

The Transition of Nevada Adolescents to Adulthood: A Rocky Road

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The transition of adolescents to adulthood can be a rocky road. Key societal changes, some ominous and some promising, shape the pathways today's adolescents are taking to adulthood. This brief presents information on vulnerable and disconnected youth and suggests programs and strategies that can be used in Nevada to help our youth.

Societal Changes

In their article "Macrostructural Trends and the Reshaping of Adolescence," Mortimer and Larson (2000) discuss societal changes that could affect paths chosen by adolescents. Some of these changes are:

- The general aging of the population, which is expected to continue throughout the 21st century, will change the issues that face society. The shrinking numbers of adults entering the work force will strain resources that prepare youth to move into adulthood properly prepared to handle their economic and other adult roles. The question is whether we can sustain youth-oriented resources without shortchanging those that benefit the elderly.
- The United States has increased immigration from overpopulated societies to help alleviate its labor shortages. While their labor is welcomed in this country, our restrictions, prejudices, and acts of discrimination may create hardships for immigrant parents' adolescent children who must now face further uncertainties in their futures.
- "Traditional" families no longer predominate, affected by falling birth rates, delayed parenthood, rising divorce rates, single-person households, and other alternative lifestyles. For example, the historical expectation of adolescent girls to "marry and

live happily ever after, supported by their husbands" no longer exists. This complicates the choices adolescents facing adulthood must make.

- Rapidly increasing technological changes require youth to prolong their educational achievement in order to obtain more desirable jobs, often postponing full-time work, marriage, and childbearing.
- Pessimism and economic restrictions in the area of juvenile justice have been cited as causes for the United States swing toward harsher punitive incarceration philosophy as a means of protecting society from a perceived threat from juvenile offenders. The changes may profoundly affect the most vulnerable youth in our society.

Vulnerable Youth

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2004) defines vulnerable youth as those who have been in foster care, involved in the juvenile justice system, and have children of their own.

In the United States,

- 132,641 persons ages 15-19 were in foster care in 2001
- 846,259 mothers were under age 20 in 2002
- 104,413 juveniles were detained, incarcerated, or placed in residential facilities in 2001
- 20% of 18- to 24-year-olds were in poverty in 2002 (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004)

Other groups may also qualify as vulnerable youth. The four groups are not meant to be totally exhaustive (Beavers, 2004). These other groups could include youth with incarcerated parents, teen dads, juveniles /young

adults in adult prisons, those with mental illness substance abuse or disability issues and immigrant youth (Beavers, 2004).

The following discussion, however, relates to the four groups identified in the bullets.

Foster Care

According to an AFCARS report, which included fiscal year 2001 estimates as of March 2003, 542,000 children and youth lived in foster care—100,056 were 16 years of age or older (USDHHS, 2003).

A study of youth exiting the foster-care system in Clark County, Nevada, revealed that a significant percentage faced “serious difficulty in transitioning to life on their own” (Reilly, 2001). Additional findings included:

- 31% didn’t have a place to live
- 50% didn’t have at least \$250.00
- 73% didn’t have a valid driver’s license
- 64% lacked health insurance

Young Mothers

Approximately 400,000 teens have children each year, sometimes with profound adverse consequences. Young mothers more often

- head single-parent households
- live in poverty
- have lower educational attainment
- are less likely to complete successfully in the labor market
- have children who more often experience abuse, poor educational attainment, and poor health and are more likely to be delinquent (Pogarsky et al., 2003)

Juvenile Detention

No experience may be more predictive of future adult problems than having been confined in a juvenile facility. Of concern, virtually all of the 100% growth in youth institutionalized since 1985 (now numbering 27,000) is due to largely increased rates of detention for African American and Latino youth (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004).

About 70% of adolescents in juvenile justice systems are not violent offenders, but have been incarcerated for property offenses, multiple misdemeanors, or controlled substance violations, and have substance-abuse problems (Marler and Scoble, 2001).

Getting young people through school, providing them with good vocational training, and helping them find jobs with a community support network are far less expensive than paying for their room and board in prison for the next 20 years (Marler and Scoble, 2001).

Poverty

A growing body of research links poverty with lower levels of child well-being. Poor children are more prone to

- demonstrate low academic achievement
- drop out of school
- have health, behavioral, and emotional problems

The lives of poor children and their families can be improved by a combination of parental effort and correctly designed and implemented social programs (Moore and Redd, 2002).

Nevada

- 313 Nevada youth between the ages of 16 and 19 were in foster care in 2001
- 901 Nevadans were incarcerated in juvenile-detention facilities in 2001
- 6,915 Nevadans were mothers under the age of 20 in 2002
- 14% of 18- to 24-year-olds in Nevada were living in poverty in 2002 (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004)

The number of adults between the ages of 18 to 24 described as “disconnected” are those who

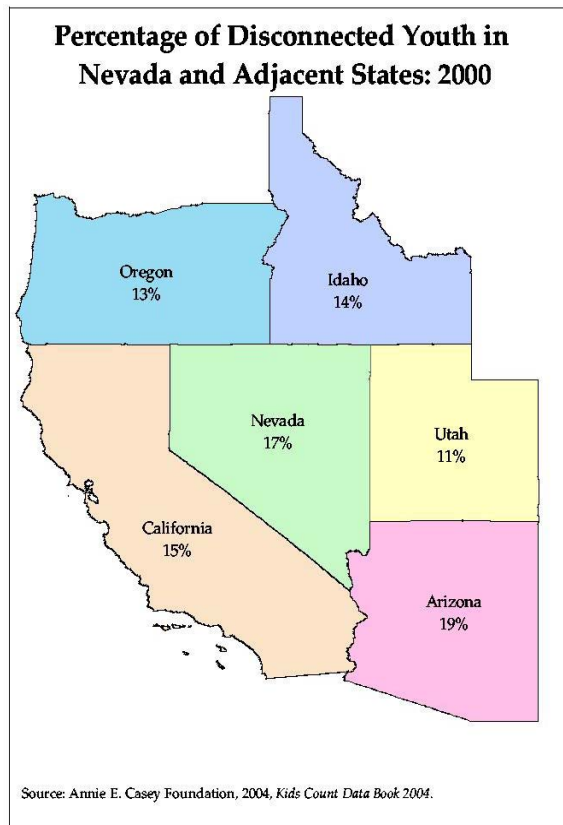
- are not enrolled in school
- are not working, and
- have no degree beyond high school

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2004) believes that disconnected youth are “the young adults who we believe deserve the most urgent attention. Their

risk is greatest; their hardship is most profound; and their current and future costs to our communities are the most significant” (p. 6).

In 2000, disconnected youth numbered 31,000 in Nevada. This represents 17% of Nevada young adults as compared with 15% in the United States (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004).

The map below illustrates the percentage of disconnected young adults in Nevada and surrounding states. Thirty percent of Nevada’s young adults are Hispanic. Only 13 states have higher Hispanic populations than Nevada (ACS PUMS, 2002). Because Nevada exceeds the national average in this category, it highlights an important segment of our population in need of remedial support.



Other behaviors of youth may also affect their ease of transition into adulthood. The Nevada Youth Risk Behavior Survey assesses an array of risk behaviors of middle and high school students every other year. For this brief, 88 risk behaviors were examined to determine if Nevada high school students’ risky behaviors had diminished or increased

from 2001 to 2003. It appears that high school students showed improvement in about 86% (n=76) of 88 risk behaviors. For the 12 risk behaviors in which there was no improvement, students reported that in 2001 and 2003, respectively, they

- were offended, threatened, frightened, or attacked more than one time because of their racial or ethnic background (19.3% vs. 19.6%)
- believed there was gang activity in their school (40.4% vs. 43.5%)
- had been forced to have sexual intercourse against their will (9.2% vs. 11.0%)
- felt so sad or hopeless in the past year every day for two or more weeks in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities (29.7% vs. 29.9%)
- attempted suicide in the past 12 months, attempts resulting in injury, poisoning or overdose that required treatment by a doctor or nurse (32.1% vs. 33.2%)
- drank alcohol, and usually got their alcoholic beverages from home with or without parental knowledge (32.0% vs. 33.9%)
- used steroid pills or shots without a doctor’s prescription (6.4% vs. 6.5%)
- thought that parents/guardians would approve or not care if they have five or more drinks in a row within a couple of hours (10.3% vs. 12.0%)
- had sexual intercourse during their lifetime with four or more partners (16.5% vs. 19.0%)
- were sexually active in 2003, used a condom or partner used a condom the last time they had sex (63.0% vs. 64.2%)
- believed that they were slightly or very overweight (29.5% vs. 30.0%)
- watched television, used a home computer, or played video games for more than three hours per day on an average school day (45.3% vs. 48.8%)

Although these indicators of racial or ethnic discrimination, gang activity, sexual precociousness, depression, substance abuse, obesity, and physical inactivity are not unique to Nevada adolescents, these prevalence rates underscore problems that Nevada must address in easing the transition from

youth to adulthood or face the likelihood of more extensive social costs in the future.

Easing the Transition from Adolescence to Adulthood

In Nevada, funds are available for youth between 18 and 20 years old who have aged out of foster care to help them make a successful transition to independence.

- There are stipend funds (\$250-\$1,000 per youth) for youth who left the foster-care system after January 1, 2003 (Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth).
- There are also critical needs funds (up to \$1,000 per year) for former foster-care youth up to the age of 21 (Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth).

These monies were meant to address such needs as dental and eye care, rent and utility expense, and supportive mentoring. Additional funds could become available to address specific emergency requests until they turn 21. These kinds of assistance could make the youth better prepared to achieve independence on their own at 21 than they would be at 18 (Kulin, 2004).

The recent (June 2004) popular national column Dear Abby focused on programs to help those youth who were “aged out” of foster care after turning 18. They were advised to contact their state’s foster-care system to get more information about resources. Online resources suggested were Foster Club (<http://www.fosterclub.com>) and Casey Family Programs (<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Tools/>). Additional resources for those in need of assistance cited were:

- Job Corps (<http://www.jobcorps.org>)
- Catholic Charities
- Orphan Foundation of America (www.orphan.org), which also helps kids in the foster-care system.

According to a report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Nevada falls short in meeting standards in all of the foster-care areas related to child welfare, which would cause them to lose more than \$300,000 in funding. Although the state has 90 days to develop an improvement plan

and about two years to implement it, there are serious concerns that Nevada may lack the multiple agencies and providers needed to fix the problems (Casey, 2004).

Nevada could profit by researching some of the more successful programs initiated by other states, such as Silicon Valley Children’s Fund Youth Education Scholarship (YES) program and the Guardian Scholars program in California, and the Tree House Coaching to College Program in Washington. Other entities include the Casey Foundation Family-to-Family Initiative, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (JCYOI), and the Casey Foundation School to Career Partnership (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004).

“JCYOI a nonprofit, single-purpose, grant-making foundation, supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs, that brings together the people and resources needed to help youth in foster care and foster care alumni gain access to education, employment, health care, housing and supportive personal and community relationships” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004, p. 17). To date, nine sites have benefited from this effort and five more will be selected in the next year. Las Vegas, if not selected, could learn from the successes enjoyed from the nine cities that have already been fortunate enough to benefit from the foundation’s assistance.

Rima Shore in a Kids Count Indicator Brief proposed five strategies for reducing the number of disconnected youth. The strategies could help reduce the anxieties Nevada youth face as they transition into adulthood:

- “Aim for comprehensive system reform, not just the provision or expansion of direct services
- Start with schools
- Create well-structured school-to-career (STC) programs
- Address impediments to employment
- Meet adolescents’ intense need for nurturance, guidance and protection” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003).

Conclusion

Douglas W. Nelson, president of the Annie E. Casey

Foundation, asserts that “It is within our power and capacity—over the coming decade—to move millions more of our vulnerable youth from risk to opportunity” (Nelson, 2004, p 4). To do this, he believes we must make this problem a community, state, and national priority. And, we must base all our efforts on sound data, and good follow-up evidence and responsible accounting to assure that all of our efforts are cost effective (Nelson, 2004).

As the fastest-growing state in the nation, Nevada may be hard-pressed to provide support for the ever-growing needs of its diverse population. The big question remains: Will Nevada meet the needs of its adolescent youth?

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