



Pierce County

Young Adults: Disconnection & Opportunity

2026 Report



| Digital Report & Interactive Charts

To read a digital version of this report and view interactive charts visit workforce-central.org/dya26



| Executive Summary

More than 14,000 young people in Pierce County — roughly 1 in 8 residents between the ages of 16 and 24 — are not working or enrolled in school.

This population of young people are often called “disconnected” or “opportunity” youth, depending on the audience and context. Both definitions refer to the same population of young people, those who represent a systemic challenge and a significant opportunity. Early disconnection is one of the strongest predictors of long-term disengagement from the workforce, and the consequences compound over time, resulting in reduced lifetime earnings, increased reliance on public benefits, and diminished community economic vitality.

Despite years of economic growth and workforce investment across Pierce County, the rate of disconnection for local young adults has remained stubbornly flat — the same today as it was in 2013, even as every other adult age group has improved. This report examines where disconnected young adults live, who they are, and what barriers stand between them and stable employment or education. Key findings include:

- **Disconnection is geographically concentrated (p. 4):** South Tacoma, Parkland/Spanaway, and Lakewood/University Place account for more than half of all disconnected youth in the county at roughly 10 times the average density.
- **The post-high-school transition is the highest-risk moment (p. 5):** disconnection peaks sharply at ages 19-21, suggesting that transition support during and immediately after the high school years is a critical intervention point.
- **Multiple compounding barriers are common (p. 6):** poverty, lack of a high school diploma, disability, and early parenthood frequently co-occur among disconnected young adults, underscoring the need for sustained wraparound services.
- **Young Adults are the only age group that has made no progress over the past decade (p. 7):** disconnection is in decline for all other age groups, but persists as a key challenge for young adults ages 16-24.
- **Young men face disproportionate risk (p. 8):** the majority of disconnected young adults across most racial groups in Pierce County are male, with particularly high rates among men identifying as some other race, Black, and Asian.
- **AI is increasingly impacting entry-level employment opportunities (p. 9):** young adults are facing new barriers in an increasingly automated hiring system and labor market.



Disconnection is geographically concentrated

By geography, we see some regions stand out as hot spots for disconnected young adults — *South Tacoma, Parkland/Spanaway, and the Lakewood/University Place* regions host over half of all DYA in the county, with about 85 DYA per square mile (10 times the county’s overall concentration).

Concentrating 50%+ of the county’s DYA population in three contiguous areas represents a clear opportunity for outreach and connection.

But the spread also suggests that these aren’t young adults who are geographically isolated from opportunity — they’re disconnected despite being in relative proximity to many colleges, employment hubs, and public services, which strengthens the case that the barriers are structural (transportation, cost, awareness, life circumstances) rather than simply locational.

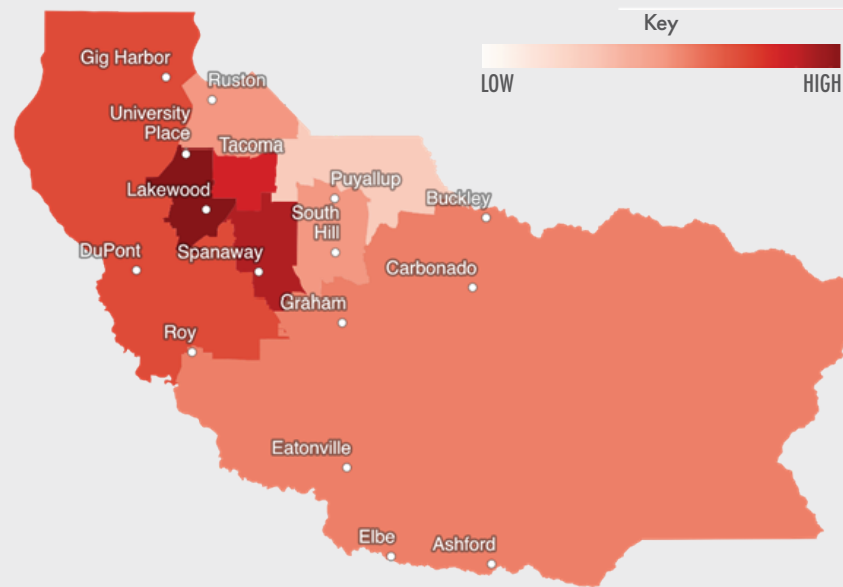
This clustering aligns with jurisdictions with some of the strongest incentives to act. Lakewood and University Place have their own city governments and economic development interests. The City of Tacoma has a deep investment in the revitalization of the South Tacoma corridor, and Pierce County has revitalization priorities for unincorporated Parkland/Spanaway, which has long been a service equity gap area. The unmet opportunities for these populations offer strong incentives to act — workforce pipeline, neighborhood stabilization, future tax base — while education and workforce partners have a strong incentive to focus on collaborations to overcome the structural barriers in these regions.

Disconnected Young Adults

PUBLIC USE MICRODATA AREA (PUMA)	DYA POPULATION	PERCENT DYA	DYA PER SQUARE MILE
Tacoma North	1,349	12%	46
Tacoma South	2,206	20%	112
Pierce North Central - Bonney Lake, Edgewood, Fife & Sumner	778	7%	11
Pierce South East - Graham, Elk Plain, & Prairie Ridge	1,508	10%	1
Pierce East Central - Puyallup & South Hill	1,338	10%	29
Pierce South Central - Parkland & Spanaway	2,391	16%	64
Pierce West Central - Lakewood & University Place	2,628	23%	95
Pierce North West - Peninsula Region & JBLM	1,903	11%	8

Source: U.S. Census Bureau ACS 2024 1-yr Public Use Microdata Samples

Disconnected Young Adults in Pierce County, WA



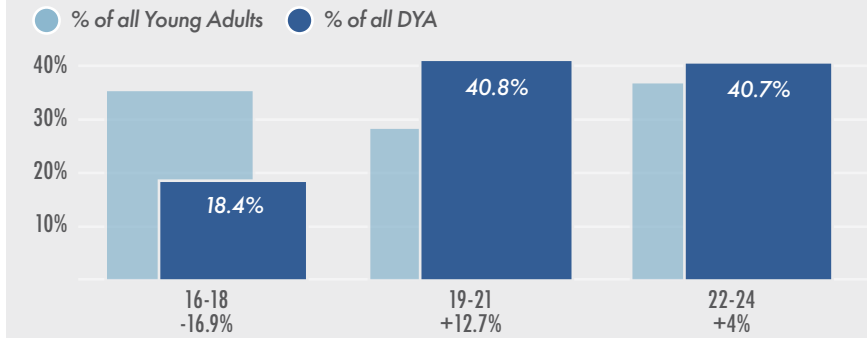
Youth, ages 16 to 24, who are not in school or working.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau ACS 2024 1-yr Public Use Microdata Samples

Disconnection peaks in the years immediately after High School

Overall, young adults are evenly distributed by age group. However, we see that they are much more likely to become disconnected after high school, with nearly 1 in 5 adults (19.2%) between 19- and 21-years-old, neither working nor attending school or training.

Disconnected Young Adults (DYA) by Age



Source: U.S. Census Bureau ACS 1-yr Public Use Microdata Samples



Poverty, disability, early parenthood, and incomplete schooling are the most common barriers

While the root causes of disconnection are not always clear, several challenges appear more frequently among disconnected young adults. These include poverty, disability, early parenthood, and not completing high school.

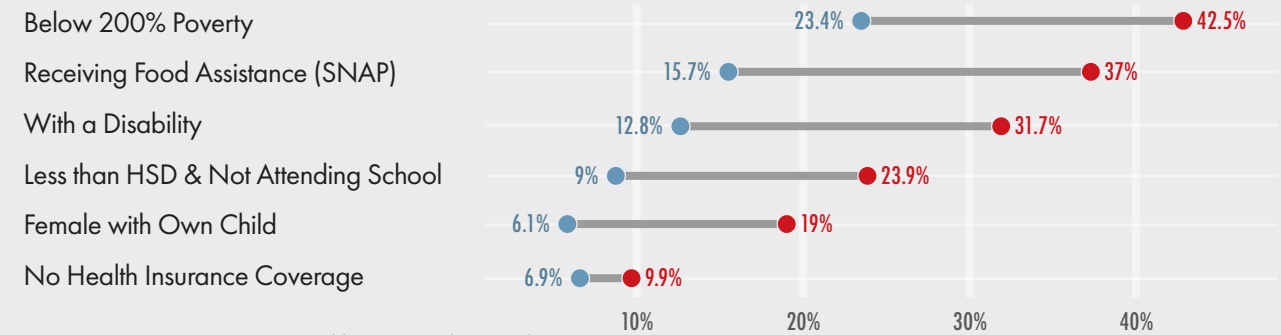
Although some barriers — such as the lack of health insurance — have

improved over time (declining from 27.3% in 2013 to 9.9% today), this progress may be at risk based on shifting policy priorities.

More than one-third of disconnected young adults rely on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits for food, and food insecurity is expected to increase as

new documentation and eligibility requirements limit access. While these eligibility changes are expected to increase the hardship for many disconnected young people, they may also create urgency that drives more young adults to seek workforce and training services.

Barriers Linked to Disconnection



Source: U.S. Census Bureau ACS 1-yr Public Use Microdata Samples



Young Adults are the only age group that has made no progress over the past decade

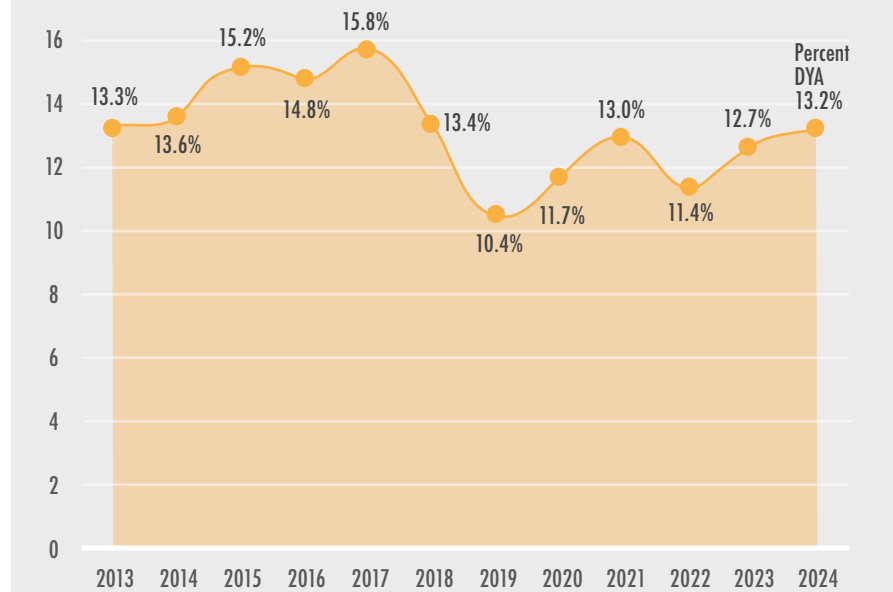
Although young adults aren't the only group that can become disconnected from employment or education — adults of any age can fall into the NEET (not in employment, education, or training) category — we focus on 16- to 24-year-olds because early disconnection is a strong predictor of longer-term disengagement. Periods of instability during the transition from school to work can have lasting consequences, shaping future earnings, job stability, and attachment to the labor market.

While 13% of young adults fall into this category, compared to a countywide NEET rate of 19% for adults of any age, this age group of young adults has seen no meaningful improvement since 2013. In contrast, every other adult age group has experienced steady gains in employment and educational participation over the past decade.

While there have been year-to-year ups and downs, the long-term picture is one of stagnation. The trend visual shows that the disconnection rate among young adults has remained essentially unchanged since 2013.

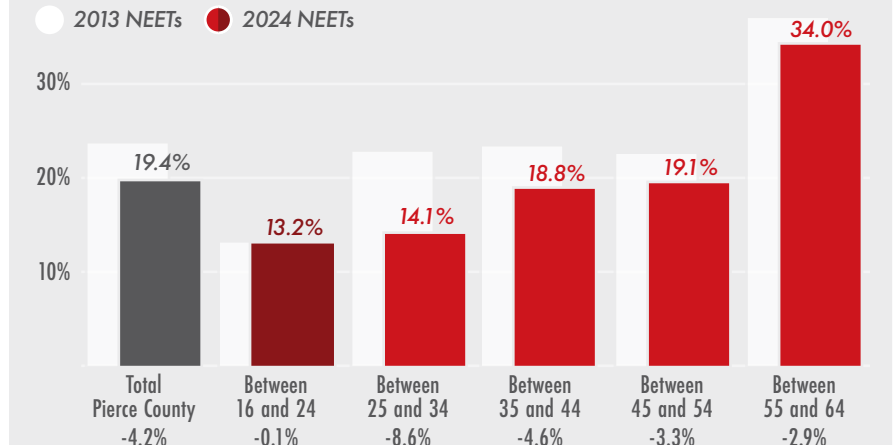
This persistent flatline indicates that, despite broader economic gains, a substantial share of young adults remain disconnected during the transition to adulthood. Closing this gap will require targeted strategies that address the specific barriers young people encounter at this stage.

Pierce County DYA Historical Trend



Source: U.S. Census Bureau ACS 2013-2024 1-yr Public Use Microdata Samples

Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau ACS 1-yr Public Use Microdata Samples



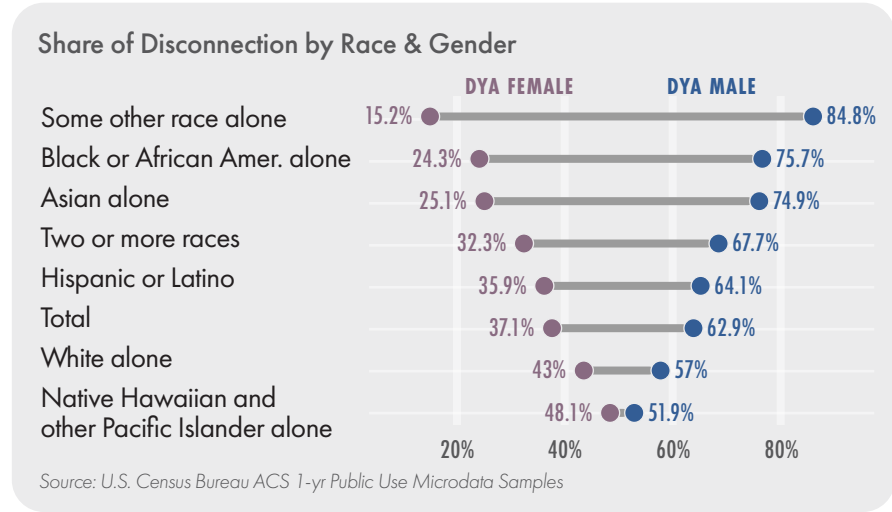
Disconnection cuts broadly across demographics with notable gaps for men and Black and Multicultural Youth

Surprisingly, youth disconnection cuts across demographic lines fairly consistently, with the overall share of disconnection largely mirroring the overall demographic share of young adults.

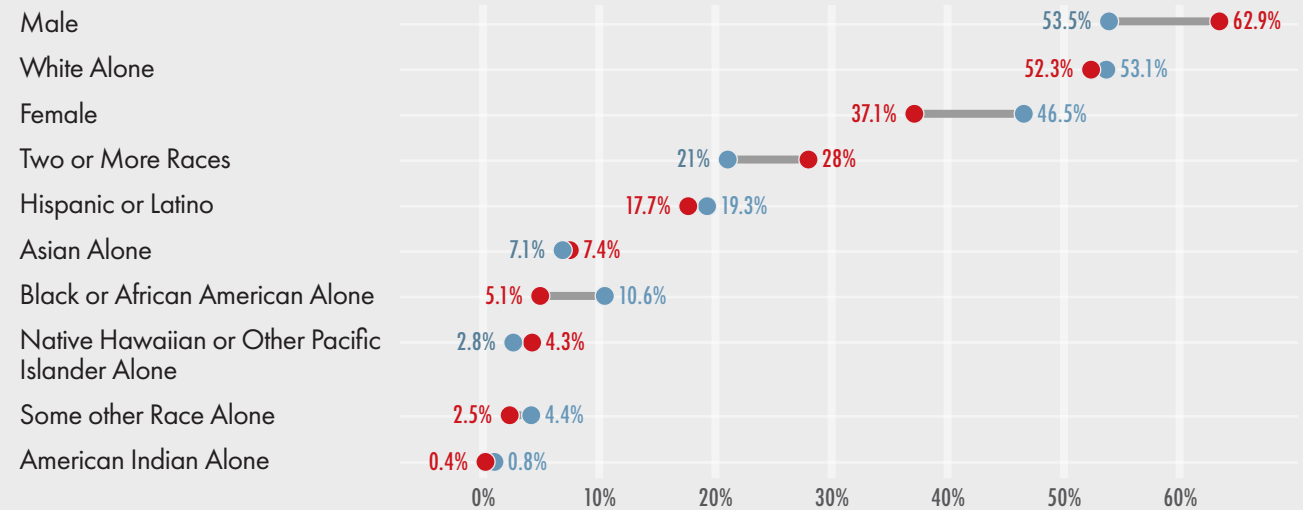
However, we do see a higher concentration of disconnection among males (+9.4%), Black and African American (+5.5%), and multiracial youth (+7.0%).

While differences in the rate of disconnection are relatively small for race and ethnicity, and modest by gender, it is the intersection between these demographic identities that we see the most variability. By gender

and race, we find that the majority of disconnected young adults in Pierce County are men identifying as some other race (85%), Black (76%), Asian (75%), or multi-racial (68%).



DYA Demographic Differences in Pierce County



Young adults are facing new barriers in an increasingly automated hiring system and labor market

An emerging and increasingly important factor shaping young adult disconnection is the rapid adoption of artificial intelligence in entry-level hiring. Many jobs that once served as accessible on-ramps to the labor market are among the first to be automated or restructured as employers adopt AI tools. While overall employment may continue to grow, these shifts are narrowing early-career pathways and disproportionately affecting young adults with limited work history or non-traditional resumes.

At the same time, hiring itself has become more automated. AI-driven applicant tracking systems now screen most resumes before they reach a human reviewer, favoring specific keywords, formats, and credentials. As a result, young adults are often encouraged to use AI tools to compete in the application process, reinforcing an increasingly automated hiring dynamic that filters out many qualified candidates.

For disconnected young adults this dynamic compounds existing barriers and raises the stakes of early job search failure. Addressing disconnection will increasingly require helping young adults navigate an AI-mediated labor market through digital literacy, job-matching support, and human-centered hiring pathways that reduce overreliance on automated screening.



Implications and Opportunities for Action

The data in this report paint a picture of a persistent, geographically concentrated challenge — one that has persisted even during periods of economic growth. Taken together, the findings point toward several strategic priorities for Pierce County’s workforce and education partners:

- **Targeted outreach to where young adults are most present.** The geographic concentration of DYA in South Tacoma, Parkland/Spanaway, and Lakewood suggests that place-based outreach and co-located service delivery is likely to reach more disconnected young adults more efficiently than county-wide approaches.
- **Prioritize the post-high-school transition.** The sharp spike in disconnection between ages 19–21 is a clear signal that the period immediately after high school graduation and dropout is when most young people fall through the cracks. Investments in transition-age supports, including dual enrollment, bridge programs, and early-career exploration through work experiences and internships, are likely to have the greatest impact.
- **Design specifically for young men of color.** The intersection of gender and race reveals that disconnected young adults in Pierce County are predominantly male, and disproportionately so in Black, multiracial, and other communities. Programs that do not explicitly account for the experiences and barriers facing young men of color are unlikely to move this number or equitably engage this group.
- **Address barriers holistically.** The co-occurrence of poverty, disability, early parenthood, and incomplete schooling among disconnected young adults means that single-service interventions are unlikely to be sufficient. Effective reconnection strategies will need to pair workforce and education programming with access to support for basic needs, childcare, disability accommodations, and alternative credentialing pathways.
- **Anticipate rising need.** The erosion of Affordable Care Act (ACA) subsidies and tightening of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance program (SNAP) eligibility are expected to increase hardship among this population in the near term. Workforce and training programs should prepare for increased demand and consider proactive outreach to young adults who may be newly eligible for services as federal safety net programs contract.
- **Prepare young adults for an AI-mediated labor market.** The rapid adoption of AI in hiring and entry-level roles is narrowing the on-ramps that disconnected young adults have historically relied on. Workforce and education partners should integrate digital literacy and AI navigation skills into programming -- not just technical skills, but practical guidance on how to present qualifications effectively in automated screening environments. At the same time, partners and employers should advocate for human-centered hiring practices that reduce overreliance on algorithmic screening, which disproportionately filters out candidates with limited work history or nontraditional backgrounds.

The 13-year flatline in Pierce County’s disconnected young adult rate does not mean that progress is impossible — it is evidence that the approaches tried so far have not been sufficient to reach the young adults who remain disconnected. The data here offer insights for more targeted, equitable, and effective action.





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