

Monday, October 19, 2009

CITIZEN JOURNALISM: Dropouts lose; so does society

Deborah Simmons THE WASHINGTON TIMES

It will happen today, tomorrow and the next day. In fact, a new study commissioned by a coalition of U.S. organizations says that on any given day, nearly one in 10 young male dropouts is in jail or juvenile detention, compared with one in 35 young male high school graduates. Another given: Male dropouts were 47 times more likely to be incarcerated than their peers of a similar age who had graduated from a four-year college, the report says.

The study, "Consequences of Dropping Out of High School: Joblessness and Jailing for High School Dropouts and the High Cost for Taxpayers," paints a portrait of the employment, earnings, incarceration and parenting experiences of dropouts ages 16 to 24 and their better-educated peers. The study was conducted by researchers at Northeastern University and used census and other government data.

"We're trying to show what it means to be a dropout in the 21st-century United States," said Andrew Sum, director of Northeastern's Center for Labor Market Studies. "It's one of the country's costliest problems. The unemployment, the incarceration rates -- it's scary."

A coalition of civil rights and education groups commissioned the study as part of a push for new educational opportunities for the nation's 6.2 million high school dropouts.

"The dropout rate is driving the nation's increasing prison population, and it's a drag on America's economic competitiveness," said National Urban League President Marc H. Morial. "This report makes it clear that every American pays a cost when a young person leaves school without a diploma."

The researchers considered several factors, including lost tax revenues, the cost of welfare and other aid and services provided to jail and prison inmates.


Other findings include:

- 54 percent of dropouts were jobless in an average month during 2008.
- 40 percent of young dropouts were jobless for the entire year.
- The mean annual earnings of young people with a bachelor's or advanced degree were \$24,797 in 2007, three times higher than the mean earnings for dropouts of \$8,358.

The National Urban League, National Council of La Raza, Youth Build and the Illinois State Council on Re-Enrolling Students Who Dropped Out of School and others are advocating a new national re-enrollment program to help dropouts earn a diploma.

Recommendations include using federal Race to the Top education dollars to arrest the dropout problem.

Here's another given: The study says that the collective cost to the nation over the working life of a single dropout is \$292,000.

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