

Who are “Opportunity Youth?” 16–24-year-olds who are not in school and are also not working. These individuals are also sometimes referred to as disconnected youth.

How do Opportunity Youth become Disconnected?

Opportunity Youth are more likely than their peers to be¹:

- In poverty
- Disabled
- Married and/or have children.
- Living apart from both parents
- Living in institutionalized group quarters
- Homeless
- Uninsured

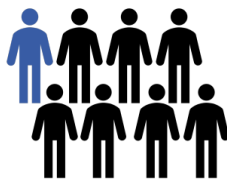
They are also more likely to face difficulties meeting their basic needs such as food, housing, and healthcare. Many Opportunity Youth also struggle with a lack of access to reliable internet, safe and affordable transportation, and high-quality, affordable childcare.²

For these reasons and more, completing school and work becomes difficult for these young people.

Opportunity Youth in NC

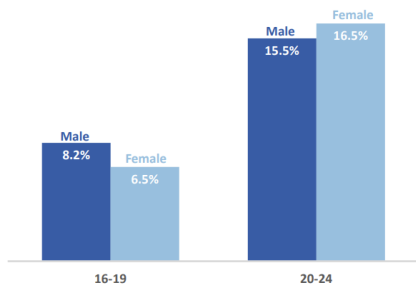
155,000 NC 16–24-year-olds neither in school nor working in 2021

1 in 8 NC youth

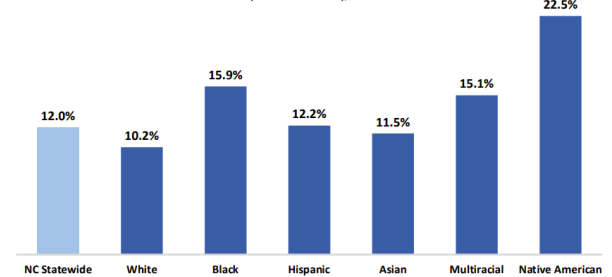


When reviewing the rate of Opportunity Youth in N.C., there are demographic differences across racial and ethnic groups, and by gender.³

Percentage of Opportunity Youth (NC)
by age group and sex, 2021



Percentage of Opportunity Youth (NC)
by race and ethnicity, 2021



Opportunity Youth and COVID-19



Before COVID-19, opportunity youth accounted for 11% of young adults in North Carolina.



National data shows that the unemployment rate for people ages 16-24 tripled from spring 2019 to spring 2020.

The rate of Opportunity Youth in America decreased 27% between 2010 and 2019.⁵ However, it is estimated that the effects of COVID-19 have undone nearly all the progress made in the last decade.⁶

Young people were more likely to hold jobs that were disrupted by the pandemic, such as service and hospitality jobs. They were also more likely to face educational disruptions due to the pandemic. For youth already facing barriers to success such as unreliable internet, transportation, and basic needs, this “double whammy” led to disconnection for many.

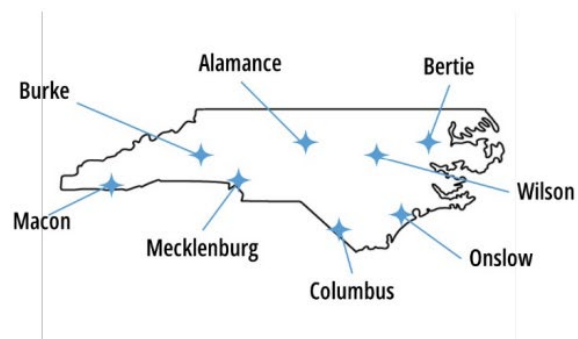
Where do employers fit in?

Employers are an essential part of the efforts to reduce the number and rate of Opportunity Youth in NC. By understanding the challenges this population faces to stay connected to work and responding appropriately, employers can **both meet their needs of filling job openings, while also providing a chance for these young people to achieve their personal and professional goals.**

ncIMPACT is an entrepreneurial initiative out of the UNC School of Government. The organization aims to help local communities use data and evidence to improve conditions and inform decision-making. NCGrowth, part of the Kenan Institute for Private enterprise, focuses on creating and sustaining jobs. Together, they launched the project: “Where are the Workers?”

Who We Talked To And How We Listened

- ncIMPACT and NCGrowth collaborated on a series of focus groups across all 8 of NC’s prosperity zones
- Talked with employers, workforce support providers, and young adults about their experiences
- Focus group conversations were recorded and transcribed; thematic analysis is ongoing





Employers

- Mixed feelings that the quality of workers has changed/declined
- A willingness among some to be more creative and flexible with benefits and workplace environment
- High demand for soft skills



Workforce Support

- Significant concerns about mental health and wellbeing of young workers
- Concerns about barriers to employment
- Seeking to expand how they expose young workers to employment opportunities
- Working with employers to adapt/expand hiring practices
- Training needs for young workers AND employers



Young Adults

- Seeking employers who value flexibility and growth as well as inclusiveness and openness related to diversity (and neurodiversity)
- Motivated by salary/wages, but equally by other benefits, the workplace culture
- Some reported not feeling respected in the workplace; they do not want to just be someone's employee
- A few mentioned systemic/structural barriers

Perspectives from Young Adults – Inclusiveness, Respect, Diversity, Flexibility

“This isn't from my personal experience, but I have a lot of physically disabled friends. And for them, school and work can be really hard because most employers or educators **don't interact a lot with people who have physical disabilities**. So, they struggle with finding people who are like, "Hey, it's okay. You can't come in today." Or if you're having a bad week, or if your arthritis is so bad that you can't hold a pencil because they have never had to deal with it before. - Young Adult, Franklin County

“My ideal work environment is to work with people that are loving, respectful, caring, who are also doing their jobs. Yes, we're here to make money, but we also respect each other and care about each other. **I wish employers knew that people are real**. -Young Adult, Bertie County

“I think post-COVID, if you're not providing support or **flexibility** to your staff, you're probably struggling a little bit. That's what I look for in a job. And mobility within....

Growth and stability are two major factors within looking for a career. If you get a job and it's just a job, besides the money, what's the point in keeping working there? -Young Adults, Burke County

Perspectives from Employers – Acknowledging a Shift, Working to Adapt

“Usually, employers are in positions of power. That dynamic has reversed these days, and **employers need to realize that the employees with their services are in demand, and they need to be adapted to them.** We need to make some kind of seismic shifts in our philosophy in order to accommodate that.

- Employer, Columbus County

“So, every position that we have has a **career development step plan.** So, it's like you'll start out as a trainee, within a year you'll be a telecommunicator one. The next year you'll be a telecommunicator two. There's a three, **and every year you get a raise.** We have a step plan for every program down to a maintenance worker.

- Employer, Onslow County

“And when I talk to employers, they're still thinking like they thought seven or nine, ten years ago, before COVID. And so, I'm like, 'You're going to have to think differently about how you're ...**appealing to this new wave of people.**' Whether that's offering them different PTO or something. So, I'm like, I'm just telling you, you cannot just post something up on your job board and think they're going to come to it.... **you're going to have to cultivate the younger generation. You're going to have to figure out a different way to recruit them.** And if you don't get in front of a classroom through some of the organized programs, we have or get teachers to do externships, or open up to let people come in and see what [the] real time is, it's going to be hard. They're not going to just read a piece of paper.... Plus, a lot of companies, I tell them this too, I'm like, 'I don't know who is creating your job descriptions, [laughs] but y'all have got to change.' And I'm not the answer to that. I'm just saying that's something else I hear a lot from the students that graduate and call me after they've graduated.

- Employer & employment support provider, Wilson County

 NCGrowth

 UNC SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT
nclMPACT Initiative

Source 7

From these findings, it's clear that to attract and retain young people, employers should:

1. Accommodate the unique needs of each individual, such as those that arise from a mental or physical disability.
2. Cultivate a culture of mutual trust and respect.
3. Provide flexibility to employees.
4. Provide opportunities for career growth and stability.

Source 8

From these focus groups where young people shared what they look for in their workplace, here are some recommendations on how to attract and retain young workers.

Offer a living wage for your area, that allows workers to meet their basic needs.

- “Ultimately, all of the issues come down to a cost-benefit analysis for potential workers. If someone needs to pay more for childcare than they would gain from working, that's an easy calculation.” – Anita Brown-Graham, nclMPACT Director
- According to Carolyn Fryberger, Assistant Director of economic development at NCGrowth, some employees forgo taking a job because the salary offered does not cover the cost of housing in an area.

Provide flexibility.

- Many higher wage jobs have always had the flexibility of **benefits, vacation time, shift flexibility.** After COVID, there is an increasing willingness to talk about these things [for lower-wage jobs].” - Mark Little, NCGrowth Executive Director.

Create opportunities for employees' personal connections to work.

- During the focus groups, it was clear from young people that “they want to work, and they want to be engaged, but they are feeling a strong sense of disconnection and **need companies to take more interest in them as individuals rather than a cog in the machine.**” - Carolyn Fryberger

Questions to Consider:

- How do your hiring and retention practices reflect these needs of Opportunity Youth and other young people?
 - How don't your hiring practices and workplace policies reflect these needs?
- What changes can you make in the short term to immediately start attracting younger workers and Opportunity Youth?
- What practices can you commit to developing in the long term to support attracting and retaining young workers and Opportunity Youth?
- What surprises you about this information?
- What do you want to learn more about?

Sources:

^{1,5} Lewis, K. (2020). "A Decade Undone: Youth Disconnection in the Age of Coronavirus." *Measure of America*.

² Mendoza, M. (2022). "Policy Recommendations to Reconnect Opportunity Youth during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Aspen Institute*

³ myFUTURE NC (2021). "Opportunity Youth." *myFUTURE NC*.

⁴ Guarine, J. (2023). "This American (Work) Life: Challenges & Opportunities in the Workforce." *Where are the Workers Webinar Series*.

⁶ Lewis, K. (2020). "A Disrupted Year: How the Arrival of COVID-19 Affected Youth Disconnection." *Measure of America*.

⁷ Dorrance, J., Fryberger, C., and Little, M. (2023). "This American (Work) Life: Challenges & Opportunities in the Workforce." *Where are the Workers Webinar Series*.

⁸ Powell, R. (2023). "Where are the Workers?" *Endeavors*.