

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Out of Work: Youth Unemployment in Baltimore City

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Degree and Year: Master of Arts, 2012

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A 2012 report from the Economic Policy Institute in Washington said that since the start of the recession in December 2007, young adults have attained the highest unemployment rate on record since 1948.

Through a series of interviews, this project aims to explore the reasons and effects of unemployment on Baltimore's young adults. To complete the project, approximately 13 youth aged 17 to 24 were interviewed in the winter and spring of 2012.

Almost all of the youth interviewed for this project said that getting further education was a key to having better work options. But simultaneously, the majority of out-of-work youth interviewed for the project lacked any consistent work experiences.

The project aims to give a human face to statistics about youth unemployment using community reporting as a model to tell the stories of young people out of work in Baltimore in 2012. Access the project: [www.alexandrawilding.com/youthunemployment](http://www.alexandrawilding.com/youthunemployment).

OUT OF WORK: YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN BALTIMORE

By

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
Of the University of Maryland in partial fulfillment  
Of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
2012

Advisory committee:

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2012

## **Acknowledgements**

Many people gave me support and encouragement as I worked to create this thesis project.

I would first like to thank my adviser, Kathy McAdams. She supported this non-traditional project from the beginning. Her comments and feedback helped me to refocus my project on a number of occasions and it was always a joy to work with her to push the possibilities of the project.

I am indebted to my committee members Stacy Spaulding and Carl Sessions Stepp as they provided much guidance and direction for me as my project unfolded throughout the year.

Stacy Spaulding has supported my growth as a writer and journalist from my very first journalism course I took at Towson University while I was still teaching English in the Baltimore City Schools. She continues to provide moral support as a mentor and I am tremendously grateful to her for her generosity with her time and ideas. She read through many drafts of the work and served as an excellent sounding board for my ideas through the process of the project. She also has a special love for Baltimore as a city and her enthusiasm for its unique culture and citizens helped me immensely to help provide more opportunities for the city's residents to have their stories and voices heard.

My family and friends should be acknowledged for the time and effort they spent listening to me discuss my thesis for countless hours. In particular, I want to thank

LaToya Peoples for her patience, love, and moral support as I worked on this project throughout the year.

Lastly, I would like to give a special thanks to the city and people of Baltimore. When I moved to the city from California in 2006, I had no idea I was about to undertake the most transformative journey of my life. The city has a vitality and energy that captivated me. For someone interested in things like education, social justice, history, issues of race and class, literature, and urban affairs, the city provided endless exploration and lessons. Baltimore has so many stories to be told, and I was fortunate enough to be present for enough time to hear a few of them. I feel like this project has brought me full circle. The city will never leave me.

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## Chapter 1

### About the Project

#### I. About the topic

The path to create this project took some unexpected twists and turns.

Last spring, I decided to create a thesis because I wanted to spend time working on a journalistic project in depth. I didn't necessarily want to do academic research on a topic in journalism, I just wanted time to work on a longer journalistic project and see where it took me as a writer, multimedia creator, and journalist.

The inspiration for my thesis was the work of Studs Terkel, and in particular his book, "Division Street: America." I was generally interested in exploring how community was being created and defined in Baltimore in 2012. I wanted to document conversations with citizens in Baltimore about their lives, concerns, experiences, etc. in a multimedia format using video, photo, audio, text, and any combination of those mediums.

Some early reflections on Terkel's ideas:

*Early Thoughts on Division Street: America*

*There is an ability to greet others and be open and present all around us, at all times.*

*Yet, how often do we really connect as fellow human beings?*

*I see this project as a way of experimenting with our connections and relationships toward one another.*

*In other words, how do I bring the world of art and journalism together?*

*Aren't there opportunities for learning, education, and connection, all the time, for everyone?*

*What does community mean anymore in a time when we don't even know our neighbors or our history? What happens when so many people are transient? How is technology changing community, particularly in a city like Baltimore? What might that tell us about the rest of the country and world?*

*Studs Terkel, in Division Street: America, talks about the lack of a connecting agent in America in 1967 that people could mark with a 'Before' and 'After,' such as a revolution like in China. Division Street: America was intended as an American version of Jan Myrdal's Report from A Chinese Village, except focused on the American village of Chicago.*

*Terkel suggests that World War II was "the great divide," but even then, he says, none of those individuals he interviewed had experienced Hiroshima and Auschwitz, "its two most indelible mementoes."*



*What was 'Before' for these Americans? Or 'After'? Or 'Now'? These were all questions that Terkel grappled with as he interviewed hundreds of Chicago's citizens to write Division Street: America.*

*These are all issues and questions that will likely arise during the duration of this project for me as well.*

“I was on the prowl for a cross-section of urban thought, using no one method or technique. I was aware it would take me to suburbs, upper, lower, and middle income, as well as to the inner city itself and its outlying sections. (I was about to say “neighborhoods,” this word has lost its meaning.)”

*If Terkel thought the word 'neighborhoods' has lost its meaning in 1967, where do we stand now?*

“I guess I was seeking some balance in the wildlife of the city as Rachel Carson sought it in nature.”

With Terkel's writing in mind, I set out to think of a way to do a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of a similar project.

I came to reporting with a background not in journalism, but in education and teaching in inner-city schools in Baltimore. Prior to teaching, I was a student of literature and

writing. So, in a way, I see my experiences as a sort of feedback loop where my teaching and direct action informs my writing and creative projects, and vice versa.

I mention this because I came to study journalism hoping to address some of gaps in coverage I felt existed between the conversations I had continually with young people in Baltimore in my classroom and the stories I heard and read about in the local and national media.

My philosophy as a writer and journalist when it comes to reporting includes the idea that subjects should drive the narratives, particularly when it comes to reporting about the lives of people whose stories often go untold.

I find the words of Arundhati Roy particularly striking to illustrate one example of this way of thinking.

*“Writers imagine that they cull stories from the world. I’m beginning to believe that vanity makes them think so. That it’s actually the other way around. Stories cull writers from the world. Stories reveal themselves to us. The public narrative, the private narrative - they colonize us. They commission us. They insist on being told. Fiction and nonfiction are only different techniques of story telling. For reasons that I don’t fully understand, fiction dances out of me, and nonfiction is wrenched out by the aching, broken world I wake up to every morning.” — Arundhati Roy*

It is that “aching, broken world,” what I witnessed in Baltimore and I wanted to figure out a way to help tell the stories of people in the city with all its immense sadness and transcendent beauty.

Reporting often comes from ‘official’ or ‘expert’ sources: policy experts, academics, government officials, non-profit directors. While they shape the narrative and discourse, reporters are often expected to find sources that demonstrate the arguments of the ‘official’ sources.

There is good reasoning behind this. Experts devote all of their time, energy, and resources to specific areas. They spend more time researching topics with serious depth than reporters are able to do. Journalists depend on these experts to guide them in the right direction.

But for this project, I wanted to experiment with the types of stories that could be told if I focused on finding subjects without the assistance of ‘experts’ who drive the discourse. My mentality was that of an artist with a blank canvas looking to paint a portrait of a city. I wanted to take the conventions of journalism and use them as tools to create small portraits of the city’s residents. Collectively they would form of a sort of multimedia quilt.

While I was interested in experimenting with reporting possibilities with this project, it was also a topic that lacked focus.

I was interested in pursuing the kind of immersive reporting practiced by writers such as Alex Kotlowitz and William Finnegan who spent extensive periods of time with a few, specific subjects.

I attempted a series of “vacilandos,” or wanderings without a purpose to find people to interview in the Fells Point neighborhood of Baltimore. This resulted in meeting random people who spoke to me about their personal histories that often also involved substance abuse.

Seeking to find a focus in the context of an academic project, I spent considerable time reading, speaking with various experts, and attending events in Baltimore. Perhaps based on my experiences as an educator, I kept being drawn to topics that involved youth.

I eventually settled on a topic of chronic absenteeism in the early grades (PreK-3). I found a local charter school that was trying some innovative ways to reduce chronic absenteeism by assigning a dedicated social worker to focus on attendance. There were also some innovative programs being done at the district level by the Baltimore City Public Schools to reduce absenteeism such as having a group go door-to-door to pick up children for school to make sure they attended.

With the help of the dedicated social worker and the consent of the family, my plan was to find a family or two with a child in the early grades who was chronically absent.

I would then regularly interview parents and guardians about the barriers to getting the child to school daily. I envisioned going into the daily lives of some of these families to see how and why kids don't make it to school each day and the negative impact that absenteeism has on a child's academic success. My hope was to uncover some of the challenges and to see if intervention programs improved student attendance and performance.

The topic was ripe to explore, but challenging in terms of access. While the charter school that I partnered with was willing to work with me to do that project, I ran into some difficulties early on with getting approval from the Baltimore City Public Schools' central office. Calls, emails, and messages were repeatedly ignored. I think the charter school also became fearful of repercussions from the central office.

After spending several months invested in the project and topic as well as changing advisors, I decided to abandon the project in November and select a new topic.

Again, I came back to my idea of profiling residents of the city but was encouraged to find a topic that would really reward readers with more tangible information, as opposed to a random collection of profiles from residents around the city.

I explored trying the profiles to different census data, but ultimately decided to focus on the issue of youth unemployment in Baltimore.

I figured that I could both profile young people as well as address the serious issue of youth unemployment. By focusing on young adults (16-24), I could get content more easily than with elementary school students.

Why focus on youth unemployment? Here's one explanation that I wrote in an early draft of the project:

*Why Youth Unemployment?*

*My first year teaching English in the Baltimore City Public Schools, I taught a unit on poetry to my 10<sup>th</sup> grade students. The culminating project was a portfolio of poetry, each poem demonstrating a particular style of poetry we'd read and studied in class.*

*The expectation was that students would type their portfolios but some were hand written, some students chose to add little drawings in case the full meaning of their poetry wasn't conveyed with just the words. It was a popular project across the 10<sup>th</sup> grade English classes.*

*About a year ago, I stumbled across some of these portfolios as I was cleaning out my office at home. I'd saved some samples of student work over the years, partly out of the thought that I might need them to get another teaching job, but also to remember what we covered, how I might improve things next time around, that kind of thing.*

*For one reason or another, I decided to save a haiku of one student. For awhile, I pinned it to my corkboard above my writing desk as a kind of ironic inspiration.*

*In short, it was a haiku celebrating money. The last line of the haiku stood out as a mantra I've heard expressed in other ways, hardly original, "money over chicks." The line does have five syllables, in case you were wondering but it's message is simple.*

*Getting money is even more important than getting girls. To a teenage boy, this is quite the proclamation.*

*To top it off, there were little green dollar bills the student drew on the paper to make it look like it was raining money over the words of the poem.*

*I can't remember the rest of the haiku for certain because with the same ridiculous irony with which I tacked it up, I one day ripped down and threw away, deciding it was silly to have raining dollar bills staring at me as I tried to work.*

*But this student was hardly unique. The desire to possess money-- make it, get it, stack it, show it visibly—permeated my experience teaching in Baltimore.*

*It doesn't take much time in a Baltimore classroom to learn the importance of money.*

*The chance to make money figured centrally into the daily challenges of getting students to care about English class, or later an elective I taught helping to expose and try to prepare students to participate in higher education.*

*More school equals more money over the long term; that was the argument.*

*Everyone knows that in order to make money, you need a job. But it didn't take me long to start wondering about what our students would do for money after they left high school. What jobs were we preparing them for? What would they do after high school? Some of my high school students worked fast food and retail jobs. But the majority looked for work only over the summer, and didn't always find it.*

*I was teaching at a school that didn't have a huge success rate at getting our students to graduate, let alone enroll in college. Many of our students struggled to pass mandated state tests. When the SAT was offered for free, our students scores in the lowest percentiles.*

*Some of my students disappeared after attending class for a half a year. Sometimes I would hear that they transferred to another high school, other times I heard through other students that the student had dropped out.*

*Unless you kept in touch with students on your own, teachers didn't know much about what happened to our students after they graduated or left the school. I heard about some students enrolling in local community colleges but unable to pass the placement exams were instead placed in remedial courses that cost money to take but didn't count towards any degree. It was the rare student who attended a four-year college right after graduating.*



*My students were like many high school kids, they dreamed of going to the best schools, having great jobs, supporting their families, and for some of them, getting out of Baltimore.*

*We talked and talked and talked about great careers they could have if they took advantage of certain programs for scholarship money, and kept their grades up. But teaching high school only gave me part of the story. I only knew so much. After most of my former students graduated or left the school, I never saw them again. But some would come back, and report taking classes at BCCC or CCBC, and some were working. But I wondered about those who didn't come back to visit, and all the other young adults in Baltimore in the same situation.*

*The question haunted me: With only a high school degree, or maybe not even a high school degree, how were these young adults in Baltimore faring with regards to employment, especially as the country emerges from a recession?*

## **II. About the reporting**

Once I selected this topic, I began to look for ways of finding young people who were out of work. My goal was to find two or three young people to profile in depth, those who were willing to let me into their lives for a period of time and follow them as they lived their lives out of working and looking to get ahead.

Early on in the project, I came across the Baltimore Workforce Investment Board's Youth Council. The board is composed of various members from various city agencies, non-profits, and corporations that work to address employment issues for youth. Some of these contacts such as Ernest Dorsey and Karen Sitnick, both with the Mayor's Office of Employment Development, would provide helpful information and contacts to complete the project.

I also began to identify the non-profit organizations in Baltimore that work to find solutions to youth unemployment in the city.

One of those organizations, The Living Classrooms Foundation, worked to put me in touch with my first interviewee, Antonio. Antonio had completed a program with Living Classrooms following his release from prison.

I attended the New Generation Jobs Conference at Coppin State University in January and met additional experts and youth that I interviewed for the project. The Department of Urban Studies at Coppin, New Lens, the Baltimore Algebra Project, and Wide Angle Youth Media sponsored the conference. Through this event I was introduced to Jamal Jones, an activist with the Baltimore Algebra Project working to identify alternative sources for employment for Baltimore's young people.

The conference also introduced me to Rafael 'Toma' Solano, who is an instructor with the Building Trades Program at the Chesapeake Center for Youth Development.

The Chesapeake Center for Youth Development in South Baltimore helped me to find additional youth sources for the story. While none of the interviews appeared in the final version of the project, I interviewed four youth in Toma Solano's building trades program about the challenges facing youth in finding job opportunities. All of the young people interviewed for the program were aging out of foster care and receiving support to find gainful employment.

Ivan Leshinsky at the Chesapeake Center for Youth Baltimore also put me in touch with both Toma Solano as well as the center's director for workforce development, Josh Harrold.

Meanwhile, Ernest Dorsey with Yo! (Youth Opportunity) Baltimore provided tremendous assistance and flexibility in helping me to find youth to interview at the Yo! Center in West Baltimore. In setting up classroom visits and interviewing youth, I received assistance from Patrica Waddell, Shawn Young, Latasha Jones-Tayree, and Amber Bolden.

The Yo! Center helped me to interview the majority of young people I worked with on the project. I was able to interview young adults at the center on several different trips to the site for extended periods of time.

Both Amber Bolden and Latasha Jones-Tayree allowed me to sit in on their classes and speak with their students about work experiences, employment prospects, their educational backgrounds, and how their lives have been impacted due to a lack of employment and/or educational credentials.

Additionally, at the State Department of Education, Diana Bailey, the Career and Tech Education and Workforce Development Coordinator for Juvenile Services Education, provided insights into how Juvenile Services Education works to prepare youth for careers.

Karen Sitnick, the director of Baltimore City Mayor's Office of Employment Development, explained the YouthWorks and Hire One Youth programs to me in depth as well as providing additional contacts throughout the city to complete the project. For every successful contact and interview, there were several that inevitably never panned out.

My goal was to follow a very small amount of young people in more detail and to provide longer, more multimedia-rich profiles of these young people.

Unfortunately, with the timeframe of the project, this did not come to fruition for this project.

Instead I focused on finding a variety of youth without jobs to interview for the project.

### **III. About the production**

While I aimed for the project to be more multimedia in nature, I assembled what multimedia I created for the project (images, sound) into a website linked to my personal homepage ([alexandrawilding.com/youthunemployment](http://alexandrawilding.com/youthunemployment)).

I used a customizable Wordpress template to create the shell of the project.

Instead of one long piece, I ultimately created several short profiles and vignettes with young adults and one longer piece to provide context about youth unemployment in Baltimore.

Additionally, I made an editorial decision to write about all of the youth in the story without their last names to maintain privacy. While some youth had no problems being identified in the context of a story about unemployment, other youth did have concerns. For the sake of consistency and also in an era of privacy being broken down due to information readily accessible on the internet, I decided to refer to all youth without last names.

Additionally, some of the photos used for the project are Wikimedia Creative Commons photographs. I caption each photo as such as not to create confusion if the image is not actually of the young person interviewed.

## Chapter 2

### Overview

For Mike\*, 20, it all happened fast.

While crossing a street in West Baltimore last summer, a car slammed into his side and sped away leaving him cut and bleeding on the ground.

He heard that riding in an ambulance cost \$3,000. Without a way of getting to the hospital but in serious pain, Mike decided to treat himself with gauze and medical supplies purchased from the local Rite Aid.

At the time, Mike was working. He had a job through a temp agency with the shoe company, Fila, in Curtis Bay doing shipping and receiving. He called his supervisor to tell her about the accident, but missed a week and a half of work.

When Mike called to see about getting his position back, his supervisor said the position had been filled.

Now, almost a year later, Mike has yet to find another job. He's looking for work, living with family, and trying to earn his GED.

Mike is not alone.

A growing number of Baltimore's young adults are out of work. With low-skilled jobs on the decline, and post-secondary education or training required for many new jobs, many of Baltimore's young adults lack basic skills to enter the workforce and are facing an increasingly competitive job market.

Last summer's unemployment number for young adults reached some of the highest level on record. Will this summer prove any different?

For unemployed youth in Baltimore, the reasons for their unemployment vary, but the consequences means that they are in limbo: uncertain about their futures and unsure about when, or if, their financial independence will start.

Unemployment for Baltimore's youth means a delayed start to adult lives, even when many of them have very adult responsibilities to maintain.

### **A Bleak Picture for Youth Employment**

Mike is hardly the only young person uncertain about this future and how he'll support himself in the years to come. While the so-called "Great Recession" ended, at least in economic terms in 2009, its effects on everything from low consumer confidence to rising food prices remain.

In October 2009, the national unemployment rate hit 10 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. For the next year, it hovered just below 10 percent, and has since been on a gradual decline. The unemployment rate currently sits at 8.3 percent. There is optimism amongst elected officials that unemployment continues to decline with the creation of new jobs.

But the Bureau of Labor Statistics also tells another story. Between December 2007 and June 2009, an estimated 7.5 million jobs were lost. The Economic Policy Institute in Washington puts the loss of jobs since the recession at over 11 million.

There were more jobs lost during that period than the previous four recessions combined, and most of those jobs aren't ever coming back, according to reports.

Young adults have been hit tremendously hard by these job losses.

Nationwide, youth unemployment rates have been higher and remained higher than the overall rates of unemployment. At its peak following the recession in 2010, 21 percent of youths between 16 and 24 were unemployed, more than twice the national unemployment rate. Since then the unemployment rate for youths has declined, but the amount of youths not in the workforce and therefore not even looking for work, has steadily climbed.



A 2012 report from the Economic Policy Institute in Washington said that since the start of the recession in December 2007, young adults have attained the highest unemployment rate on record since 1948.

In Maryland, workers have fared better in general, as the state's average rates of unemployment have kept below the national average.

But in Baltimore City, there is a bleaker picture for unemployment, particularly among youth. Unemployment for Baltimore City residents has topped 10 percent since 2009, according to the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation.

But as of 2010, more than 75 percent of youth ages 16 to 19 are unemployed, and 47 percent of 20 to 24-year-olds are unemployed, according to the American Community Survey.

This summer youth employment is expected to increase as Baltimore City wages its campaign for local businesses to employ one local youth. But the numbers tell a different story.

In 2010, the Bureau of Labor Statistics issued a report outlining the state of youth employment. Fewer than one-third of youth ages 16 to 19 were employed, and of all 16 to 24-year-olds, fewer than half were employed.

Youth of color fare worse in terms of finding a job, as they suffer from higher rates of unemployment. Additionally, the recession has made racial disparities among young adult workers even worse, according to a report from the Economic Policy Institute. Through a series of interviews, this project aims to explore the reasons and effects of unemployment on Baltimore's young adults.

Almost all of the youth interviewed for this story said that getting further education was a key to having better work options. But simultaneously, the majority of out-of-work youth interviewed for the project lacked any consistent work experiences. In other words, many had never held down a job, if only for a summer.

Noted economist and youth labor expert Andrew Sum explained in a 2010 report on youth workers that teens lack exposure to a broad base of work experiences and that lack harms their immediate and long-term employment prospects.

“Teen employment is very path dependent with one’s employment behavior today having large effects on their work behavior tomorrow,” Sum said.

In other words, if a young adult is out of work now, she’s more likely to be out of work in the future.

In the report, Sum stresses the need for a youth job stimulus program to address the critical shortage of jobs for young people.

## **Past Efforts to Address Youth Unemployment in Baltimore**

Despite the bleak numbers, efforts have been made on the state and local level to address issues of youth unemployment.

In 2009, Governor Martin O'Malley convened a statewide task force, named the Emerging Workforce Committee, to address youth employment. The task force included representatives from state and local government, business, organized labor, schools, and nonprofits.

The group was asked to find policy solutions for how to better prepare young people for work opportunities in the state.

Youth unemployment, the committee said in its report, is in a situation of crisis proportion.

In fact, said O'Malley in the report, Maryland was experiencing a growing disconnect between the skill-set required by the marketplace and the skill-set of the workforce. In the next decade, some of the fastest growing jobs will require some level of post-secondary training as more young people attempt to enter the workforce lacking basic academic and workplace skills.

The demand for high-skilled workers will continue to rise, especially in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, the report explains. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Defense's plan to reorganize its base structure will also bring numerous jobs to the area.

The steady drumbeat of the approaching retirement of baby boomers is also beginning to happen, meaning even more positions will be open and need filling.

Yet despite the rising demand, unemployment among youth, particularly young people of color, continues to rise.

### **Supporting Youth Workers in South Baltimore**

Josh Harrold sees the effects of the recession on young adults in Baltimore daily. As the director of workforce development at the Chesapeake Center for Youth Development in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Baltimore, Harrold works to provide job readiness, life skills training, vocational training, and job placement for youth aged 16 to 21.

The Center serves primarily youths that are out-of-school, high school graduates, youth in foster care, or those who are at higher risk for becoming involved in the criminal justice system.

One of the biggest challenges facing young people trying to find jobs are credentials, Harrold said.

Credentials are now a requirement for jobs, not a suggestion.

“Young people used to be competing against each other, now they are competing against those with Associate and Bachelors degrees who are willing to take positions that are under what they would take in the past. They’ve been laid off, and now the outlook is so bleak that they are willing to take an \$8 to \$10 an hour job,” Harrold said.

And then there are the intangibles like having a network of connections to people who own businesses. Many youth in Baltimore lack connections, Harrold said.

Growing up in Howard County, Harrold got his first work experience with help from his parents as a teenager at a snowball stand. He later went on to work at a carryout at the same location.

“Unfortunately many of the youth in Baltimore don’t have the opportunity to get a foot in the door, or someone who can speak for them to get the summer job,” Harrold said.

In Baltimore, there aren’t enough jobs for young people, Harrold said, but barriers exist to young people getting work in the first place. Those barriers would exist regardless of the job prospects, Harrold said.

Lack of reliable transportation, lack of education, and not having previous work experience are all factors that hurt some young adults' chances of employment in Baltimore, Harrold said.

### **A Variety of Causes Lead to Unemployment for Youth**

The overall causes of the current unemployment situation for young adults stem from several factors. Youth employment has always been seasonal, in the sense that many youth are traditionally employed during summer months and fewer hold jobs during the year.

But outside of these factors, the Economic Policy Institute points out there were problems specific to this recession that have negatively impacted young workers. In a kind of domino effect, the collapse of the housing market effectively shrank household wealth for older workers. In turn, workers chose to delay retirement or re-enter the workforce since they could not afford to retire. As a result of the recession, there are fewer jobs available and fewer jobs openings because older workers have remained in the workforce. Younger workers are also more susceptible to job loss with less experience and job protections. In Baltimore, youth wind up without jobs for a variety of reasons. For some youth, the barriers to employment are significant. Youth interviewed for the project reported a variety of reasons for unemployment including incarceration, pregnancy, lack of a high school diploma, lack of experience, lack of transportation, difficulties accessing healthcare, and termination from previous employers.

Take Brittany, 21, for example. Brittany dropped out of high school at 17 when she got pregnant. One year from graduation, she never finished high school and earned her diploma.

She tried finding work and has applied for jobs, but hasn't been called back for interviews. She says that not having a high school diploma and not being able to work during daytime hours because of her children has kept her from getting jobs.

"I'm not working ... I need to find something to start from ground zero and build my way up," Barnes said.

For Brittany, like many unemployed youth, no single factor can be attributed to their lack of work experience. Rather, combinations of factors lead to Brittany's unemployment. Some of the same factors that lead Brittany to drop out, such as pregnancy, have made it difficult to find work as she can only take certain jobs during the hours of her childcare.

### **Finding Employment Particularly Challenging for Dropouts**

As the importance of post-secondary education increases, those without even a high school diploma fare increasingly poorly in the job market. The Emerging Workforce Committee estimated that only a third of high school dropouts in Maryland are employed. Dropouts are also a drain on public resources.

Each dropout costs the public approximately \$260,000 over his or her lifetime with \$60,000 lost in taxes alone, according to a report from Teachers College at Columbia University.

During the recession, high school dropouts have fared particularly poorly in the job market. One in five high school dropouts have lost their jobs since 2007, and half of those job losses came after the end of the recession, according to a report from the Urban Institute.

For Brittany, enrolling in a job development program and a GED was a choice she said had to make for the sake of her children, but she's also in the minority when it comes to making the choice to get further training to get back on track. In a study of 20-year-old dropouts in Baltimore in 2006, 92 percent had not enrolled in some type of continued schooling, youth development, or job training, according to the Workforce Committee's report.

Brittany feels confident that further education will help her get a better job. She hopes one day to earn a commercial driving license and eventually start her own trucking business.

“That way ... I'll always have money coming in,” she said.



And the unemployment situation isn't just affecting workers who dropped out of high school like Mike, the young man who lost his warehouse job following an accident.

High school graduates like John, 19, are also being shut out of the labor market.

John graduated from Southside Academy in Cherry Hill in 2009. But since graduating, John, like Mike, has only been able to find sporadic, part-time work in warehouses.

“It’s stressful because you never know when you’ll get laid off. The money is not good, salary is very low. (You’re) constantly looking for overtime and there hardly is any,” John said.

While John said he didn't have great grades, he did well enough to graduate, but never considered college. He ultimately plans to work for a longshoreman's union or in green construction.

But with the current state of the economy, he is not optimistic about his prospects. John's mindset, instead of looking towards a brighter future, seems to be oddly of an earlier era.

“Technology has kind of taken over the job market. What people did ten, twenty years ago is being done by machines now, what's not being done is being shipped overseas. Maybe they can leave some of those jobs here, get rid of some of those machines, and put some people back to work,” he said.

## **Strains on Juvenile Justice System Hurt Employment Prospects for Youth**

Staggeringly large populations of dropouts also make their way through state institutions such as jails, prisons, and mental hospitals. In Maryland, one in four black males between the ages of 20 and 24 who dropped out of high school were incarcerated in 2006, according to the report released by the Emerging Workforce Committee.

Juvenile offenders face unique challenges when entering the workforce after being incarcerated.

Since 2004, education for juvenile offenders in Maryland has been administered by the Maryland State Department of Education. By 2014, the State Department of Education is expected to run all of the education programs within the Department of Juvenile Services. Part of the state's educational programming for juvenile offenders includes workforce development and career education. The programs offered are designed to support incarcerated youth as they transition from detention and treatment to support after release, according to the State Department of Education.

But based on budget cuts, the state department of education is increasingly challenged serving youth in its care, said Diana Bailey, the Career and Tech Education and Workforce Development Coordinator for Juvenile Services Education.

Bailey believes that there are good practitioners and educators working in the juvenile system, but the delivery of its methods is the crisis right now.

Gains were made in previous years in juvenile facilities and best practices were in place, Bailey contends, but budget cuts have virtually wiped them away, Bailey said, leaving many young people to fend for themselves following release.

“In some cases, parole and probation officers would just say, ‘Oh, find a job.’ So that’s really useful, huh?” Bailey said.

Juveniles used to be released with some type of career certificate or a pre-apprenticeship, and while that still happens to a degree, budget cuts have limited what is offered, Bailey said.

Cuts to the education budget in juvenile have reduced the certificate programs that used to be offered in schools.

For youth in the juvenile justice system, Bailey said, the needs are so great on everything from academic support, mental health, and support with substance abuse, that the system doesn’t get anywhere near addressing all the needs of youth in the system through wraparound support.

Even before the recession, in better days, Bailey estimated that the system served the needs of only 25 percent of youth.

“The resources have shrunk so dramatically, but the more the need is, the less money there is,” Bailey said.

Some of the challenges that face the State Department of Education as they try to reach incarcerated youth include a lack of technology and inadequate facilities. As tests like the GED move increasingly online, educators struggle as to how to deliver instruction and preparation for the tests with a lack of resources such as computers with Internet access, Bailey said.

But perhaps the most difficult barrier hindering young adults from employment post-incarceration is simply finding an employer willing to hire an ex-offender.

Bailey said that some terrific employers previously worked with offenders to give those young people who have been in trouble with the law, a second chance. But the economy eliminated many of the available slots for people looking for a second chance.

“Employers don’t have to take a chance,” Bailey says.

Bailey paints a picture of a system struggling to keep up with the youth that pass through its doors both while in the state’s care and in their rehabilitation following release.

It’s a perfect storm of sorts for a person like Antonio 24, to remain unemployed following his release from prison.

As a teenager, Antonio was charged as an adult was sentenced for 12 years in prison, for armed robbery and hijacking. All but four of those years were suspended. In prison, he passed his GED, but received no other formal education.

Following his release, he said he was adrift and on his own to find work until he found a program that works to get certification in various trades for ex-offenders at the Living Classroom Foundation in Baltimore.

With help from Living Classrooms, Antonio received training in construction and weatherization and was able to become employed through the organization. Still, the work was sporadic. He said he was unable to pay bills or fully support himself.

“Pay is not really so consistent with me getting 40 hours a week. It’s slim that we get 40 hours,” Antonio said.

He said that other formerly incarcerated youth he has remained in contact with have had difficulty finding jobs.

### **Engaging Youth at the Community Level**

It’s easy to wonder if the path that Antonio took could have been prevented had there been some intervention on a community level.

Raised in Westport, a neighborhood close to Cherry Hill in Southwest Baltimore, Antonio says he got decent grades in school and never struggled. Sports motivated him to go to school and stay involved with local recreation centers.

But he said that as programs at local recreation centers were cut, he found himself with more idle time. He played basketball and football in high school, but eventually got dragged into some things in the streets.

“I lost touch with sports, and then I lost touch with the community,” Antonio said.

In Baltimore, 55 recreation centers serve youth each year through a variety of programming including after school activities for children 5 to 12, and evening programs for teenagers.

At Samuel F.B. Morse Recreation Center in southwest Baltimore, less than two miles from where Antonio grew up in Westport, Anthony Watkins works as the center’s director. In addition to an after school program for children, the center offers a variety of evening sports leagues including basketball, as well as things like video games, a computer lab, and a weight room.

It’s Watkins’ job to oversee the daily programming at the center, and to engage parents and community members in the center’s activities. It’s a job that he’s done for the past

seven years, but he has spent his entire career working for the city's Department of Recreation and Parks.

Area crime statistics indicate that the neighborhood surrounding the recreation center is prone to violent crime such as shootings and assaults. The neighborhood community advocacy group, Carrollton Ridge Community Association, has long battled crime, negligent property owners, and the erosion of its tight-knit community due to the effects of transient tenants and the influx of crack cocaine into the neighborhood, according to its website.

It's against this backdrop, like many other neighborhoods in Baltimore, where people like Watkins, directing The Morse Recreation Center intersect with young people like Antonio. While Antonio loved sports, free time lead him down a path to the streets and eventually prison.

But for Watkins, the influences of the streets aren't part of his work.

"I don't see outside of the rec center," Watkins said, "It ain't my job to question who is hustling."

Watkins sees his role as director to provide a "good, wholesome program" for neighborhood children.

He said he's never had any kinds of problems with the young people that use the center and never had trouble engaging youth since he's been the director.

### **Building Community and Supporting Youth Workers in West Baltimore**

It's after 10 a.m. in a windowless classroom squeezed in a concrete slab of a building across from liquor stores and boarded up houses in Harlem Park. The brutalist structure houses the Yo! Baltimore Center, a program run by the Baltimore City Mayor's Office of Employment Development that helps "out of school" youth, those young people who aren't in school, either because they dropped or already graduated, to find jobs.

Amber Bolden, a job developer at Yo!, directs her students to write pitches for an ideal job. They scribble their responses on binder paper, and then share them with a group of six peers.

Bolden graduated with a bachelor's degree in journalism but was unable to find work in the field. Long drawn to grassroots community work, she found employment as a job developer began working with young people directly.

She teaches classes at the Yo! Center to help young adults them improve their resumes and then does outreach into the community to try and find them job opportunities.



Most young people don't want to resort to getting jobs on the street, Bolden said, but it's nonetheless a job that's always available and often deeply embedded in the community.

“Rather than going and filling out applications, there's an underground economy always taking applications and always hiring ... They are looking for a quick return, and It's a challenge to want to wait two weeks for a check, or wait for a call back, when you have this person saying you can have this now ... it lulls a lot of people, especially in places where it's part of the community,” Bolden said.

Knowing how to take advantage of work opportunities when they arise is also a challenge with the youth that she works with, Bolden said.

One young person in Bolden's program, a youth in foster care, was offered an internship working 35 hours each week. Of those 35 hours, she made only six. For the hours she did not work, she called in sick, Bolden said.

“It's not an uncommon as I'd like it to be,” Bolden said.

If you gave these young people a test and asked them whether they should miss a week of work, they would all say no, but a disconnect exists with their actions, Bolden said.

### **Baltimore Works to Create Youth Jobs in the Summer**

The city agency working to spur the growth of youth jobs in Baltimore through the Yo! Center and other initiatives, is the Mayor's Office of Employment Development. The agency is one of the major engines working to drive youth job development in Baltimore. Through a program called YouthWorks, young people between the ages of 14 to 21 are connected with employers through a six-week summer jobs program.

The goal of this year's program is to match the 5,000 jobs provided for Baltimore youth last year, said director of Baltimore City Mayor's Office of Employment Development, Karen Sitnick.

Additionally, this summer the agency implemented a new initiative, the Hire One Youth campaign, aimed at connecting youth to jobs in the private sector. The campaign wants to encourage local businesses to put forward the \$1,200 required to hire one youth for the summer.

"It just started out as an idea to more aggressively engage and invest in helping prepare the future workforce," Sitnick said.

By engaging private industry in youth job creation, the Mayor's Office of Employment Development hopes to find a solution both for expanding the type of work available to youth, and also providing a financial solution to a cash-strapped program. The office doesn't have the funding in the form of stipends to support youth jobs, Sitnick said.

The office hopes the connections to private industry provide additional work opportunities in areas such as the medical and hospitality fields.

But of the 5,000 jobs that the office plans to create for youth this summer, only 250 of those will be through the Hire One Youth campaign, Sitnick said.

The office plans to target more mature youth that are prepared to be successful in the private sector for the Hire One Youth campaign. The campaign will focus on finding jobs for youth 16 and older, who have attended a job readiness workshop, and who have a prepared resume.

The youth will be pre-screened for employers and matched through an interview process. Following placement, youth will be paired with a YouthWorks job coach to ensure a successful work experience for both parties involved. The new positions were also created to help to provide support for employers and youth for transitioning summer jobs to more long-term employment, Sitnick said.

The regional president of Wells Fargo hosted a mini job fair with various banks to recruit youth this summer. The banks participating in the program were willing to hire young adults over 18 who are interested in working full-time as bank tellers after the summer program ends, Sitnick said.

As for the 4,750 young people not employed through the Hire One Youth campaign, they will work with employers in various settings including working for city and state government employers and nonprofits, as well as the private sector.

But for some in the field of youth job creation in Baltimore, YouthWorks doesn't give students skills that they can take beyond that summer job.

For Josh Harrold at Chesapeake Center for Youth Development, it's the difference between simply exposing young people to employment, versus giving them skills that they can use beyond the summer in other settings.

"YouthWorks is great, but most of the jobs are in the public sector, so there's not the opportunity to get a job after the summer or when they graduate," Harrold said.

Through programs at the Chesapeake Center for Youth Development, Harrold said, young people gain experience and they finish the program with nationally recognized certification that will hopefully make them employable and give them a leg-up against the competition.

While Sitnick agrees that a six-week program doesn't give youth all the work experience they need, it is regardless a path towards future employment.

“For my first job I cleaned up dirty dishes in a restaurant. Your first job is learning how to work,” Sitnick said.

Sitnick contends that even if youth are sweeping streets by working for say, the Downtown Partnership, they are gaining basic workforce experience and learning valuable skills such as developing a work ethic, time management, and teamwork.

Yet both Harrold and Sitnick agree that youth need on-going exposure to careers, skills, and experiences to make them attractive to employers.

Even if employers are hiring, for many of Baltimore’s young people, just completing basic entry requirements for a job is a challenge.

A few months ago, Mike had a job interview at Walmart. The interview consisted of two people asking him questions back and forth about how he performs under stress, how well he could multitask, and his ability to work as part of a team.

It didn’t go well.

Mike said it seemed like he couldn’t cut it, even though he’s sure he could.

“I just choked, I couldn’t answer the questions ... I was just nervous and all of that,”

Mike said.

They never called him back.

For Sitnick, job training should be going on in every secondary school in Baltimore City, spearheaded by the school's leadership and infused into the curriculum.

"If you've never had an interview before, it's traumatic. You have to have a support system," Sitnick said.

### **Peer-to-Peer Model: A Possible Solution to Youth Joblessness?**

Perhaps young adults themselves are generating one of the biggest sources of hope for future work opportunities.

Jamal Jones helped organize a youth-run conference in January on the campus of Coppin State University to address issues of youth employment in Baltimore.

The conference, titled "New Generation Jobs: A Youth Conference to Change the Shape of Vocation," was organized by New Lens, Baltimore Algebra Project and Wide Angle Youth Media, all groups that advocate for a peer-to-peer model to empower young people.

Through teaching and activism, peer-to-peer programs connect youth to other youth through mentoring and peer tutoring programs. Often young people who serve as tutors

and instructors are teaching other youth skills that they can transfer to other situations such as tutoring in math or video editing. In turn, the youth instructors are often paid a stipend for their teaching skills.

Jones, 20, works as a site coordinator for the Baltimore Algebra Project, running math tutoring program that employs youth through peer tutoring. Jones also works as youth organizer for various campaigns including the Alliance for Educational Justice.

He currently attends Morgan State University where he doubling majoring in psychology and secondary education and with a minor in philosophy. He plans to become a teacher when he graduates.

Held in January, the conference consisted of workshops, discussions, and interactive skits, all lead by young people, designed to help youth rethink the nature of work for young people.

Instead of working service-based jobs operating a cash register for a fast food restaurant, Jones said, youth should be gaining skills for a knowledge-based economy like learning how to tutor in a particular skill such a video editing.

In a way, the conference was one big promotional event for the peer-to-peer model. But the model is a powerful one. Groups like the Baltimore Algebra Project and New Lens

use a peer model to train young people in a particular skill set, and in turn, the youth get paid to take classes or tutor others.

Jones believes the peer-to-peer model works for youth because young people are more influenced by their peers.

"Students have a hard time relating to the materials as well as the person teaching the material. We figure that it's easy for students to learn from each other. I can make something relate to a student that a teacher can't relate to them ... youth learn better from youth," Jones said.

Additionally, young people have a lot of positive energy that is being wasted on service-based jobs they don't like, Jones said.

"I like to teach math ... Now I'm teaching and I look forward to going to work," Jones said.

But not everyone Jones knows is so lucky. Many of his peers struggle to find work.

One of Jones' friends recently graduated with degrees in computer programming but couldn't get a job at Staples and is currently unemployed.



Ultimately Jones said, it's the youth that have to stand up for themselves and fight for better jobs. Without funding from grants as well as government funding, the peer-to-peer model can't thrive, Jones said.

"What essentially we're hoping to have happen, is we'll have more people actually help fight for funding, so we can have more jobs, we can employ more youth and essentially we can switch from this service-based economy to this more knowledge based economy in terms of jobs," Jones said.

### **The Future for Baltimore's Young Adult Workers**

As summer draws to a close, many young workers will again find themselves out of work. Fewer job opportunities will be available to youth in Baltimore.

Young people who have spent time in prison or who dropped out of high school face tremendous barriers when trying to find and sustain employment.

While some opportunities exist within the city for Baltimore's young people, will the city's youth take advantage of them?

\*The last names of the unemployed young adults in this story have been removed for privacy.

## Chapter 2

### Youth Profiles

Aaron, 21

After dropping out of Baltimore Polytechnic High School, Aaron Arnold, 21, enrolled in Baltimore City Community College where he earned his GED diploma.

Now he's studying information technology at the Community College of Baltimore County. He hopes to eventually work as a computer technology teacher.

Arnold has worked a variety of jobs including internships with the City of Baltimore and with local nonprofits. But he's also had trouble with consistency, and was recently fired for missing days of work.

While he's unable to support himself financially, he says he receives financial help from his family.

His outlook for the future however, is bleak.

"I'm not too optimistic at all, especially the way things are right now ... the jobs here in Baltimore are kinda crappy," Arnold said.

(With supporting audio)

Antonio, 24

It's December in Baltimore's Eastside neighborhood of Coldspring-Montebello, Antonio, 24, takes a break from watching the Green Bay Packers battle the Kansas City Chiefs. A chill wind blows off of Lake Montebello outside, but inside Antonio's house it looks like a tropical garden with houseplants covering the dining room of the sprawling downstairs of a stately lakeside rowhouse where he lives with family members.

Sitting on a white leather couch, and dressed in wide-framed glasses and a tie, Antonio's confidence and optimism gives off an impression of hipster college student than someone who served a two-year sentence for armed robbery and carjacking.

Antonio grew up in the Westport neighborhood of Baltimore, close to Cherry Hill in the southern part of the city. School had never really been a problem for him. He said he got decent grades, mostly Bs, and never struggled.

But he says sports were his main motivation to come to school. Growing up he always played sports, but says local athletic centers and programs were cut over the years, and he gradually had more idle time. He played basketball and football while in high school, but during that time, he says he got dragged into some things on the street.

"I lost touch with sports, and then I lost touch with the community," he said.

It was during his junior year of high school that Antonio got in trouble. He doesn't go into much detail, except to say that he made some bad decisions. Court records show that Antonio was convicted and charged with armed carjacking and third degree assault. He spent two years in prison. Instead of earning a diploma from Southside Academy, he earned a GED in jail.

Unsure of what to do when he got out of prison, he heard about a program that helped ex-offenders to get careers, so he enrolled.

For the past nine months, he's been training and working in construction through a program called Project Jumpstart through the Living Classrooms Foundation. The program aims to help provide job-training skills to ex-offenders.

The first six months of the program are devoted to helping ex-offenders get ready for real employment such as waking up early, being on time, helping you get a trade, and dressing appropriately, Antonio said.

Antonio works in carpentry and weatherization, insulating homes after earning a certificate from CCBC as part of the Living Classrooms program. He's now working part-time, depending on the construction contracts that Living Classrooms receives, doing weatherization.

But the work is sporadic, sometimes only two or three days each week. If there aren't any contacts, there's no work, Antonio says, appearing optimistic.

For the moment, he's looking for more stable work prospects and just trying to get a much experience and save as much money as he can so that he can support himself. Besides, he said, there were few bills for him to worry about paying while living with family.

But several weeks later, Antonio's whole attitude seems changed. His voice no longer sounds hopeful, and instead he seems deflated.

Work, it turns out, has dried up. He's not getting any hours at all. And now, he's worried about bills and expenses, not having money that he needs.

We talk over the phone and we set up a meeting for the approaching Sunday afternoon. I say we can firm up a time closer to Sunday, as he's always been good about responding to my calls and texts. But when I call on Saturday, he doesn't answer or return my call.

My text messages go ignored. It's the same on Sunday. We never meet. Over the next several weeks, I try him again, but I only get silence.

Brittany, 21

For 21-year-old Brittany Barnes, the day starts early. She's up by 6:00, getting clothes for her three and one-year-old daughters ready, and fixing breakfast. She bathes, dresses and feeds them, and then she gets herself ready for the day. She packs their lunches, and then they're off. They're out of the house by 8:00.

The children's daycare is a few blocks away, a walk that takes around 15 minutes.

Brittany walks everywhere. She likes walking, and says it keeps her in shape to keep up with her children. It's also expensive to buy a bus pass every week, she says.

"I listen to music and I just bop," she says.

During the weekdays, she attends classes to help her prepare for the GED and is looking for a job. By earning her GED, she hopes to set an example for her daughter.

"After awhile I just got tired depending on someone else to do something for you. You just got to go out and do something for yourself," she says.

Their evening routine is similar. She picks up her daughters at 5:00, and makes them dinner. She always cooks a big meal on Sundays and stretches the meal out for a few days with the leftovers. Sometimes she lets her daughter choose a dinner, but she's picky.

She'll ask for a cheeseburger but won't want pickles, for example.

Talking about her daughters, Brittany smiles with confidence. She says her daughters are happy and healthy. She plays games with them; they read books, color, do arts and crafts.

Her three-year-old knows her ABCs, her birthday, the colors. She says her daughter is smart and wants her to know "the real world."

But three years ago, Brittany's life was different.

While a senior at Augusta Fells Savage High School in South West Baltimore, Brittany got pregnant and says pregnancy pains she had during the day caused her to drop out.

She wanted to go back to school to get her diploma after having the baby, but she said it didn't seem right, that she was somehow too old for high school.

She ended up living with the father of her children, her high school sweetheart, and getting pregnant for a second time two years later. But living with her children's father didn't last long. Brittany says they separated after he abused her. She now lives on her own, while the father of her children is in prison.

"We were together, but I couldn't deal with him being back and forth in jail," Brittany says.

Brittany is out of work and looking for a job. She says her family doesn't support her financially, but is getting funds to support herself and her children from Baltimore City's Department of Social Services. It's enough to scrape by, but she says she needs job. She makes a little money here and there doing hair for people she knows.

"It's survival of the fittest, you gotta do it on your own," she says.

She's applied for jobs at places like Aldi's Supermarket and a men's store called Changes, but hasn't ever gotten a call back after an interview. She says that not having a high school diploma and not being able to work during daytime hours because of her children has kept her from getting jobs.



Chelsea, 19

It was only after getting pregnant at 16 that Chelsea started thinking about getting a job.

But even once she started applying for work, she still couldn't find any.

"I'm still looking, filling out applications, calling and calling. Every time they tell me, 'We'll call you back,' and I never get any calls back," she said.

Chelsea said she couldn't find or afford childcare, so she dropped out between her 10th and 11th grade years to take care of her daughter, Syria, now two.

Chelsea tells her story in an almost whisper as she clutches her purse. It's not long because tears begin to slowly roll down her face. Her daughter climbs on her lap and tries to pat them dry with a tissue.

"Mama, mama," she says. Confusion sweeps across her face.

Chelsea met Syria's father, Darius, while they were both students at the Institute for Business Entrepreneurship at Walbrook High School in West Baltimore.

Chelsea was optimistic about Darius' ability to help support his young daughter. He was taking classes at a local community college and working at a neighborhood Target. He wasn't making a lot of money, but it was enough to help with expenses.

But that all changed when Darius' cousin got out of jail, Chelsea said.

Darius' cousin started convincing Darius that his daughter needed clothes and diapers, and even though Chelsea said he was able to provide all of that with his job, Darius became his cousin's partner in crime. The pair started robbing people, Chelsea said.

He started getting arrested, eventually receiving a two-year sentence, she said.

Now Chelsea takes her daughter to visit Darius in prison.

"She knows who he is, she knows he don't belong where he is. When we leave the visiting room she looks and asks if he's coming with us," she said.

She doesn't know if she'll be together with Darius when he gets out of prison, they weren't together when he went in, but it's more important for him to be out supporting his daughter, something he can't do now, Chelsea said.

Without help from Darius, and without a diploma to help her get additional job opportunities, Chelsea is focused on finishing her GED and living with her family. Darius' family helps occasionally, but not like before he went to jail and now only if she requests something from them.

She's still applying for jobs, but not with much consistency. She applied recently for jobs at a super market and a Home Depot.

Overall, she's not optimistic about her prospects.

"I think it's harder for me because I'm 19 and I've never had experience. I think that's why a lot of places don't hire you," she said.

She says she's hopeful she'll find something, but not ever hearing back from employers makes her feel burdened.

She's struggling to make ends meet and was recently denied Temporary Cash Assistance (TCA), a welfare program to help individuals with dependent children to pay for expenses because she wasn't enrolled in enough school hours.

"Even if I was to get TCA, I want to make the money myself instead of just getting free money. It's something to help me for right now, so that's why I applied," she said.

Eventually she hopes to be self-sufficient and have her own place. Her first step is GED, which she thinks will make finding work easier.

She plans to continue her education into college and is hoping one day to become a social worker.

John, 19

Here is John, this 19-year-old young man. He is tough, guarded, yet baby-faced, uncertain of how much to participate, how much to commit. It seems as though he doesn't belong here in this place, looking for a job when he could be doing something else. He seems distracted, peering out into the hallway, leaning back in his chair.

"I'll wait for you, John," says Amber Bolden, a job developer at Yo! Baltimore, a youth employment center on Baltimore's Westside.

She's asked him to move forward to listen to interview pitches each of the other students in the class wrote about what makes them employable. She pivots the attention of the class on John after he ignores her request and remains seated in the background.

The need to issue an ultimatum to an uncooperative adult feels out of place in a job-training center and in a class where all of the students have either finished high school or their GEDs and have the sole task of finding steady employment in front of them.

But unlike in a high school where a challenge might have ensued, the attention drawn away from the task at hand deliberately for a few fleeting moments, it doesn't take much for John to get up and relocate closer to the front of the room. John doesn't present in front of the group, but he has plans.

John dreams, like many young men I've met in Baltimore, of playing football. He wants to go to college in Pennsylvania or Delaware, maybe Delaware State, study business. But if that doesn't work, he can play at Morgan, Coppin, Towson, or maybe Bowie State.

"What position?" I ask.

Now he's fired up. Linebacker, running back, it doesn't matter. He's played almost every position. He grew up playing football. But then he broke his leg, and he hasn't worked out much since.

"I broke my leg and it messed up a lot of stuff, about I'm about to get back on it, get back on my football stuff," he says. So there's football.

And then there's the fact that he's unemployed, never had any type of consistent job, and is about to become a father. He's also already carrying \$16,000 of student loan debt from a dental assistant program at a career school.

John seems in limbo: the football-playing dreams of youth mixed with the very adult responsibilities of supporting a child and repaying debts.

For starters, his previous work experience was limited to working odd jobs: once for a marketing company, for a tiling company, and for a temp agency. But so far, he's never had a consistent job for any period of time.

At the temp agency, John says he would work one a week here, and two or three times another week.

‘That’s not gonna work. You ain’t gonna make it working two days per week, you ain’t gonna make no money like that,’ he says.

John graduated from Coppin Academy, a Baltimore public school on the campus of Coppin State University, a historically black university.

After finishing school, John decided to attend a professional training program in dental assistance at the Medix School. The program lasted 10 months and John borrowed \$16,000 from the school to attend. He says he needs to pass some exams to be eligible for jobs, but still doesn’t have anything lined up. Soon his loan repayments will start.

“What’s your outlook for the future?” I say.

“Outlook,” he says and pauses for several very long seconds. “What does that mean?”

“You know,” I say, “How do you feel about your future?”

“I feel it can get better than what it is now, but things gonna be alright cause I'm gonna work hard so things can be better than what they is now. My future...” he says, voice trailing off, “I don’t know.”

John, 20

After graduating from Southside Academy in 2009, John found himself without a stable job.

After three years, he's only been able to find sporadic, temporary work.

Currently unemployed, he's looking for work and trying to find a way to support himself.

He hopes to work as a longshoreman or in green construction.

(With audio)



Nicole, 17

Last fall, Nicole dropped out of Baltimore's Northwestern High School. She moved around a lot, attending four different high schools in two years. She had problems adjusting to high school where the constant moving made meeting new people a challenge. She felt that her peers were too judgmental and mean.

Even though she was going to what she called "the bad schools," she felt the teachers did a good job of trying to engage the students.

"The only time you feel important is when the teachers acknowledge you," she said.

Nicole planned to get a job after dropping out even though she had no previous work experience. She got a work permit and started applying to jobs to fast food restaurants.

But no one called her back.

Without a high school diploma, employers told her they wouldn't hire her unless she was enrolled in school. So she decided to enroll in a GED program at the Yo! Baltimore Center, in a program that helps "out of school youth," or youth who weren't successful in

traditional school setting. The program helps youth to complete a GED and provides them with skills for finding a job. Some of the participants at Yo already have their diplomas or GEDs and are just trying to find work.

Unlike at some of the neighborhood high schools that Nicole attended, she's felt welcomed and supported in the Yo program.

"Here the students accept you, everyone accepts you. Everybody treats you like family," she said.

Her focus now is on school, and is not seeking fulltime work. In the future, she sees herself working with kids, possibly at a daycare.

In addition to dropping out of school, Nicole will have to overcome some major barriers to find and maintain a job.

She doesn't have a car, so she wakes up early to catch multiple buses to get to the Yo Center. No one in her house drives a car. Having a car while having a job is essential Nicole says, because the bus isn't dependable.

Her resume lacks references since she has no work experience and she never participated in any extracurricular activities while in school. Additionally, Nicole has no Internet at home, so she applies for all of her jobs at the Yo Center where there is Internet access. She describes her typing skills as poor, but improving.

Too many employers require online applications to apply for jobs, Nicole said. To help those who are unemployed, employers could accept paper applications, she said. Nicole wants to be able to go in and speak with a manager after submitting an application as opposed to being told no one can help her since everything is handled electronically.

Overall, Nicole is worried about the future of her community and the goals of young people. Her community lacks role models, she said. The only role models that Nicole sees in the community for young people are rappers and singers. She thinks more career oriented people need to visit communities, and inspire young people through the difficulty of their own lives. Maybe then she'd hear more people saying they want to be lawyers.

“I don't hear no one say they want to be a lawyer,” she said.

Tyler, 20

Tyler Westbrook, 20, graduated from high school two years ago but has yet to find any type of employment. At the Youth Opportunity Center in West Baltimore, Tyler takes job development classes that will hopefully help him to find employment.

He says he has applied for jobs, but hasn't been able to find work.

(With audio)

## Images and Photographs

Image 1:



Baltimore youth/ Alexandra Wilding

Image 2:



Image via Bureau of Labor Statistics

Image 3:



In 2009, Governor Martin O'Malley convened a statewide task force to address youth employment./ Image via Wikipedia

Image 4:



A young mother with her child/ Image via Flickr

Image 5:



John prepares for a future job interview at the Youth Opportunity Center in West Baltimore/ Alexandra Wilding



Image 6:



Many young people have difficulty transitioning from prisons to the workforce./ Image via Flickr

Image 7:



Samuel F.B. Morse Recreation Center/ Baltimore City Dept. of Recreation and Parks

Image 8:



A student works on a job pitch at the Youth Opportunity Center in West Baltimore/ Alexandra Wilding

Image 9:



Karen Sitnick, director of the Baltimore City Mayor's Office of Employment Development/ Office of Employment Development

Image 10:



Jamal Jones/ Photo via The Baltimore Algebra Project

Image 11:



John prepares for a future job interview at the Youth Opportunity Center in West Baltimore/ Alexandra Wilding

Image 12:



John, 19 applies for jobs at the Youth Opportunity Center in Baltimore, Md./

Alexandra Wilding

Image 13:




Aaron at the Yo! Baltimore Center in 2012/ Alexandra Wilding

Image 14:

Screenshot of project website:


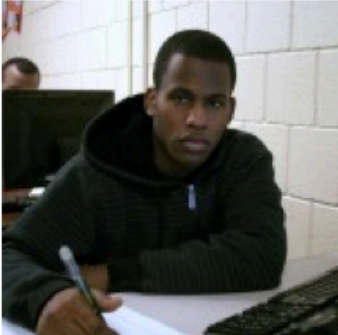

posts comments

**OUT OF WORK** youth unemployment in baltimore



Overview Youth Profiles About the project

**Overview** **John, 20** **Brittany, 21**



For Mike\*, 20, it all happened fast. While crossing a street in West Baltimore last summer, a car slammed into his side and sped away leaving him cut and bleeding on the ground. He heard that riding

After graduating from Southside Academy in 2009, John found himself without a stable job. After three years, he's only been able to find sporadic, temporary work. Currently unemployed, he's looking

For 21-year-old Brittany, the day starts early. She's up by 6:00, getting clothes for her three and one-year-old daughters ready, and fixing breakfast. She bathes, dresses and feeds them, and then she gets

Image 15:

Screenshot of overview story

Overview	Youth Profiles	About the project
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## Overview

For Mike Staley, 20, it all happened fast.

While crossing a street in West Baltimore last summer, a car slammed into his side and sped away leaving him out and bleeding on the ground.

He heard that riding in an ambulance cost \$3,000. Without a way of getting to the hospital but in serious pain, Mike decided to treat himself with gauze and medical supplies purchased from the local Rite Aid.

At the time, Mike was working. He had a job through a temp agency with the shoe company, Fila, in Curtis Bay doing shipping and receiving. He called his supervisor to tell her about the accident, but missed a week and a half of work.

When Mike called to see about getting his position back, his supervisor said the position had been filled.

Now, almost a year later, Mike has yet to find another job. He's looking for work, living with family, and trying to earn his GED.

Mike is not alone.

A growing number of Baltimore's young adults are out of work. With low-skilled jobs on the decline, and post-secondary education or training required for many new jobs, many of Baltimore's young adults lack basic skills to enter the workforce and are facing an increasingly competitive job market.

Last summer's unemployment number for young adults reached some of the highest level on record. Will this summer prove any different?

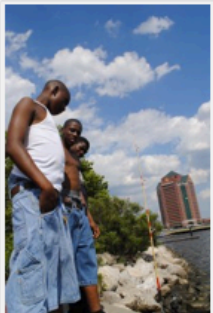
For unemployed youth in Baltimore, the reasons for their unemployment vary, but the consequences means that they are in limbo: uncertain about their futures and unsure about when, or if, their financial independence will start.

Unemployment for Baltimore's youth means a delayed start to adult lives, even when many of them have very adult responsibilities to maintain.


### A Bleak Picture for Youth Employment

Mike is hardly the only young person uncertain about this future and how he'll support himself in the years to come. While the so-called "Great Recession" ended, at least in economic terms in 2009, its effects on everything from low consumer confidence to rising food prices remain.

In October 2009, the national unemployment rate hit 10 percent, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). For the next year, it hovered just below 10 percent, and has since been on a gradual decline. The unemployment rate currently sits at 8.3 percent. There is optimism amongst elected officials that unemployment continues to decline with the creation of new jobs.



Baltimore youth/ Alexandra Wilding



But the Bureau of Labor Statistics also tells another story. Between December 2007 and June 2009, an estimated 7.5 million jobs were lost. [The Economic Policy Institute](#) in Washington puts the loss of jobs since the recession at over 11 million.


There were more jobs lost during that period than the previous four recessions combined, and most of those jobs aren't ever coming back, according to reports.

Image 16:

Screenshot of individual post with audio embedded

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**OUT OF WORK** youth unemployment in baltimore



Overview Youth Profiles About the project

### Aaron, 21

After dropping out of [Baltimore Polytechnic Institute](#), Aaron Arnold, 21, enrolled in Baltimore City Community College where he earned his GED.

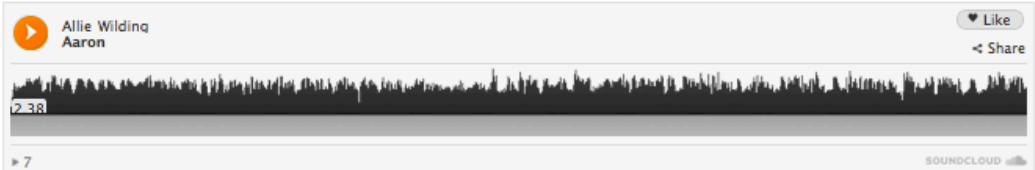
Now he's studying information technology at the Community College of Baltimore County. He hopes to eventually work as a computer technology teacher.

Arnold has worked a variety of jobs including internships with the City of Baltimore and with local nonprofits. But he's also had trouble with consistency, and was recently fired for missing days of work.

While he's unable to support himself financially, he says he receives financial help from his family.

His outlook for the future however, is bleak.

"I'm not too optimistic at all, especially the way things are right now ... the jobs here in Baltimore are kinda crappy," Arnold said.

 Allie Wilding  
Aaron Like Share

2:38

7 SOUND CLOUD

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