



Life as a teenager in Pennsylvania



**Pennsylvania
Partnerships for Children**

Risk & Protective Factors Youth in Transition Series

Most Pennsylvanians likely would agree that it is important to recognize the good grades and good deeds of today's youth, to show awareness of; approve of and appreciate their hard work. So, one would hope that today's teenagers feel that their parents and teachers encourage them, support them, cheer them on for a job well done, right?

Though we may think this support of our youth is overt, or at least implied, teens tell us their experiences are quite different.

A survey of about 75,000 Pennsylvania teens shows many of them do not feel supported or protected by their schools, families, neighbors and communities. The Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS), conducted in 2003 by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, in cooperation with the Pennsylvania Department of Education, obtained data from a representative sample of 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th graders in urban, rural, and suburban communities in every region of the state.

The PAYS survey queried students about "protective factors" in their lives, such as clear standards for behavior communicated by families, schools and communities; strong bonds with adults who hold healthy beliefs; and an investment in positive lines of action such as school, service and work. These protective factors "can buffer young people from risks and promote positive youth development"¹ and help smooth the journey from youth to adulthood.

Fully 45 percent of students responded that they are not praised by teachers for good work, that their teachers do not tell parents about good work, and that they do not feel safe in school. Home is where youth feel most appreciated for their accomplishments. Still, 25 percent reported that their parents do not express pride in their accomplishments or that they enjoy spending time with their parents. About one-third said they do not feel strong enough family attachments to share thoughts and feelings with parents.

A recent national survey echoes some bleak opinions of Pennsylvania's youth. In August, nearly one-third of all teens surveyed nationwide said "now is a bad time to be growing up."²

Whether we agree with these perceptions or not is irrelevant. What matters is what our kids perceive, and this despair is a part of their lives. If they do not feel

A Snapshot of Pennsylvania Youth Poverty

- One in 3 Pennsylvanians aged 12-21 lives in a low-income family, below 200 percent of federal poverty level (\$37,700 for a family of four).

Graduation Gap

- Of the 153,523 ninth graders who started high school in 2000-01, those not reaching graduation in the same district four years later totaled 33,349, or 21.7 percent – more than one in five students.

Foster Care

- In 2004, 12,166 children (eight out of 1,000) were placed in foster care/out of home for a variety of reasons including family instability, poverty and abuse and neglect.

Juvenile Justice

- More than 40,000 Pennsylvania youth ages 12-21 had a juvenile court disposition in 2003.

Teen Parents

- In 2002, 9.2 percent of babies in PA were born to mothers under age 20;
- In Pennsylvania, there are 26,047 teenage girls who are juggling the challenges of being a young mother.

Limited English Proficiency (LEP)

- Statewide, 1 in 50 students has limited English proficiency, but in some school districts such as Allentown, Lancaster and Lebanon, more than 1 in 10 students struggle to learn English.

Disabilities

- Fourteen percent (255,370) of Pennsylvania high school students have disabilities;
- Approximately 29,659 students (1.6 percent) have severe disabilities.

1 Channing Bete Company. *Pennsylvania Youth Survey Report*, 2004.

2 *National Teen Comparison Survey*, *The Washington Post*, Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Harvard University



Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

20 N. Market Square, Suite 300
Harrisburg, PA 17101-1632

www.papartnerships.org

717-236-5680

1-800-257-2030

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children gratefully acknowledges the generous financial support for this project by The Annie E. Casey Foundation and the William Penn Foundation.



safe and supported as young people, how can we expect them to transition successfully to become well-adjusted adult members of society?

The PAYS survey also identified a number of “risk factors” in communities, families, schools, and peer groups. These factors – such as the availability of drugs and firearms; low neighborhood attachment; poverty, and a lack of commitment to school – are “known to increase the likelihood that a student will engage in one or more problem behaviors.”³ Decades of research supports the view that alcohol, tobacco, and drug use, delinquency, poor school achievement, and other negative outcomes for young people are associated with the presence of a number of risk factors.⁴

About three out of ten teens (31 percent) reported it would be easy to obtain alcohol, tobacco, drugs, or handguns, including twice as many (65 percent) 12th graders. About 22 percent said neighbors would not think it is wrong for students to use marijuana, drink alcohol, or smoke, and nine percent reported they live in communities that are unsafe and in which there are crimes, drug dealing, fights, abandoned buildings, and graffiti. Young people need family guidance, but 10 percent reported poor family supervision (or lack of clear rules, questions about homework, or knowledge of the student’s whereabouts).

When there is an absence of hope and the belief that they are not supported, young people tend to think less about the risks they take, perhaps reasoning, “Who cares, anyway?” The fact that kids aren’t buffered from risks means they have a more difficult time transitioning to adulthood. And we want all youth to be ready for whatever life throws their way: to be a productive member of society, a solid citizen and to earn a family-sustaining wage.

What is PPC doing to help smooth the transition from youth to adulthood? We are dedicating resources to analyzing the conditions of teenagers in Pennsylvania; convening a coalition of key stakeholders to develop and advance a public policy agenda; and reaching out to policymakers at the state and federal level to partner with PPC to improve chances that youth in PA will transition successfully to adulthood.

Research shows that young adults need the following to successfully transition to adulthood:

- An education that prepares them for the rigors of college or a competitive labor market; they need skills that create the potential to earn wages that will support themselves and a family someday;
- To avoid risky behaviors such as illegal drug use in order to become healthy, well-adjusted adults;
- Strong interpersonal relationships with friends and family who support their growth and achievements;
- Strong connections to the community that forge a sense of belonging.

The absence of any of these key factors creates challenges that impede a successful transition; plus the weaker the support system for a teen, the greater the risk.

But there also **must** be optimism and anticipation for what the future holds. There **must** be an expectation by our young people that their parents, teachers and community members support them and care about the choices they make.

Just how do we create more support and help minimize the risk factors in young people’s lives? That is a question that all of us should be asking: parents, teachers, policymakers and community members alike. It’s not just a government problem with a government solution, or a classroom issue with an education fix. It’s also a people issue with a human remedy. They are our youth and we **must** put their needs first and encourage them every step of the way.

3 Channing Bete Company. *Pennsylvania Youth Survey Report*. 2004, p. 44

4 Hawkins, Catalano, and Miller. “Risk and Protective Factors for Alcohol and Other Drug Problems in Adolescence and Early Adulthood: Implications for Substance Abuse Prevention,” *Psychological Bulletin*, 112, 1992, pp. 64-105.