

A Profile of the Idle Youth in the US

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Introduction

School enrollment among people 16 to 24 years of age has increased since 2000. However, youth who are not in school have exhibited a decrease in labor force participation (Mosisa and Hipple, 2006), leading to an increase in idle youth. Idle youth appear in the economics literature as the residual in school-to-work transition analyses, and as disconnected youth in the transition to adulthood literature in sociology. Their 'choice' to be idle is attributed to labor market opportunities and competition, income and wealth effects, family and social context, and personal preferences (Powers, 1994 and Bacolod and Hotz, 2005).

Objective

The purpose of this analysis is to explore the population of 16 to 24 year olds that are not enrolled in school and not in the labor force. We will present a comprehensive snapshot of the idle youth, describing their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, along with geographic concentration. This will provide a better understanding of who these youth are, aiding researchers and policy-makers who want to help these youth successfully connect with the labor market and society.

Data

This analysis uses data from the 2006 American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS collects detailed person-level data annually from a national sample of 3 million household addresses. The large sample size and rich demographic detail of the ACS allow for a more in-depth analysis than is possible with other national surveys. Of the 38.3 million people 16 to 24 years of age in the survey, 40.6 percent are not enrolled in school. Our universe of interest consists of the 2.8 million unenrolled youth not in the labor force in housing units.

Methods

For this analysis, we will use descriptive statistics to summarize demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic characteristics for our universe. Demographic indicators such as age, sex, race, ethnicity, educational attainment, and citizenship will be evaluated. We expect to find a higher prevalence of idleness for black and Hispanic youth, consistent with Census 2000 tabulations (Jekielek and Brown, 2005).

We will review household composition to ease comparability with the transition to adulthood literature. Research in that area often precludes youth who are married or have borne children. We aim for a broader definition to also permit comparability with other studies, including international comparisons.

The analysis will also examine the geographic concentration of the idle youth, focusing on metropolitan, regional and rural designations. We expect to find that most of the disconnected youth are concentrated in the Southern states and in metropolitan areas, consistent with the literature (Wald and Martínez, 2003).

We will also review the economic resources in the households where the idle youth reside. Total household income will be examined, along with the presence of unearned income, social insurance income, and other cash transfers.

References

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