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ABSTRACT

A research project has been conducted to examine the transition from school to work, to explore how this transition does or does not work for inner-city high school and other at-risk students, and to propose school policy and program changes to increase the likelihood of a successful transition. Data were derived from the High School and Beyond Survey, a longitudinal study of a large national sample of students who were high school sophomores in 1980. This report describes findings from the descriptive phase of the project. The analysis is based on dividing the cohort into inner-city and noninner-city subcohorts. Comparison of these groups indicated that inner-city youth were more likely to have dropped out between their sophomore and senior years. Both groups showed approximately equal interest in obtaining a job, but inner-city youth were less successful in finding jobs even though the gap between the two groups decreased between 1980 and 1982. Results do not support conventional wisdom about the irreversible and increasing despair among inner-city adolescents. They do suggest that inner-city youth have the same employment aspirations as noninner-city youth, have more difficulty, possess fewer job search skills, but eventually catch up. Helping students make a successful transition to work should be part of the empowerment zone legislation and other programs for urban improvement. Three related publications are listed. (Contains one table.) (SLD)

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by
William Stull

OVERVIEW

The transition from school to work is one of the central life passages in modern society. For most people, the process is protracted and discontinuous—a linked series of discrete steps starting in the middle teens, when full-time schooling begins to be supplemented with part-time and summer work. The passage ends in the late teens or early twenties when formal education ceases and a full commitment is made to occupation and career.

The primary purpose of this research project is to discover how this transition does or does not work for inner-city high school and other at-risk students, and to propose school policy and program changes for increasing the likelihood that students will make the transition successfully. It also examines the widely held belief that the majority of inner-city adolescents are trapped in a self-fulfilling cycle of failure brought about by the poverty and hopelessness of their environment. Initial setbacks in school and the labor market lead to discouraged student and worker effects that then feed back and cause additional setbacks. According to this view, most of the young people caught in this downward spiral eventually cease pursuing conventional careers and settle instead into lives of irregular employment, welfare dependency, crime, drug abuse, or some combination of these.

The project has two major objectives. The first is largely descriptive. Little appears to be known about the process of transition from school to work for inner-city youth and how it differs from the corresponding process for non-inner-city youth. A significant portion of the initial research effort was therefore devoted to developing a statistical picture showing how students attending inner-city and non-inner-city schools make their way from the classroom to the workplace.

The second objective of the research is more analytical, involving development of econometric models that link the early labor market success of young people to their personal and family characteristics and to alterable attributes of their school and curriculum. This phase of the research has been productive for generating policy recommendations regarding school changes that would increase the probability of labor market success for inner-city students at a time when they so desperately need it.

The data used in both phases of this research were those provided by the High School and Beyond project, collected longitudinally, on a large national sample of high school students who were sophomores in 1980. The large number of observations and variables in this database and its longitudinal structure made it ideal for this particular project.

HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS

This *Spotlight on Student Success* reports on findings from the descriptive phase of the project. The analysis is based on dividing the full participation cohort into inner-city and non-inner-city subcohorts. The inner-city group was defined by the location of the high school they attended and family socioeconomic status. In addition, inner-city youth in the data set are much more likely than non-inner-city youth to be minority group members, to live in the northeastern part of the United States, and to attend public schools. They also have, on average, lower test scores and grades. These differences are all in the expected direction and suggest that inner-city high school students have both special characteristics and special needs.

Comparisons of employment and enrollment statuses of the inner-city and non-inner-city subcohorts yielded four main conclusions: (1) inner-city youth were significantly more likely to have dropped out of school between their sophomore and senior years in high school; (2) both groups showed approximately equal interest in obtaining gainful employment as measured by their labor force participation rates; (3) inner-city youth were less successful in finding jobs as indicated by the difference in the unemployment rates between the two groups; and (4) the

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gap between the two unemployment rates decreased markedly between 1980 and 1982.

These results, in part, do not support conventional wisdom regarding irreversible and increasing despair among inner-city adolescents as they pass through high school and enter the labor force. The labor force participation rates of inner-city youth were found to increase with time and to approximately equal those of non-inner-city youth. In all the comparison years, the inner-city unemployment rate was higher than the non-inner-city rate, but the gap between the rates declined dramatically between the base year and the third follow-up. The data are thus consistent with a model in which inner-city youth have the same employment aspirations as non-inner-city youth, possess initially fewer job search skills, but eventually "catch up."

It is also important to note that although the dropout rate between the sophomore and senior years in high school was much higher for inner-city than non-inner-city youth, in the subsequent four years a substantial portion of the dropouts from both groups eventually obtained their high school diploma; so, the difference between the inner-city and non-inner-city dropout rates in the long run was significantly less than in the short term.

This project's analysis does not provide strong evidence that inner-city youth are prone to long-term "discouraged worker" or "discouraged student" effects. Instead, they appear to be quite resilient in the face of hardship. Dropouts return to school to get their diplo-

mas; the unemployed search for jobs until they find them; students from less-than-promising family and school backgrounds seriously pursue post-secondary education. All of these phenomena suggest that the negative stereotype of the inner-city high school student needs some revision.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

- When designing education policy and programming, it must be recognized that over half of all high school students do not go on to higher education, but rather are involved in a protracted and discontinuous transition from school to work. This research shows that inner-city youth have the same desire to work as non-inner-city youth, but intervening environmental factors impede the fulfillment of this desire.
- Increased emphasis on reducing dropout rates for inner-city youth would dramatically improve labor force participation rates for this cohort, regardless of economic trends.
- Helping students make a successful transition from school to work should be part of the programmatic thrust included in "Empowerment Zone" legislation and grants to cities. Since inner-city youth were shown to eventually "catch up" to the non-inner-city cohort (as shown in the table below), policy and pro-

grams should focus on teaching inner-city youth to search for work and helping them develop mechanisms that would facilitate employer contacts. Both measures would help inner-city youth enter the work force more quickly.

- As part of the second phase of this project, formal econometric models are being developed that, when estimated, will explain why and under what circumstances inner-city students achieve success in the labor market. It is important, from a policy standpoint, that this research is directed toward controllable school attributes related to early labor force success. These needs are paramount given the contemporary reality of a shrinking opportunity structure and continued restructuring of the economic base in most inner cities.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Stull, W., & Goetz, M. (1994, January). Secondary employment and education status of inner-city youth: Conventional wisdom reconsidered. *Atlantic Economic Society (AES) Best Papers Volume*.

Stull, W., & Madden, J. F. (1991). *Work, wages, and welfare in the Philadelphia metropolitan area*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

If you would like to receive a copy of these publications, or would like other information, please contact the LSS Information Services Coordinator at (800) 892-5550.

**Labor Force and Unemployment Rates for Subcohorts:
1980, 1982, and 1986**

| Year | Labor Force Participation Rate | | Unemployment Rate | |
|------|--------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| | Inner City | Non-Inner City | Inner City | Non-Inner City |
| 1980 | 56.5% | 55.9% | 42.6% | 27.5% |
| 1982 | 72.5 | 74.6 | 27.3 | 19.0 |
| 1986 | 80.1 | 76.1 | 10.5 | 7.7 |



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