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By the Numbers: Dropping Out of High School

SEPTEMBER 21, 2012 /

by [JASON M. BRESLOW](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/person/jason-m-breslow/) ([HTTP://WWW.PBS.ORG/WGBH/FRON](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/person/jason-m-breslow/)



How costly is the decision to drop out of high school?

Consider a few figures about life without a diploma:

\$20,241

The average dropout can expect to earn an annual income of \$20,241, according to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#)

(<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0232.pdf>)

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(PDF). That's a full \$10,386 less than the typical high school graduate, and \$36,424 less than someone with a bachelor's degree.

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Of course, simply finding a job is also much more of a challenge for dropouts. While the national unemployment rate

(<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>) stood at 8.1 percent in August, joblessness among those without a high school degree measured 12 percent. Among college graduates, it was 4.1 percent.

30.8

The challenges hardly end there, particularly among young dropouts. Among those between the ages of 18 and 24, dropouts were more than twice as likely as college graduates to live in poverty according to the Department of Education

(http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012026/chapter3_31.asp).

Dropouts experienced a poverty rate of 30.8 percent, while those with at least a bachelor's degree had a poverty rate of 13.5 percent.

63

Among dropouts between the ages of 16 and 24, incarceration rates were a whopping 63 times higher than among college graduates, according to a study (<http://www.northeastern.edu/clms/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/CLMS-Report-FINAL.pdf>).

[\(PDF\) by researchers at Northeastern University. To be sure, there is no direct link between prison and the decision to leave high school early. Rather, the data is further evidence that dropouts are exposed to many of the same socioeconomic forces that are often gateways to crime.](http://www.northeastern.edu/clms/wp-content/uploads/The_Consequences_of_Dropping_Out_of_High_School.pdf)

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\$292,000

The same study

[\(PDF\) found that as a result — when compared to the typical high school graduate — a dropout will end up costing taxpayers an average of \\$292,000 over a lifetime due to the price tag associated with incarceration and other factors such as how much less they pay in taxes.](http://www.northeastern.edu/clms/wp-content/uploads/The_Consequences_of_Dropping_Out_of_High_School.pdf)

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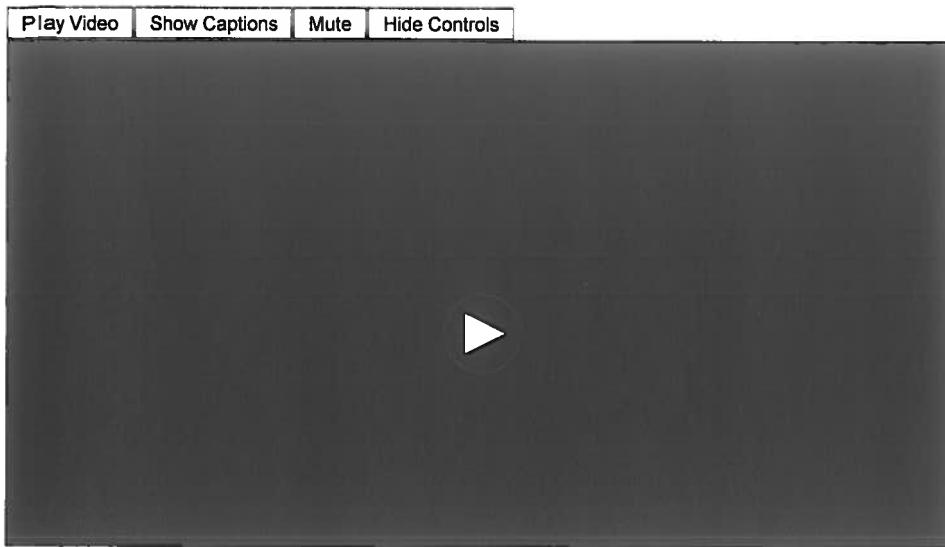
Those are the numbers. Even more revealing are the human stories associated with leaving high school without a degree. In *Dropout Nation* (</wgbh/pages/frontline/dropout-nation/>), premiering Sept. 25, FRONTLINE visits a once notorious "dropout factory" for an intimate look at four of the faces behind a national crisis in education.

In the film, viewers are introduced to Sparkle, a teenage mother whose schooling takes a back seat to finding food to eat and a place to sleep. There is Marco, who struggles to balance homework with a

40-hour-per-week job at a grocery store. Another student, Marcus, lives within a short walk to school, but on most days is nowhere to be found. Lawrence, meanwhile, is five years into high school, yet remains far from earning his degree.

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Watch a preview here:



On Saturday, ahead of the premiere of *Dropout Nation*, many PBS stations nationwide will be broadcasting an American Graduate Day special to spotlight solutions to improving high school graduation rates. Details on the program, which will also be streamed online, are available [here](http://americangraduate.org/grad-day) (<http://americangraduate.org/grad-day>).



FILM:

> **Dropout Nation**

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