

OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

# Untapped Potential in the Equality State



Approximately 2,000 Wyoming young people, between the ages of 16 and 19, are neither in school nor employed.<sup>1</sup> As the least populated state, Wyoming cannot afford to waste their potential to participate fully in our community.

Fortunately, over the last 20 years, Wyoming has built the foundation for full community engagement. Wyoming's focus on education – free full-day kindergarten, developmental screenings, and excellent school facilities—has produced some of the highest high school graduation



rates the state has ever seen.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as the equality state, we can and must do more to ensure that all our young people have a fair chance—no matter where they live or learn—to become engaged citizens who contribute to

Wyoming's economy, raise healthy and strong families, and participate in community life.

## NOT IN SCHOOL, NOT WORKING

Despite our efforts, however, too many young people are not enrolled in school nor working. These individuals are known as opportunity youth.<sup>3</sup> The name expresses the hope that they are not just one more example of how “striking differences in opportunity” propel “striking differences in outcomes.”<sup>4</sup> We can change their future by giving them what their name suggests: opportunity. Opportunity is especially important for young people who

Opportunity youth is a term used for young people ages 16-24 years old, who are...



Not enrolled in school



Unemployed or not looking for work

are just starting their journey towards full community participation.

Some young people have childhoods marred by poor housing, family violence, homelessness, inadequate schools, foster care, and few jobs.<sup>5</sup> Youth growing up under these conditions are prone to chronic unemployment, poverty, criminal activity, poor mental and physical health, and early death.<sup>6</sup> These childhood experiences can lead youth to leave school before graduating and not to pursue any additional education or training. These youth then miss the opportunity, early in their journey towards independence, to acquire the labor market skills necessary for employment in an increasingly competitive and technological world.

## WE ALL LOSE

When this happens, we all lose. Families risk their self-sufficiency and our communities are left with a less-skilled workforce<sup>7,8</sup> which results in lost tax revenues, lost productivity, the inability to compete in a global economy,<sup>9</sup> and dependence on government assistance programs (like Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP]).<sup>10</sup> The cost to society is significant enough that two major research groups now use the percentage of opportunity youth as an indicator of community health. Both Measure of America (MoA), a non-profit project of the Social Science Research Council, and the University of Wisconsin consider opportunity youth a key health indicator for community or county health rankings.<sup>11</sup>

## WE CAN CHANGE THIS PICTURE

We can develop new policies and programs that provide schools, communities, and families with the resources

# PROFILE: WYOMING'S OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

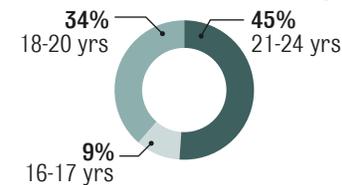
## WHO ARE WYOMING'S OPPORTUNITY YOUTH?

Percent who are opportunity youth

**7%**

of all 16-24 year olds in Wyoming are opportunity youth

Percent of opportunity youth by age

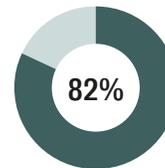


**58%**

of opportunity youth are male.

**1 in 5**

American Indian/ Alaska Native youth are opportunity youth. Only **3%** of all 16-24 year olds are American Indian/ Alaska Native.



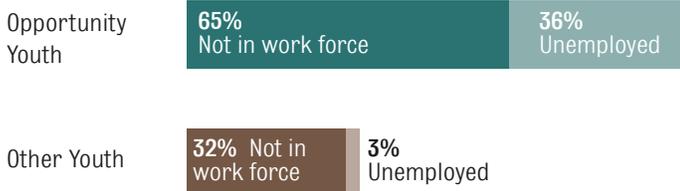
of opportunity youth have no college experience.

**24%** did not graduate from high school.

## THE COST OF LEAVING WYOMING'S OPPORTUNITY YOUTH BEHIND IS TOO HIGH

If opportunity youth are not encouraged to enter the workforce or to seek higher education, their potential remains untapped, and the cost to Wyoming will continue to increase.

### LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION



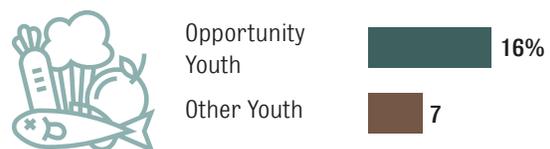
### UNEMPLOYED VS. NOT IN THE LABOR FORCE

**Unemployed:** No job, but actively seeking employment  
**Not in Labor Force:** No job and not actively seeking employment.

### NO HEALTH INSURANCE



### SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) PARTICIPATION



Source: WYSAC Analysis of 2018 5-Year American Community Survey (ACS) microdata. IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org).

they need to prepare all children to become contributing members of society. Growing up can be difficult for all kids, but if schools, communities, and families are strong and stable, youth can navigate the transition to adulthood with greater ease. If they do not have support, then our children (and our society) are at risk. Like a well-built home, our communities, schools, and families need a solid foundation and structure. The sooner we address the challenges children and families face, the more likely we can find solutions to these problems. We can keep our promise to youth to prepare them for a place in the global economy.

## HERE'S HOW YOU CAN HELP

- ✓ Support programs that address life-altering hardships, such as poverty and trauma, that disconnect youth from education and job training.<sup>12</sup>
- ✓ Advocate for school suspension and expulsion policies that do not disconnect children from education.
- ✓ Identify youth who are starting to struggle and help them engage positively with peers, family, afterschool programs, and schools.
- ✓ Use data to identify warning signs, to document the success of prevention and intervention efforts, and to persuade policymakers and the public to continuously improve the resources available.<sup>13</sup>
- ✓ Use data to understand how policies and programs impact the most vulnerable opportunity youth in Wyoming: Native Americans.
- ✓ Consider markers of educational opportunity to include school attendance, job opportunities, access to healthy food, and the availability of key resources.
- ✓ Offer comprehensive wraparound services that target multiple needs (e.g., substance abuse treatment, housing, child and family care, food security).<sup>14</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://action-lab.org/opportunity-youth/video-page/>
- 2 <https://edu.wyoming.gov/data/graduation-rates/>
- 3 [https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Economic\\_Value\\_of\\_Opportunity\\_Youth\\_Report.pdf](https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Economic_Value_of_Opportunity_Youth_Report.pdf)
- 4 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2019 May 16.
- 5 <https://americanhealth.jhu.edu/article/why-were-addressing-risks-adolescent-health>
- 6 <https://americanhealth.jhu.edu/article/why-were-addressing-risks-adolescent-health>
- 7 <https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/ADecadeUndone.pdf>
- 8 <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/with-our-shortage-of-skilled-workers-career-and-technical-education-is-ready-to-be-taken-seriously>
- 9 <https://americanhealth.jhu.edu/article/why-were-addressing-risks-adolescent-health>
- 10 [https://www.cumuonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/OY\\_Scan-of-the-Field.pdf#page=3](https://www.cumuonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/OY_Scan-of-the-Field.pdf#page=3)
- 11 Mason, D. Engaging “Disconnected” Youths to Prevent Lives of Isolation, Poverty, and Ill Health. *JAMA Health Forum*. Published online March 14, 2019. doi:10.1001/jamahealthforum.2019.0011
- 12 [https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/disconnected\\_youth/state/WY](https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/disconnected_youth/state/WY)
- 13 [https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/disconnected\\_youth/state/WY](https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/disconnected_youth/state/WY)
- 14 Schnoke, M. and Brown, G., “Opportunity Youth Programs based in Urban and Metropolitan Universities: A Scan of the Field” (2019). Urban Publications. 0 1 2 3 1633. [https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/urban\\_facpub/1633](https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/urban_facpub/1633)