that information into the adjusted percentages. However, the adjusted conclusions were partially subjective based on my own observations. The reason for including adjusted percentages was because they may reflect a more accurate picture of the lives of youth in the region.

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