

Chicago Tribune

June 12, 2017

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Nearly 90,000 Cook County teens, young adults not in school or working, report says

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Lilia Gomez, 19, knows what it's like to be out of school and out of work.

Amid a storm of events in her life — the incarceration of her mother, a baby at 16 and time spent living in a shelter — Gomez dropped out of high school. She took the time off to care for her son, but she also knew she needed a longer-term plan.

“In that moment I felt like, what am I going to do with my life?” said Gomez, who lives in South Chicago. “I just felt really lost.”

Gomez has since restarted school at Youth Connection Leadership Academy, a charter school on the city's South Side, and is set to graduate soon with her high school diploma. It's taken a lot of hard work, but she feels if she can do it, anyone can.

“I think what people should know is any obstacle in your life, you can overcome it,” Gomez said.

A new report is a reminder that those obstacles can be numerous. According to the report by the Great Cities Institute at the University of Illinois at Chicago, the good news is the percentages of young people in Chicago and Cook County who aren't in school or working are slowly decreasing after hitting highs during the last recession. Yet in 2015, nearly 90,000 teens and young adults, ages 16 to 24, in Cook County and Chicago remained out of work and out of school.

“This is really having an adverse effect on people's life trajectories,” said Matthew Wilson, co-author of the report and economic development planner with the Great Cities Institute.

It's a situation that can lead to more violence, incarceration and intergenerational poverty, he said. “This is a generation of people that are experiencing something unlike any prior generation.”

In 2015, 19.4 percent of people ages 20 to



Lilia Gomez, 19, is set to graduate with her high school diploma from Youth Connection Leadership Academy, a charter school on the city's South Side. It's taken a lot of hard work, after having a baby at 16 and dropping out of school, but she feels if she can do it anyone can. (Alexandra Wimley/Chicago Tribune)

24 in Cook County were out of work and out of school, down from 19.9 percent the year before. The numbers, however, are far worse for black young adults in Cook County, though they, too, are improving. In 2015, about 34.3 percent of 20- to 24-year-old black adults in Cook County were out of work and out of school, down from 39.5 percent the year before.

The report also notes that employment levels for Latinos continue to drop, even as they improve slightly for young white and black people.

Though the numbers are improving, they still haven't recovered from the 2008 recession when jobs dried up, pushing less-experienced, less-educated young people out of the workforce, Wilson said. During the recession, older people took jobs that might have once been done by younger people — and in some cases they've stayed in them, Wilson said. Consumers may notice more older faces serving them at fast-food restaurants and delivering their newspapers, he said.

Another challenge for young people? Many jobs are concentrated in the Loop and northwest suburb, away from the areas where youth joblessness is the highest, according to the report.

The city's South Side has a low number of jobs accessible via a 30-minute commute and also high numbers of 20- to 24-year-olds out of work.

“There's just a mismatch of where these kids are in Englewood, in areas of south suburbs away from areas of the jobs,” said Jack Wuest, executive director of the Alternative Schools Network, which commissioned the report.

Though many who labor in the Loop are accustomed to lengthy commutes, they can be daunting for young people who might make only minimum wage, Wilson said.

“Working in the internationally important financial firm versus working at the restaurant in the building (are) very different,” Wilson said.

Though they're tough problems to solve, the report's authors hope to spur conversations about developing appropriate job training for young people, the geographic mismatch between jobs and unemployed young people, and how the changing economy is affecting different racial and ethnic groups.

The report's authors and local leaders plan to discuss the report at a news conference Monday, along with ways to help, such as two bills being sponsored by U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and a bill being sponsored by state Rep. Robin Kelly, D-Matteson.

Cook County Commissioner Bridget Gainer, who will also be at Monday's event, said efforts are already underway locally to improve the situation. For example, the Cook County Land Bank Authority, started in 2013, aims to get vacant and tax delinquent properties in the hands of local developers who can then hire local people to do rehabilitation work. She also said companies like Aon have apprenticeship programs where high school graduates work within the company, learning traditionally white-collar jobs, while earning associate's degrees.

Wilson acknowledged that broad reform can be tough to come by, given funding constraints at the local level and partisanship in Washington.

"Young people are a bipartisan issue for the most part, but the solutions, for the most part, are not, especially when you're talking about spending money on programs," Wilson said.

Still, it's important to keep the conversation going and continue to push for change, said Teresa Cordova, co-author of the report and director of the Great Cities Institute.

In addition to the individual costs of not graduating from high school, a nongraduate in Illinois will pay \$197,055 fewer dollars in taxes over 45 years than someone with a diploma, according to the report.

"The costs of youth joblessness for individuals, households and the state as a whole, just isn't worth it," Cordova said.

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For the full report, *The High Costs for Out of School and Jobless Youth in Chicago and Cook County*, by the University of Illinois at Chicago Great Cities Institute [click here](#).