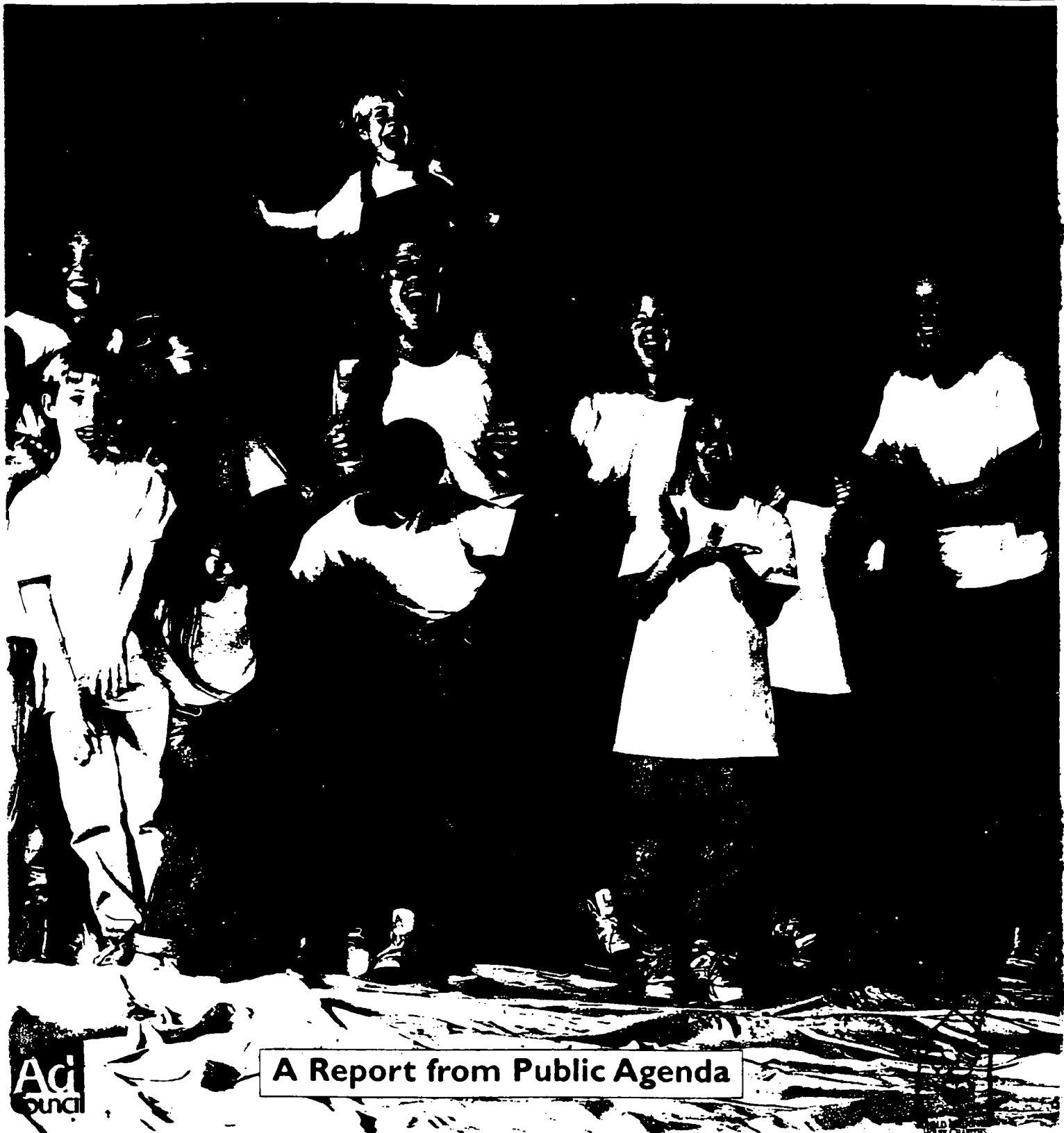


KIDS THESE DAYS:

WHAT AMERICANS REALLY THINK ABOUT
THE NEXT GENERATION



A Report from Public Agenda

Ad
Fund

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WHAT AMERICANS REALLY THINK ABOUT THE NEXT GENERATION

A Report from Public Agenda

**By Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson
With Ann Duffett and Ali Bers**

Consulting Editor: Chris Perry

ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues and to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view. Public Agenda's in-depth research on how citizens think about policy forms the basis for extensive citizen education work. Its citizen education materials, used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country, have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision-makers across the political spectrum.

ABOUT COMMITMENT 2000

The Advertising Council, the largest source of public service advertising in the nation, has made a 10-year commitment to focus the majority of its resources on developing campaigns which improve the circumstances of children in this country. As part of Commitment 2000: Raising a Better Tomorrow, the Council will develop hundreds of ads on a variety of different topics which will benefit children.

ABOUT RONALD McDONALD HOUSE CHARITIES

RMHC has made a \$100 million commitment over the next five years to fund programs that provide comfort and care to children and families. RMHC will use this important research to help guide its giving, and it will be shared with people and organizations on the frontlines advocating for at-risk children, including national and grassroots philanthropic organizations, as well as community and church leaders.

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INTRODUCTION

A recent survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates showed that almost three-quarters of the American people think that young people with a poor education, poor job prospects, and problematic values now pose a greater danger to the United States than any threat from abroad.¹ Thankfully, the end of the Cold War has far reduced public fears of foreign enemies, so it is hardly surprising to find people focused so definitively on a domestic concern. But the image evoked by this finding is somehow disturbing. Are Americans *really* afraid of the next generation? Do they *really* see the country's young people — or some group of them at least — as "the enemy within?"

Plenty Of Symptoms

Grousing about the next generation, of course, is a time-honored activity among older citizens, and surveys have captured public concern about teenagers in particular for decades.² However, the complaints of adults are not the only sign that all is not well among the nation's young. Drug use is on the rise among adolescents. Teen suicide has increased. One in five of the nation's children live in poverty. About 1 in 3 American children do not live in an intact two-parent household. Half the country's public high school students say drugs and violence are serious problems where they go to school. Seven in ten say cheating on tests and assignments is commonplace.³

There are many indicators that something is wrong. Political leaders, along with liberal and conservative advocates, have offered competing diagnoses and solutions. But how do typical Americans think about and define the problems facing the country's children and teens? What, if anything, do most Americans think can be done to improve the condition and prospects for the nation's youth?

The Public Agenda Study

To find out, Public Agenda, a nonprofit research and education group based in New York, conducted an in-depth study of the views of the general public, along with those of African American, Hispanic, and white parents. The study also included focus groups in New Jersey, Colorado, and California and a shorter survey of youngsters themselves — those between the ages of 12 and 17. (For more details on how the research was conducted, see the Methodology section.) *Kids These Days* is our report on the major findings from this research.

To our knowledge, Public Agenda's research is the most wide-ranging and in-depth examination of Americans' views on this issue conducted in recent years. It was underwritten by Ronald McDonald House Charities and conducted on behalf of The Advertising Council, both organizations having committed themselves to ambitious and sustained efforts to improve the lives of children. Ronald McDonald House Charities will use findings from the Public Agenda study to guide its \$100 million commitment in giving to children's programs. The Advertising Council will do likewise as it launches a decade-long effort to mobilize citizens to volunteer in their own communities in efforts on behalf of children and teens.

Americans from around the country, from different walks of life, from different racial and ethnic groups, with children and without them, are in ample agreement on what could be done.

A Specific And Clear Message

But the implications of this research are far broader. As we describe in detail in the following pages, the public has a quite specific analysis of what troubles the nation's youth and a surprisingly clear set of recommendations. The findings show a public that is anguished about our young people but not bereft of ideas about how to help them. Americans see the potential for solutions in the public schools, law enforcement, community groups, religious bodies, charitable activities, and — albeit much less hopefully — government and the media. What's more, there is a widely-shared — and strongly-felt — definition of the problem. Americans from around the country, from different walks of life, from different racial and ethnic groups, with children and without them, are in ample agreement on what could and should be done.

As an opinion research organization, Public Agenda is continually interested, even fascinated, by Americans' views on the challenges facing today's world. What Americans have to say about the nation's children and youth, we are convinced, is more than merely interesting. *Kids These Days* charts a course for designing public and private policies and programs for children that can win broad public support. More important, this study — if opinion leaders will listen carefully — offers the key to rebuilding Americans' confidence in the future.

FINDING ONE: The Moral Meltdown

Americans are convinced that today's adolescents face a crisis — not in their economic or physical well-being but in their values and morals. Most Americans look at today's teenagers with misgiving and trepidation, viewing them as undisciplined, disrespectful, and unfriendly.

Ask Americans to pick one overriding national concern, and the chances are good they will pick kids. More than half of Americans surveyed by Public Agenda (52%) think that helping youngsters get a good start in life ought to be society's most important goal, even considering such competing priorities as protecting citizens from crime (18%) and creating more jobs (16%).

The concern is not youngsters' health problems, safety, or poverty rates. Rather, Americans are deeply troubled by the character and values exhibited by young people today. More than 6 in 10 adults (61%) think that youngsters' failure to learn such values as honesty, respect, and responsibility is a very serious problem. And almost half (49%) believe the same about fewer families teaching their youngsters reli-

gious faith and values. A Denver man summed up the concern this way: "It all just stems from respect. When I grew up, you respected adults, no matter who they were whether they were your mother, your neighbor, the person down the block. If there was an adult, you respected them."

**As advocates worry
at children and teens
growing up with physical
material deficits,
Americans worry about
deficits in character
values.**

Many children's advocates fear that an aging society, a society that prizes independence and self-sufficiency, has begun to care less about its young people. They point to high rates of youth poverty and other indicators of deprivation and call on Americans to back measures to improve youngsters' material well-being. This study shows — in finding after finding across all demographic groups — that Americans are intensely concerned about young people, but their concerns center directly on youngsters' moral well-being. Thus, even as advocates worry about children and teens growing up with physical and material deficits, Americans worry about deficits in character and values.

Rude, Irresponsible, And Wild

When asked what first comes to their minds when they think about today's teenagers, two-thirds of Americans (67%) immediately reach for negative adjectives such as "rude," "irresponsible," and "wild." Another 16% point to social problems teens face, such as lack of guidance. Only a handful (12%) describe teens positively, using terms such as "smart" or "helpful." These descriptions point to the automatic, almost invisible evaluations people commonly make about teenagers. Are they polite or rude? Conscientious or irresponsible? Are they behaving themselves or are they acting out? Are they neat or sloppy? Most people seem to have made up their minds, and the answers are not good.

"By the time they are in high school, most of them are in trouble. They might not be in criminal trouble, but they are out aggravating the neighbors and raising hell in the streets." — New Jersey man

"It seems like kids are more destructive now . . . There is anger inside of them." — Denver man

Idle Hands

These initial impressions are far more than thoughtless, top-of-the-head reactions. In question after question, Americans express dissatisfaction with the demeanor and behavior of teenagers. Half say it's very common for teens to get into trouble because they have too much free time. "Teenagers used to have chores to do, and they learned how to work," said an Illinois man. "Teens today aren't being taught how to work." Four in ten Americans (41%) say it's very common to find teenagers who have poor work habits and lack self-discipline.

For many adults, teen behavior is more than disappointing; it can be intimidating. Three in ten say teens who are "wild and disorderly in public" are very common. "I know older adults who are afraid when a teenager walks past them," said a woman from Washington state.

In focus groups for the study, there were rare complimentary comments. "I find most of the children in my area — teenagers, youngsters — to be terrific," recalled one New Jersey man. "You open the door and the kids are out there . . . I never have any problem. They are very respectful." But very few Americans hold such favorable impressions: only about 1 in 8 (12%) think it is very common for teens to treat people with respect and be friendly or helpful toward their neighbors.

To Know Them Is To Love Them?

These are harsh and sobering judgments. But are they really judgments, or just vague impressions casually gathered from watching television or walking past the local school? Do people who regularly deal with teenagers on a day-to-day basis have a different — perhaps more reliable — sense of how good or bad they are? To find out, respondents were asked if they personally had a lot of contact with teenagers (35%), some contact (27%), a little contact (30%), or no contact at all (8%).

A closer look at the survey results shows that people who have regular contact with teens are as critical of them as everyone else, if not more so. Two-thirds (65%) of those with a lot of contact describe teenagers disapprovingly. More than half (54%) believe teens get into trouble because they have too much time on their hands — versus 49% among those with little or no teen contact. And those who have a lot of contact with teens are slightly more likely than others to think they have poor work habits (45% versus 38%).

Nor are people who have a lot of contact with teens more likely to think they treat others with respect — 14% say so, versus 11% among those with little or no teen contact. Similarly, they're not more likely to view teens as friendly and helpful (14% versus 11%). Thus, even those who have extensive experience with teenagers are reluctant to sing their praises.

Even Parents Agree

One would expect the parents of teenagers to be most likely to view teens in a positive light, but their judgment is identical to that of everyone else. Forty-five percent of parents who have teens at home say teens get into trouble because they have too much time on their hands; 43% say teens have poor work habits; 3 in 10 say teens are wild and disorderly. Ask parents about positive traits and again their responses echo those of the general public. Only 12% say teens are friendly and helpful, and only 9% say teens treat peo-

ple with respect. Parents probably — hopefully — have more sympathetic and complimentary views of their own teenagers, but they have little praise for the other teens they come across.

The Root-Cause: A Lack Of Values

The public's widespread disappointment with the character of today's teens (including their work ethic, behavior, and sense of responsibility) has resulted in an intense focus — a virtual preoccupation — on morals and values.

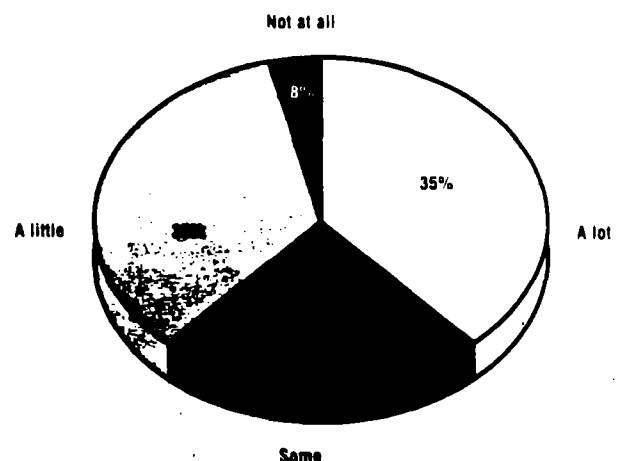
The public believes values are a vaccine: if you inoculate teens with them, they will be able to resist the world's many troubles and traps.

Why is the public so preoccupied with the character and values of America's teen-agers? First and foremost, this focus reflects an over-arching public concern that extends to society as a whole. Asked to choose between two causes for the problems facing society today, 51% say they mainly stem from a decline in moral values; only 37% attribute them to economic and financial pressures on the family.⁴

Values and character are, for most people, the root-cause explanation for why things go wrong or right.

CONTACT WITH TEENS

How much contact would you say you have with teenagers — a lot, some, only a little, or none at all?



throughout society. For the public, values and character explain why some people give in to drugs and others resist, why some people get stuck in welfare and others climb out, why some people commit crime and others lead productive lives. The public believes values are a vaccine: if you inoculate teens with them, they will be able to resist the world's many troubles and traps. "You have got to instill values in them now at home," said a New York mother. "So that when they go out in the street and somebody comes up to them and says, 'Hey, try some,' they say 'No. I know what that does to you.'"

"There is one word that keeps coming to my mind — discipline. For some people it is a harsh word, but I think it is one of the best words in the dictionary. It doesn't mean you have to hurt anybody."

It is the ability to do right — If you have discipline you can be polite, you can control your weight, you can learn, you can make it your job to share and love one another and not be selfish. We have forgotten the word when it comes to kids." — Illinois man

Thus, there seems to be a wide breach between teenagers and adults, with adults looking at teens — preferably, in their minds, from a safe distance — with anxiety and disappointment, not at all certain that this generation bodes well for their communities or for the country.

FINDING TWO: It's Not Just Teens

Public dissatisfaction and disapproval extend beyond the nation's teenagers. Even young children are viewed in a negative light. Many Americans think children are spoiled and out of control, not friendly, helpful, or engaging. And people apply these criticisms to children across a broad economic spectrum, to children from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as children from the middle and affluent classes.

This study would hardly break new ground if all it reported were adult concerns over teenage behavior. After all, complaints that young people are sullen, adrift, hard to understand, and unaccountably attracted to ugly music and even uglier styles of dress are hardly original with this generation. Does this bleak view of America's youth simply reflect every generation's "kids-these-days" complaint?

Seven Going On Twenty-One

Public criticism is not limited to teenage behavior. Americans have surprisingly harsh things to say even about younger children, defined in this study as those older than 5 but not yet in their teens. When asked the first thing that comes to mind when describing today's children, 53% offer negative descriptions, with many people characterizing them as lacking discipline and being rude or spoiled. Only 23% of the respondents had positive things to say about children — that they were curious or enthusiastic, for example. These top-of-mind negative responses are uncomfortably close to what people say about teens. "My daughter is wild. She is 7 going on 21," said a stressed Denver mother.

In this study, some survey questions explicitly distinguished children from teens in the expectation that public perceptions of the two would differ. And Americans do make some distinctions. For example, nearly two-thirds (64%) say they find it easy to communicate with children, while only 43% say the same about teens. Also, the majority describing children negatively is smaller than the majority that is critical of teens (53% versus 67%). Finally, people in the focus groups were less likely to express a fear of children.

But that only amounts to saying that the good news is that the bad news could be worse. "Children are doing better than teens," said an Iowa woman, "because they don't have the wherewithal or the devices to be bad, like adults or teens have. They don't have things like money, access, cars."

Children Who Have Too Much

What is significant and perhaps surprising is that children today do not inspire an instinctively positive feeling from adults. Instead, adults express wide-

spread, and often harsh, disapproval of children between 5 and 12 years old. For example, nearly half the public (48%) thinks it is very common for children to be spoiled and not appreciate what they have.

When Americans complain about spoiled kids, they seem to have two thoughts in mind. One is the notion that children have become mindlessly acquisitive, mini-consumers who demand — and get — electronic gadgets and designer clothes and sneakers, things they have come to expect as a matter of right. "With all the technology, kids always want more," remarked a weary father in Denver. "It's 'I want, I want, I want.'"

Americans increasingly suspect that a consumer ethic among the middle class is driving a never-ending chase of "things" with the result that children are simply overindulged.

People also worry that when so much is available to children so easily, bad habits form and the wrong values are conveyed. Three in ten Americans say children who are lazy and do not apply themselves are very common. A non-parent from New Jersey complained: "They have no sense of values. I think that the more you give, the more they want."

Children have become mindlessly acquisitive, mini-consumers who demand — and get — electronic gadgets and designer clothes and sneakers, things they have come to expect as a matter of right.

Getting No Respect

Another major shortcoming adults see in today's children is how they behave in public and how they relate to adults. Only 12% find it very common for children to treat people with respect, while only 17% consider it usual for children to be friendly and helpful toward their neighbors. About 3 in 10 Americans (31%) say it's very common for children to be out of control in public areas such as restaurants or the movies. One frequently-expressed theme — particularly from parents in focus groups — was the need for adult authority, for setting limits and standards of behavior. "The problem today is that a lot of kids are not held accountable for what they do, and there are no consequences," said a Denver mother. "If you don't have any consequences for your behavior, then you don't learn anything."

The stakes are high, many adults believe, because if such problems are left to fester they will only become more serious. "You have to train the younger kids first," said a New Jersey man. "If you let them [get] out of control, as they get older, their problems get bigger." There was also the sense in the focus groups that children are growing up faster and that the age of innocence is shrinking. What's more, increased sophistication is not often seen as a good thing.

"Children years ago could be children up to 14 or 15. But today the kids who are 10 years old know what the average teenager did years ago They grow up too fast." — New Jersey man

Rich Kids, Poor Kids

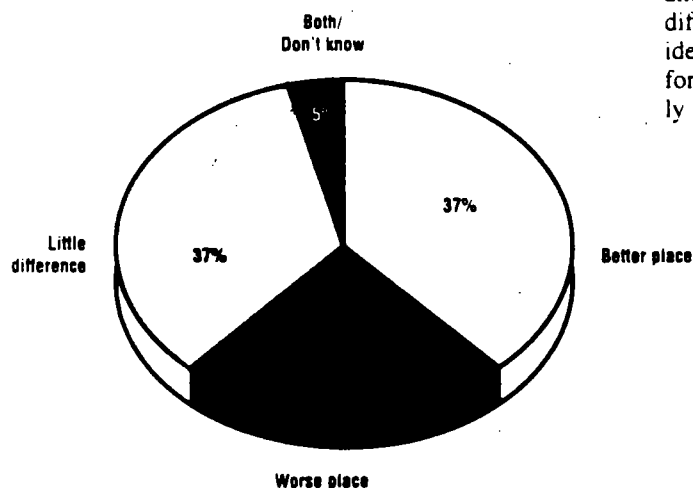
The public's preoccupation with youngsters learning the wrong values is applied widely, and not at all targeted at children from the "wrong side of the tracks." Those who identified "kids failing to learn such values as honesty, respect, and responsibility" as a very or somewhat serious problem were

Only 37% of Americans believe that when today's children grow up, they will make this country a better place.

asked whether this problem mostly affects youngsters from lower-income families or is widespread. Nine in 10 (91%) say the failure to learn values is widespread; only 8% say it mostly affects youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds.

HOW TODAY'S KIDS WILL AFFECT AMERICA

When today's children grow up, do you think they're likely to make America a better place, a worse place, or will they probably make little difference?



Speaking From Experience

As was the case with teenagers, these perceptions hold even among adults who have a lot of contact with children (47%). Half of the adults in this category say that spoiled children are very common, about the same percentage as those who have little or no contact with children (48%). People who have a lot of contact with children are slightly more likely to describe children as out of control (35% versus 28%). At the same time, they are also slightly more likely to describe children who are friendly and helpful to their neighbors as very common (20% versus 14%).

Nor are the parents of children aged 5 to 12, who presumably have the most contact with kids this age, noticeably upbeat. In fact, they are as likely as the general public to say that children this age are spoiled (44%), lazy (30%), or out of control (28%). And they are not substantially more positive than the general public about whether children treat people with respect (14%) or are friendly and helpful (22%).

And The World Will Be A Better Place?

The public's judgments are not entirely negative. For example, about 3 in 10 Americans (32%) think that bright and eager-to-learn children are very common in our society. When Americans look at our nation's children, however, they generally conclude that something is wrong with the values they display and the standards of behavior they exhibit.

Across history and across various cultures, people have often considered the next generation as the best hope for the future. But for Americans in the 1990s, this bedrock belief seems to have been shaken to the core. Doubts start with teenagers and carry over to children; they apply to middle class kids as well as the disadvantaged. It's no wonder that only 37% of Americans believe that when today's children grow up, they will make this country a better place; while almost 6 in 10 (58%) believe children won't make a difference, or will make it even worse. The traditional ideal of children as a source of renewal and hope has, for the majority of the American public, been seriously undermined.

FINDING THREE: Careless Parents

Americans believe that parents are fundamentally responsible for the disappointing state of today's youth. People say parents fail to teach youngsters right from wrong and pass on the values children need to learn in order to become productive members of society. Too often, people say, today's parents have children before they're ready; give them presents instead of guidance and attention; and fail to provide necessary discipline. Even parents themselves from all income, ethnic, and racial backgrounds agree.

From the public's perspective, it is impossible to discuss children and teenagers without discussing their parents. People believe youngsters primarily reflect what they learn at home. Americans believe it is parents' job to make sure young people grow up with the right values, ready to take their place in society. "Children need guidance and molding," said a New Jersey man, "and the only place they can get it is from their parents at home. That's where it all begins."

So Where Are The Parents?

If children and teens fail to learn right from wrong, are spoiled, or misbehave — which the data clearly show is what people believe — Americans look first to the parents. Many Americans think children and teens are troubled and out of control because too many parents fail to do their job. People accept the notion advanced by John Locke — that at birth humans are a blank slate who develop attitudes and character through education and experience. Children are not born with a good or bad mindset, people believe; they absorb it.⁵

"Automatically, with an annoying young child, I look right at the parents . . . I don't blame it on the kid. I blame it on the parents who are sitting right there, allowing it to happen." — New Jersey man

"Parents are not raising kids with the right work ethic. They are not taking the time to explain things to kids, to show them. They do too many things for them instead of asking, demanding, or disciplining them to do it."
— Illinois man

Falling Down On The Job

Since the public believes parents are the key to how youngsters turn out, it is not surprising to find their complaints about children and teens echoed in their complaints about parents. Only about 1 in 5 Americans (22%) say it's very common to find parents who are good role models for their kids. Half complain that parents fail to provide discipline. More than half (55%) believe parents break up marriages too easily instead of trying to stay together for the sake of their children. More than 6 in 10 (63%) say it's very common for parents to have children before they are ready to take responsibility for them. "Parents need to be mature themselves before they have children," said an Iowa woman.

Those who believe today's children and teens are spoiled and materialistic attribute these same faults to their parents. Half of those surveyed find it very common for parents to equate buying things for children to caring for them. "The fact is that children are learning values now — everyday," said an Ohio man with derision. "They're being taught: 'Number one is me,' and 'Spend and buy things and accumulate things.' The fact that kids need to have \$200 Nikes shouldn't surprise anyone." Virtually half the public (49%) believe it's very common for parents to spoil their kids.

Not My Child!

The vision of almost willfully oblivious parents — parents who refuse to believe their children might be at fault, much less reprimand them for doing wrong — came up repeatedly in focus group discussions. "How many times have you heard: 'Not my son! Not my daughter!'" a man in New Jersey noted in frustration. "The whole neighborhood could witness an incident, but that parent is going to say, 'Not my kid!' It is sick." A retired teacher remembered being shocked by "how many kids do drugs in high school and their parents have no idea; they think their kids are model, perfect kids. It is almost like a lot of them lead two lives."

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It Takes A Village?

Some social observers have suggested that Americans — especially those without children — refuse to shoulder any responsibility for the next generation or show any interest in children's development or families' problems. But have Americans really turned their backs on parents, saying in effect, "They're your kids, you raise them?"

Ironically, many Americans believe parents themselves are the ones who reject any involvement from outside the home. Focus group respondents repeatedly told moderators that parents don't appreciate suggestions about — let alone criticism of — their children. Sensing that parents resent anything that might be interpreted as interference, people are wary of interfering in someone else's business. "I wouldn't feel comfortable in going over to someone and saying I didn't think they were doing

something correctly," said a woman in Washington state. "I don't know if it would be something they would appreciate." More than 4 in 10 people surveyed (43%) think it's very common for parents to resent advice about their kids — even when that advice comes from people who mean well. "If you say something to somebody else's kids nowadays, you are going to get into it with their parents," remarked a California woman with a matter-of-fact tone. So people walk away, shake their heads, mutter beneath their breath, and protest internally — but not publicly, where it could make some difference.

In focus groups conducted by Public Agenda for its education studies, teachers consistently complained that today's parents challenge their decisions and often refuse to consider even the possibility that their children are at fault in matters of discipline or academic effort. A New York teacher in a focus group for this study echoed this theme: "What really bugs me is that kids have all these rights. I thought kids are

minors, meaning they need the protection of society. Since when did these minors — who I think are supposed to be protected — all of a sudden get all of these rights? So now, as a teacher, if I say, 'Shut up and sit down,' I am

If you say something to somebody else's kids nowadays, you are going to get into it with their parents." — woman, CA

the one in trouble because I used the word 'shut up,' after the kid has been telling me to commit unnatural acts upon myself It is like we are both equals. Who am I to tell him to sit down and pay attention? This is nonsense!" Some adults, like this one from New Jersey, refer back to times when the teacher's decisions were accepted and even reinforced in the home: "When I was in school, if I ever came home to my father and told him a teacher hit me, he would beat the hell out of me and then ask me why later. Today, the kid comes home and says 'The teacher hit me,' and they want to sue."

Spare The Love, Ruin The Child

Much of the public's criticisms of parents might be taken to be a call to return to an old-fashioned, paternalistic, severe mode of parenting. But people's belief that children need values and discipline does not mean people are ready to return to the austere child-rearing practices of the past. To the contrary, people believe parents must talk with their children, show interest in their lives, give them love, and put their interests first. "Dr. Spock" norms have penetrated most Americans' consciousness and carry more than a faddish, feel-good appeal. People believe that love and guidance are needed to raise healthy children who will become responsible and caring adults. Indeed, one fear is that if the family fails to provide love and guidance, young people will seek it elsewhere.

"They need love and affection. If the family unit doesn't show the potential to love, they will go for it elsewhere . . . even gangs." — New Jersey man

"When children are unsupervised, they look for other people who care . . . they look to each other for guidance, but [young people] do not have the sophistication or knowledge to take care of themselves, and they end up making unwise choices."

— Nebraska woman

And here again is an area where the public feels parents often fall short. Half the public (51%) think that parents who don't know how to communicate with their kids are very common. "You have to spend quality time with the child," said a New York woman. "Just talk. 'What happened today? I am here for you. Whatever it is, now is the time, let's talk.' That does not happen anymore." Said a Utah man, "Just being with your kids as much as you can is important. Help them with their homework, explain things to them."

Parents: We Can't Tell Them No

Interestingly, the very people closest to this issue — parents themselves — are as critical of parents as everyone else. About two-thirds of parents (65%) say it's common for parents to have children before they are ready to take responsibility for them. "You have to be with them as much as you can," said a Utah father, who added with regret, "I had one son, and I knew he was going out drinking. He'd come in and say, 'Well, I'm here Mom and Dad.' And we never got up to see whether he was drunk or not. I knew he was on drugs."

Half the parents surveyed think it's very common for parents not to do their job on discipline. Only 1 in 5 (19%) say it's very common for parents to be good role models and teach their kids right from wrong. In Denver, a mother tried to explain the lack of confidence and vacillation she saw among parents:

"A lot of my friends feel insecure in their role as parents, and they don't let the child know: 'I am the boss, you are the child.' They want to be friends with them. I think they don't want to relive their parents' [style of parenting] where it was too structured and disciplined. And they have guilt for leaving the kid in day care all day and running off to work. So it's 'We can't tell them no, we must buy them everything they want.'"

It is interesting that this parent talked about discipline in the same breath as materialism — much as the general public did. About half (51%) of the parents surveyed believe it's very common for parents to think that buying things for kids means the same thing as caring for them.

Many parents also agree that parents are perhaps overly sensitive to criticisms or suggestions about their children. Approximately 4 in 10 (42%) say parents who resent advice about their kids are very common. A California mother thought parents were defensive because of "... a sense of guilt. Parents are not around their kids as much ... so they become more protective of their child. So if someone else tries to come in and even says something ..."

Parental Authority

Many parents acknowledge that far too many of their number fail to fulfill their responsibilities to their children. But many also complained that society has undermined their authority as parents, particularly with regard to discipline. In nearly every focus group, at least one respondent brought up the subject of corporal punishment as an example of how society second-guesses parents and looks over their shoulders. There is very little evidence in this study that most parents see spanking as the "be all and end all" of raising well-behaved children. But many spoke with some anguish about the more complicated nature of parental authority today.

"The law is against the parents on discipline," complained one California parent. "That gives the kid the mind that, 'I can do what I want to because my mother and father better not hit me because I am going to call 911.'"

Many parents, by their own report, seem tentative and uncertain in matters of discipline and authority, and many believe that society is increasingly likely to question their judgment in this area.

Are Kids Priority One?

While some parents are ready to shift some of the blame to society, many Americans believe, in contrast, that too many parents put their own personal needs and challenges ahead of the needs of their children. Fifty-five percent of Americans say parents break up their marriages too easily, instead of trying to stay together for their kids. "There are a lot of single-parent homes, and children are alone all the time," said a New

Jersey woman explaining why kids are in trouble. "I think the big problem is so many divorces and single-mother families that are having a tough time," said a Utah man. By virtually identical numbers, parents themselves agree with all of these assessments.

And, finally, there is also a sense that parents take on too many activities that needlessly compete with their kids for attention. "I think kids are in real crisis, and parents just don't get it," said a woman from Georgia. "They're missing the point that you just can't do effective parenting when you are this spread out, involved in so many things. Quality time, one-on-one time — I think they're missing it."

Many parents seem tentative and uncertain in matters of discipline and authority, and many believe that society is increasingly likely to question their judgment in this area.

FINDING FOUR: Mitigating Circumstances

Americans acknowledge it is tougher to be a parent or a child in today's world. They recognize that more than ever, parents — and especially mothers — must work hard and sacrifice for their children. Americans also believe today's youngsters face threats from society that can undermine their parents' best efforts. People are extremely concerned about ubiquitous threats endangering all kids: drugs and crime; sex and violence in the media; and public schools that often fail to deliver education in a safe and orderly environment.

Many Americans have strong criticisms of the job parents are doing. But these criticisms coexist — simultaneously and side-by-side — with substantial levels of empathy and understanding for what people see as the enormously difficult and challenging undertaking that raising children has become. These coexisting viewpoints may appear to be contradictory, but ordinary citizens seem to recognize the complexity of the situation, and the sometimes tumultuous circumstances of modern life. Instead of choosing to simply condemn parents or to view them as totally helpless or blameless, Americans seem to simultaneously subscribe to two truths: These are tough times — maybe the toughest of times — to be a parent, but parents are not rising to meet the challenge.

Tough Times To Be A Parent

Americans recognize the many challenges and demands facing today's parents and families. They

are profoundly conscious of fundamental changes that have made the job of parenting tougher than ever before. In fact, 4 in 5 Americans say it's much harder for parents to do their job these days, while only about 1 in 5 (19%) say it's easier or about the same as in the past.

Thus, the harsh judgments about parental failings described in Finding Three are coupled with — and at least partially mitigated by — an acknowledgment that parents often struggle and make financial sacrifices for their kids. Half of all Americans (51%) say that parents who sacrifice and work hard for their kids are very common. Forceful finger-pointing at parents is inevitably linked with some recognition of the pressures they face, pressures that lead them to make compromises and take short-cuts in parenting.

"They have no choice but to go out there and work. So a lot of them, unfortunately, when they do come home, they put their kids in front of the TV set so they can cook." — New York woman

"I think we have another problem — for family budget reasons, both parents are out working. Whereas years ago my mother never worked and my father used to say, 'You will never work as long as I am around.' Today it is just the opposite — they both have to work. And that leaves the child under the care of someone else, and that's where a lot of problems start." — New Jersey man

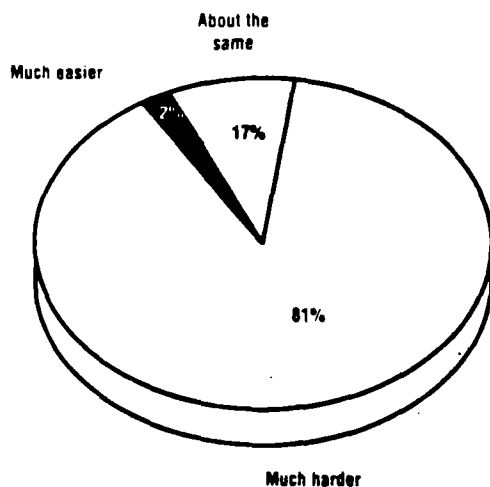
They may not be happy about it, but the public knows that the *Leave It To Beaver* days are gone. "My father, as a single wage-earner, took care of five children," said an Ohio man. "I don't think that can be done now. So now mothers feel the need to go out and work so they can live to a certain standard."

The Pressure On Mothers

While people in the focus groups pointed to the absence of mothers in the home as a problem, Americans clearly believe that most mothers work because they have to, not because they've chosen self-fulfilling careers over the well-being of their kids. Specifically, 3 in 4 people believe it's very common for mothers to give up time with their kids

BEING A PARENT TODAY

Do you think it's much harder or much easier for parents to do their job these days, or do you think it's about the same?



to work and make ends meet; only 27% say it's very common for mothers to give up time with their kids so they can work for personal satisfaction. An Illinois woman with grown children spoke sympathetically about the plight of today's mothers: "For mothers who are working today, it's the stress of doing a full-time job, and then coming home and doing the things you need to do with your kids, and even to further your own education. That's a lot of stress."

New-Age Dads

What society expects from fathers has changed markedly, well beyond the legislative focus on getting "deadbeat dads" to fulfill their financial responsibilities. What do Americans expect from fathers who are with their families? "It's a confusing time," said an Ohio man. "There was a time for my father's generation when what it meant to be a father was a lot simpler, a lot clearer. It isn't today. There's the modern, new-age guy who's trying to figure out how to be a warm, loving, caring father — not domineering and traditional. And then there's the totally absent one that can't deal with it."

One change has been the notion that fathers can and should show affection and love to their children, while still being considered "men." But only about 1 in 5 (22%) Americans say that such fathers are very common. Fathers agree — only about 1 in 4 (27%) think that the affectionate, loving Dad is very common.

Another change has challenged the notion that a father has fulfilled his responsibility simply by putting "food on the table." As a California mother put it: "If he is just being there, wearing the pants, it is better if he is not there at all. If he is not going to be with these kids, and talk to these kids, it is better that he is not there." The image of fathers is better here: only 35% of the general public thinks it's very common for fathers to put their jobs ahead of their kids. Once again, fathers essentially agree (37%).

The Job That's Never Over

People can easily imagine moments where the pressures of life can get to the most devoted parents. By an almost 2-to-1 margin (63% to 32%), Americans believe that "most parents face times when they really need help raising their kids" instead of the alternate proposition that "most parents can handle the job of raising their kids without help." Indeed, people even give some benefit of the doubt to parents of youngsters who are struggling and getting into trouble. Only 11% of the public believes that such parents are irresponsible; people are more likely to believe that such parents are simply overwhelmed by their own personal problems (40%).

In fact, the extraordinary challenges people see for today's families led some non-parents to be openly

thankful that they did not have children, a striking reversal from times past, when not having children was seen as cause for pity. "I consider it a real blessing that I don't have any children," said a woman from Iowa. "It is a job that is never over."

Environmental Hazards

People also recognize that today's kids — even those with parents who work hard to raise them properly — face a world of dangers and temptations that threaten their well-being. Not only must parents double their efforts to make ends meet, they also face the daunting task of raising respectful,

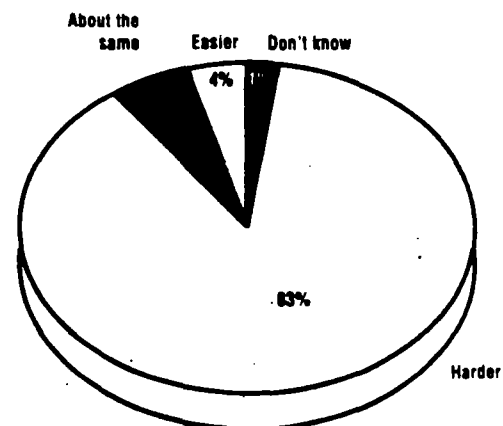
helpful, morally-grounded children in a world fraught with hazards and decidedly mixed messages about what's right and wrong. "I don't like the world I am raising my kids in," said a Denver father.

"Today's world, it stinks and I don't like it." Americans think these are uniquely difficult times for kids: more than 8 in 10 (83%) say it's harder to be a kid growing up in America these days; only 16% say it is easier or about the same. The survey asked people to rate the severity of problems children and teenagers face. Topping the public's list of the problems facing youngsters is drug and alcohol abuse, which 7 in 10 Americans (71%) consider a very serious problem. "Nowadays you get young kids — 13, 14, 15 carrying guns and beepers, and they want to be little drug dealers on the corner," said a California woman. "I think it's harder [to be a kid] today. Because we didn't have AIDS, crack, all these

Parents face the daunting task of raising respectful, helpful, morally-grounded children in a world fraught with hazards and decidedly mixed messages.

BEING A KID TODAY

Overall, is it easier or harder to be a kid growing up in America these days, or is it about the same?



drugs kids are exposed to," said a New York woman. Seven in 10 people (69%) also see excessive violence and sex on television and in the movies as a very serious problem. "They just show things they shouldn't be showing on the local TV channel," said a frustrated Denver mother. "There is semi-nudity on TV now. When I was growing up, I watched *I Love Lucy*, and they never showed those people in bed together — they had two separate beds." Another mother in the same group responded in agreement: "Even if you are watching a decent show or a radio station you have chosen, then you get the commercials coming in and, 'Oh, I thought I was safe for 15 minutes.'" Parents particularly seem to feel that they have no place to hide, even when they seek to control the influences to which their kids are exposed.

Crime and gangs are another very serious threat to kids, according to 62% of the population. "The streets are so dangerous in certain communities," said a California man. "[You don't want kids] hanging out on the street with a bicycle — there might be a drive-by shooting."

Schools: No Longer A Safe Haven

And finally, there is also growing disappointment with the public schools, which half (49%) of those surveyed believe fail to give kids a good education.

People tended to draw together laundry lists of daunting social pressures facing young people today, ticking problems off one by one as a sad testimony to how much the meaning of childhood has changed.

Prior Public Agenda studies have documented the roots of this disaffection — a sense that schools fail to teach the academic basics in a safe and orderly environment. Even as educators protest that the schools face the same societal problems identified above, the public adds the quality of education to the list of serious problems facing kids

today. And not only do people blame the schools for failure to deliver on their educational mission, many believe they no longer offer the safe haven of structure and discipline that young people need in order to thrive. For example, 7 in 10 people say drugs and violence are problems in the public schools, and even youngsters see this as a problem.⁶

Survey questions, by design, are meant to tease apart different aspects of an issue; but in the focus group discussions, people tended to draw together laundry lists of daunting social pressures facing young people today, ticking problems off one by one as a sad testimony to how much the meaning of childhood has changed. "It is a breakdown of a lot of things," said a New York man. "It is the drugs that flow freely, the moral factor as far as it is okay to jump into bed on

the first date. And this is enforced in movies, in television all over. And the lack of respect for your elders."

But in the end, people are most likely to return to the moral definition of the problem. When survey respondents who described several problems as very serious were asked to choose the one most critical of all, the plurality (25%) pointed to young people's failure to learn values such as honesty and respect. Another 12% pointed to youngsters' failure to learn religious faith and values.

The Suburbs - And Beyond

Once again, the public overwhelmingly believes these problems threaten all of America's youth, not just the disadvantaged. Those who identified problems as very or somewhat serious were asked how widespread they are. Ninety-five percent believe that drug and alcohol abuse is a widespread problem, not one affecting only children from lower-income families. Nine in ten (91%) think the failure to teach kids such values as honesty, respect, and responsibility is widespread, with only 8% linking it only to lower-income children. The same is true for crime and education, areas where middle-class families are supposed to have an advantage: two-thirds (67%) view crime and gangs as widespread, while more than three-quarters (76%) consider failing public schools to be a widespread problem.

The Bottom Line: Raise Them Right

Whether the problems young people face result more from parents or from social pressures is a widely-debated question, dividing American politicians, educators, and social commentators. The American people seem to share this division. When pressed to choose whether the difficulties facing kids today are mostly the result of irresponsible parents or social and economic pressures, people split about evenly — 44% to 41%.

Still, even after they recognize that these are tough times for parents, teens, and young children, and that every parent can face occasions when they are pressed, people often return to the refrain: if you're going to have children, raise them right. "We all have personal problems," said a New Jersey man, "some greater than others. But whoever has children, you have to put those problems aside and you've got to do your best to try to raise your children right and set a good example for them." In the public's mind, no matter what the personal problems and social pressures are, parents are obligated to shoulder the responsibility for their children's upbringing.

FINDING FIVE: Never Give Up

Notwithstanding their extensive criticisms of young people, Americans refuse to give up on kids. They care deeply about their well-being and believe that tackling the issue is of paramount importance to our society. Most encouraging, they are stubbornly optimistic about the chances of reclaiming the lives of even the most troubled teens.

Despite their deep disappointment over how teens and children are turning out, Americans demonstrate surprisingly high levels of caring and sympathy toward young people. More importantly, they believe that confronting the challenges youngsters face — especially the moral ones — is a paramount and urgent national priority.

About 7 in 10 people (71%) say the statement "I am strongly moved when I see media stories about children suffering" comes very close to how they feel. They also recognize the importance of this issue for the nation's future. As noted earlier, slightly more than half of those surveyed (52%) say that helping kids get a good start in life is more important than creating more jobs, protecting citizens from crime, or helping the poor or homeless.

Redeemable, Retrievable

Americans display an extraordinary, almost stubborn, refusal to write young people off as unsalvageable. Almost three-quarters (72%) say that "given enough love and kindness, just about any kid can be reached." A Denver man's comment was typical: "All kids can be helped if you get to them early enough, if you spend time with them."

From the public's viewpoint, even the toughest youngsters — teenagers already in real trouble — can be redeemed, given the right kind of effort. Even when the survey presented them with a scenario about "the tough customers" — teenagers who are always getting into trouble at school and in their neighborhood — 85% believe given enough attention and the right kind of guidance, almost all such teens can get back on track; only 11% say instead that many of these teens are beyond the point where they can be helped.

"It is not too late to redirect a young adult, to teach him an alternative. But you have to treat him as a semi-adult now instead of a child. They always say you can't straighten a tree after it is grown. But I still think that if that kid gets to be 18 years old, you can show him the road." — California man

Almost All Can Learn

Nor are people willing to give up on a young person's potential to learn, achieve, and — with the right kind of help — contribute to society. The refusal to give up on kids, to practice triage on the tough cases, continues when it comes to schools and education. Given a choice between two views, 74% say that given enough help and attention, just about all youngsters can learn and succeed in school; only 21% say that some just won't learn or succeed, no matter how much help and attention they get.

Most people just do not believe that youngsters are "born bad," or that they are unreachable and not worth salvaging. In fact, people's comments often reveal an undertone of faith in the capacity of young people to transcend their surroundings or shaky beginnings. "Kids are resilient and they will survive," said a Nebraska woman. People may recognize that some kids can be "a handful," that it might take supreme effort to invest affection in a tough child. But they still want society — and parents — to make that effort, to keep trying, because there is likely to be a pay-off at the end. "Strong-willed children are very tough to love unconditionally," said a Denver mother, "and all kids need unconditional love — especially from parents. But they are the ones that, if you can just let them know you love them no matter what, they are the ones who are going to be super achievers ... the people who make the difference in the world."

Most people just do not believe that youngsters are "born bad," or that they are unreachable and not worth salvaging.

By Virtue Of Their Character

Is this insistence that it is never too late unrealistic, merely an example of Americans' instinctive optimism? Are people simply offering socially acceptable responses? Perhaps. But people consistently draw on personal experience to share examples of individuals able to surmount the roughest environments and most difficult personal challenges. In every part of the country, people in every walk of life relate stories about late-bloomers, people who managed to overcome harsh beginnings by virtue of their character, and kids who were failures in school but somehow as adults discovered latent talents.

What's more, many people acknowledge that they themselves were no angels growing up (and presumably believe they turned out all right). Slightly more than half (54%) say that they got into mischief as youngsters, at least on occasion. The notion that one might get into trouble, then straighten out, fits people's own experience and their recognition that the path to productive adulthood is seldom a straight line.

Americans stubbornly resist giving up on individual youngsters or abandoning an entire generation. But if people believe that kids can straighten out and develop the values and attitudes that will guide them into responsible adulthood, how do they think that can happen?

FINDING SIX: Solutions That Miss The Mark

Government programs aimed at improving the health and economic circumstances of young people miss the mark in three important ways as far as the public is concerned. First, Americans define the children's issue as predominantly moral in nature, not one of money or health. Second, people believe the crux of the problem is parents, not a lack of government programs. And third, welfare has left a legacy of skepticism about government intervention on behalf of the family. Even when it comes to low-income, at-risk kids, Americans doubt that such programs could help. They suspect that parents who need such programs will fail to take advantage of them.

In recent years the most visible and dominant governmental efforts to address the problems of young people have centered on measures to improve their physical well-being and economic circumstances. Yet such ideas fail to attract much enthusiasm from the general public or — even more puzzling to some children's advocates — from parents themselves. From the public's perspective, such efforts are beside the point for three reasons: people fundamentally view the children's issue as moral in nature — better values and character are what's needed, not necessarily more spending; people think parents are not doing their job when it comes to "raising kids right" and severely doubt government programs can take their place; and people harbor doubts that government programs to help the family can truly work given their perceptions of how welfare turned out.

The Real Problem: Morality, Values, And Character

The most fundamental reason efforts to improve nutrition and health care for children fail to resonate with the public is that people define the children's issue in terms of morality, values, and character. Since this is hardly the stuff of most government programs, it is not surprising that few Americans (27%) consider a shortage of such programs to be a very serious problem. In fact, when presented with a range of 10 possible problems facing young people today — from drugs to crime to a failure to learn values — a shortage of government programs ranks last on the list. Comparing this result to an earlier finding in which 61% think kids' failure to learn such values as honesty, respect, and responsibility is a very serious problem, makes clear where the public stands on this issue.

To the public, it may not be so much that health initiatives on behalf of children and teenagers are worthless. Indeed, there is an archive of survey findings suggesting at least some support for a variety of such proposals.⁷ The key point is they do not speak to the public's definition of the issue, and they are therefore seen as less relevant. In this study, only 34% say more government funding for child and health care programs would be a very effective way to help kids. If such initiatives languish during legislative log-rolling

sessions without public outcry, it's probably because they fail to address the public's fundamental concerns.

Parents Remain The Key

As already noted, people believe that children thrive when their parents care for them and teach them right from wrong. They hold parents responsible when their children go astray. This frustrates many children's advocates who want to bring the children's issue into the public policy realm, much as some European nations do. While parents are responsible for their own children, advocates say, society as a whole must still assume some responsibility for the next generation for its own good, if

for no other reason. But to the public, the fate of young people chiefly hinges upon how well parents care for them — and how and what they teach them day-in and day-out. This image is so strong in the public mind that

efforts to move the focus of attention to what government does for children and teenagers would seem to hold little promise of success.

In the public's mind, government programs that aim to supply the health and financial needs of youngsters cannot remedy the most glaring failures of parents — the failure to be there for their children and to take responsibility for the development of their character. People are thinking: "We might succeed at immunizing children against a full range of diseases; but how will that improve the quality of parenting and teaching they get at home? How will that make their parents better parents?"

A Legacy Of Government Failure

But what about parents who — for a variety of reasons — are just not up to the job of parenting? Should government take the lead in trying to help them? When asked, "When parents have serious trouble raising their kids properly, who is in a better position to

When presented with a range of 10 possible problems facing young people today — from drugs to crime to a failure to learn values — a shortage of government programs ranks last on the list.

step in with help — other than relatives or close friends.”, only 11% opt for government agencies and programs. 79% would rely on private efforts such as volunteer organizations or neighbors and citizens who pull together.

The public's repudiation of welfare was driven not by its costs but by a sense that welfare rewarded values and behaviors that are anathema to most Americans.

The extreme reluctance to count on the government, even for the neediest, most troubled families, reflects grave doubts about the efficacy — and wisdom — of asking government programs to rescue families in trouble. “I don’t think we should turn to the government for help,” said

a Denver woman. “I don’t want them to come up with more ways for them to take our children and raise them.”

A principle source of this reluctance is the legacy of government welfare programs, prompting people to define government as causing problems for the poor, not solving them. In a 1996 study, *The Values We Live By: What Americans Want from Welfare Reform*, Public Agenda found the public’s repudiation of welfare was driven not by its costs but by a sense that welfare rewarded values and behaviors that are anathema to most Americans. The public concluded that a program motivated by good intentions had gone seriously awry and was perpetuating and exacerbating the very problems it was intended to fix. Why? For one thing, the program focused on caring for the material and financial needs of recipients without making any morally-based demands upon them — that they work in return for their benefits, for example, or that they continuously strive to climb out of dependency. For another, the public believed welfare undermined rather than supported the family.⁸

In this study, almost 6 in 10 Americans (58%) believe that welfare programs that encourage single-parent families and teen pregnancy pose a very serious problem for today’s young people. And, perhaps predictably, only 10% believe that increasing government funding for such welfare programs as AFDC and food stamps would be a very effective way to help young people. “I am thinking about the government programs that have not helped a whole lot of people — for instance, welfare,” said a California woman. “People are still on welfare who have been on it for years. That’s their livelihood; that’s their career.”

Will They Come?

But how government goes about helping the poor is not the only source of public skepticism. People also harbor serious doubts about whether those who need such programs make good use of them. When asked to evaluate government programs to help low-income, at-risk kids and families, only 8% say such programs usually succeed. The vast majority (71%) say the results are mixed, while 19% say the programs usually fail. Most interesting is the public’s explanation for why such programs usually fail or produce mixed results. Only 5% say the reason is a lack of money. Instead, nearly 4 in 10 (38%) believe the programs are poorly designed, while 51% believe it is because the parents who need these programs don’t make good use of them. About half of the public thus believes that it is the failure of at-risk parents to use government programs that helps explain the lack of results.

“You can’t force parents to do what we all agree they should do,” said a woman from Georgia who works with juveniles and at-risk families. “You can legislate a program, but I don’t know how you enforce a program . . . I don’t know how you force people to do that. Even if we have their kids, we can’t force them to do it.”

FINDING SEVEN: Solutions That Show Promise

Because they define the problem as one of values, Americans gravitate toward solutions that help develop young people's character. People believe the schools should help teach kids discipline, honesty, and respectfulness toward themselves and others. They believe community centers and volunteer organizations like the Boy Scouts could be effective because they lend moral structure to youngsters' lives.

If people do not look to government for effective solutions, what do they think might help? People see a need for action in several arenas, and they are surprisingly pragmatic and clear-sighted about what they think will work.

Schools Should Reinforce Values

After parents, people look to public schools as society's most critical point of contact with young people. But just as the public voices dissatisfaction with parents' performance, people also believe that public schools have abandoned their traditional and essential role of reinforcing responsibility, integrity, and respect — along with teaching academics. (Recall that about half identified inadequate public education as a very serious problem.) People believe that if the schools do a better job, young people will turn out better. In fact, two-thirds (67%) say that improving the public schools would be a very effective way to help young people.

But people's definition of what a good education includes goes beyond conveying academic skills. Studies by Public Agenda have shown repeatedly that the public overwhelmingly believes schools should teach values along with academics. "Schools have a social role as well," pointed out a Denver woman. "I think that is eminently important, equally as important as teaching them the basics of academics."

The values people want schools to teach are straightforward — and not likely to generate much controversy. Basically, people want schools to teach the values and standards of behavior that will stand kids in good stead out in the real world — being responsible, on time, and disciplined (83%); the value of hard work (78%); and honesty and tolerance of others (74%).⁹

Educators sometimes complain that instilling strong character traits and teaching acceptable social behavior are tasks that more properly belong to parents. But the public wants the schools to *supplement* and reinforce the values parents should provide. They do not expect schools to replace parents. "You can model good behavior at school, but youngsters don't spend the bulk of their time in school," said an Illinois woman. "So if you're going to educate them with a value system, it's going to have to come from home." And many parents are quick to point out that from

their perspective, the social environment tolerated at public schools — the behavior that is overlooked or allowed to go unpunished — undermines, rather than reinforces, what they try so hard to teach at home.

Keep Kids Busy

Since people believe that leaving young people with nothing to do is asking for trouble, one attractive solution is more after-school programs — seen by 6 in 10 Americans as a very effective way to help kids. "When my daughters were pre-school age, there were many things they could do," noted a Denver mother. "But now at the ages of 10 and 13, there are very, very few things, and what there are cost a lot. And now is when they really need it."

The public doubly values such programs, since they not only take kids off the streets and give them constructive things to do, but also provide them with the structure and adult guidance they believe are missing from youngsters' daily lives.

The public doubly values such after-school programs, since they not only take kids off the streets, but also provide them with the structure and adult guidance they believe are missing.

"We [need] more community-based programs for these children after school, so that they are not latchkey kids. More programs that teach kids athletics ... things of that nature." —California woman

For the same reasons, more than half of those surveyed (53%) also believe that greater reliance on volunteer organizations like the Boy Scouts would be a very effective way to help kids. In fact, the Scout Law is a promise to be trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous and more — a fairly neat summation of what Americans want young people everywhere to learn.

Help Parents Have More Time

Since parents are the key to good kids, and because people do recognize the stress that the workplace puts on parents' ability to do their job, more than half those surveyed (55%) think more flexible work schedules would be very effective to help young people. "Usually now, both mothers and fathers are working," said a Utah man, "and they can't get home before the

Perhaps people doubt that the media will be responsive to public pressure, or wonder just how much influence they as individuals can bring to bear.

kids are out of school. That's where the big problem is." The public sees so many families under such pressure and rushing to meet their many obligations that they want to help parents better juggle their responsibilities. By contrast, only 37% think holding parents legally responsible

when their kids get into trouble would be very effective — another indication that the public considers the issue as more complicated than simple parental malfeasance.

The Problem Without A Solution: The Media

Given the intense complaints about the media, it is somewhat surprising that only half of those surveyed (49%) think pressuring the entertainment industry to produce movies and music with less violence and sex will be a very effective way to help kids. Perhaps people doubt that the industry will be responsive to public pressure, or wonder just how much influence they as individuals can bring to bear. Only 37% believe that protesting violence or sex in the media would help a lot. People may also question whether it is really possible to return to the days when most media content was at the G or PG level.

When To Get Firm . . . And How

Whatever else happens, many people say it is critical to keep kids off the streets where they can easily get into, or cause, trouble. Fifty-three percent of those participating in the survey consider nighttime curfews for kids to be a very effective way to help them. "Their parents are letting them out until midnight when they are in the sixth grade," complained a New Jersey man. People are thinking: if parents are not keeping their kids off the streets late at night, the law should force them to do so.

Half of the public (48%) believe that an effective measure to help youngsters is tougher punishment for those who commit crime. Public Agenda's research on attitudes toward crime indicates that people place great stock in how the criminal justice system responds to a young offender's first brush with the law. The worst lesson to transmit to such youngsters, people believe, is that they can commit a crime — no matter how petty — and just get away with it. People believe that the proverbial slap on the wrist only invites further, and ever worsening, violations. At the same time, people also are loath to put juvenile offenders who have not committed violent crimes in prison, fearing that the experience will only make them worse. The public's list of preferred sanctions is therefore very instructive: boot camp, community service, or restitution with intense supervision. All of these sanctions are intended to teach young offenders discipline, hard work, and responsibility. The consistent recurrence of these themes across different studies — from education, to welfare, to crime — is quite striking.¹⁰

FINDING EIGHT: Will Individual Americans Help?

Americans are convinced that young people need adults in their lives who will help guide them to responsible adulthood. But will Americans — as individuals — help in the task? People say all the right things about helping, but they also have concerns. Many are not sure that their efforts will be well received. They fear embarrassing those they are trying to help. They want to make sure that they themselves are not taken advantage of. Finally, many Americans believe that those who receive help should show their appreciation, return the favor when they can, and take responsibility for helping themselves. As it is, only about a third of Americans volunteer regularly.

The notion of neighbor helping neighbor, or even of well-intended strangers helping others simply because they need help, is a powerful one with deep roots in American history. The barn-raising that tapped a community's collective energy may have all but disappeared, but its poignancy still speaks to many citizens. Highly-publicized efforts to rejuvenate volunteerism in Americans have recently been launched. These efforts presume that there is a reservoir of energy and helpfulness among Americans waiting to be tapped.

Giving From The Heart

So many Americans say the right things about helping others that such a reservoir of helpfulness does appear to exist, but this untapped energy exists side-by-side with concerns about when and how to lend a hand. On the positive side, 3 in 4 Americans strongly believe that helping others is the right thing to do. An even higher percentage (85%) say that helping others makes them feel good. Seventy-four percent say when they were growing up, their parents taught them that helping others was important. A New Jersey woman, for example, emphasized the positive aspects when she reflected on what helping others meant to her: "That personal sense of self-worth, that good feeling you get from helping somebody just out of the goodness of your heart. It is something beyond money." A California woman who seemed to be no stranger to the act of helping voiced a similar notion. "The main thing is that when you help somebody, you feel so good inside, you give it from your heart and let it go."

But Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Despite these overwhelmingly positive expressions, there appears to be a sharp drop-off between those who say helping others is a good thing and the number of people who actually act on their good intentions. In this study, only 34% of Americans say they regularly participate in volunteer groups that do charity work or community service, although many respondents express positive sentiments towards the value of volunteerism. So what accounts for this drop-off? If people say they believe so strongly in the benefits of helping, what is stopping them from doing more?

Any Time Left To Give?

Many of those concerned about rebuilding the tradition of volunteering in American life fear that the real problem is a lack of time. Circumstances for most families have changed dramatically: women have entered the workforce in large numbers; most people must commute to their jobs; and those jobs are more demanding than ever. But lack of time, based on this study, seems to be an obstacle of somewhat lesser importance to most Americans.

When asked to pick one statement out of three that best describes how much free time they have, only 24% of Americans say all of their time is spoken for. About 3 in 10 (29%) say they have enough free time to do something new if they want to, and 46% say they are pretty busy but could find time to do something new. For most Americans today, extra time seems to be like disposable income — an elastic concept. Look hard enough, and chances are you will find it.

Only 34% of Americans say they regularly participate in volunteer groups that do charity work or community service.

People do seem more open to volunteer opportunities that fit into pre-existing schedules. Almost half of Americans (47%) say they would be much more likely to help young people if they could do so occasionally whenever they found extra time, instead of making a regular commitment. Half the parents surveyed say they would be much more likely to volunteer to help kids if they could bring them along to an activity they already do with their own children.

Overall, however, lack of time does not seem to be the chief barrier stopping people from helping others.

The Loss Of Confidence

A far more troubling obstacle is the doubt many Americans voice about whether helping out will bring the positive benefits and reactions people yearn for. Many people seem to have lost confidence that the human-to-human interaction involved in helping will

be comfortable, natural, and trouble-free. Their concerns are diverse and multi-layered, but all reflect a sense that there are great differences among people that could cause problems when they reach out to help — differences in what people want, how they will respond, what they expect.

Many Americans, for example, express concerns that their efforts to help will embarrass or insult the very persons they are intended to benefit. Over half (56%) say, "You have to be careful to avoid embarrassing people when you try to help them."

Perhaps an even more telling indication that modern times have dampened Americans' volunteer spirit is a widespread fear of intruding on someone's privacy or trampling on their rights. Respondents in focus groups repeatedly expressed fears that their good intentions might be misread, rejected, and even turned against them. The risk of getting sued came up often in conversations about helping. As one Kansas man put it, "People are less inclined to get involved in things. I think they are afraid they'll get sued nowadays."

Many Americans seem especially sensitive when it comes to intervening with parents concerning the behavior of children. Only 33% of Americans would be very comfortable telling a neighbor their child had been getting into mischief, and only 4 in 10 (39%) would be very comfortable telling kids who are mis-

behaving in a public area to behave themselves. As one California woman put it, "Now if I go out there to say something to somebody else's kid, I may get cursed."

People's uncertainty about interceding — about stepping precipitously into other peo-

ple's private lives — even came up regarding reporting possible child abuse. While certainly concerned about children's welfare, many respondents in focus groups acknowledged real discomfort in reporting suspected abuse to authorities. Almost half (47%) of the people surveyed say they would feel very comfortable taking action if they suspected a neighbor of abusing a child, but many expressed fears about making such a serious charge when they did not have all the facts. Others acknowledged that different families often view corporal punishment in different ways, and seemed reluctant to impose their own standards unless the abuse was truly severe. A Colorado Springs man explained his calculations this way, "I shouldn't go in there and tell somebody how to raise their kids, but if I see something abusive, I'll report it to the authorities."

More Generous In Safer Territory

Obviously, when people are operating within their regular circle — among people whose responses they feel they can accurately anticipate — their level of comfort and confidence increases dramatically. Fully 71% say they would be very comfortable watching a child for a neighbor who has to run an errand. Another 56% would be very comfortable helping a neighbor who is a new mother with a baby.

The Importance Of Hearing "Thank You"

Another significant barrier to giving help is people's sense that their efforts may not be appreciated or may not result in any significant change or increased self-reliance on the part of recipients. Americans still believe the ideal helper is, as this California man describes it, "... someone willing to assist from the heart, regardless of the situation." But while they may not start out looking for a "thank you," most people notice when they do not get it. Even more important, people want to see some results from their exertions — help should lead to reciprocation, to progress and improvement, not to perpetuating a hopeless, endless state of need.

One of the most important expectations, shared by 60% of Americans queried, is that people who get help should show appreciation — should say "thank you." In focus groups, many people remembered helping someone without receiving such thanks, and the experience left a bitter taste in their mouths. This New Jersey woman was unusually explicit: "You don't want to do it for people unless they say 'Thank you.' Some people don't even acknowledge your help."

Most Americans (51%) also want those who benefit from help to return the favor when they can. The notion of reciprocity plays out powerfully when it comes to people's views on aiding the poor through welfare. One of the most compelling expectations Americans had of welfare reform was that it places an obligation upon recipients to do something in return for the help they get. Almost 6 in 10 Americans (57%) thought it absolutely essential that welfare reform require "recipients to do community service in exchange for benefits" while 85% said they would be satisfied if welfare recipients were "required to do something in exchange for their benefits — even if it was just raking leaves or cleaning roads."¹¹

The idea that recipients were continually being given something for nothing struck people as counterproductive. More importantly, they saw it as insulting to their own efforts to struggle and work hard. In this study, half the people surveyed say they help when they see that it makes a difference for other people. It's important for people to feel that they are con-

Respondents in focus groups repeatedly expressed fears that their good intentions might be misread, rejected, and even turned against them.

tributing to a *solution*, rather than merely applying a Band-Aid to a perpetual, insoluble problem.

People Are Different

The issues and concerns discussed so far apply broadly to Americans in every part of the country from every walk of life. But people — being people — do bring different backgrounds, experiences, and mindsets to the business of helping and volunteering. As in politics, music, fashion, and lifestyle, there are “different strokes for different folks.”

Within the American public, some segments hold their opinions and assumptions about helping and volunteering with a special intensity, so much so that they have a distinct — and unique — “world view” about the issue. This study suggests that there are three particularly distinctive personality types when it comes to volunteering and helping out. “Natural givers” have an almost ingrained desire to help. “Reciprocators” are particularly concerned that those they assist show appreciation and start to help themselves. “Conditionals” worry that volunteering may involve unpleasant or troubling experiences. (These distinctive personality types and the views of other important subgroups in the population are reported in more detail in a second volume to this study.)

The Natural Givers

Comprising about 16% of the population, natural givers have few reservations about helping and betray little suspicion about who gets help or about how it is granted. These are the defining characteristics of natural givers: they are particularly apt to believe people who help others are usually appreciated; that it is important to avoid embarrassing those you try to help; and that people usually help out of the goodness of their hearts. Natural givers often sound as if they are simply waiting to be called to action, much like this woman from Illinois. “I think they really just need to advertise the need for help and thousands of volunteers will come... When you get out there and expose what the need is, and what the goal is, you can get people behind it.”

Because of their world view, natural givers stand out as particularly sympathetic to youngsters. Natural givers are more likely than other Americans to believe that “given enough, love and attention just about any kid could be reached” (an 85% to 69% margin). They are also more likely to think that “many adults have a hard time dealing with kids because they forget what it was like when they were young” (a 50% to 36% margin).

Reciprocators

Another important and distinctive group are the “reciprocators” — people who strongly believe that someone who gets help should return the favor and that someone who gets help should show their appreciation. Reciprocators, who represent about 38% of the population, often focus on how the recipient of help responds to their assistance. Like this man from New Jersey, they want to see progress: “What you are trying to do [in helping] is to show someone that they have to be independent. You have to stop doing and start enabling. Now you are on your own, you either succeed or fail, but at least you are learning.”

More so than other Americans, reciprocators will cautiously watch the recipients of aid to make sure they will make good use of it before they pitch in. In fact, 6 in 10 (59%) reciprocators say they help when they see the difference it makes for other people; only 45% of other Americans feel the same way.

The Conditionals

And finally, there are the “conditionals”: people who are particularly concerned about the social circumstances in which they grant help, worried that things might go wrong — especially for themselves. They are far more likely than other Americans to worry about interfering in other people’s personal affairs, and to worry that they themselves will be taken advantage of. Conditionals represent about 12% of the population. Often, their sense of trust in their neighbors — and in themselves — has been eroded. This woman from St.

Louis reflected on some of those feelings. “Some people are afraid that they wouldn’t know what to do, or they fear authority figures. Or fear getting pulled into a situation they couldn’t handle or get out of.”

The mindset conditionals bring to the issue of helping invades their outlook on specific aspects of when and how to volunteer. About 7 in 10 conditionals (69%) say you have to be careful about charity groups because some are dishonest and waste money; only 44% of other Americans feel the same way. Almost twice as many conditionals as other Americans say they have tried to help people in the past, only to feel their effort was wasted (54% to 28%).

The Big Picture

Although specific segments of the public stand out, it is important to realize they represent widely-held views common to many Americans. These unique segments all reflect tendencies that the American pub-

As in politics, music, fashion, and lifestyle, there are “different strokes for different folks.”

lie widely displays: many people want to do good; many people are also concerned lest they be put into

People want to know their efforts will be aimed at creating honest, kind, respectful, polite, and compassionate youngsters.

awkward, perhaps even unpleasant, situations when helping; and many people want helping to lead to some long-term improvement in the condition and self-reliance of those they help.

Any effort to call Americans to action that ignores these common concerns — or fails to address the public's laser-like focus on the need to build character and moral judgment among the nation's youth — is unlikely to produce any long-lasting response. People want to know their efforts will be aimed at creating honest, kind, respectful, polite, and compassionate youngsters. And they want reassurance that if they give their help, it will be appreciated and make a difference. It is no longer enough just to say to Americans: "Children are our future. Come and help."

Special Focus: The Views Of African American, Hispanic, And White Parents

In order to compare the views of African American and Hispanic parents to those of white parents, supplementary interviews were conducted with 300 black and 300 Hispanic parents. The results: regardless of race and ethnicity, all three groups of parents are critical of how teens and children are turning out, of the job parents are doing, and for the most part, all are concerned about the same social problems threatening youngsters. Where there are differences, these are usually differences in degree, not in kind. African American and Hispanic parents are sometimes more critical of today's youth than are white parents, for example, and black parents are more attracted to government child and health care programs.

Teens Are Trouble

The general public's disapproval of how teenagers are turning out is mirrored among all parents, and black and Hispanic parents are hardly an exception - in fact, they are often more disapproving.

About 7 in 10 African American, Hispanic, and white parents resort to negative adjectives when describing today's teens (73%, 68%, and 71%, respectively). Black and Hispanic parents are more likely than whites to say teens who get into trouble because they have too much free time on their hands are very common (63%, 61% versus 49%). African American and Hispanic parents also are more likely than white parents to criticize teenagers for lacking self-discipline (49%, 46% versus 38%), and for being disorderly and wild in public (49%, 43% versus 31%). Minority parents are only slightly more likely than white parents to have positive evaluations of teens — to say, for example, that they are helpful toward neighbors or treat adults with respect.

On the other hand, minority parents view youngsters with more empathy. Black — and to a lesser extent, Hispanic — parents find it easier than white parents to communicate with teens (52%, 47%, and 38%, respectively). They are also more likely to say that many adults have a hard time with kids because they forget what it was like when they were younger (49%, 42%, and 33%, respectively).

Children Too

Like Americans in general, the criticisms of teens carry over to children for African American, Hispanic, and white parents. When asked what comes to their mind when describing children — defined as older than 5 but not yet teens — half or more parents from each group resort to negative adjectives (56% of black, 49% Hispanic, and 56% white).

Although the criticisms are not as intense as those made of teens, parents across all groups do not view children in hopeful and endearing terms. Much of the focus is on children who are spoiled, with about half of black, Hispanic, and white parents saying such

children are very common. Black parents are more likely than Hispanic and white parents to believe out-of-control or lazy children are very common. Black and Hispanic parents are slightly more likely than whites to believe friendly or respectful children are very common, but they are far from ready to sing their praises. For example, few African American (25%) or Hispanic parents (19%) say children who are friendly and helpful toward their neighbors are very common. Among white parents, the number is 16%.

Hopes For A Better World

Once again, just as was the case among the general public, the picture is not all bad. Many parents across the three groups do believe that today's children are bright and eager to learn (40%, 37%, and 32%, respectively). But in the end, regardless of their racial or ethnic background, parents concur with the general public: they do not expect the current generation of children to fulfill or redeem hopes for a better world. In similar majorities, black, Hispanic, and white parents believe today's children will make little difference or make the nation an even worse place when they grow up (61%, 54%, and 58%, respectively).

Black and Hispanic parents are more likely than whites to say teens get into trouble because they have too much free time on their hands.

Look To The Parents

As was the case with the general public, there is a widespread belief — shared by about 8 in 10 black, Hispanic, and white parents — that it is harder than ever for parents to do their job. But, like Americans in general, parents across the three groups are critical of the job parents are doing in important areas of responsibility. African American parents often stand out as more critical than Hispanics and whites, and simultaneously more understanding of the pressures facing parents.

Sizable majorities of black, Hispanic, and white parents believe parents today have children before they're

ready to take responsibility for them (72%, 69%, and 63%, respectively); and that they often break up too easily rather than try to stay together for the sake of their kids (56%, 57%, and 58%, respectively). Many parents across all three groups echo the public's complaint that parents often fail to discipline their children and resent advice about their kids. And about half of parents in each group reproach parents who believe buying things for kids means the same as caring for them. Small percentages believe that parents who teach their kids right from wrong are very common.

African American and Hispanic parents are substantially more critical of fathers for choosing careers as more important than children (47%, 39% versus 33%), and of parents in general for abusing welfare (41%, 43% versus 29%). But they also stand out as more sympathetic to the challenges facing parents when, for example, they say parents who sacrifice and work hard on behalf of their children are very common (65%, 58% versus 52%) or when they cite economic pressures on parents as a serious problem (60%, 53% versus 42%).

Drugs, Crime, And Gangs

According to parents, economic pressures and the demands of the workplace are only the beginning of the story of what makes parenting and raising children so difficult today. Even if parents do a good job, widespread social problems threaten children, in their view. Black and Hispanic parents are attuned to these dangers by larger margins, but white parents are not far

African American parents — and to a lesser degree, Hispanic parents — are more likely to cite a shortage of government programs on behalf of kids as very serious problem.

behind. Drug and alcohol abuse on the part of young people are a serious threat according to black, Hispanic, and white parents (79%, 83%, and 67%, respectively). Crime and gangs are another very serious problem according to 77% of both black and Hispanic parents, and 60% of white parents concur. Parents across the three groups point to schools that fail to adequately teach children as another very serious problem. And wide majorities — more than 7 in 10 in each group — decry sex and violence in the media as threatening to the well-being of young people. No wonder parents — across all groups — overwhelmingly deem it harder than ever to be a youngster growing up in the U.S.

Moreover, parents perceive these social threats to be widespread and not at all unique to youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, about 7 in 10 black, Hispanic, and white parents believe the risks of crime and gangs are widespread. Even higher percentages across all three groups believe drug or alcohol abuse by kids is widespread, and not limited to those from lower income families. African American parents do add another problem to the list of threats: 58% point to a lack of strong communities where

neighbors care about kids. Fewer Hispanic (45%) and white (41%) parents agree.

What To Do

If the public refuses to give up on youngsters, even in the most difficult circumstances, it is only to be expected that parents will evince at least the same level of commitment. Indeed, nearly 9 in 10 African American, Hispanic, and white parents believe that even very troubled teens can be redeemed given enough attention and guidance. But are parents from different racial and ethnic backgrounds attracted to the same solutions?

In comparable numbers, black, Hispanic, and white parents look to improving the quality of schooling kids get as a key solution (76%, 67%, and 70%, respectively). And although after-school programs in community centers are particularly compelling to black and Hispanic parents (75% and 67%), they speak to a majority of white parents (57%) as well. Most parents in each group also believe in the effectiveness of relying on volunteer organizations dedicated to youngsters, such as the Boy Scouts. Nor are parents across the spectrum resistant to tougher measures to keep kids off the streets and productive: majorities of black, Hispanic, and white parents support nighttime curfews for young people (63%, 66% and 54% respectively).

Differing Views On Government Programs

There are some substantial differences between African American parents in particular and white parents, and these are often over the role of government programs — although even here there are some areas of commonality. African American parents — and to a lesser degree, Hispanic parents — are more likely to cite a shortage of government programs on behalf of kids as a very serious problem (47%, 36% versus 27% of white parents). And they are considerably more apt to believe that government funding for child care and health programs would be a very effective approach to help kids (56%, 45% versus 36%). Interestingly, black parents continue to stand out in support of such programs even when their incomes reach middle-class levels. By contrast, although such programs draw support among lower-income white and Hispanic parents, that support declines when their incomes rise.¹²

The racial or ethnic background of parents makes little difference, however, when it comes to views on the efficacy of welfare programs. Few black, Hispanic, or white parents have very much faith in the effectiveness of such programs (16%, 13%, and 8%, respectively). What's more, about 7 in 10 parents in the three groups think government programs to help at-risk families have led to mostly mixed results, not success. Like the general public, minority parents

attribute the lack of success to their sense that the families that need such programs do not make good use of them. It is little wonder that, when it comes to helping parents who have serious trouble raising their kids, all three groups of parents would first look to volunteer groups or neighbors — not government.

African American parents — and to a lesser extent, Hispanic parents — are also more likely to cite economic pressures on parents as a serious problem (60%, 53%, and 42%, respectively). Consequently, they also believe a proposal to increase wages and job security of parents would be an effective way to help kids (60%, 51%, and 44%, respectively). Once again, black parents across income levels often continue to worry about the impact of economic stress on kids and families, and to support increased wages and job security. For white — and to a lesser extent, Hispanic — parents, levels of concern about such issues more closely track income levels.¹³

Helping And Volunteering

Although African American, Hispanic, and white parents generally share the same positive views toward helping and volunteerism, some differences do stand out.

African American parents would be much more comfortable than Hispanics or whites telling a neighbor that their child had gotten into mischief (59% versus 37% and 37%); substantially more likely to be willing to volunteer for an organization that helps kids (63% versus 53% and 49%); and to say they had made a difference in the life of someone who was not a family member (61% versus 45% and 47%).

But black parents also seem to be more careful about helping. For example, 6 in 10 black parents say you have to be careful when helping because some people will try to take advantage of good intentions, while Hispanic and white parents are far less likely to hold this view (43% and 34%). African American parents are also more likely to say they help when they see the difference it makes to the other person. Both African American and Hispanic parents are more likely to want to make sure recipients of help truly want their assistance before they come forward.

When talking about kids today, shared perceptions seem to be the norm. It makes very little difference whether one is an African American, Hispanic, or white parent.

From Where You Sit

When it comes to views about young people today, more often than not, African American, Hispanic, and white parents have a shared understanding of the problem — and its solution. In turn, their views are rather close to those of Americans in general. This is hardly surprising. When it comes to views toward race relations or criminal justice, differing historical and personal experiences can lead to differing perceptual lenses. But on most other issues — for example, education — attitudinal differences across racial and ethnic groups are usually modest at best. And when talking about kids today, shared perceptions seem to be the norm. It makes very little difference whether one is an African American, Hispanic, or white parent, or whether one is watching and interacting with kids as a nonparent.

Special Focus: What Kids Have To Say

Teenagers surveyed as part of this study generally describe themselves as happy and say they have warm relations with their parents and other adults in their lives. But large numbers also say they have plenty of time on their hands and describe an environment filled with hazards and potential trouble. A third say there is no adult in the house when they come home and about a quarter admit that they have engaged in risky behavior such as smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol.

Thus far, *Kids These Days* has reported what adults think about young people today: their concern that adolescents fall far short when it comes to character and conduct; and their belief that parents, with very little help from society, are responsible for this state of affairs. But what do young people have to say about themselves, their friends, and the environment in which they live? To find out, the study probed the views of 600 adolescents 12 to 17 years of age using a questionnaire designed both to compare their views to those of adults, and to capture attitudes unique to them.

I'm OK

The vision of sullen, alienated youth seems to fly in the face of what young people have to say about themselves. Most America's adolescents report they are doing well — not only when it comes to their physical well-being but on a personal level as well. A little more than 6 in 10 (61%) say the description "I am usually happy" comes very close to capturing how

they feel. And, in what might be a surprise to many adults, two-thirds (66%) say "faith in God is an important part of my life," and about equally as many (68%) say they attend religious services at least once a month.

Nor do the vast majority of adolescents worry about physical and financial deprivation. Three

in four young people (75%) do not worry *at all* about one parent losing a job, and 72% do not worry *at all* that their family will not have money to take care of the basics. About 3 in 4 adolescents (74%) say they *never* have to "worry about having enough food or a place to sleep." The large majority of youngsters seem to live secure and comfortable lives, although the finding that even a quarter of the nation's young people are sometimes anxious about having enough to eat or a place to live will undoubtedly disturb many Americans.

My Parents Are OK

When youngsters talk about their own parents, they describe them as supportive and giving. If caring, lov-

ing parents are critical to the emotional well-being of children — and most everyone agrees they are — most youngsters say they are in good shape when it comes to this dimension of parenting.

About 8 in 10 (81%) say "I can always trust my parents to be there for me when I need them." In fact, the percentage of adolescents saying they trust their parents to be there for them is higher than the percentage saying the same of their friends (81% versus 62%) — an unexpected finding given all the focus on how important peers and friends are in young people's lives. Almost 7 in 10 (68%) say they get a hug or kiss from their parents almost every day. And few teenagers find a statement designed to capture that ever-present "generation gap" compelling. A surprisingly low 24% say "My parents don't really understand the problems I face" captures the way they feel.

These positive reinforcements often continue when youngsters leave the house and interact with adults. Nearly 8 in 10 (79%) say the adults they run across outside of school are friendly toward them and their friends. About two-thirds (65%) say they get a compliment or encouraging word from adults almost every day. And 7 in 10 (70%) have adults other than parents they can talk with about a serious problem. Responding to a question about whom adolescents could confide in, this Denver teen said, "My next-door neighbors...I've known them for five years and we're really close. I tell them everything. And if I can't talk to my parents about it, then I tell them."

Why Are Kids Saying Such Nice Things?

At first brush, the way youngsters describe their own relationships with adults seems entirely incompatible with what adults have been saying about them throughout this study. What accounts for these vastly differing viewpoints? This study was not intended to be the definitive accounting of the day-to-day lives, attitudes, and experiences young people go through. But the data do suggest some reasons for the contrasting views of adults and youngsters.

Although it is obvious that most youngsters do not have routinely antagonistic relationships with adults — nor are they particularly dissatisfied with the major features of their lives — it is important to reiterate

important to reiterate the public's fundamental concerns about young people center not their day-to-day happiness, but on the quality quantity of moral chance they receive

that the public's fundamental concerns about young people center not on their day-to-day happiness, but on the quality and quantity of moral guidance they receive. In fact, it is not unlikely that some adults interviewed for this project might think many youngsters would be better off if they occasionally had a few antagonistic encounters with adults telling them to behave themselves.

Attention Deficit

But do youngsters themselves sense that they are not getting the guidance they need? The results of Public Agenda's 1997 study, *Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools*, suggest that many youngsters *do* want more structure and supervision in their lives. It showed students were drawn to caring but firm teachers, to more rigorous academic standards, and to policies that made expectations of their behavior clear. High school students thought highly of teachers who managed to both care about them and run a focused classroom where little nonsense was tolerated. They also strongly supported measures to remove disruptive students from classrooms.

There are also indications in this study that many adolescents may not be getting the sort of attention and supervision they need. One-third (33%) say there is no adult at home when they return from school. And 53% reported that there was no parent or guardian in the room as they were answering the questions to this survey — a survey that lasted about 23 minutes on average, and asked about relatively private attitudes and experiences. Although phone interviewers were encouraged to provide details to kids and their guardians about how to contact Public Agenda for further information about the organization and the study's purpose, only one parent called Public Agenda offices to inquire about the purpose and content of the survey in which her child had taken part.

At Malls, People's Houses, Wherever

The public's concern that young people do not have enough meaningful things to do in structured environments may be well placed, according to what the youngsters say. Seven in 10 youngsters (69%) do not belong to any club or organization outside of school. When meeting friends, 7 in 10 say they usually hang out without anything specific to do; only 28% get together to do something specific. "I hang out with my friends," said a Westchester teen, "at malls, people's houses, wherever."

While adolescents have a reputation for wanting more freedom and less supervision, in this study, many youngsters seem to think that too many of them do not receive enough guidance and attention. Nearly half (49%) believe most people their age need more

guidance and attention from adults, while 42% say things are about right. "It is true," said another Westchester teen, "when you have a lot of free time on your hands, you are going to sometimes get into bad things or else you will be totally bored."

Still another question is whether most youngsters have the life experience and perspective to truly judge whether they are personally getting the supervision and adult guidance they need. It may be too much to expect teenagers to conduct a self-conscious accounting of their personal freedom, their own shortcomings and those of the people who they are closest to and most dependent upon. Among the youth surveyed here, it seems far easier to see gaps and shortcomings in other youngsters and in other people's parents, than to judge their own parents and their own behavior as lacking.

My Friends' Parents...

While they have good things to say about their own parents, adolescents are far more equivocal about other parents around them. While over half (57%) say most parents do an excellent or good job of raising their kids, a substantial number — 43% — think they are doing only a fair or poor job. "A friend of mine — her parents aren't together," said a Denver teen, "and when her father comes along her parents are always arguing, and her little sister and brother are always hearing their arguments. And the mother's into drugs. It's not a happy life." Parents who are failing to fulfill their responsibilities may not be the rule, according to youngsters, but they are also hardly the exception.

Seven in ten youngsters (69%) do not belong to any club or organization outside of school.

Some of the specific criticisms young people have of today's parents echo the criticisms of the general public, although often by lesser margins. About 4 in 10 (41%) adolescents think parents who have children before they're ready to take responsibility are very common. Another 43% believe parents who spoil their kids are very common; one-third (33%) that parents fail to discipline their kids. The need for setting limits was apparent to this California teen: "We have this one friend who has this mom who is so devoted to him, he just fools around with her. He calls her by her first name: 'I need this, come give it to me.' And she does it." And parents do not get stellar marks for raising their kids with the right values: only about 4 in 10 (39%) say parents who are good role models and teach their kids right from wrong are very common. "My friend's parents just don't care, they are never home," said a California teen. "There is food in the house, but they are never there to talk or confide in, so he turns to friends. It's not a question of a poverty stricken home — he just has no one to confide in."

Something's Wrong

For the most part, these results do not portray the levels of blame and finger-pointing found among the general public and of parents themselves, and that may be good news. But the very fact that substantial numbers of young people have noticed something wrong with how many parents are doing their job is telling.

One might say it's only natural for young people to jump at the chance to turn the tables on adults and criticize them for a change. But youngsters also give parents their due: half (50%) say parents who sacrifice and work hard so their kids have a better life are very common. Many youngsters, such as this one from California, also acknowledge "it is tougher to be a parent today than it was 20 years ago." And the things youngsters criticize in parents — spoiling children, not taking responsibility for them, failing to teach them right from wrong — are hardly self-

serving. And, once again, large numbers hold these views regardless of their economic circumstances: using free/reduced lunch eligibility to distinguish disadvantaged youngsters from those who are better off, middle-class

**fifth (22%) of
lescents come
ss gangs every day**

kids are as critical as those who are disadvantaged. If this many young people take parents to task for failing to provide guidance and values to their generation, it is little wonder that adults are far more upset.

Dangers Lurking

Once they leave the immediate context and safety of their home, these young people talk — in focus groups and the survey — about a very different reality they see close up, one they are exposed to everyday. They talk about how friends, other people their age, and sometimes they themselves get into trouble — sometimes serious trouble. And where in the past kids may have worried about fitting in, budding romance, or the neighborhood bully, today youngsters talk about drugs, fighting, and gangs, as a daily fact of life they had to deal with. "Most kids I know are struggling," said a Denver teen. "Drug addiction, gang violence..." To hear them describe it, their world is full of dangers, requiring them to be ever-watchful and on guard.

These are more than focus group impressions. About 4 in 10 (41%) say that they see people their age using drugs or alcohol every day or almost every day. About a third (34%) report being to a party in the past 6 months where other kids were drunk. Three in 10 (30%) say their parents "press me to stay home because they think it's not safe out there." One-fifth (22%) come across gangs every day or almost every day. These are not majorities, but that is small com-

fort; the numbers indicate many adolescents live in environments where threats and dangers are commonplace.

A Fight Every Day

At school, this Denver youth had a far more practical concern than fitting in: "I've just got to watch my back and make sure they don't try to jump somebody or me. They take shoes, clothes..." In Long Beach, this teen reported that trouble was an everyday occurrence: "At my school, the people are getting worse. There is a fight every day. It used to be a good neighborhood, now there is tagging (graffiti) everywhere. At a party, there always has to be a fight."

Risky Business

But some youngsters do more than merely observe the dangers around them. Forty percent say "my parents would be very upset if they knew some of the things my friends have done." What's more, the number of adolescents who admit they themselves are crossing some lines and taking some risks is far from insignificant. One in four youngsters (26%) admit to smoking cigarettes in the past six months; 1 in 4 (26%) to drinking alcohol; 13% to using illegal drugs; and 10% to getting into trouble with the police.

This behavior does not seem limited to lower-income youth. Both youngsters who are disadvantaged and those who are better off are as likely to see people their age using drugs or alcohol every day or almost every day (45% and 40%, respectively); to report they themselves had used illegal drugs in the past 6 months (14% and 11%, respectively); and to have had alcohol to drink (25% for both groups). The disadvantaged, however, are more likely to come across gangs by a 31% to 18% margin.

Be Careful How You Look

Adults, as noted earlier, fault today's young people for a preoccupation with things material. For their part, there seems to be no more conspicuous manifestation of this preoccupation than the clothes they wear. More than 6 in 10 (63%) adolescents believe that most or all people their age pay too much attention to their appearance — what they wear and what they look like. The pressure to keep up appearances is there, although many youngsters deny that they are personally affected by it. In Westchester, one 10th-grader wearing a Calvin Klein tee-shirt, designer jeans and the requisite three or four earrings insisted that she would never allow another teen to influence what she buys because "that girl is not the one paying for my clothes — I am." Peer pressure is often more subtle than crude. Based on this study it seems more often a function of milieu rather than direct taunting.

And today, young people find themselves in a milieu fostered by targeted marketing, advertising, and celebrity endorsement, one that is commonly tolerated by the adults and authority figures in their lives.

If adolescents report their peers are paying very careful attention to how they dress, they also report they are not paying careful attention to how they treat each other. Only one-fifth (21%) say most people their age are very respectful toward each other. In Long Beach, California a teenager compared her experience growing up in England to that in the U.S.: "In England, kids, you look at them and they smile at you. Here you look at them and they are like, 'What are you looking at?'" And one girl in Denver reported this behavior crossed the line into abuse: "Some of the girls are really ruthless. If they just see you and they don't like the way you look or how you are walking, they'll start something with you. . . . For a while I had these girls calling my house, following me home from school." Nor do young people rate adolescents' behavior toward adults very highly — only 26% say people their age are very respectful of adults. "I have a friend who has no respect for her dad at all," said a California teen. "She calls him very bad names to his face, and she just has no respect."

In the end, youngsters are hardly more optimistic than adults about having faith in their generation's capacity to change the world for the better. About 6 in 10 (57%) say people their age will not make much difference to the country or even make it worse; one-third (32%) think they will make it better. Historically, young people have often been dismissive of adults and the world they had fashioned, beaming with a self-confident "step aside and let us do the job" attitude. They now seem to display little confidence that they themselves will be up to the task.

If I Am Only For Myself...

There does seem to be a large pool of potential energy among youngsters waiting to be tapped. Young people today are not only waiting for help and guidance; they seem very willing to help and guide each other, and to help adults who need it.

As with the adults in this study, fully 7 in 10 (70%) youngsters subscribe to the notion that people should help others because it's the right thing to do. "My

family is that way . . . that's how I was raised, to help people out," said a California teen. About 6 in 10 (59%) youngsters would be very comfortable watching a younger child for a neighbor as a favor, without pay; and 60% have recently done it. Two-thirds (67%) would be very comfortable running errands for a neighbor; and half (51%) have recently done so.

Adolescents also are willing to contribute to community-wide efforts to help the needy. For example, 55% would feel very comfortable volunteering at a hospital or church; about half (51%) would be very comfortable feeding poor or homeless in a soup kitchen. It is interesting to note the drop off, however, between willingness to help and actually helping, one similar to that found among adults. Only 37% of youngsters, for example, report they have recently volunteered at a hospital or church. It seems that the same ground rules regarding helping that prevail among adults often prevail among youngsters as well. The reciprocity norm seems, for example, to be widely espoused by young Americans: 69% say someone who gets help should express their gratitude; and 56% say someone who gets help should return the favor when they can.

Rather than simply playing the role of the passive beneficiaries, many youngsters themselves are interested in helping.

To Give Is To Receive

Some of the things young people say may be heartening for those who suspect that kids are not as bad as many think they are. Other findings confirm that things could be much better. But one compelling theme emerging here is that many young people are ready, willing, and able to help others and help each other. Many children's advocates look at society and ask what can be done to help kids. But rather than simply playing the role of the passive beneficiaries, many youngsters themselves are interested in helping, not only their friends and neighbors, but others in the community. The potential resonance of this theme is threefold: it fits nicely with the notion of reciprocity about helping that the public already has; it contradicts the widely-held image of spoiled kids who lack character; and, perhaps most importantly, it meshes perfectly with the public's focus on teaching children character and responsibility.

People have very negative feelings about today's youngsters, and they fault parents for the problems they see. At the same time, they readily acknowledge how tough it is to be a parent in today's world — even as they feel compassion for what the young are up against.

To some, the public's voice in *Kids These Days* may sound strident at times, or even contradictory. But Americans do recognize the complexity of the problem. People are critical of parents and kids, but they

here are troubling obstacles to volunteerism that do not lend themselves to a quick fix or clever slogan.

are also sensitive to the problems they face. But most important of all, they are neither confused nor ambivalent on how best to help the youngsters. People are riveted by one goal — the necessity of teaching all children the

values of integrity, ethical behavior, concern for others, respect, civility, compassion, and responsibility. They believe that these values are the arsenal children need to become responsible adults and to benefit society.

A Sweeping Diagnosis

Many of those who spend their professional lives helping children worry that America pays lip service to the young but doesn't really care about them. We found quite the opposite to be true. People are deeply concerned. They are frightened for these children, who seem to be growing up with such serious deficits in character and morals. And sadly, in some cases, they are frightened of these children as well. As the study points out, however, such attitudes are not reserved solely for teenagers; nor are they directed exclusively at the residents of our most disadvantaged inner cities. The diagnosis is much more sweeping, encompassing all of society and including the very young.

Traditional child advocacy has historically focused on ending poverty and improving the health of young people through expanded nutrition and medical care. While many people find these goals persuasive, and few Americans adamantly oppose them, they are — given the focus of the public's concerns — somewhat beside the point.

The Need For Responsible Adults

People of every persuasion are crying out for adults — in any guise — to help youngsters become peaceable, disciplined, and respectable human beings. They want schools to play a very significant role. They want children to be taught such values as honesty, tolerance, and respect for others, and they want students to be held accountable for their behavior.

Further, they call for parents to begin taking parenting seriously, to understand the sacrifices that must be made, to understand that all young people need discipline and limits to thrive, and thereby start life on the right foot. And, they endorse the need for individuals, schools, and agencies other than the government to step in and fill the gaps when parents have serious trouble raising their children properly.

As we have observed, however, there are troubling obstacles to volunteerism that do not lend themselves to a quick fix or clever slogan. Free time is increasingly hard to come by these days, but discomfort over intruding into someone else's life is the real action-stopper. Reserve and hesitancy have overwhelmed old-fashioned "neighborliness." People simply seem to have lost confidence that "people are people" everywhere.

No Magic Bullets

America has not reached this impasse overnight, nor will the situation be remedied in a fortnight. There is no magic potion that will quickly unleash the public's desire to care for all of the nation's youngsters. But the public has defined the path we must follow to regain our footing.

For many of those who have labored long and hard to help children and teenagers, this message may be tough to take. But if we are truly committed to engaging all Americans in the business of improving the lot of all youngsters, the centerpiece of such an endeavor must surely be the creation of a morally intact generation.



Deborah Wadsworth
Executive Director, Public Agenda

TABLE 1: VIEWS ON TEENAGERS

"Now I'm going to describe different types of teenagers and ask if you think they are common or not. How about teenagers who [INSERT ITEM]? Are they very common, somewhat common, not too common, or not common at all?"¹

% saying "very common"	General public	Parents	Parents of teens	African American parents	Hispanic parents	White parents
Face social problems like drugs, gangs, or crime	62%	66%	62%	71%	72%	64%
Get into trouble because they have too much free time	50	51	45	63	61	49
Have poor work habits and lack self-discipline	41	40	43	49	46	38
Lack good role models	36	36	35	43	34	36
Are wild and disorderly in public	30	33	30	49	43	31
Are lively and fun to be around	29	25	24	35	25	25
Are friendly and helpful toward their neighbors	12	10	12	16	14	10
Treat people with respect	12	9	9	17	11	8

1 Teenagers were defined for respondents as 13 to 17 years old

Sample Sizes:

General public = 2,000; Parents = 763; Parents of Teens = 162; Parents of Children = 293; African American Parents = 367; Hispanic Parents = 348 White Parents = 596; Youth = 600.

TABLE 2: VIEWS ON CHILDREN

"Now I'm going to describe different types of children and ask if you think they are common or not. How about children who are [INSERT ITEM]? Are they very common, somewhat common, not too common, or not common at all?"¹

% saying "very common"	General public	Parents	Parents of children	African American parents	Hispanic parents	White parents
Face social problems like drugs, gangs, or crime	54%	56%	52%	63%	58%	53%
Are spoiled and do not appreciate what they have	48	49	44	54	51	48
Don't get enough attention and support from adults	46	45	42	45	47	45
Are bright and eager to learn	32	32	37	40	37	32
Are out of control in public areas such as restaurants and movies	31	30	28	39	34	29
Are lazy and do not apply themselves	30	30	30	38	28	28
Are physically or sexually abused	21	23	21	31	29	21
Are friendly and helpful toward their neighbors	17	17	22	25	19	16
Treat people with respect	12	11	14	20	14	9

1. Children¹¹ were defined for respondents as older than 5 but not yet teenagers.

TABLE 3: VIEWS ON PARENTS

"Now I'm going to describe different types of parents and ask if you think they are common or not. How about parents who [INSERT ITEM]? Are they very common, somewhat common, not too common, or not common at all?"

% saying "very common"	General public	Parents	African American parents	Hispanic parents	White parents	Youth (12-17 years old)
Mothers who have to give up time with their kids to work so their families can make ends meet	75%	78%	83%	76%	79%	NA
People who have children before they are ready to take responsibility for them	63	65	72	69	63	41
Parents who break up too easily instead of trying to stay together for the sake of their kids	55	57	56	57	58	31
Parents who sacrifice and work hard so that their kids can have a better life	51	54	65	58	52	50
Parents who do not know how to communicate with their kids	51	52	54	56	51	32
Parents who think buying things for their kids means the same thing as caring for them	50	51	53	52	51	29
Parents who fail to discipline their children	50	50	58	49	50	33
Parents who spoil their kids	49	50	56	46	50	43
Parents who resent advice about their kids even when it comes from people who mean well	43	42	48	44	40	NA
Fathers who act like their careers are more important than their kids	35	35	47	39	33	NA
Parents who care more about their jobs than their kids	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	11
Parents who abuse welfare and teach their kids to depend on handouts	32	31	41	43	29	NA
Mothers who give up time with their kids and go to work to gain personal satisfaction	27	29	32	33	26	NA
People who are failures as parents and should never have had kids to begin with	22	21	31	29	17	12
Fathers who are affectionate and loving toward their kids ¹	22	20	24	20	20	35
Parents who are good role models and teach their kids right from wrong	22	19	32	25	18	39

1. Wording for Youth: "Fathers who are warm and loving toward their kids"

TABLE 4: PROBLEMS FACING TODAY'S KIDS

"I'm going to describe different problems and ask if you think each is a serious problem facing today's kids. How about [INSERT ITEM]? Is that problem very serious, somewhat serious, not too serious, or not serious at all for today's kids?"

[If "very" or "somewhat serious":] "Do you think this problem mostly affects kids from lower income families, or is it widespread?"

% saying problem is "very serious"	General public	Parents	African American parents	Hispanic parents	White parents
% saying problem is "widespread"					
Kids abusing drugs or alcohol	71%	69%	79%	83%	67%
Kids abusing drugs or alcohol is widespread	95	95	93	93	95
Kids seeing too much violence or sex on television and in the movies	69	71	76	75	71
Kids seeing too much violence/sex in the media is widespread	96	97	95	95	98
Kids threatened by crime or gangs	62	64	77	77	60
Kids threatened by crime/gangs is widespread	67	70	75	73	71
Kids failing to learn such values as honesty, respect and responsibility	61	63	67	66	62
Kids failing to learn values is widespread	91	91	88	90	92
Welfare programs that encourage single-parent families and teen pregnancy	58	57	66	62	55
Welfare programs encouraging single-parent families/teen pregnancies is widespread	46	47	55	50	46
Public schools that fail to give kids a good education	49	52	60	53	49
Public schools failing to give kids a good education is widespread	76	77	61	71	80
Fewer families teaching their kids religious faith and values	49	50	58	55	48
Fewer families teaching religion/values is widespread	95	95	91	92	95
Kids suffering because of economic pressure on their parents	44	44	60	53	42
Kids suffering from economic pressure on parents is widespread	64	67	64	61	69
Kids lacking the support of strong communities where neighbors care about them	40	44	58	45	41
Kids lacking support from communities is widespread	80	82	74	72	84
Families facing a shortage of government programs that support kids	27	30	47	36	27
Shortage of government programs that support kids is widespread	50	51	43	54	51

Percentages saying problems are widespread are based on respondents who identified the problems as either very or somewhat serious

TABLE 5: WAYS TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE

Now I'll read different ways to help kids and ask how effective you think each would be. Do you think that [INSERT ITEM] would be a very effective way to help kids, somewhat effective, not too effective, or not effective at all?

% saying "very effective"	General public	Parents	African American parents	Hispanic parents	White parents	Youth (12-17 years old)
Improving the quality of the public schools ²	67%	71%	76%	67%	70%	51%
More programs and activities for kids to do after school in places like community centers	60	60	75	67	57	46
Employers giving parents more flexible work schedules so they can spend more time with their kids	55	57	66	59	58	NA
Nighttime curfews after which kids could not be on the streets without their parents	53	55	63	66	54	30
More involvement by volunteer organizations dedicated to kids, like the Boy Scouts and the YMCA	53	51	61	55	50	NA
Pressuring the entertainment industry to produce movies and music with less violence and sex	49	50	54	58	49	26
Tougher punishment for kids who commit crime	48	51	50	48	52	49
Neighbors spending more time with kids and watching out for them	47	49	59	46	48	33
Increasing the wages and job security of parents	44	46	60	51	44	NA
Holding parents legally responsible when their kids get into trouble	37	35	32	37	37	15
More government funding for child care and health care programs	34	37	56	45	36	NA
Increasing government funding for such welfare programs as AFDC and food stamps	10	8	16	13	8	NA

1. Wording for youth: "Now I'll read different ways to help kids and ask how effective you think each would be."

2. Wording for youth: "Making the public schools better"

TABLE 6: GENERAL VIEWS OF HELPING

Now I'll read you statements about helping people. Please tell me how close each come to your own view. [INSERT STATEMENT.] Is that very close, somewhat close, not too close or not close at all to your view?

% saying "very close"	General public	Parents	African American parents	Hispanic parents	White parents	Youth (12-17 years old)
People should help others because it is the right thing to do	75%	75%	76%	65%	76%	70
Someone who gets help should show that he appreciates it	60	60	71	57	60	69
You have to be careful to avoid embarrassing people when you try to help them	56	54	64	53	52	42
People usually help out of the goodness of their hearts	55	53	57	61	53	40
When someone gets help he should reciprocate and return the favor when he can	51	50	54	41	52	56
People who help others are usually appreciated	44	41	52	44	41	NA
You have to be careful because some people will try to take advantage of you when you try to help	37	37	60	43	34	37
Many people help only when they think they can get something in return	24	21	31	22	19	NA
People who spend a lot of time helping others often forget to take care of their own families	17	16	23	23	15	NA
Many people help only when they feel embarrassed or pressured to do so	16	13	20	15	12	NA
People who help often interfere in other people's personal affairs	14	14	17	16	13	NA

1. Wording for youth: "Someone who gets help should return the favor when he can"

TABLE 7: HELPING – COMFORT LEVEL AND BEHAVIOR

"Now I'll describe different ways of trying to help kids and ask which you would feel comfortable doing and which you would feel uncomfortable doing. How about [INSERT ITEM]? Would you feel very comfortable doing that, somewhat comfortable, somewhat uncomfortable, or very uncomfortable?"*

"Have you done anything like that in the past six months?"

% saying they would be "very comfortable" doing item	% saying "yes" they have done something like item in past six months		General public		Parents		African American parents		Hispanic parents		White parents	
Complimenting a neighbor's child who has done a good deed or done well in school	85%	70%	89%	70%	89%	78%	89%	76%	81%	71%	89%	79%
Taking some extra time off from work just to do something special with your kids ¹	NA	NA	80	72	81	69	82	69	79	72		
Watching a child for a neighbor who has to run an errand	71	52	79	70	74	65	73	65	79	69		
Taking a child to a ball game or a show ²	62	43	71	60	75	54	69	60	71	60		
Helping out a neighbor who is a new mother with a baby	56	29	66	37	70	43	64	39	66	35		
Having a serious discussion with a teenager who is not your own about a problem they are having	52	46	56	52	69	61	52	45	54	51		
Volunteering to be a mentor or to help in some way at a local school	48	24	55	33	61	34	56	29	54	32		
Joining a volunteer organization that helps kids ³	47	23	52	28	63	27	53	17	49	28		
Taking some action if you suspect a neighbor is abusing their child	47	10	48	11	59	12	51	11	49	11		
Telling kids who are misbehaving in a public area to behave themselves	39	47	44	58	50	60	40	51	44	58		
Knocking on a neighbor's door if you think the family needs help	38	26	40	29	46	32	39	23	40	29		
Telling a neighbor that their child had been getting into mischief	33	28	39	39	59	43	37	37	37	38		

1. Asked of parents or guardians of children under 18 who live with them

2. Wording for parents/guardians: "Taking a child who is not your own to a ball game or a show"

3. Follow-up question: "Are you now a member of this type of organization?" Chart shows percent saying "yes"

* Respondents were assured that no one would contact them about doing any of these activities.

TABLE 8: WAYS TO VOLUNTEER

Suppose you wanted to do something new to help kids and you were considering different options What if [INSERT ITEM]? Would that make you more likely to help, less likely, or would it not make much difference? [IF LIKELY: Is that much more likely or somewhat more likely?]*

% saying "much more likely"	General public	Parents	African American parents	Hispanic parents	White parents
You could bring kids along to an activity you already do with your own children [†]	NA%	50%	56%	57%	48%
You could help occasionally, whenever you found extra time, instead of making a regular commitment	47	49	51	52	49
You could take kids to something you enjoyed, like a hobby or a sports event	45	49	58	55	48
You could develop a special bond with one child	37	41	46	43	39
Your close friends were already involved	34	35	35	43	36
You could meet new friends while helping kids	32	34	44	41	32
The kids you were helping came from an inner-city neighborhood	14	13	22	20	10
You could donate your time to a kids' organization without dealing with the kids themselves	12	11	18	21	9

† Asked of parents or guardians of children under 18 who live with them.

* Respondents were assured that no one would contact them about doing any of these activities.

TABLE 9: THE VIEWS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

"Now I'll ask you how close each of the following statements comes to how you feel. [INSERT STATEMENT.] Is that very close, somewhat close, not too close or not close at all to your view?"

% saying "very close"	Youth (12-17 years old)
I can always trust my parents to be there for me when I need them	81%
If I ever need to talk to an adult, there is someone other than my parents I can go to	70
Faith in God is an important part of my life	66
I can always trust my friends to be there for me when I need them	62
I am usually happy	61
I am good at helping other kids with their problems	48
Many of the adults in my neighborhood know me by name	46
My parents would be very upset if they knew some of the things my friends have done	40
My parents sometimes press me to stay home in the evening because they think it's not safe out there	30
When my friends and I are in stores or at the mall, we often get suspicious looks, as if we're up to no good	25
My parents don't really understand the problems I face	24
I avoid certain areas in my neighborhood just to be safe	24
I enjoy spending time with people who are in their 60s or older	21

TABLE 10: YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES

Now I'm going to describe some things and ask how often you experience them. How often do you [INSERT STATEMENT]? Every day, almost every day, sometimes, almost never, or never?

% saying "every day" or "almost every day"	Youth (12-17 years old)
Get a hug or kiss from your parents	68%
Get a compliment or encouraging words from adults	65
Come across teachers who really care about their students	60
Get help or advice from your parents with homework or school projects	51
See people your age using drugs or alcohol	41
Feel bored	39
Come across adults who have a hard time dealing with people your age	34
Come across people who try to put you down	30
Get excited by something you study in school	26
Wish you had more good friends	26
Cut corners when it comes to schoolwork	24
Feel tense or nervous about your day	24
Come across gangs	22
Get into an argument with your parents	22
Come across people who try to intimidate or bully you	18
Worry about how well your parents are getting along	18
Worry about having enough food or a place to sleep	5
Get into a physical fight with other people your age	4

TABLE II: COMFORT LEVEL AND BEHAVIOR OF YOUNG PEOPLE

"Now I'll describe different ways of helping and ask which you feel comfortable doing and which you would feel uncomfortable doing....How about [INSERT ITEM]? Would you feel very comfortable, somewhat comfortable, somewhat uncomfortable, or very uncomfortable doing that?"*

"Have you done anything like that in the past six months?"

% saying "very comfortable"	% saying "yes," they have done something like item in the past six months	Youth (12-17 years old)	
Running an errand for a neighbor who needed help		67%	51%
Watching a younger child for a neighbor as a favor, without getting paid		59	60
Doing volunteer work once a week at a place like a hospital or church		55	37
Helping to feed poor or homeless people at a place like a soup kitchen		51	24
Volunteering to tutor kids at school		47	37
Spending time once a week with very old people who need company		44	41

* Respondents were assured that no one would contact them about doing any of these activities.

ENDNOTES

1. Princeton Survey Research Associates (sponsored by *Newsweek* and NBC News). National telephone survey of 656 adults, conducted April, 1997. "Which of the following is a bigger threat to the United States...foreign nations working against us, or young Americans without education, job prospects or connections to mainstream American life?" Foreign nations, 18%; Young Americans, 74%; Don't know, 8%.

2. For example, Princeton Survey Research Associates has conducted many surveys that include questions on attitudes toward teenagers, including the Family Circle Family Index Project, for *Family Circle* magazine in June, 1993 and *Speaking of Kids—A National Survey of Children and Parents* (June 1991), conducted for the National Commission on Children.

3. After hitting a low of 27% in 1992, the percentage of high school seniors who have used any illicit drug in the past 12 months has increased each year, reaching 40% in 1996. Source: National Institute on Drug Abuse, *Monitoring the Future Study*, 1996.

The suicide rate for people ages 15 to 19 increased from 5.9 per 100,000 in 1970 to 10.8 per 100,000 in 1990. More recent data shows that for people ages 15 to 24 the suicide rate increased from an estimated rate of 12.9 per 100,000 in 1992 to 14.9 per 100,000 in 1994. Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Trends in the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth: 1996*, p. 88.

In 1994, 21.2% of children under 18 lived in poverty. Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Youth Indicators, 1996*, p. 54.

In 1994, 30% of children lived with either one parent (27%) or no parent (3%). Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Trends in the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth: 1996*, p. 21.

Forty-eight percent of public school students say "too much drugs and violence in school" is a serious problem, and 68% identify cheating on tests and assignments as a serious problem. Source: *Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools*, Public Agenda, 1997, p. 42.

4. Hart and Teeter Research Companies (sponsored by NBC News and the *Wall Street Journal*). National telephone survey of 2,003 adults, conducted December, 1996. Fifty-one percent agreed with the statement "Most serious problems in our society stem mainly from a decline in moral values, 37% agreed

with the statement "Most serious problems in our society stem mainly from economic and financial pressure on the family." Eleven percent volunteered that they agreed with both statements and 1% were not sure which statement was closer to their view.

5. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (ed. Peter H. Nidditch), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

6. See: *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools*, Public Agenda, 1994; and *Getting By*, p. 42.

7. For example, see *Great Expectations: How American Voters View Children's Issues* (published by the Coalition for America's Children, 1997) and the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey 1990 for many survey questions on support for proposals and programs that benefit children, such as nutrition programs, pre-school programs, health care, and child care.

8. *The Values We Live By: What Americans Want from Welfare Reform*, Public Agenda, 1996.

9. See: *First Things First and Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform*, Public Agenda, 1995, p. 43.

10. See Public Agenda's three statewide studies on attitudes toward crime and sentencing: *Punishing Criminals: The Public's View, An Alabama Survey* (1989); *Punishing Criminals: The People of Delaware Consider the Options* (1991); and *Punishing Criminals: Pennsylvanians Consider the Options* (1993).

11. *The Values We Live By*, p. 18.

12. For example, of those earning \$15,000 or less per year, 60% of black parents, 53% of Hispanic parents, and 52% of white parents think that more government funding for children and health care programs would be a very effective way to help kids. For those earning \$25,001 to \$40,000 per year, 61% of black parents, 48% of Hispanic parents and 37% of white parents say the same.

13. For example, of those earning \$15,000 or less per year, 62% of black parents, 59% of Hispanic parents, and 52% of white parents think increasing the wages and job security of parents would be a very effective way to help kids. For those earning \$25,001 to \$40,000 per year, 63% of black parents, 51% of Hispanic parents and 43% of white parents say the same.

Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About The Next Generation is based on two telephone surveys within the continental United States. The first is a survey of 2,000 adults aged 18 years or older, plus oversamples of 300 African American and 300 Hispanic parents. The second is a survey of 600 young people aged 12 to 17 years old. In addition, six focus groups were conducted in sites across the country, as well as dozens of in-depth, follow-up telephone interviews with adults who had completed the survey.

The Survey Of Adults

Two-thousand telephone interviews with adult members of the general public were conducted between December 3 and December 18, 1996. The interviews averaged approximately 39 minutes in length. The interviews were conducted using a random sample of households and a standard, random-digit-dialing technique whereby every household in the region covered had an equal chance of being contacted, including those with unlisted numbers. The margin of error for the 2,000 members of the general public is plus or minus two percentage points; the margin of error is higher when comparing percentages across subgroups.

In addition to the national random sample interviews, oversample interviews were conducted with 300 African American and 300 Hispanic parents of children under the age of 18 living at home. When the study reports results about African American and Hispanic parents, it pools the oversampled parents with those appearing "naturally" in the national sample, netting 367 African American parents and 348 Hispanic parents.

The Survey Of Young People

Six-hundred telephone interviews with young people aged 12 to 17 years old were conducted between December 3 and December 18, 1996. The interviews averaged approximately 23 minutes in length. Similar to the adult sample, the interviews were conducted using a random sample of households and a standard, random-digit-dialing technique whereby every household in the region covered had an equal chance of being contacted, including those with unlisted numbers. The margin of error for the 600 young people is plus or minus four percentage points.

Interviewers were instructed to provide details about the purpose and content of the study, and to encourage parents to contact Public Agenda if they wished to know more about the survey their child had participated in.

The Questionnaires

The questionnaires were designed by Public Agenda, and all interpretation of data reflected in this report was done by Public Agenda. As in all surveys, question order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including extensively pre-testing the survey instruments and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked.

Western Watts supplied the sample. Interviews were conducted by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc. of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

The Focus Groups

Focus groups allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the dynamics underlying the public's attitudes toward complex issues. Insights from these groups were important to the survey design, and quotes were drawn from them to give voice to attitudes captured statistically through the survey interviews.

A total of six focus groups were conducted. Five focus groups took place in May 1996 in three cities: Long Beach, California; Denver, Colorado; and Secaucus, New Jersey. In Long Beach two focus groups were conducted, one with African American parents, and one with teenagers aged 15 to 18 years old. In Denver two focus groups were conducted, one with parents and one with young people aged 12 to 14 years old. In Secaucus, one focus group was conducted with adults who were not parents of school-aged children living at home. One focus group of high school students was conducted in September 1995 in Westchester, New York. In all cases, local professional market research organizations recruited participants to Public Agenda's specifications. All focus groups were moderated by Public Agenda senior staff.

RELATED PUBLIC AGENDA PUBLICATIONS

**Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools* (1997). Public high school students are the focus of this national telephone survey that examines how teens view their schools, teachers, and the learning process. Includes insights into what students say would motivate them to work harder in school and how they define "good" and "bad" teaching. Special sections on African American and Hispanic students, private high school students, and students from Jefferson County, Kentucky and the San Francisco Bay Area are included. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$10.00.

The Troubled American Family: Which Way Out Of The Storm? (1996). Prepared for the National Issues Forums (NIF), this issues book examines the pressured American family. Three diagnoses of what has gone wrong with the family as well as three courses of public action are explored. NIF consists of locally initiated town meetings and study circles that bring citizens together in over 5,000 communities across the nation for nonpartisan discussions. The publication can be ordered from McGraw-Hill by calling 1-800-338-3987.

A new National Issues Forums book with a focus on children will be available in the fall of 1997. This NIF issues book will focus on the problems today's young people are facing. Three approaches that have wide public support will be explored. The publication will be available for ordering from Kendall/Hunt by calling 1-800-228-0810.

**The Values We Live By: What Americans Want From Welfare Reform* (1996). This study examines public attitudes toward welfare reform: what bothers Americans about welfare; why they are so frustrated with the current system; what kind of change they are seeking. A special focus on the views of African Americans and residents of New York, Florida, and Illinois is included. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$10.00.

**Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business Of Education Reform* (1995). Prepared in collaboration with the Institute for Educational Leadership, this study examines why support for public schools is in jeopardy; why Americans are so concerned with the basics; whether people are really committed to higher standards; and whether they value education in and of itself. This study is based on a telephone survey of 1,200 Americans, including oversamples of parents with children attending public schools and public school teachers, plus a mail survey of leaders in business, education, government, and the media, and focus groups. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$10.00.

**First Things First: What Americans Expect From The Public Schools* (1994). Based on an examination of the views of over 1,100 members of the general public, including 550 parents of children currently in public school, this report looks at public attitudes toward values issues in the schools and toward education reform efforts. A special focus on the views of white and African American parents, as well as parents identified as traditional Christians, is included. Copies are available from Public Agenda for \$10.00.

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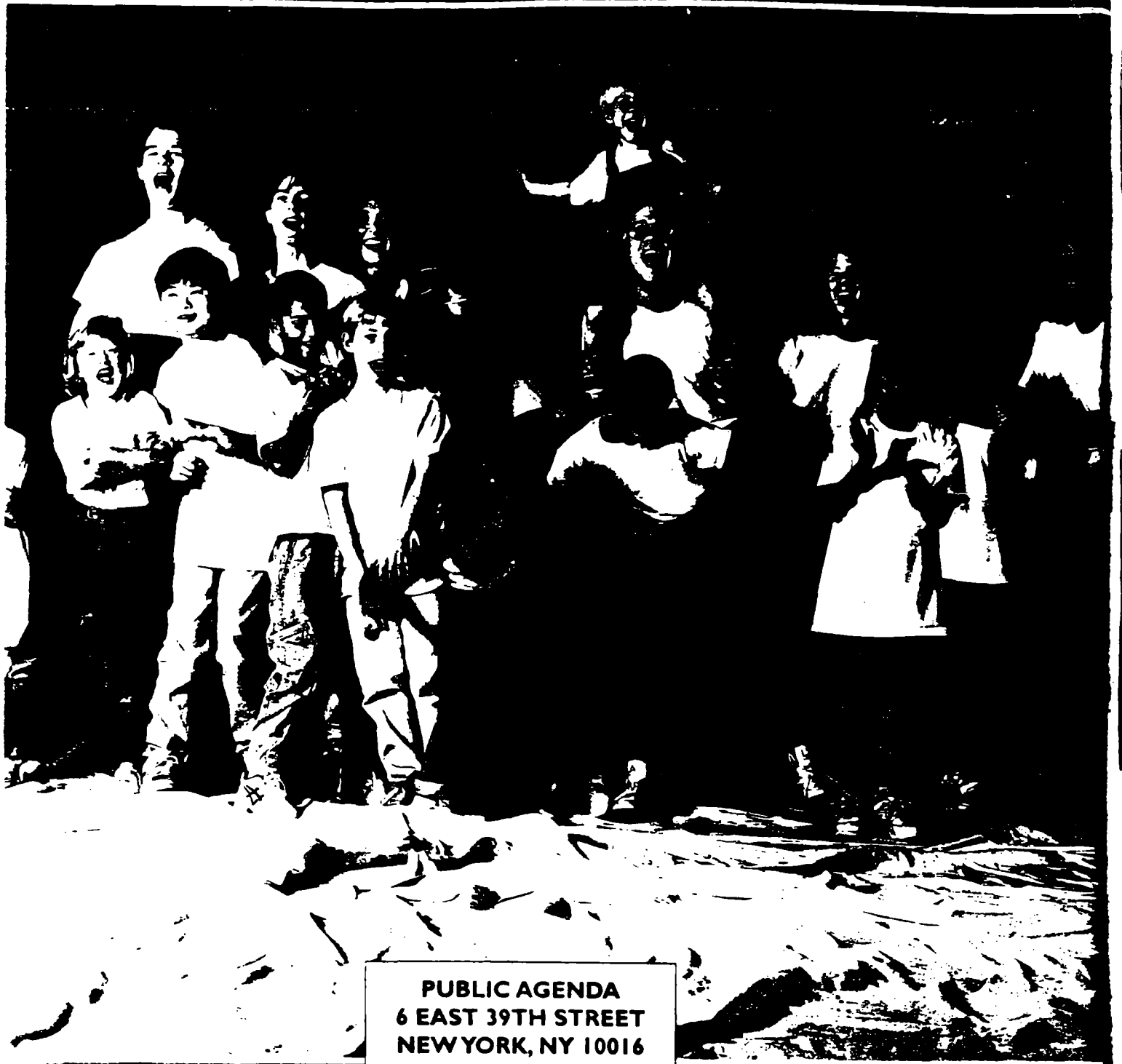
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