

The Impact on Society of Youths Who Drop Out or Are Undereducated

William M. Jones

Estimates of a positive return of six dollars for one invested spur cities, suburbs, and rural areas alike to improve the strategies and techniques of schooling.

Historically, America has looked to its system of public schooling to solve many of its pressing problems and, generally, the expectations our nation has had of the schools have been vindicated. Use of the public schools as a medium for massive training programs in areas that enhance our progress and national welfare, has, several times in our history, been initiated through the federal government in the form of categorical programs.

Record of the Public Schools

The Morrill Act, the Smith-Lever Act, and the Smith-Hughes Act are classic examples of federal legislation that provided resources and stimuli through public educational institutions. Such provisions have given us prominence throughout the world in military leadership, scientific and agricultural production, and mechanical and engineering development. Our confidence in public education has prompted the enactment of compulsory school attendance laws until an appropriate age, and spurred us to support more and more years of free schooling at

public cost. Today, a high school diploma is considered a minimum educational credential for many careers.

The public schools of this nation have compiled an excellent record in terms of retaining and graduating students from high school. To illustrate, in 1900, only 10 out of 100 students enrolled in public high schools graduated. In 1974, 78 out of 100 students enrolled in these



Photo: Swanson, Documerica.

institutions graduated. Fifty-one of 100 students who entered the fifth grade in 1950 graduated from high school. More than seventy-five of every 100 students who entered fifth grade in 1962 graduated from high



Photo: Michael D. Sullivan.

school. Today, approximately 78 of 100 students entering fifth grade will probably graduate.

This brief historical scenario on public schooling would be a glorious tribute to our society were it not marred by our deplorable neglect of the 22 students out of 100 who enter fifth grade and do not complete high school or its equivalent. We are discussing here only students whom we consider capable of finishing high school, not mentally and physically handicapped children.

Who Are the Dropouts?

Let's take a look at the 22 of 100 fifth graders who do not complete high school (dropouts), identifying their problems, and assessing their impact on our society.

Approximately fifteen percent of these dropouts are students from other than poor families, who are usually bored, lack ambition, desire to start to work, or for some other personal reason, do not choose to continue in schools. The other 85 percent are grievously, deplorably, and disproportionately poor blacks and Hispanics, along with poor whites. For these children, much of

the cherished American dreams of equity, equality of educational opportunity, equality of employment opportunity, and the pursuit of happiness and material success are a cruel hoax. We do not provide the teaching and learning techniques, strategies, and programs that would compensate for (and offset) the handicaps that have been imposed upon them because of birth, historical circumstances, and chance environmental conditions. It is from this group of neglected dropouts that we reap many of our social and economic ills. About 800,000 drop out each year, leave school, and seek employment—which too many do not find.

In the larger cities, the overwhelming number of dropouts are black, disadvantaged youths with some, or most of the following characteristics:

- Their lifestyle or behavior patterns derive from customs, values, and attitudes that are dissimilar to those of the urban middle class;
- They suffer educational handicaps that are rooted in poverty, deprivation, racial discrimination, historical circumstances, and

environmental conditions over which they have little or no control;

- Many are from large, impoverished families headed by females and suffer from problems of desertion, divorce, unemployment, mental illness, retardation, and delinquency;

- Their upbringing has not and does not provide the self-concept, opportunity, motivation, or the capacity to cope with their problems and become responsible citizens.

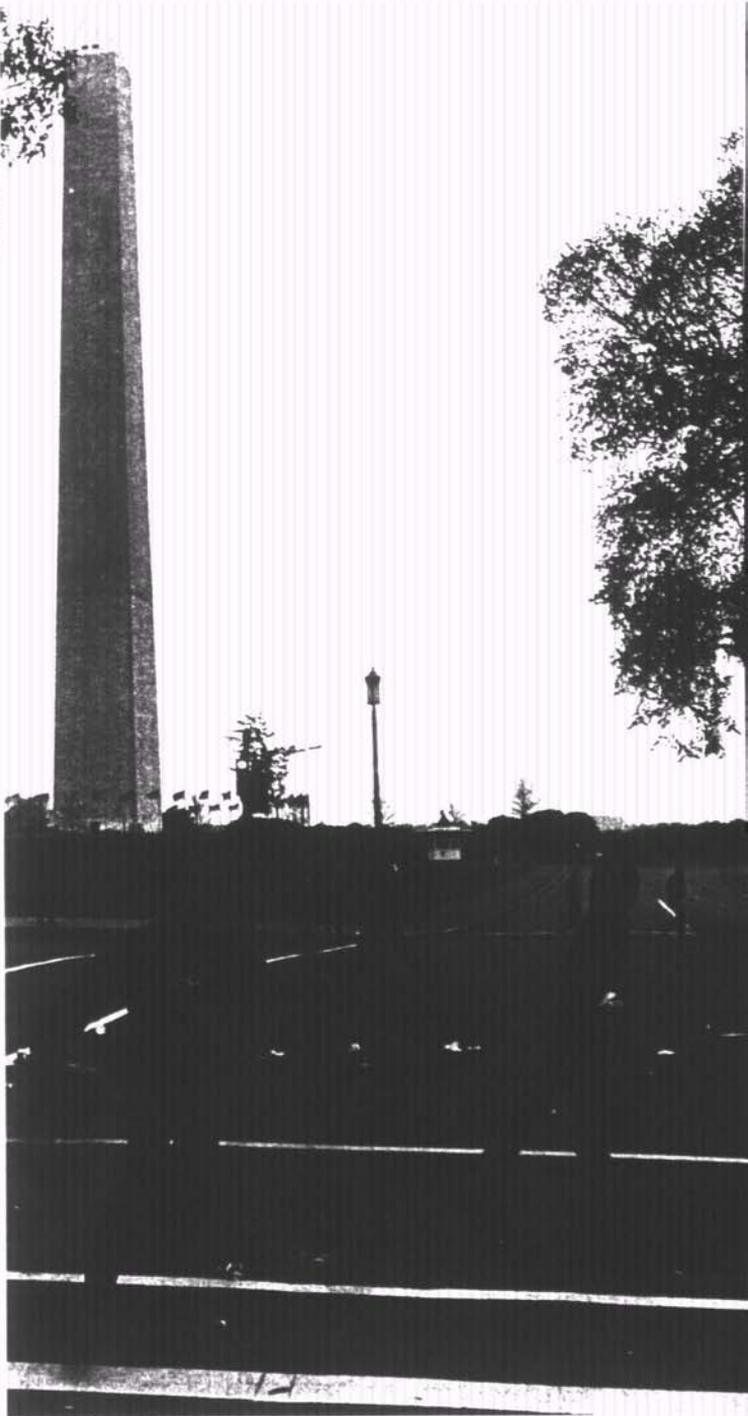
Statistics on dropouts reveal that approximately 85 percent of them exhibit some, many, or most of the characteristics stated above. Dropouts are distributed in both rural and urban areas; however, in urban areas they present and generate critical social problems because of these unique circumstances:

- They are concentrated in poverty-slum areas;
- Many come from broken homes that are female-headed;
- Many are unemployed and unemployable;
- Their male role models of success are frequently ghetto pimps and hustlers;
- Many have come to alienation because of deprivation and what they perceive as social inequities, injustices, and neglect.

American Ideals and Alienation Ideals

Some of the fundamental values in American society stress and include a strong belief in freedom, equality of educational and economic opportunity; a strong drive for material success and achievement; a fundamental respect for the importance of the individual's feelings; a basic feeling of individual responsibility; support for equality of law, order, and justice; ability to

Photo: Michael D. Sullivan.



conform; and an underlying belief in reason.

Our ideals are lofty, wise, and beautiful, but we have too many contradictions, conflicts, and built-in "flaws of the system" that negate them for large segments of our population. Clear-cut examples are the widespread practices of race, sex, and to some extent class discrimination that are reflected in the whole fabric of our dominant cultural patterns. To be more specific, the most pervasive and systematic discrimination in our system, which may or may not be intentional but is built into it, is the substantive preference for white males in employment—irrespective of their qualifications. This statement was a conclusion of the United States Commission on Civil Rights. This practice has a profound and negative effect on women and non-white males that restricts and limits their fundamental rights and privileges under the American ideals of equality of opportunity, pursuit of happiness, and drive for material success and achievement. In fact, to deny any of our basic rights and privileges to any citizen is to abridge and affect all of them.

The stereotyped, inferior roles and statuses that have been historically and are presently imposed with regard to race and sex are most far-reaching and have very great negative impact.

Alienation

Alienation, which is a general term for feelings of not belonging, rootlessness, estrangement, and hopelessness, is often associated with those who feel and perceive they have suffered great inequities and injustices. Children become alienated in a variety of ways, but for the

majority of poor children, it is those who have not been able to form strong identifying and unifying ties to school, neighborhood, church, and the dominant society. Minority students who are rejected for their color, religion, or language, are very susceptible to alienation. Many minority students find their language (slang or foreign), culture, religion, race, or whole self ignored, derided, or attacked outside their group. Opportunities for social mobility and even survival are restricted, and the rejected develop hidden apathy toward the limiting characteristics, and open hostility toward the outside society.

The alienated usually react in two ways—retreat or counterculture. Some retreat into a dream world that is enhanced by drugs and alcohol. Others actually run away; but a great number form countercultures. These counterculture groups frequently adopt slang, anti-social behavior, and build their lives around gangs that provide close peer group ties, structures, standards, and protection. The alienated usually are apathetic to many societal standards, including school success. The established society is likely to classify the alienated as nonrational in much of their behavior.

Alienation is a woeful status for the young to be cast into. Crime, violence, and terrorism can proceed from it. Therefore, it represents an explosive, irrational, emotional attitude. Society would do well to prevent alienation by correcting major flaws that cause it.

The dropout generally is an alienated youth, possessing some, many, or most of the characteristics of the alienated. Some poor white youth from rural areas, who for diverse reasons are unable to form identifying ties because of regional



Photo: James A. Parcell,
The Washington Post.

or social class prejudice, come to exhibit alienating characteristics. Spanish-speaking youth, because of language and/or cultural differences and racism, do likewise. The most widespread and deepening alienation is exhibited by black youths, who suffer from racism, semi-caste status, and the gamut of alienation-generating characteristics.

The massive exodus of whites from the city and their replacement by mostly poorer black and Hispanic populations has more than doubled the numbers of disadvantaged children in the public schools in America's big cities. Many dropouts are alienated and they live in the large cities in the tens and hundreds of thousands. Unemployment runs as high as seventy percent among them; they suffer economic distress and difficulty in mere survival. Their deprivation makes many hopeless and desperate, and counterculture, already described, is a way of life for many.

Drug addiction and gang culture are the forms of counterculture most prevalent. Police statistics indicate that the dropout is six to ten times more likely to be involved in crime than the in-school student. The stability and civility of the large cities with huge dropout populations have suffered immeasurably. Arson, vandalism, and all forms of crime against property and person have increased. Crime is now the number one concern in Chicago, New York, Detroit, and most of the other big cities as indicated by recent polls.

Some of the deleterious effects and negative impact of disaffection can be indicated from the following criminal activities in the cities:

- Mail is no longer safe and secure. Mail boxes are burglarized in massive numbers, and many checks are taken causing inconvenience and suffering. Many people receiving

checks are forced to have them delivered to currency exchanges or to addresses out of the inner city.

- Rental property in the inner city is frequently vandalized.
- Many businesses and industrial establishments are victims of extortion, robbery, and burglary.
- Robbery and rape are so common that many persons fear to walk the streets day or night.
- Homes are invaded and ransacked, and the inhabitants are frequently beaten, kidnapped, or killed. Older people are very subject to home invasions.
- Thefts of autos and parts are so common that, as a result, insurance rates are steadily rising.
- Many businesses and industrial establishments move from the city because of crime, security, and the lack of a trained labor force. Dropouts have few job skills.
- Property damage to schools and other public property, theft, and shoplifting run into the billions of dollars.
- Some essential services are lost or curtailed because the people who perform those services are afraid to travel in the city.

The kinds and types of crime are far too numerous to detail here; however, the critical point is that the big cities are beginning a phase of deterioration and plunder that if not stopped will lead to the termination of their roles as centers of commerce, culture, education, and other symbols of advanced civilization.

Cost of Dropping Out

The Select Senate Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity, chaired by former Senator Walter Mondale (Minnesota), published a monograph in 1972 entitled "The



Photos: Charlene Rothkopf.

Effect of Dropping Out." The study assessed the loss to the nation for 25- to 34-year-old males who had not completed high school for the year 1969. The study concluded the following costs to the nation:

1. \$237 billion in income over the life of these men;

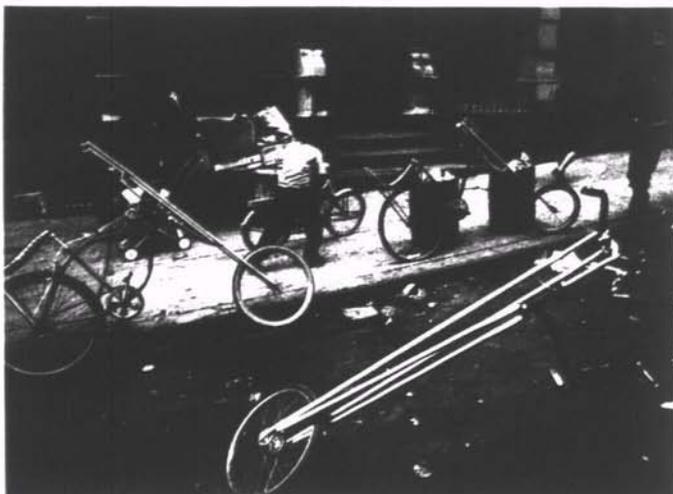


Photo: Michael D. Sullivan.

2. \$71 billion in foregone government revenue—\$47 billion to federal government and \$24 billion to local government;

3. In contrast, it would have cost \$40 billion to have the men ages 25-34 complete high school. Thus, a net loss of \$197 billion was exacted.

4. The welfare expenditure attributed to inadequate education is \$3 billion per year;

5. The cost of inadequate education reflected by reduced political participation and intergenerational mobility is difficult to assess;

6. Each dollar generated for the social investment in education generates six dollars over the lifetime of the group.

Recommendations

The cost of educational neglect, as documented by the Senate Select Committee, is compelling reason for increased investment in having more youths complete high school. A return of six dollars for one invested cannot easily be matched in business life. There is ample research that documents the strategies and techniques for offsetting the effects of disadvantaged students to complete high school, or at least become trained to be responsible and productive citizens. These strategies call for modifications in the total structure of society that are inevitable anyway, such as the eradication of racism, sexism, and a realization that our most valuable resources are found through development of human beings.

Using paraprofessionals, educating parents, and modifying the values, attitudes, and customs of the disadvantaged through intervention by their own indigenous community leaders are strategies of proven effectiveness. It would be surprising if this type of social investment did not generate a six dollar return similar to that in the Select Senate Committee investigation. If we believe in the profit motive, how can we afford not to invest in high school completion, even for the disadvantaged, even if many are black or brown? ^{Tr}.



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