

AMERICA BY THE NUMBERS

High School Dropout Prevention

WHAT ARE THE ODDS?

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education announced that over 80 percent of students graduate from public high school in four years.

This is good news. High school graduates do much better in life than those who don't finish school. For the most part, the more education one has, the more money one makes. People who graduate from high school make more money over their lifetimes than those who don't graduate. Young adults who graduated from high school make more money each year than young adults who don't graduate. High school graduates are less likely to end up in jail, and more likely to be employed.

But the news isn't all good. Approximately one-fifth of young people who begin ninth-grade do not complete high school on time, or even graduate at all. The percentage of blacks and Latinos who graduate from public high school is considerably lower than the percentage of whites and Asians who graduate. Typically a big gap exists between the graduation rates in suburban schools and their urban and rural counterparts.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS?

It would be easier to keep people in high school if there were only one reason for dropping out. However, there are many reasons. Students living in poverty are more likely to drop out than students living in middle-class homes. Students who struggle in school—as early as elementary school—are more likely to drop out. Young people who have early adult responsibilities are more likely to drop out—for example, those who become parents as teenagers or have heavy work schedules. Students who are disconnected from school and lack family connections to school are also more likely to drop out.

WHAT “DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS” MIGHT PREVENT DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL?

One nonprofit organization, the Search Institute, has an interesting way of looking at what young people need to successfully make the transition from kid to adult, which includes completing their education. Rather than focusing on the problems of at-risk adolescents, they've worked to identify 40 “developmental assets” that help young people on the path to a caring and responsible adulthood. These are the general categories:

- Support, including the involvement of adults who are not their parents
- Empowerment; for example, youth are involved in service to others
- Boundaries and expectations, including having peer role models
- Constructive use of time, such as spending three or more hours per week participating in youth programs
- Commitment to learning, including the motivation to learn
- Positive values, such as caring, social justice, honesty and integrity
- Social competencies, such as planning and decision making, comfort with people of different backgrounds
- Positive identity; for example, have a purpose in life, optimistic view of their future