

High School Student Dropouts

Who Are At Risk and What Are the Causes?

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses research and data collected from different articles and different state censuses which attempt to show the students who are at risk for dropping out and what is causing them to decide to do so.



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Why Students Are Dropping Out of High School

Abstract

Education in the United States has slowly become one of the most important metrics for finding, holding, and prospering in jobs over the last few decades. In the past, apprenticeships, trade schools, and on-the-job learning was the most acceptable way for young men and women to learn and acquire the skills necessary to find and hold a job, and make a comfortable living. In the present day, having a high school diploma, an Associate's degree, an Undergraduate degree, or further determines who gets hired and the extent of future promotions. Despite this trend, students are still dropping out of high school. The rate has drastically declined over the years, but there is no doubt that the rate at which these students are leaving could be further reduced. Due to the broadness of this topic, this paper will specifically focus on comparisons of dropout rates between the United States, as a whole, and the state of California. Furthermore, this paper will primarily cite data and studies published by the *National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)*, the *California Department of Education Data Reporting Office*, and will cite other research and studies that have observed this problem for years.

The Students at Risk

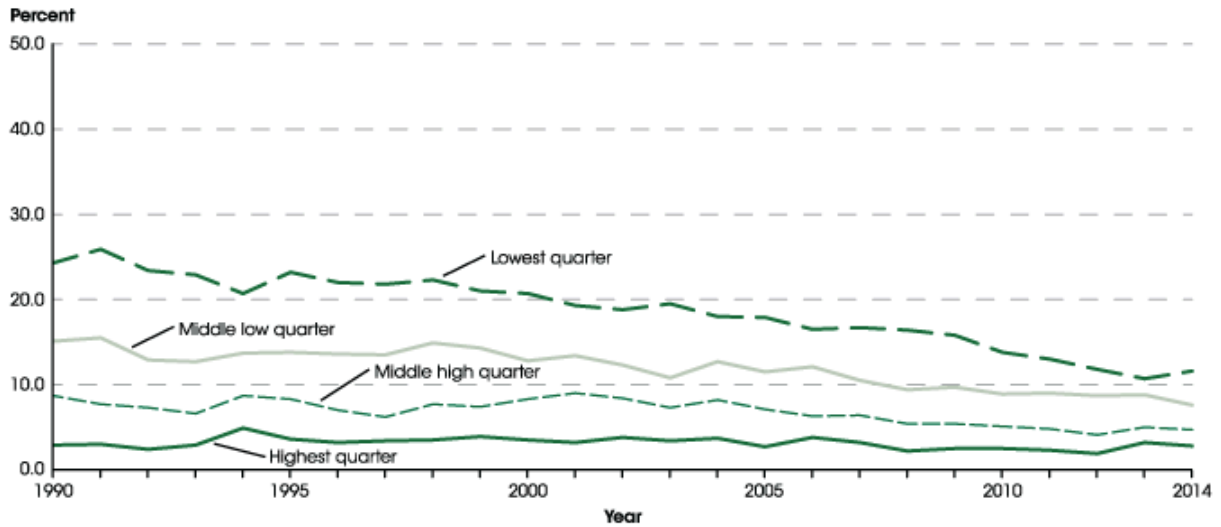
There are many reasons why a student would want to drop out of high school, factors ranging from socioeconomic situation to an individual's family life, but this section is focused on the collected statistics from the *California Department of Education Data Reporting Office* and the *National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)* to show the vulnerable demographics that have a higher likelihood of dropping out of school. The only statistic that will not be elaborated will be Urban and Rural lifestyle because a paper published by Jeffrey L. Jordan, in a 2012 edition of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, concluded that there were no big discrepancies in dropout rates due to a school's location in a rural, urban, or suburban area (It should be noted, rates have been reflected with as little as a 3% deficit).

Socioeconomic Situation

In data collected from 1990 to 2014 by the NCES, the income level of households with students between the ages 16 to 24 is divided into four quartiles: lowest quarter incomes, middle low quarter incomes, middle high quarter incomes, and highest quarter incomes. According to this data, those whose household incomes were in the lowest quarter consistently represented the highest percentage of those who dropped out. Essentially, when further evaluating these statistics, a student that is within the lowest quartile is 1.5 times more likely to dropout than a student from the middle low quarter, 2.5 times more likely than a student from the middle high quarter, and 4 times more likely than the highest quarter. The past 24 years have seen many changes in socioeconomic trends and policies, so there could be many factors influencing the decline of dropout rates based on income; but the numbers effectively demonstrate that since 1990 income has played a significant role in impacting the likelihood of a child dropping from school.



Figure 3. Status dropout rates of 16- to 24-year-olds, by income level: 1990 through 2014



NOTE: The "status dropout rate" is the percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a GED certificate). The "lowest" quarter represents the bottom 25 percent of family incomes. The "middle low" quarter represents families between the 25th percentile and the median (50th percentile). The "middle high" quarter represents families with incomes between the median (50th percentile) and the 75th percentile. The "highest" quarter represents the top 25 percent of all family incomes. Data are based on sample surveys of the civilian noninstitutionalized population, which excludes persons in prisons, persons in the military, and other persons not living in households.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), October 1990 through 2014. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2015*, [table 219.75](#).

Grade Level

Since the 1990s, dropout rates based on the grade of the student have polarized immensely. From 1990 to 2014, the percentage of dropouts increased tremendously for those who have been in school for 11 or 12 years. As Figure 4 shows, half (50%) of all junior and senior high school students are expected to drop out, as opposed to the other grade levels - nearly decreasing an average of 10% across the board. The shock of these statistical figures is the fact that all the other grades decreased in dropout rates over the years at a steady pace, while 11 or 12 year students, instead, grew at an alarming rate for the past 24 years.

Furthermore, data straight from the *California Department of Education Data Reporting Office* shows a staggering 55% of students who dropout in California are students who are 12 years into their educational career. For example, in the 2014-2015 school year, the California DOE reported 32,978 12th graders dropped out of school, out of the 53,804 total that dropped out, which means that about 61.3% of the students dropping out of high school in California that year were in the 12th grade. Every year since 2004-2005, the dropout rate ratio for 12th graders has been this high. It's also noteworthy that the data results show a combination of an enormous amount of 12th graders dropping out on top of the growing ratio of 12th graders to the total dropout population. This demonstrates that every other grade is decreasing their dropout rates much faster than the 12th graders, while there is lethargic movement in the dropout population with 12th graders.

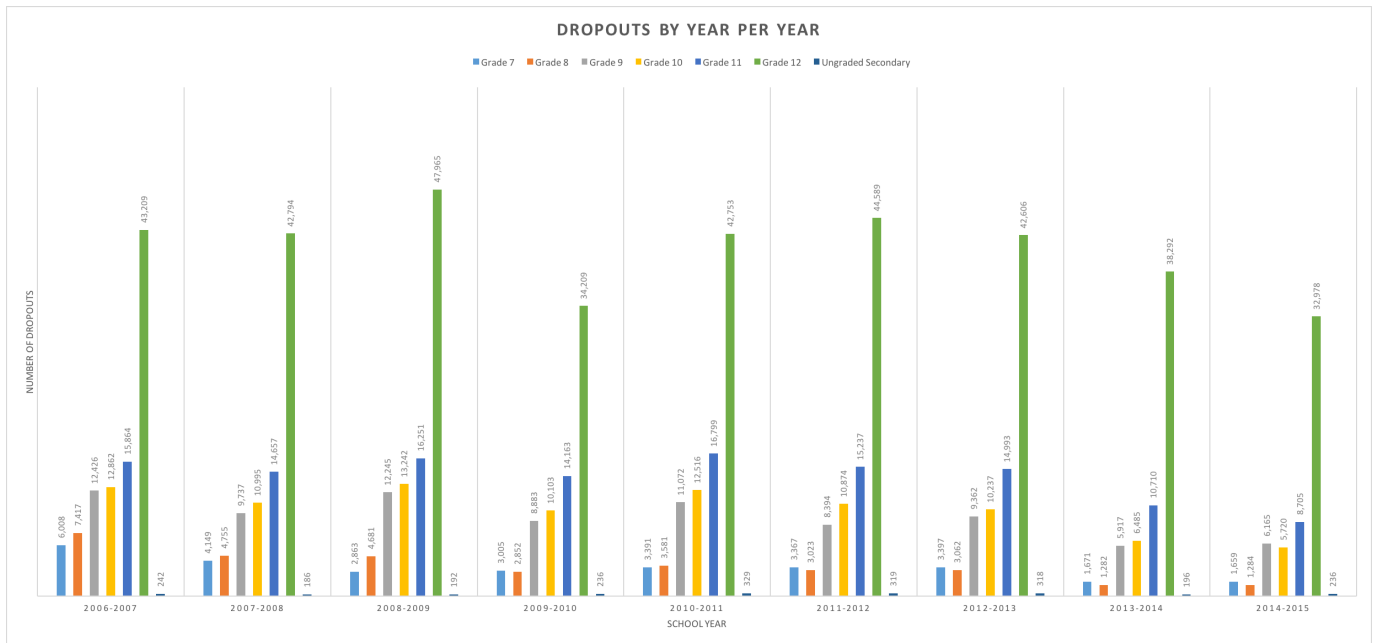
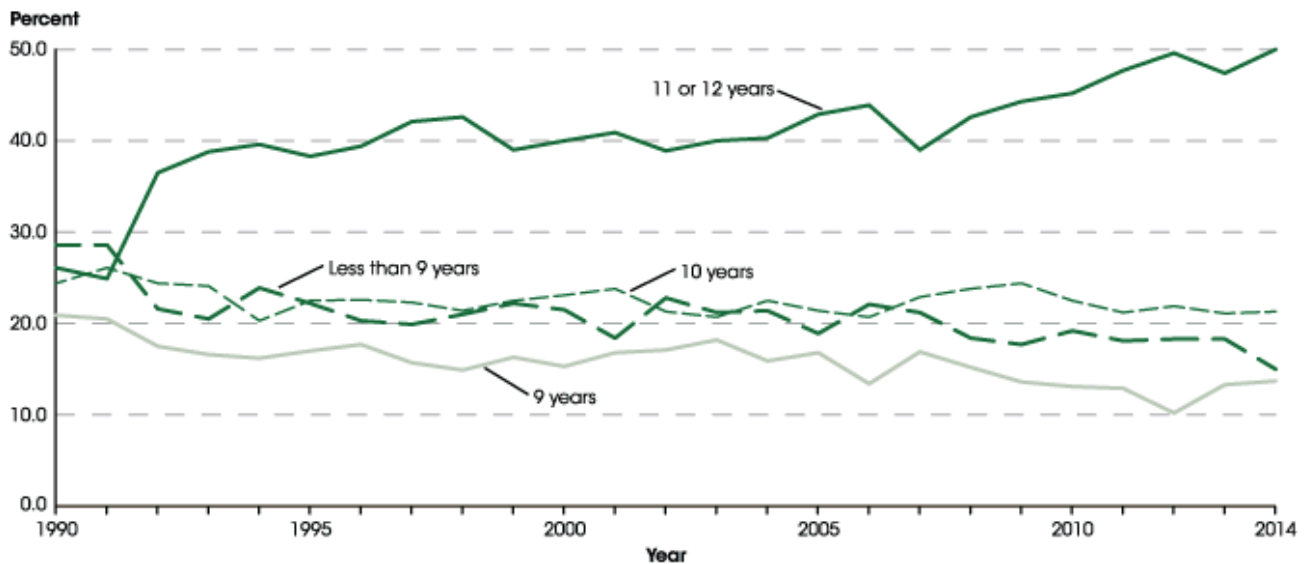


Figure 4. Percentage distribution of status dropouts, by years of school completed: 1990 through 2014



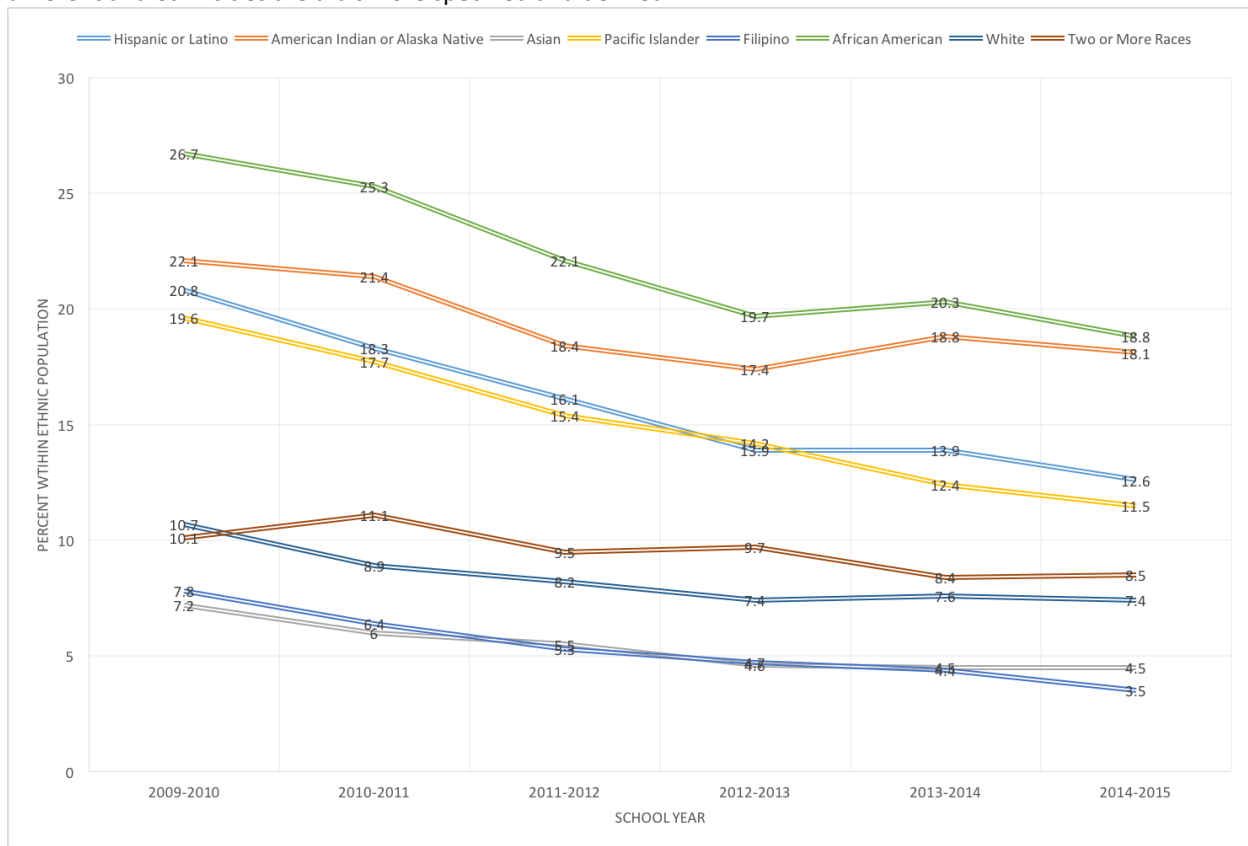
NOTE: "Status dropouts" are 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a GED certificate). Data are based on sample surveys of the civilian noninstitutionalized population, which excludes persons in prisons, persons in the military, and other persons not living in households.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), October 1990 through 2014. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2015*, [table 219.75](#).



Ethnicity and Racial Background

Another characteristic in the demographics that have a measurable effect on dropout rates is the ethnicity and race of the student. In the U.S., per the NCES, the racial demographic with the highest risk of dropping out of high school are those of Hispanic descent, with a 10.6% dropout rate as of 2014. This statistic is put in comparison to the 7.4% of Black students and 5.2% of white students who dropped out in 2014. The data compiled by the NCES shows that, since 1992, what the office considers to be “Hispanic” has been the highest percentage of dropouts: fluctuating between 20-30%. This trend ended in 2007, when the number of Hispanic dropouts began to slowly dissipate. Staying consistent with the other reported stats, even since 1992, the white and Black dropout percentages had maintained approximately a third and half, respectively, of the percentage of dropout Hispanic students. In comparing this national data with California, we find that the statistics are slightly different and ethnicities are a bit more specified and defined.



Creating this chart using data from the California DOE Data Reporting Office, the additional ethnicities and races listed are: American Indian, Two or More Races, Pacific Islander, and Asian. In California, the numbers are similar to national averages in that white dropouts are at a much lower dropout percentage with 7.4% of white students leaving school. In contrast with national data, the largest dropout percentage in California is African Americans and American Indians. Hispanic or Latino come in 3rd highest for percentage, but are the largest in sheer numbers in California for both dropout population and student enrollment percentage. The chart shows that there is a hidden demographic that is overshadowed by the sheer numbers, which is the Two or More Races ethnic denomination. The chart plainly shows this demographic to be in the higher percentages in the tiers below 15%, but there is an interesting rise in their overall population in the reported numbers. The Two or More Races is not the only ethnic demographic that has been rising at a steady rate since 2009 - the Hispanic/Latino student population has also shown steady growth. The reason that these growths are important to note is because every other demographic on the list has shown a steady *decline* in overall population and student dropout rates. The possible reason could be that the census is becoming more specific with their data collection, so more people are listed as multiple races



and/or Hispanic, as both the California DOE and the NCES consistently try to improve their data collection algorithms. The other possible reason is that there are more immigrant and interracial families in California due its position as a coastal state and the state culture being encouraging and welcoming of many ethnic communities. More research and data needs to be collected to affirm these possible explanations of growth.

Sex/Gender

In order to see trends and broad data movement, the data constitutes those of binary genders and sex. The NCES and California DOE show across the board that males have an average 5% higher dropout rate than females. Despite the average rate being higher in males, there are some spikes in the data that show that the dropout rates differ based on the factors which will be described in more detail below. The summation of the data explains that males are more susceptible to dropping out based on push factors, while females are more likely to dropout due to pull factors. Furthermore, there is a need to understand that the push factors are more closely associated with issues involving school, while pull factors are more centered around personal issues. This relationship shows that it is possible that males dropout more due to school issues while females dropout due to personal issues. More data will be needed order to affirm this possibility, but the correlation is there.

Who's at Risk?

The statistics paint a clear picture of who is at the highest risk of dropping out in California and the United States. The student based on all these metrics who is at the highest risk of dropping out of high school is a low-income male student who is in 11th or 12th grade that has a background of either being American Indian, African American, or Hispanic depending the state. There are a lot of assumptions that can be made about the student in cultural, social, and personal terms, but the numbers are there in order to show that there is a student demographic that needs help and a closer look is urgent in order to understand why they are at the highest risk.

Causes of Dropping Out

In order to understand what can be done to shift away from the currently occurring drop outs, one must look at what Jonathan Jacob Doll explains as “pull, push, and fall out” factors, in his scholarly article published in SAGE on October 2013. Per Doll, the reason why students drop out of school is due to one of these or a combination of these pull, push, and fall out factors. This section will explain and discuss, in detail, the factors for each, the major risk factors, and the importance in understanding why truancy and dropouts occur.

To clarify the impact of these factors, it is necessary to explain what these pull, push, and fall out factors are specifically. According to Doll, the differences lie in “agency.” In Push factors, the agent is the school while the student is “pushed” out as a result. The opposite is the case with pull factors, as the student is the agent, who decides to “pull” out of school in order to deal with outside issues, such as jobs or family. Lastly, fall out factors have agency in neither the school or the student, and the circumstances that exist cannot be “remediated” or fixed by either the student or the school, thus the student “falls” out of school. Pull, push, and fall out factors may be specifically aimed towards explaining dropouts, but that does not detract from the study showing that the highest reason for a student dropping out of school is truancy. In a longitudinal study conducted by Dalton B. et al from 2002 – 2006, missing over 10% of all school days accounts for 43.5% of former students dropping out of school. Albeit the other factors contributing to the causes, the data shows that truancy across the board was the biggest reason for students dropping out, which demonstrates the undeniable relationship between truancy and dropout rates. More important to note, the reasons for students missing school or dropping out is, often, a combination of the push, pull, and fall out factors. As the factors, such as the fall out factor of “not belonging” could easily overlap with the push factor of “could not get along with teachers,” the students could have multiple reasons for not going to class and contributing causality is not simple enough to limit a student to a single category. As decisions or opinions are proposed in order to address these factors, it is vital that students are not so easily categorized - as the issue is more complex and nuanced than it may appear.

Push Factors

Push factors are the factors that cause the highest overall frequency of dropouts as shown in the longitudinal study by Dalton. Exemplifying this, in 2006 48.7% of former students accounted their dropout reason to push factors. In the chart reproduced below, there are ten push out factors – all of them school related. As previously stated, push factors are defined by their agency being attributed to school. Thus, the chart shows that students missing school, the top ranked push factor, are missing too many school days due to something that the school could probably assist in remediating. The other push factors such as getting poor grades, being behind in schoolwork, thinking they were unable to complete assignments, and getting along with teachers all have some sort of attribution that the school could have helped remedy. The push factors, for the most part, are on average affecting the male student population more than the female student population, as 53.1% were reported to having used push out factors as their reason for dropping out opposed to the female 47.1%.

Pull Factors

Pull factors differ slightly as the factors pose an emphasis outside of the realm of school and the agency is attributed to the student. As the chart shows, the only pull factor that is school-related is the second ranked reason, which is that those students thought it would be easier to get a GED (as opposed to traditional graduation). It was an active choice that the student made to dropout, due to that preconceived notion of a GED being easier, so the only role school could have played would have been making school easier or educating the student in what striving to get a GED actually entails. The rest of the pull factors are listed under Family-related reasons and Employment-related reasons, as these are the outside, non-school related, influences present in a student’s life. The statistics to pay attention to are those for females on family-related reasons and males on employment-related reasons, as they are, respectively, the higher percentage in each category. The top family-related reason was attributed to female pregnancy with a 27.8%, which goes to show that about a fourth of the time the reason that a female student dropped out was because she got pregnant, and the other top family related



reason of supporting a family can be a follow-up to the pregnancy. In terms of the employment-related reasons, there are only two, which are the acquisition of a job or the inability to maintain working and schooling. For both factors, the males are the ones with the higher percentages, as getting a job accounted for a third of the males at 33.5%. Despite these high number for males in the employment category, the females are more likely to drop out due to pull out factors than the males are, with 40.0% versus the male 30.4%.

Fall Factors

The factors with the least prominence, but nonetheless the hardest to solve, are the fall factors, which only total in three. The fall factors are all school-related, but they are factors that neither the student nor the school can actively fix. The factors are as listed: “Did not like school,” “Did not feel they belonged there,” and “Changed schools and did not like new one.” As seen from the short reasons, there does not seem to be a way to actually help alleviate these fall out factors. Interestingly enough, a report published in 2006 by John M. Bridgeland, *The Silent Epidemic*, actually found that about 47% of students who dropped out thought that school was boring. As this is the most similar to a fall factor as defined by Doll, it is interesting that what was considered to be the least impacting in one study, is one of the most identifying reasons for student dropouts in another study. Regardless, the reports referenced here all list possibilities that may help student engagement, but at the end of the day, it’s hard to fix anything if both the school and the students cannot find the common ground.

Table 10. Education Longitudinal Study (2002) Ranked Reasons for Dropout in 2006 by Student Dropouts.

Type	Rank	Cause of dropout	Overall frequency percentage	Males	Females
	Overall	Pushed out—10 factors	48.7	53.1	47.1
		Pulled out—8 factors	36.9	30.4	40.0
		Falling out—3 factors	14.3	16.5	12.9
Total ^a			100.0	100.0	100.0
		School-related reasons:			
Push	1	Missed too many school days	43.5	44.1	42.7
Pull	2	Thought it would be easier to get GED	40.5	41.5	39.1
Push	3	Was getting poor grades/failing school	38.0	40.1	35.2
Fall	4	Did not like school	36.6	40.1	32
Push	5	Could not keep up with schoolwork	32.1	29.7	35.3
Push	8	Thought could not complete course requirements	25.6	22.9	29
Push	9	Could not get along with teachers	25.0	27.7	21.6
Fall	12	Did not feel belonged there	19.9	19.9	19.9
Push	13	Could not get along with other students	18.7	17.7	20.1
Push	14	Was suspended	16.9	22.9	9.0
Fall	17	Changed schools and did not like new one	11.2	14.5	7.0
Push	18	Thought would fail competency test	10.5	9.0	12.3
Push	19	Did not feel safe	10.0	10.5	9.5
Push	20	Was expelled	9.9	15.2	3.0!
		Family-related reasons:			
Pull	6	Was pregnant ^a	27.8	—	27.8
Pull	11	Had to support family	20.0	17.6	23.0
Pull	15	To care for a member of the family	15.5	15.2	16.0
Pull	16	Became a father/mother of a baby	14.4	6.2	25.0
Pull	21	Married or planned to get married	6.8	3.0	11.6
		Employment-related reasons:			
Pull	7	Got a job	27.8	33.5	20.3
Pull	10	Could not work at same time	21.7	23.1	19.9
		Sample size	663	375	288

Source: Dalton, Glennie, Ingels, and Wirt (2009, p. 22); Dropout Indicator 29.

^aDetail may not sum to totals due to rounding.



Conclusion

Students are dropping out of school for many reasons; these reasons could be due to family, school, or other outside influences. As such, there was a need to observe the data from a macro standpoint to see which characteristics were in need of more attention. The data collected in each of the sources all point to a similar description, male students, low income students, students with an ethnic background of African American, American Indian, or Hispanic/Latino, and those students who are close to finishing school in 11th or 12th grade. The students' futures are not just in the hands of those in school and the students themselves, the factors seem to miss the fact that students are influenced by the people around them and the policies that are put in place. School can be made more interesting, learning can be made fun, and dropping out of school can be reduced or even eliminated, all it takes is simply adding value to these items. As reported by both Doll and Bridgeland, students immediately regret dropping out of school as soon as they realize the implications that it causes them later in life. What does it take to convince students that dropping out isn't the way?

Sources

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