



Mission

The mission of the Kinder Institute is to:

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

Houston's Opportunity:

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

Executive Summary

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

Background

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

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

Methodology

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

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

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



Findings

Characteristics

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

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

Contributing Factors

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

Recommendations

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

Generously underwritten by JPMORGAN CHASE & CO.