

No job, no degree? No problem. Las Vegas has answers for ‘disconnected youth.’

[Jackie Valley](#) Sept. 06, 2025, 5:00 a.m. ET

Several miles from the glitzy Las Vegas Strip, tucked in a nondescript plaza, a restaurant is bursting with positive vibes.

The dining room features cheerful yellow paint, a greenery wall, floral-inspired artwork, and a sign that says, “Have a beautiful day.” It’s an intentional atmosphere for this eatery called The Blooming Bistro.

The restaurant, in fact, is mission-driven. It considers itself a lifeline for adrift young people like Diego Ramos, who at this moment is juggling the demands of the lunch crowd on this busy weekday afternoon. He clears plates from one table, refills water cups at another, and delivers fresh food and silverware to a third.

Why We Wrote This

A sizable number of teens and young adults in the U.S. are not in school, employed, or in job training. Civic leaders want to reconnect them to a path toward productive adulthood.

“People struggle in life. People have hard times,” says Samantha Steele, co-founder of The Blooming Bistro, which opened this spring. “I want people to feel hope and light when they come in here.”

A few months ago, this job wasn’t on Mr. Ramos’ radar. No job was. The 21-year-old grew up liking music and basketball, “kid stuff” as he calls it, before getting swept up in gangs, drugs, and fights. He was arrested as a teen and kicked out of school.

“It just got to the point where that was the only thing I knew, because that’s what everyone around me was doing,” he says. When he moved to Las Vegas during his senior year of high school, that disrupted his education journey, too.

His mother heard about the opportunities at The Blooming Bistro, and its mission to provide young adults from challenging backgrounds with workforce training – as well as social-emotional learning in an atmosphere that gently eases them into employment.

Many of the employees here have recently aged out of the foster care system. Some have experienced homelessness. Others, like Mr. Ramos, were involved in the juvenile justice system, while others are recovering from substance disorders.

Indeed, many of the employees at this bistro fit the definition of what government officials and many experts today call “disconnected youth.”



Alfredo Sosa/Staff

Jennifer Briones cleans a table inside The Blooming Bistro in Las Vegas. Ms. Briones says this work experience is teaching her skills such as multitasking, communication, and attention to detail en route to one day becoming a mobile

app developer.

In general, the term describes teens and young adults, ages 16 to 24, who are neither employed nor in education or training programs. In the United Kingdom, experts label this group with the acronym NEETs (not in employment, education, or training). Others use a more positive term: “opportunity youth.”

According to researchers, these ages are a critical time in a person’s life. Young people begin to form adult identities and become more independent, joining the rhythms of adult life and figuring out, as it were, how to “make a living.”

“It’s a lot better than just pointlessly sitting around the house all day, not knowing what you’re going to do or have any idea what the next step is,” Mr. Ramos says of his restaurant job. “It’s good to be able to look forward and to plan on doing something.”

Who disconnected youth are and why they’re seemingly stuck in place isn’t always obvious. It makes the problem tricky to unravel, experts say.

But for a sizable number of fledgling adults in the United States, a lot can go wrong. Not surprisingly, where a person grows up matters. Youth disconnection is tightly linked to neighborhood poverty, adult unemployment, and low adult educational attainment. In short, disadvantage often clusters geographically and persists across time.

Risk factors can take root in unstable household situations, places where there are fewer quality educational opportunities or unreliable transportation options. Illnesses and what scholars call “adverse childhood experiences” can inhibit educational and employment paths, as does being brought into contact with the justice system. Disconnection, many experts say, is an outcome years in the making.

Economists and social scientists began studying this phenomenon in earnest around 2010, after the Great Recession. The numbers of young people dropping

out of the economy had surged to almost 6 million, or 14.7% of this age cohort, according to research by Measure of America, an initiative of the global network Social Science Research Council.

These numbers loosely parallel the state of the economy. As the job market improves, so do disconnection rates, which stood at 10.7% in 2019. The rate climbed sharply again when COVID-19 rattled the economy.

In 2023, the latest year of available data, there were an estimated 4.15 million young people, or 10.6% of this age group, considered disconnected, according to the census data analyzed in the forthcoming 2025 edition of the Measure of America report. The rates are higher among non-white youth: Latino, 12.2%; Black, 15.9%; Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 17.5%; and Native American, 22.7%.

“The most dangerous thing you could have for a community is a young person without hope,” says Robert Sainz, president and executive director of New Ways To Work, an organization in Montebello, California, that works with private and public groups. There remain stubbornly high rates of disconnection within states such as Louisiana, Mississippi, Alaska, West Virginia, and Nevada. Many urban areas across the United States also have high rates of adrift young people that far exceed the national average. The Memphis, Tennessee, metropolitan area, for example, has the worst youth disconnection rate in the nation at 17.4%.



Alfredo Sosa/Staff

An expanse of residential dwellings in Las Vegas can be seen from Exploration Peak Park, July 8, 2025.

In Las Vegas, the problem remains so large that its population of 37,000 unplugged youth could fill half of a typical professional football stadium. Nearly 1 in 7 young people in this tourism-driven city are out of school and out of work, giving Las Vegas the sixth-highest rate in the nation.

One of the reasons fueling concerns is the long-term personal and economic costs of such disconnection.

People who worked or attended school during their teens and early 20s make \$38,400 more annually by their 30s than those who did not, according to a Measure of America estimate. On the flip side, Nevada officials say every disconnected youth poses an average \$28,000 cost per year to taxpayers, citing

the inflation-adjusted numbers from the 2012 study “The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth.”

“The writing is on the wall,” says Cecil Fielder, strategic initiatives manager for Workforce Connections, a federally funded job training and placement center in Las Vegas. “This is a time where we should be investing in youth programs to give them the exit ramp so that they can begin adulting.”



Alfredo Sosa/Staff

Cecil Fielder (right) and Tiffany Tyler-Garner, members of the Opportunity Youth Coalition, stand at the Workforce Connections office in Las Vegas.

Helping young people see a world of opportunity

“If there were no limitations, what would your dream job be?”

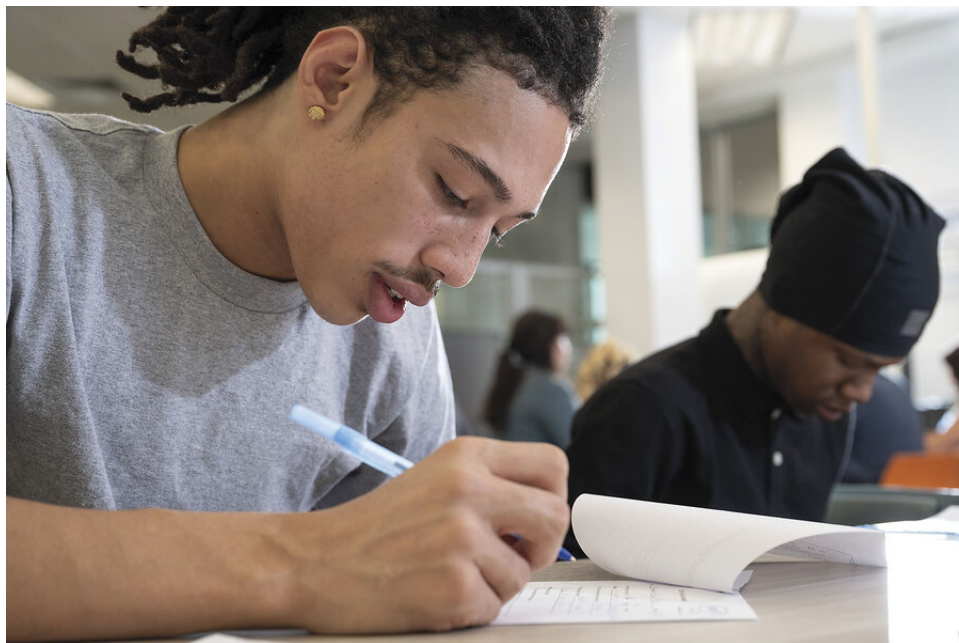
The question from Rose Noriega, outreach manager for EmployNV Youth Hub, kicks off a program orientation inside a Las Vegas library in July. About a dozen young adults in attendance start sharing their aspirations.

Author. Restaurant owner. Game developer. Mechanic.

She assures them there are no wrong answers. The EmployNV Youth Hub is a federally funded American Job Center specifically designed to help 16-to-24-year-olds in southern Nevada. Its purpose straddles career awareness and job connection. Virtual reality headsets, for instance, give these young adults a chance to explore careers in a way that written descriptions cannot.

Over the past four years, the program has connected 1,689 youth participants to employment, given 1,087 participants paid work experiences, and helped 527 others earn a credential or diploma for completing an educational or training program. “Our purpose is to make sure you get that job and keep growing,” Ms. Noriega says.

Two young men say they want to enter the information technology and real estate industries. Is college part of that plan? Perhaps someday. But their primary motivation right now, they say, is helping their families. Eighteen-year-old Amiere Ross, sitting at the same table, has that same desire. The newly minted high school graduate, who has work experience, has no intention of becoming “disconnected,” but he is temporarily out of school and without work.



Alfredo Sosa/Staff

Amiere Ross participates in an EmployNV Youth Hub program orientation at the West Charleston Library in Las Vegas. The organization seeks to connect young adults with job training and opportunities.

He, too, moved to Las Vegas toward the end of high school. To help his single mother pay bills, the teen held jobs at a skating rink and McDonald's. Mr. Ross bowed out of the workforce in February to focus on his senior year of high school and earn his diploma.

His road map beyond high school wasn't immediately clear. Mr. Ross says he considered becoming a firefighter or joining the military. Then a teacher mentioned plumbing, a high-demand career suited for kinesthetic learners – those who thrive with hands-on experiences and activities with physical movement. It checked a lot of boxes in his mind.

"I want a career that's gonna last long, that I'll enjoy and be comfortable with," Mr. Ross says. "Something that will require me to do physical work."

That's what brings him to the EmployNV Youth Hub. He wants to connect with a plumbing trade school and get a part-time job to pay his way through the nine-month training program. He got his first job at age 15, and he now envisions one day starting his own plumbing business.

"Sometimes, it's overwhelming," he says about the future. "But as long as I just be positive about it, I think I'll be good."

The scene at this EmployNV orientation exemplifies what many Las Vegas community leaders see as the most pragmatic approach to disconnected youth: exposing teens and young adults to more career options and providing a helping hand as they navigate the transition into this next life chapter.

Their approach deviates slightly from the college-for-all messaging that dominated classroom settings for the better part of recent decades. Instead, the emerging mantra is more along the lines of: *college, eventually*.

“If I’m struggling because we don’t have food in the refrigerator, I’m probably not going to be having a conversation about whether or not I can go to school because I don’t think I can afford it,” says Lisa Morris Hibbler, a managing partner at JBM Strategic Partners, a civic organization in Las Vegas that works with government agencies and nonprofits to improve communities.

“So we’re really trying to make sure that they understand that there are lots of ways you can get there, and it doesn’t have to be linear,” she says. A certification program or vocational training now. An associate or bachelor’s degree later.



Alfredo Sosa/Staff

Participants in an EmployNV Youth Hub program orientation use virtual reality to explore various career pathways at the West Charleston Library in Las Vegas.

That strategy could resonate in tourism-heavy Nevada, where the high school-to-college pathway isn’t very strong. Only about 29% of the state’s residents age 25 or older have at least a bachelor’s degree, according to Census Bureau estimates.

That’s notably lower compared with residents in neighboring states such as

California (38% with a bachelor's degree or higher), Arizona (34%), Utah (38%), and Idaho (32%).

Reconnecting 30,000 young people by 2030

If the transition from adolescence to adulthood were easy, legions of books and movies would not exist. But disconnection implies a greater struggle beyond the normal stumbling a young person may experience.

In Las Vegas, the number of young people considered disconnected is being viewed as a community problem – not as an individual one. And people like Dr. Morris Hibbler, who has a Ph.D. in public administration, have helped form the Opportunity Youth Coalition in Las Vegas. Its members represent nonprofits, the school district, social service and faith-based agencies, law enforcement, and employers, among others.

Its goal is to reconnect 30,000 Nevada youth by 2030. Officials say doing so could grow the state's economy by \$17 billion. As it stands, thousands of stalled teens and 20-somethings with reduced lifetime earnings would stunt the regional economy, powered by residents' and visitors' discretionary spending.

"As more people are earning money, they are then spending that money, and the money circulates through the economy to benefit other people," says David Schmidt, the state's chief economist. "I start earning a paycheck. I'm buying clothes. I am buying food. I might be paying rent."

The coalition's strategy is rooted in engaging, educating, employing, and empowering withdrawn youth, and it's showing some seeds of promise. The city's current 14.8% disconnection rate has fallen from 15.6% in 2022.

"You hear disconnection rate, and you think, 'Oh, they're juvenile delinquents, right? They're foster youth. They're homeless youth, so on and so forth,'" says Ricardo Villalobos, chief programs officer for Workforce Connections. "And some of them are, but interestingly, about 58% are high school graduates."

The same is true nationally. More than half of disconnected youth in 2023 had a high school diploma or equivalent.

Experts say there is no one-size-fits-all answer for why some young adults wind up unplugged from work and school. A variety of economic and cultural factors likely contribute. And the pandemic didn't help. The shaky economy and COVID-19-era restrictions created greater uncertainty for certain teens entering young adulthood during that period, and they remain off track.

Richard Reeves, founding president of the American Institute for Boys and Men, suspects changing norms may also be at play. More young adults, especially men, are living at home longer with their parents.

Those who do not contribute financially to the household may feel less pressure for economic independence. Others may be rejecting traditional career paths and aiming for entrepreneurial success or passive income streams touted on social media.

"It has never been that cool," Mr. Reeves says of landing an entry-level position and working your way up. "But I'm not sure that it's been much less cool than it is today."

In the Silver State, disconnection is more heavily concentrated among young men. Nineteen percent of men between the ages of 16 and 24 are out of work and out of school, compared with 10% of women in that age group, according to a study recently prepared for the Nevada Office of Workforce Innovation. "This poses a significant threat to the state's long-term economic prosperity and social stability," the study warns.

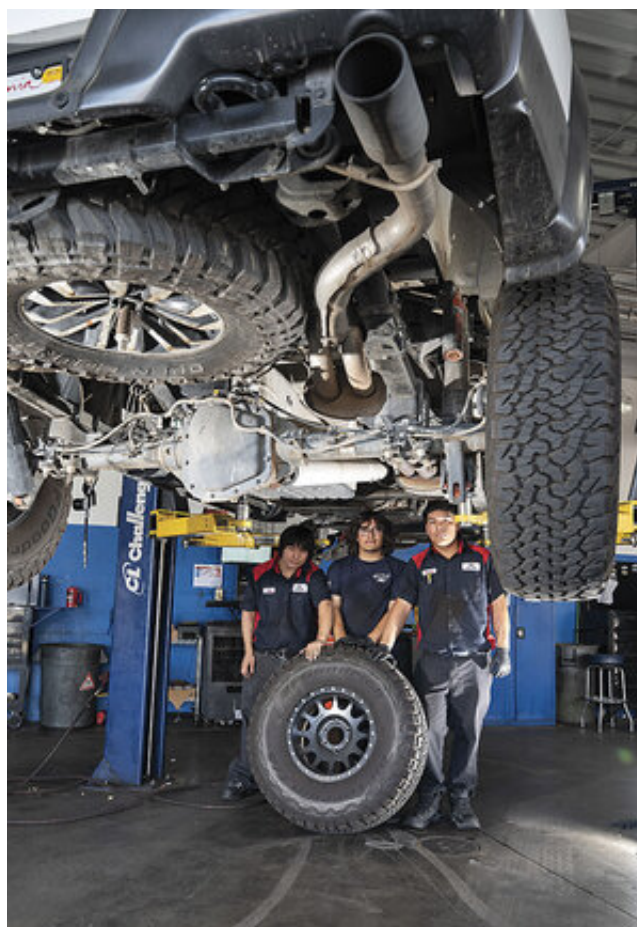
Experts caution labeling disconnection as a gender-specific challenge, though. As a whole, disconnection affects more young men in the United States. But the rate of unplugged 22-to-24-year-old women (15.2%) is higher than men in that age range (13.8%).

“It’s definitely not a solved problem,” says Kristen Lewis, director and co-founder of Measure of America. The research agency [releases annual reports about economic well-being](#), including for disconnected youth. “It’s still extremely concerning that so many young people are not in school and not working,” she says.

Providing hands-on training

Inside the service center at Gaudin Ford in Las Vegas, Angel Moreno, age 19, is helping with an oil change for a Ford F-150 Raptor.

Last fall, the auto dealership launched the Gaudin Technical Institute to train the next generation of auto technicians – and provide a solution to a complex problem.



Alfredo Sosa/Staff

Angel Moreno (left) and another student work on a truck with Gaudin Ford employee Miguel Montes (center) at Gaudin Technical Institute. The program trains aspiring auto technicians.

Mr. Moreno heard about the auto technician opportunity from a friend who'd recently completed the Gaudin program. Until then, the teen admits he felt directionless. He thought about becoming a sushi chef, but he didn't know how to make that happen.

"I was just worried about my future – like, what am I gonna do?" he says.

His friend was part of the first class of five students who completed the institute's subsidized training program earlier this year. Now, 13 more students are enrolled, learning the skills needed to take industry certification exams and then land a full-time job. The median pay for auto technicians, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, is nearly \$50,000 per year.

Members of the Opportunity Youth Coalition say there's hope for reconnecting adrift young people, especially since Nevada labor market data points to a mismatch between unemployment numbers and job opportunities.

In July, Nevada's unemployment rate remained at 5.4%, third-worst in the nation, trailing only California and Washington, D.C. The state added roughly 1,100 jobs in July, mostly concentrated in government. Mr. Schmidt, the state's chief economist, described it as a "relatively stable labor market."

"The opportunities have been there," says Tiffany Tyler-Garner, manager in the Department of Youth Development and Social Initiatives in the city of Las Vegas. "The question is, Are folks positioned with the skills needed to take hold of those opportunities?"

Auto technicians are in short supply, and the industry is facing an acute labor shortage nationwide. The nonprofit TechForce Foundation estimates that nearly 1 million entry-level technicians in the automotive, diesel, collision,

aviation, and avionics sectors will be needed between 2024 and 2028.

Cesar Martinez, the institute's technician career development manager, says he looks for kinesthetic learners who display a strong work ethic. He recruits from local high schools, but word of mouth is growing.

"What we're doing is serving the community," Mr. Martinez says. "It's not just attacking the technician shortage, but also helping those youths that are just hanging around the house."

Mr. Moreno says the hands-on, active nature of the field appealed to him, so he kept asking his friend for more information. Now, he's a student in the second class of 13 students. "It's great," he says. "I could just go up from here."

That's the advice Mr. Martinez says he imparts to students. Do your technician training now, and in the future, consider getting an associate degree or higher. But in the service center and institute classroom, it's all about the nuts and bolts of the job.

"There's no better feeling," Mr. Martinez says, "than being able to break something down, put it back together, take a step back, and look at it and say, 'I did that.'"



Alfredo Sosa/Staff

Miguel Montes, a Gaudin Ford employee and recent graduate of the institute, works on a car in the service area of Gaudin Ford in Las Vegas.

Learning to be an adult

Addison Ripplinger, age 18, aspires to be a nail technician. For now, however, she is honing her customer service skills at The Blooming Bistro.

Several years ago, in the grip of substance misuse and self-harm, Ms. Ripplinger couldn't have imagined this moment. Her transformation started at Mission High School, an education setting in Las Vegas designed for students recovering from drug or alcohol dependency.

Her recovery has continued at the restaurant, where she credits Ms. Steele with mentoring her. She says guidance from her boss has taught her to value teamwork, respect authority, and bite her tongue. "I just had to learn that's not how the world works," Ms. Ripplinger says. "There's a chain of command." Now, she is working on securing her driver's license as well.

The presence of a trusted adult who helps young people navigate the postchildhood transition can make the difference between whether they flourish or flounder, says Ms. Lewis of Measure of America. It's even more important for young people who didn't grow up in environments where they witnessed stable career paths. "They need to be able to fail safely, without terrible consequences, because they have supportive adults around them to help," she says.

The Blooming Bistro is meant to be a steppingstone, co-founder Ms. Steele says. Most of its young employees don't come anywhere close to working 40 hours per week, and that's entirely fine. "We meet the youth where they're at and get them acclimated and comfortable." Then they launch into opportunities elsewhere.

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For Mr. Ramos, that next step is a job at a Starbucks inside a Las Vegas Strip resort. Maybe down the line he will open his own restaurant or dabble in real estate.

What he does know with certainty: "I deserve more opportunity and a better chance and a better life."