



# Who's Minding the Neighborhood?

## The Role of Adult Capacity in Keeping Young People on a Path to Graduation

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### Overview

The nation's high school graduation rate has been rising over the past decade and is now at a historic high. As of 2014, however, 4 percent of all 16- to 19-year-olds in the United States—a total of 690,000 young people—had left high school without graduating.<sup>1</sup> On a hopeful note, the current 4 percent rate represents a noticeable decline from 40 years ago, when approximately 14 percent of young people did not graduate high school with their peers.<sup>2</sup>

Possible reasons for this change over time include stronger and more consistent academic standards and accountability systems, persistent action within states and districts to raise on-time graduation rates, and the implementation of policies (such as the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act) and programs (such as YouthBuild and Job Corps) that help young people to attain their high school diploma, even after some interruptions in their education.<sup>3,4</sup>

In the study described here, the Center for Promise offers a complementary hypothesis: *Increasing the number of adults in a community—adults who are available to nurture, socialize, teach and become role models for youth—results in more young people on a positive path to adult success.* That is, regardless of other factors that influence a young person's educational trajectory, the ratio of adults (aged 25+) to school-aged youth (age 6 to 17) in a neighborhood matters for keeping young people on a path to academic success.

The analyses here are based on research and theory suggesting that community capacity is associated with the developmental outcomes of that community's young people.<sup>5</sup> Community capacity for youth development includes institutional resources (for example, community-based organizations and schools), relationships within the community, and the collective attitudes and norms that support young people (e.g., norms around educational success and attitudes about the strengths of youth). Youth-focused neighborhood assets like these are substantive predictors of youth's educational success.<sup>6</sup> These assets depend on the adults within them—that is, the community's adult capacity.

Using Decennial Census data from 1970-2010, the authors examine whether the adult capacity in a community matters for reducing the rate of youth who leave school. The authors use a community's **adult-to-youth ratio** as a proxy for a community's adult capacity. The study is focused on neighborhoods in metropolitan areas throughout the United States.

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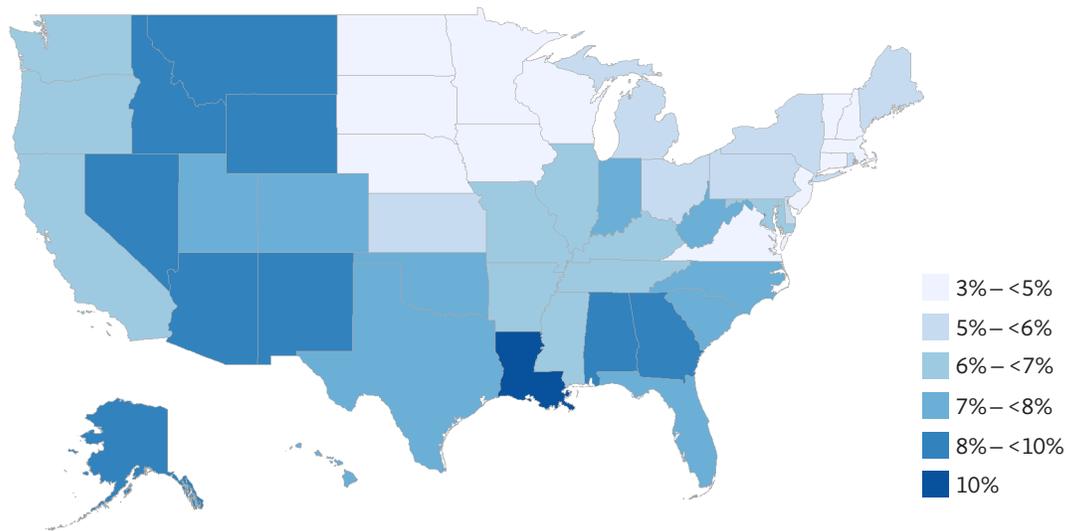
## Why This Matters

Leaving school without a diploma places a burden on individuals, their families and the broader society. Young people who do not complete high school have a higher likelihood of being unemployed in adulthood, living below the poverty line, being incarcerated, and having poor health outcomes.<sup>7</sup> Because of these outcomes, the combined social and fiscal cost to society of each young person who leaves school without graduating has been estimated to be nearly \$260,000 over his or her lifetime,<sup>8</sup> equal to nearly \$180 billion for this cohort of 690,000 young people.

The 2015 study from the Center for Promise, *Don't Quit on Me*, highlights the importance of relationships in keeping a young person on a positive educational trajectory. *Don't Quit on Me* presents the concept of a 'web of support,' the multiple adults and peers in a young person's life who all have a role in supporting the young person. Considering that many adults in a young person's web of support will live in that young person's community, a first step in encouraging more social support is to understand whether a community has the adult capacity necessary to strengthen a young person's web of support and to bolster their educational experiences.

Continuing to examine why young people do or do not complete high school, how communities and the systems that surround them can improve young people's prospects for high school graduation, and the ways that adults can support young people's success beyond that educational milestone has enormous economic and social benefits.

**Figure 1: Rate of youth who leave high school before graduating, 2010**



Source: 2010 Decennial Census data, analysis by author

## Background

Extensive literature exists on the role that relationships play for young people in mediating the causal link between community capacity and youth outcomes. Many studies show that supportive relationships—relationships that are often found among non-parent adults throughout a given community, including adults who are based in community-based organizations and schools—can lead young people to be more engaged in school and connected to their communities.

Therefore, the authors of this study hypothesize that communities with larger adult-to-youth ratios will have greater capacity to provide the social supports young people need. Conversely, a ratio overly biased toward youth—what has been called a “youth bulge”—may indicate that a community lacks the adult capacity to encourage young people on a positive developmental path.

Youth bulges have been examined as a predictor of increased levels of political and community violence in other countries.<sup>9</sup> However, few studies of youth bulges have been conducted in the United States and none have looked at the implications for education.

### Types of Social Supports

Adults in a community can provide an array of social supports to young people. Some of these social supports provided by adults<sup>10</sup> include:

- emotional supports (the bonds between an adult and young person)
- instrumental supports (tangible supports such as money, food, shelter)
- informational supports (navigational tools)
- appraisal supports (setting expectations for youth and holding them to those expectations).

## Focus and Method

This study examines:

- Changes in the rate of young people leaving high school without graduating throughout the United States.
- Variations in the rate of youth leaving between states, within states, and within cities.
- The effect of adult-to-youth ratios on the changes in the rate of youth leaving school in metropolitan areas throughout the United States. A metropolitan area is defined as an area of at least 50,000 people with a core urban area.

To conduct the analyses of the relationship between adult-to-youth ratios and the rate of youth leaving high school, the authors integrated three different datasets:

- **Geolytics, Inc. Neighborhood Change Database (NCBD)**, which allowed the authors to examine a dataset of 16,269 zip codes within areas defined as “metropolitan,” defined as having a core urban area of at least 50,000 people.
- **Business Master Files (BMF)** from the National Center of Charitable Statistics, which tracks the number of nonprofits in the United States and their financial activity. These data provide a zip code-level approximation of youth-focused nonprofits.
- **Common Core of Data from the National Center of Educational Statistics at the United States Department of Education**, which provides the data for the student-to-teacher ratio in neighborhood schools.

The authors conducted an econometric analysis to investigate the effect of the adult-to-youth ratio within communities on the improving rates of young people who left school before graduating over the last four decades.

In addition to the ratio, the authors accounted for the effect of the number of youth-oriented nonprofits in the community, the student-to-teacher ratio for schools within the neighborhood, mean neighborhood income, percentage of adults with at least a college degree, racial composition of the neighborhood, and neighborhood population. The analysis also accounts for between-city differences and historical changes.<sup>11</sup>

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## Findings

As a foundation for this study, the authors first examined the trends in rates of youth who leave high school and then assessed whether these trends varied by region, state, city and zip codes within cities. The analyses show that:

- There has been a steady improvement in the rate of youth leaving school in the United States since 1970, from a high of 14 percent to a 2010 rate of approximately 6 percent.
- There is substantial between-state, within-state, and within-city variation in the neighborhood-level change rate of youth leaving school.<sup>12</sup>
- There are still many places where the rate of youth leaving school is worsening, with substantial within-city variation in the neighborhood change rate.
- The changes in the rate of youth leaving school are not due to changes in the neighborhood occupants (that is, they cannot be attributed to high mobility rates).

The authors then assessed why this variation over time and within cities (i.e., between zip codes) occurred. They find:

- **The adult capacity in a community is related to a decrease in the rate of youth leaving school.** A 1 percent increase in the adult-to-youth ratio results in a 1 percent decrease in the rate of young people leaving school. In real-world terms, this result means that for every seven more adults in the neighborhood, one fewer young person leaves school.
- **Race matters, specifically in predominantly Black or African-American communities, in amplifying this effect.** The effect of an adult-to-youth ratio is amplified in neighborhoods that are comprised mostly of Black or African-American residents; with a 30% greater effect on youth leaving school compared to an all-White neighborhood. Since more than half of Black or African-American residents live in neighborhoods that are majority Black or African-American in 24 of the 100 largest metropolitan areas in the country,<sup>13</sup> the potential benefits of this amplified effect cannot be underestimated. However, factors such as mass incarceration and higher mortality rates work against an increase in adult residents, especially male residents, in predominantly Black or African-American communities.

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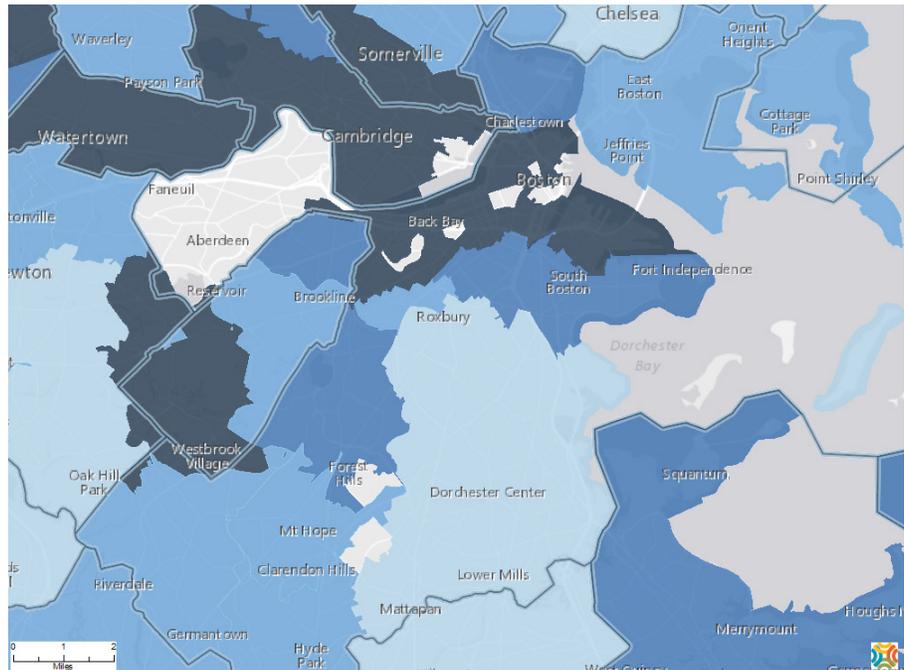
- **Income matters—but education does not—in increasing the effect of adult capacity.** The adult-to-youth ratio effect is also amplified in higher-income communities. Our analysis shows that doubling a neighborhood's mean income increases the effect size of the ratio by 12 percent. For example, the adult-to-youth-ratio effect in a community with a mean income of \$100,000 would be 12 percent greater than in a community with a mean income of \$50,000.

This finding could suggest that adult capacity alone is not sufficient. Instead, if we consider neighborhood-level income a proxy for the resources available in that community, we could conclude that a combination of adult capacity and the resources that those adults could use to support young people is needed to reduce the rate of non-graduating youth.

However, a higher level of educational attainment among adults—looking at the graduation rate in relationship to the proportion of adults in a neighborhood with a bachelor's degree or higher—did not have a significant effect. Therefore, all adults, regardless of their educational attainment, can play a role in keeping young people on a path to graduation.

### What's happening in your neighborhood?

You can find the adult-to-youth ratio in your neighborhood on the [Community Commons](#) website. Community Commons—a nonprofit collaboration powered by the [Institute for People, Place and Possibility](#), the [Center for Applied Research and Environmental Systems](#), and [Community Initiatives](#)—“provides thousands of meaningful data layers that allow mapping and reporting capabilities, so you can thoroughly explore community health.” The map at right shows an example based on Boston's data.



Ratio of Adults to Youth, 2010    1%-<2%    2%-<3%    3%-<4%    4%-<5%    5%+

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## Conclusions and Implications

There are large numbers of young people in the United States who have left high school without graduating. The trend has been steadily improving over the last four decades, but the improvements are not equally distributed. In fact, there is great variation across all cities and neighborhoods within those cities. The result is that there are still nearly 700,000 16- to 19-year-olds who are not in school and who do not have a high school diploma.

We have presented evidence that a change in the adult capacity in a community is related to improvements in the rate of youth leaving school. Our most conservative estimate indicates that increasing the adult-to-youth ratio in a neighborhood by 1 percent results in a decrease in the rate of youth leaving school by 1 percent.

This finding is consistent with models of community capacity that elucidate the organizational, relational and cultural supports that put youth on positive developmental trajectories, including educational trajectories.<sup>14</sup> These facets of community capacity depend on the people within a community and institutions housed within that community.

In addition, our findings extend the literature on youth bulges beyond community and political violence.<sup>15</sup> When there are not enough adults in a community compared to the number of youth, youth will not have the norms, values, social opportunities and constraints that they may need to achieve academically. Likewise, more adults in a community can help keep youth on positive educational pathways and re-engage others.

Without a sufficient number of adults in a community, the array of social supports that youth need might not be available.<sup>16</sup> The presence of community-based organizations did not, by itself, contribute to fewer young people leaving school. Further, as one aspect of this study shows, adult capacity has a stronger relationship to the rate of youth leaving school in communities with higher incomes—suggesting that sufficient resources overall need to be available in order for changes in the adult-to-youth ratio to make the biggest difference.

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## Questions and Considerations for Policy and Practice

- What surprises you about these findings?
- What insights do the findings offer for how you understand your day-to-day work?
- How does this new research relate to what is happening in your community? How could you explore the trends in the [zip codes you serve](#)?
- The findings related to race and income might lead you to think about particular policy directions, such as mixed-income or affordable housing, arrest and incarceration rates, and employment initiatives. How can this brief help to initiate a conversation with leaders and partners in your community?
- What questions are not answered by this research that deserve further study?

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## Endnotes

- 1 From the Kids Count Data Center <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/73-teens-ages-16-to-19-not-in-school-and-not-high-school-graduates?loc=1&loct=2#detailed/1/any/false/869,36,868,867,133/any/380,381>. We use the term “leaving high school without graduating” instead of the more commonly used “dropout.” See the Center for Promise 2014 report, *Don't Call Them Dropouts*, for a discussion of this choice of language.
- 2 Analysis of 2010 Decennial Census data by author.
- 3 Civic Enterprises & Everyone Graduates Center (2016). *Building a GradNation Report*. Washington, DC: America's Promise Alliance.
- 4 Bloom, D., Thompson, S. L., & Ivry, R. (2010). *Building a Learning Agenda around Disconnected Youth*. New York, NY: MDRC.; Bridgeland, J. M., & Milano, J. A. (2012). *Opportunity Road: The Promise and Challenge of America's Forgotten Youth*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises.; Edelman, P. B., & Holzer, H. J. (2013). Connecting the disconnected: Improving education and employment outcomes among disadvantaged youth.
- 5 Leventhal, T., Dupéré, V., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2009). Neighborhood influences on adolescent development. *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*.
- 6 Zaff, J. F., & Smerdon, B. (2009). Putting children front and center: Building coordinated social policy for America's children. *Applied Developmental Science*, 13, 105-118.; Zaff, J. F. (2011). A cease and desist order for school reform: It is time for educational transformation. *Applied Developmental Science*, 15, 1-7.
- 7 Rouse, C.E. (2007). The labor market consequences of an inadequate education. In C. Belfield and H.M. Levin (Eds.), *The price we pay: The economic and political consequences of an inadequate education* (pp. 99—124). Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.; Sum, A., Khatiwada, I., McLaughlin, J., & Palma, S. (2009). *The Consequences of Dropping Out of High School*. Boston, MA: Center for Labor Market Studies Publications.
- 8 Rouse, C. E. (2005). The labor market consequences of an inadequate education. In symposium on the *Social Costs of Inadequate Education*, Teachers College Columbia University.
- 9 Urdal, H. (2006). A clash of generations? Youth bulges and political violence. *International studies quarterly*, 50, 607-629.
- 10 Dang, M. T., & Miller, E. (2013). Characteristics of natural mentoring relationships from the perspectives of homeless youth. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 26, 246-253.; Furman, W., & Buhrmester, D. (1985). Children's perceptions of the personal relationships in their social networks. *Developmental psychology*, 21, 1016.; Greeson, J. K., & Bowen, N. K. (2008). “She holds my hand” The experiences of foster youth with their natural mentors. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 1178-1188.
- 11 For a full description of the statistical methodology used for this analysis, see the full paper at <http://www.americaspromise.org/resource/adult-capacity-study>.
- 12 For complete results of these analyses, see the Appendix in the full paper at <http://www.americaspromise.org/resource/adult-capacity-study>.
- 13 William H. Frey, Brookings Institution and University of Michigan Social Science Data Analysis Network's analysis of 2005-9 American Community Survey and 2000 Census Decennial Census tract data; The US Census Bureau uses the term 'Black or African-American' to refer to a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa.
- 14 Leventhal, T., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2000). The neighborhoods they live in: the effects of neighborhood residence on child and adolescent outcomes. *Psychological bulletin*, 126, 309.
- 15 Urdal, H. (2006). A clash of generations? Youth bulges and political violence. *International studies quarterly*, 50, 607-629.
- 16 Center for Promise (2015). *Don't Quit on Me*. Washington, DC: America's Promise Alliance.



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## About the Center for Promise

The Center for Promise is the applied research institute for America's Promise Alliance, housed at the Boston University School of Education and dedicated to understanding what young people need to thrive and how to create the conditions of success for all young people.

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## About America's Promise Alliance

America's Promise Alliance is the nation's largest network dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth. We bring together more than 400 national organizations and thousands of community leaders to focus the nation's attention on young people's lives and voices, lead bold campaigns to expand opportunity, conduct groundbreaking research on what young people need to thrive, and accelerate the adoption of strategies that help young people succeed. GradNation, our signature campaign, mobilizes Americans to increase the nation's high school graduation rate to 90 percent by 2020. In the past 12 years, an additional 2 million young people have graduated from high school.

### To Learn More

This brief is based on an econometric study conducted in 2016 by Thomas Malone and Dr. Jonathan Zaff. For a copy of the working paper, please go to [www.americaspromise.org/resource/adult-capacity-study](http://www.americaspromise.org/resource/adult-capacity-study) or contact the Center for Promise at [cfp@americaspromise.org](mailto:cfp@americaspromise.org).

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