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Contact: Debbie McLean
Ryan McDay
202-667-0901



TEENS, CRIME,
AND THE
COMMUNITY
Education and Action

National Crime
Prevention Council
1700 K Street, NW
Second Floor
Washington, DC 20006
Voice: 202.466.6272
Fax: 202.296.1356

National Institute
for Citizen Education
in the Law
711 G Street, SE
Washington, DC 20003
Voice: 202.546.6644
TT: 202.546.7591
Fax: 202.546.6649

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Education in the Law with
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GROWING UP WITH HOPE IN A CLIMATE OF FEAR

**New Harris Poll Shows Impact of Violence on American Youth
Fear Leads Many to Cut School, Carry Weapons, Curtail Activities
But Teens Hopeful and Determined to Stop Violence and Crime**

Washington, DC --- The threat of crime and violence has led significant numbers of teens to carry weapons, miss school, get lower grades, condone retaliation, and rationalize gang behavior, according to a nationwide Harris Poll of 2000 junior high and high school students released today. But contrary to the stereotype of youth resigned to growing up in these circumstances, a substantial majority of teens are determined to change this situation and willing to volunteer their time.

The survey, *Between Hope and Fear: Teens Speak Out on Crime and the Community*, shows how crime and violence have altered the very fabric of American teenage life and influenced the way kids live, learn, think, play and behave. Many youth today live in a climate of fear that leaves them unwilling to venture even into their own neighborhoods, according to the survey. Many are also reluctant to rely on the police.

"One could say that for many young people, crime and violence is this generation's Vietnam," said Erin Donovan, Co-Director of **Teens, Crime and the Community (TCC)**, the education and service learning organization that commissioned the poll with the support of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice. TCC, a joint initiative of the National Institute for Citizen Education in the Law (NICEL) and the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC), has crime prevention and conflict resolution programs in cities and schools across the country. "Crime and violence force kids as young as 12 to confront a world of very angry and harsh realities," said Donovan.

This fear, distrust, loss of freedom and encroachment on schoolwork are especially heightened among kids whose neighborhoods or homes are considered at-risk. Compared to kids living in non-risk neighborhoods, these at-risk youth are more than four times as likely to carry a weapon, stay home from school or cut class, more than three times as likely to get lower grades than they otherwise would have, and more than twice as likely to avoid particular parks -- all because of their fear of crime and violence. At-risk neighborhoods are those with high incidence of drugs, crime and gang activity as reported by the

survey. At-risk home lives are those in which students report dysfunctional behaviors and weak parental supervision.

"The saddest finding is how crime and violence limit the opportunities of the most disadvantaged Americans. It is at bottom an equal opportunity issue," said Donovan.

The survey also shows that young people want to end this climate of fear but are looking for support from the rest of society. Almost 9 in 10 teens (86%) surveyed expressed interest in participating in community programs that could help prevent crime and violence.

"We see two distinct trends," said Jack Calhoun, executive director of the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC). "Many youth are negatively affected by crime and violence, but at the same time an astonishing 9 in 10 are ready to involve themselves in prevention programs, presenting us with a marvelous opportunity to harness their energy and commitment."

Among the findings:

◆ **Neighborhoods of Fear**

For many children, the neighborhood is not a safe haven. One in 4 teens (26%) do not always feel safe on their own block or in their own neighborhood. For kids living in at-risk neighborhoods, that number jumps to 47%. African American and Hispanic students -- regardless of whether they are in urban or suburban communities -- are more likely than white students to say that they do not always feel safe on their own blocks or in their neighborhoods.

Six in 10 students surveyed expressed at least some safety concerns about walking to and from friends' homes after dark. Four in 10 had safety concerns about the area around their schools and the park closest to their home; 28% about their school buildings.

29% of students worry about becoming a victim of a drive-by shooting. For kids living in at-risk neighborhoods, 48% worry about a drive-by shooting. 44% of African American students and 41% of Hispanic students have this worry.

Three in 4 (75%) teens in at-risk neighborhoods say crime is a serious problem in their communities. Overall, 36% of all kids say this.

◆ **Readiness to Resort to Violence**

Two in 5 teens (40%) have physically fought in the past year with another person about their age. Nearly half these students (46%) report having *started* at least one fight. Of the kids living in at-risk neighborhoods, almost two-thirds (64%) have been in a physical fight in the last year.

This high number of fights correlates to a widespread attitude among teens that they have the right to get back at someone who is confrontational or disrespectful. Almost 6 in 10 (56%) say friends should defend you if you are "dissed," no matter what it is about. Three in 10 (30%) say that a boy has the right to get back at someone who "checks out his girlfriend"; 24% say that a girl has this right.

◆ **Neighborhoods with Weapons and Drugs**

More than a third of students (35%) say they have seen or been in fights where weapons are involved; 71% of teens in at-risk neighborhoods say this. 21% have seen or been in fights where knives are used; 49% of teens in at-risk neighborhoods say this. 14% of all teens have seen or been in fights where a gun was involved; 44% of teens in at-risk neighborhoods say this.

Many teens say it is easy to get illegal drugs in their neighborhoods -- almost a third (29%) say it is very easy and another third (31%) say it is somewhat easy or not very hard. 82% of kids living in at-risk neighborhoods say it is very easy to get drugs. This finding is important given that 6 in 10 young people (61%) believe that drugs deserve a lot of blame for violence against teens.

◆ **Coping with Violence**

Change Friends, Avoid Parks, Carry Weapons, Cut School

Almost half of the teens (46%) report making at least one change in their daily routines because of crime and violence.

At least 1 in 5 say they have changed their group of friends (22%) or avoid particular parks and playgrounds (20%).

One in 8 teens report carrying a weapon for protection (12%).

One in 8 teens report changing routes to school (13%); one in 8 report getting lower grades in school because of crime and violence (12%).

One in 9 teens report staying home or cutting class because of crime and violence (11%).

One in 10 have gotten someone to protect them (10%).

One in 10 teens (10%) have stopped attending a particular activity or sport.

These numbers are significantly higher for students who live in at risk neighborhoods. 42% of these kids avoid particular parks, 38% carry a weapon for

protection, 34% have stayed home from school or cut class, and 31% have received lower grades.

But Teens Ready to Go Beyond Coping to Improve their Communities:

Almost 9 in 10 teens (86%) expressed interest in participating in community programs that could help prevent crime and violence.

◆ **Crime and Violence Can Breed Distrust**

Teens worry about people they don't know and about people who look different and are not familiar. Two-thirds of all teens (65%) say they would feel nervous if they were walking down the street alone near their home and there was a group of people their age who did not live in the neighborhood. Four in five (83%) would be nervous if they had to walk alone through an unfamiliar neighborhood. Three in five (60%) say they would feel nervous if they were walking down the street and there was a group of people about their age of a different racial or ethnic background.

◆ **Uneasy Relationships with the Police**

49% of teens say that they or their friends have been hassled by the police at least once when they weren't doing anything wrong. This is true for 72% of teens living in at-risk neighborhoods.

One in 4 teens (25%) believe that police officers in their communities do not like people their age. For kids living in at-risk neighborhoods, 52% say this.

Although most teens feel otherwise, 25% do not believe the police would help them immediately if they called about an emergency situation. 34% do not agree with the statement "knowing a police officer is nearby makes me feel safe." Two in three (68%) say that when they see police officers patrolling the street, they try to stay out of their way.

◆ **A Mixed View of Gangs**

One in 8 of all teens (12%) -- but 71% of young people in at-risk neighborhoods -- say that gangs play a big part in the daily life of their neighborhoods.

While 78% of all teens believe gangs "are violent and destructive," 25% of all teens -- and 66% in at-risk neighborhoods -- believe that most young kids in their neighborhood look up to gang members.

Twenty-one percent of all kids (57% of at-risk neighborhood kids) believe that belonging to a gang is "like having a family that will always be there." Similarly, half of

all teens and 75% of at-risk neighborhood teens say that gangs protect from people outside the neighborhood who might want to hurt them or 1. At least 1 in 5 teens -- and 3 in 5 teens in at-risk neighborhoods -- believe these sympathetic statements about gangs.

◆ The Root of the Problem According to Teens

The survey found that students coming from at-risk neighborhoods, at-risk economic circumstances, and at-risk home lives are more likely to report participation in or experience with violent behavior. For example, while 40% of all teens report being in a fight during the last year, that number is 64% of kids from at-risk neighborhoods and 48% of kids from at-risk families. These risk factors also correlate with other distrustful attitudes and views.

Teens themselves cite a number of factors contributing to teen violence. Drugs, lack of parental involvement and peer pressure are the top three causes teens cite as deserving a lot of blame. Significantly fewer teens cite economic hardship, music that young people listen to, or television.

While few teens cite television as a cause of violence, this survey finds that extensive television viewing (4 or more hours per day) correlates with a higher incidence of fighting, more favorable views of gangs, and approving retaliation when "dissed." Teens who watch 2 or more hours a day have lower rates of volunteering than their peers who watch less TV.

◆ Teens as Part of the Solution

Seven in ten teens could not name anything they can personally do about crime. But when asked if they would like to engage in specific crime prevention efforts to help their communities, an extraordinary 86% said yes to taking part in one or more of a wide range of prevention activities. This is true for young people from every background and circumstance.

This evidence suggests that young people would get involved if only they had information about what can be done and how to do it. The issue is not motivation but information and assistance. It also suggests that the stereotype of teenagers as self-centered and apathetic is unfounded.

Not surprisingly, given this generation's familiarity with the media, programs featuring media-based solutions generated the most interest. Three in four (76%) students surveyed say they would participate in a program that creates ads about safety, creates posters or newspapers that highlight the cost of crime and vandalism, or develops entertainment programs that teach young people to be safe. Even more encouraging,

students from at-risk homes or neighborhoods are just as likely as their peers to show an interest in participating.

Almost as many teens (71%) are willing to participate in tutoring, mentoring or peer leadership programs. And 62% are willing to participate in programs designed to prevent violence or drug use.

Nor are these attitudes mere expressions of interest. Considerable numbers of young people -- 71% -- currently take part in some kind of volunteer program. Fifty-seven percent say they participate in voluntary activities in their schools. 42% volunteer at their churches, and 12% volunteer in local community groups.

"Never before in the history of our country have teens, especially disadvantaged youth, had to face such daily fear and obstacles to achieving the American dream," said Ed O'Brien, co-director of the National Institute for Citizen Education in the Law (NICEL). "It is very encouraging to us that they still have such optimism and hope and are willing to roll up their sleeves to work to end the violence and make this country a better place."

"Teens may be unhinged by the violence, but they are unbowed and willing to fight it. We adults must do more to support them," said O'Brien.

Copies of the full survey report are available upon request. For more information, call Debbie McLean or Ryan McDay at 202/667-0901.

Harris Survey Background: Talking Points

- ◆ Commissioned by Teens, Crime and the Community (NCPC & NICEL) through Louis Harris and Associates
 - Conducted by Louis Harris and Associates
 - Highly reliable
 - Nationwide
 - 2,000 interviews (urban, suburban and rural)
 - Covered students in grades 7 - 12
 - Samples drawn from a list of approximately 80,000 public schools in the U.S.
 - Final draft on Wednesday, December 20th
 - Survey to be released at press conference on January 11 (National Press Club)

- ◆ Design and basic questions:
 - How does violence and crime affect young people's lives?
 - What are young people's attitudes toward violence and crime?
 - Are young people willing to be part of the solution for prevention of violence and crime?
 - Are young people open to participating in a variety of community service activities aimed at preventing violence and crime?

- ◆ Youth participation:
 - Remarkable 75% of kids do some volunteering
 - Roughly 6 in 10 in schools
 - Roughly 70% would do something about crime prevention **if they knew what to do** (e.g., mentoring, peer counseling, leadership, videos, posters)
 - Volunteer rates: 79% black; 73% white; 67% Hispanic; 50% Asian

- ◆ Dumb stuff kids do:
 - Most have watched a fight, and most feel it's OK to stand and watch and not intervene
 - Friends stand up for friends if "dissed" (high level of obligation to friends)

◆ Behavior changes forced by crime:

- 20% changed friends
- 1 in 7 carried a weapon at some point
- 1 in 5 avoided a park or playground
- 1 in 8 changed the way they travel to school
- 1 in 8 cut or stayed home
- 1 in 10 stopped an activity such as a sport (we're robbing kids)
- Roughly 53% have not changed any behavior

◆ Kids sense of safety tracks that of adults:

- 90% feel safe at home
- 70% feel safe in own block or neighborhood
- 70% feel safe going to school
- 70% feel safe in school
- 60% feel safe around school
- 50% feel safe in the park
- 37% feel safe to and from friends after dark
- Only 24% “always feel safe on public transportation”

◆ Hope

- 75 - 80% have a very positive sense of the future, and want college, family and a job

◆ Sources of support:

- 80% see parents as source of values
- Most turn to friends for advice (thus they want to learn from their friends when they turn to them)

◆ Concerns/Challenges:

- Wed youth's desire to help with crime prevention issues
- 3 in 10 have done some “coping” (this is not the same as crime prevention activity or handling problems)

◆ Link to JJ Plan:

- Involvement
- Holistic
- Looks at all kids
- Juvenile justice involves justice for all; therefore new emphasis on public education, community mobilization; **and youth involvement is absolutely key and on target.**

For Youths, Fear of Crime Is Pervasive and Powerful

Worries Force New Behavior, Study Finds

By PETER APPLEBOME

Fear of violence and crime is affecting the behavior, expectations and school performance of teen-agers around the country, according to a study issued yesterday by organizations that work with youths on crime prevention.

The poll of 2,000 teen-agers conducted by Louis Harris & Associates found that 1 in 8 youths — and almost 2 in 5 from high-crime neighborhoods — reported carrying a weapon for protection. One in 9, and more than 1 in 3 in high-crime neighborhoods, said they had cut classes or stayed away from school at times because of their fear.

The findings are consistent with other recent studies about the impact of crime on youngsters, but this poll was particularly far ranging in gauging both the impact of crime and violence on teen-agers and the enormous disparity between its effects on youth in affluent and high-crime neighborhoods.

"Crime has become this generation's Vietnam," said Erin Donovan, co-director of the Teens, Crime and the Community Program, which runs social service and violence-prevention programs in 40 states under the auspices of two nonprofit groups, the National Crime Prevention Council and the National Institute for Citizen Education in the Law.

A look at what one official calls 'this generation's Vietnam.'

"When you find that 46 percent of teen-agers are changing their behavior because of crime, you're seeing an impact that's very alarming," added Ms. Donovan, whose organization commissioned the poll, which was financed by the Justice Department and conducted late last year.

On the other hand, she said, the study documented a widespread willingness on the part of teen-agers to take an active role in dealing with problems of crime and violence. Almost 9 in 10 youths polled said they would be willing to participate in mentoring, education, or community awareness programs.

"From a policy perspective these figures say to me that kids really long for and need adult connections," said John Calhoun, executive director of the National Crime Prevention Council. "This country has a huge reservoir right under its nose that's ready to help."

According to the Justice Department, young people between 12 and 15 are the victims of crime more often than any other group. Teen-agers of all ages are crime victims at twice the national average and at 10 times the rate of the elderly, according to Government statistics.

Among the other findings in the Harris poll were these:

¶ One in 4 teen-agers, and 1 in 2 in high-crime areas, said they did not always feel safe in their own neighborhood.

¶ Almost 1 in 3 students worried

cycle of fear

about being victims of drive-by shootings. More than 2 in 5 black and Hispanic students expressed that fear.

¶Almost half the teen-agers said they had changed their daily routine because of crime and violence. One in 5 moved into a different circle of friends, 1 in 5 avoided particular parks or playgrounds, and 1 in 8 changed their route to school. Another 1 in 8 said they got lower grades because of crime and violence.

In high-crime neighborhoods, about 2 in 5 avoided particular parks, while 1 in 3 reported staying home from school or cutting classes. And 1 in 3 said they got lower grades because of crime and violence.

¶More than 7 in 10 teens in high-crime areas said that gangs played a big part of daily life in their neighborhood, and 2 in 3 said most neighborhood youngsters looked up to gang members. More than half said they believed that belonging to a gang was "like having a family that will always be there."

Overall, though, 78 percent of teen-agers said gangs were "violent and destructive," and only 1 in 4 nationally said youngsters looked up to gang members.

Independent interviews with youngsters at a private school and an inner-city public school in Atlanta reflected both the disparity in experiences with crime and the common expressions of concern about it.

At the Paideia School, a private school that caters largely to whites, students said violence and guns were not part of their world, but added they were very aware of urban violence and wary of it. Female students at the school last year requested a self-defense course.

At Grady High School, in a black neighborhood five miles away, students said gangs and guns were a common part of life.

But students at both schools expressed an interest in taking part in activities aimed at curbing violence. For example, C. Douglas Hollis Jr., a senior at Grady, said after college he would like to start a recreation center as an outlet for youngsters who desperately need one.

Those who work with youth and crime said the findings, both in the extent of crime and the willingness to combat it, rang true, but some cautioned that a stated desire to deal with the problem did not necessarily translate to a commitment to action.

"Kids are just so much more aware of crime than when I started teaching 23 years ago," said Suzann Marrazzo, who teaches a course on criminal justice issues at an alternative school in Las Vegas, whose students include juvenile offenders, chronic truants and teen-age mothers. "These kids are exposed to so much tragedy they're almost numb to it."

She continued: "Nobody is better equipped to deal with it than the kids themselves. Even the most hardened ones can show amazing empathy when they talk about crime with younger kids."

"Their hearts are in the right place. But whether they would follow through and make a commitment, I'm not sure."