



# The Silent Epidemic

High dropout rates are a silent epidemic afflicting our nation's high schools. The dropout epidemic in the United States disproportionately affects young people who are low-income, minority, urban, singleparent children attending large, public high schools in the inner city. But the problem is not unique to young people in such circumstances. Nationally, research puts the graduation rate between 68 and 71 percent, which means that almost one-third of all public high school students in America fail to graduate.<sup>1</sup> For minority students (black, Hispanic or Native American), the rate at which they finish public high school with a regular diploma declines to approximately 50 percent.\* Graduation rates for whites and Asians hover around 75 to 77 percent, respectively, with about one-quarter of these students failing to graduate.<sup>3</sup> On average, female students graduate at slightly higher rates.<sup>4</sup> Graduation and dropout rates vary considerably by state and region of the country, sometimes by as much as 30 percentage points.<sup>5</sup> And the dropout problem radiates beyond cities to suburbs, towns and rural areas.<sup>6</sup>

In 2003, 3.5 million youth ages 16 to 25 did not have a high school diploma and were not enrolled in school.<sup>7</sup> There are nearly 2,000 high schools in the country with low graduation rates, concentrated in about 50 large cities, and in 15 primarily southern and southwestern states.<sup>8</sup> In more than 20 of these cities, 75 percent or more of the students attend public high schools where graduating is less than a 60 percent proposition.<sup>9</sup> This tragic cycle has not substantially improved during the past few decades when education reform has been high on the public agenda. Some experts expect the dropout problem to increase

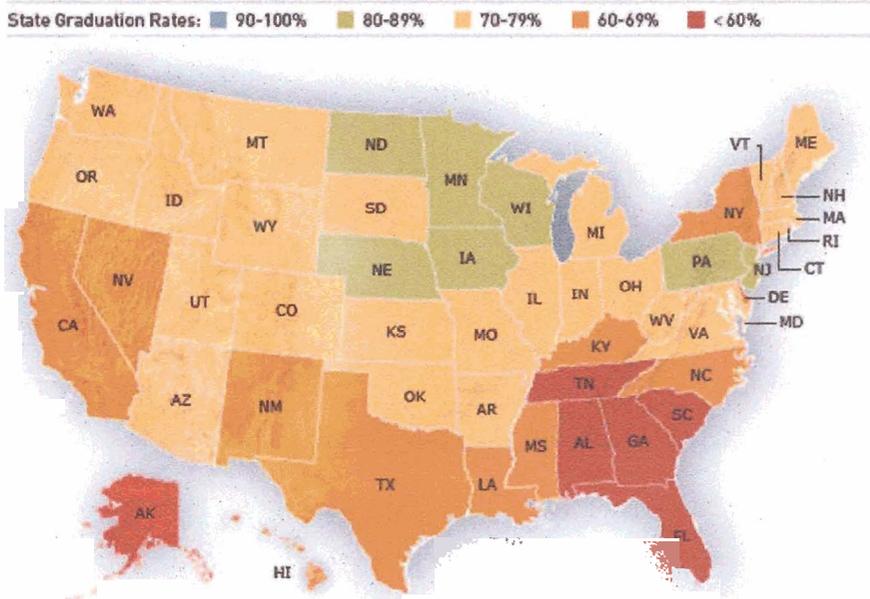
substantially through 2020 unless significant improvements are made.<sup>10</sup>

Tragically, the public is almost entirely unaware of the severity of the problem due to inaccurate data – both the underestimation of dropout rates and the overestimation of graduation rates. As a former Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education has observed,

"Many schools in America can't tell us on any given day who's in school and who's not, nor in any given year how many students have successfully made it through their four years of schooling to graduate and how many have dropped out."<sup>11</sup>

This report is written from the perspective of high school dropouts in the context of what we know from decades of studies about the problem. It paints a picture of who drops out from high school, shares their insights and reflections about why they dropped out and what schools could have done to help them stay in school, and offers ways forward to inform a national conversation on the dropout epidemic in America.

## U.S. Graduation Rates for the Class of 2002



Based on data from Greene, Jay and Marcus Winters (2005). *Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991–2002*. Education Working Paper No. 8. New York: Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute.