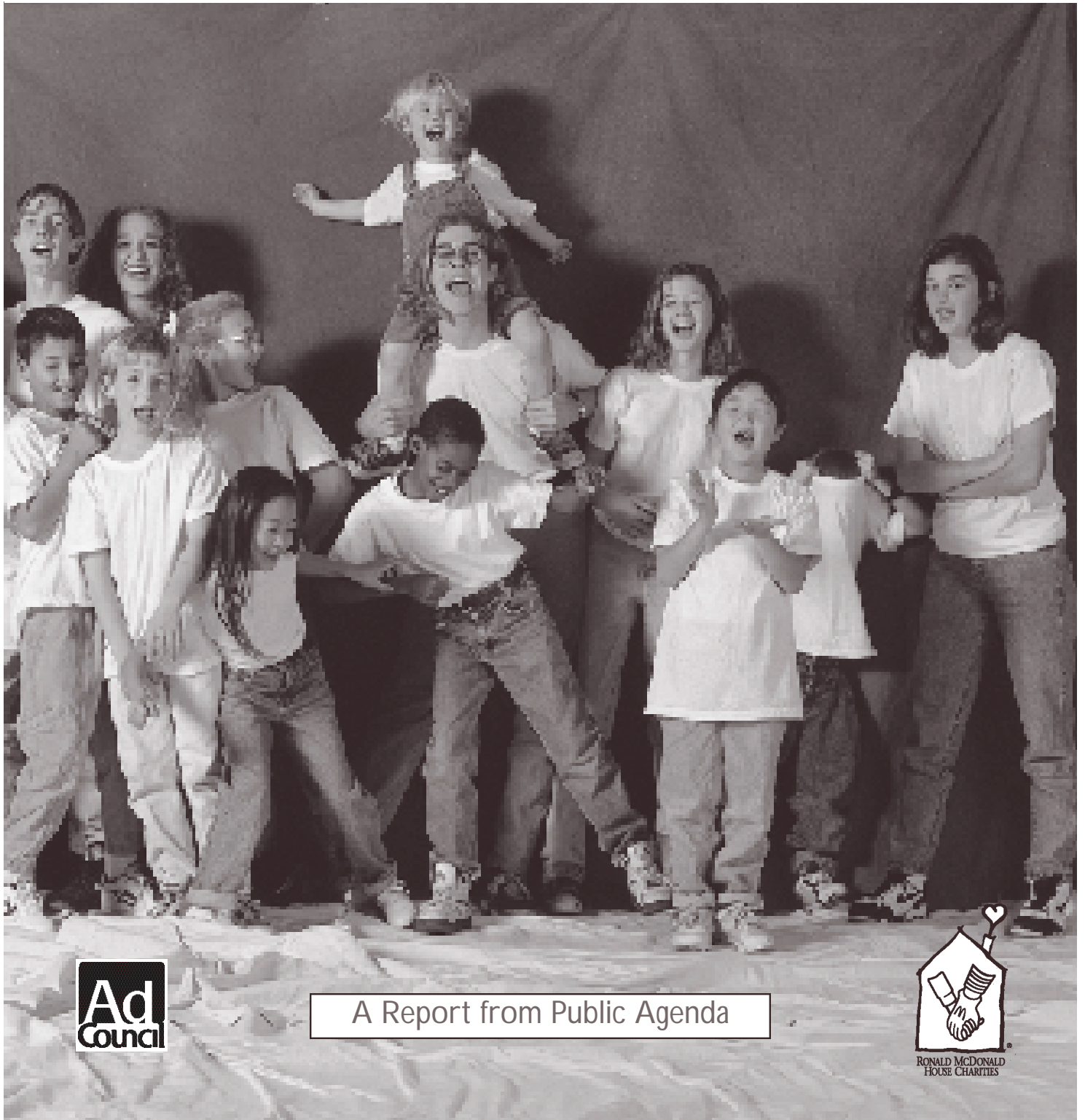


KIDS THESE DAYS '99

WHAT AMERICANS REALLY THINK ABOUT
THE NEXT GENERATION



A Report from Public Agenda



RONALD McDONALD
HOUSE CHARITIES

INTRODUCTION

Two years ago, with support from Ronald McDonald House Charities and The Advertising Council, Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, released a landmark opinion survey exploring Americans' attitudes about children and teens. Entitled *Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation*, the study revealed a pervasive concern among Americans that the nation's children face a crisis—not an economic crisis brought on by extensive poverty or joblessness, but rather a moral crisis, one that has emerged because adults have failed to teach them about character and values.

Kids These Days attracted widespread attention from journalists, policy makers, educators, and professionals in law enforcement and the religious, charitable and philanthropic communities. It sparked a nationwide discussion about values among children, teens, and their families. *Congressional Quarterly* selected the study as one of the most significant documents published in 1997.

To determine whether Americans have changed their views on children and youth over the last two years, Public Agenda conducted a "tracking" survey—that is, a survey asking respondents to answer identical batteries of questions. We report the findings of this follow-up survey in the following pages. These results are based on a random sample telephone survey of 1,005 members of the public, including 384 parents of children under 18. The study also included a survey of 328 teenagers. This is the second in a series of five surveys, the last one scheduled for 2002.

Americans' concerns that too many children and teens are not absorbing the moral lessons that will allow them to grow into respectable, respectful, compassionate, and honorable human beings remain virtually unchanged. The consistency of opinion over time is notable: it both confirms the soundness of the benchmark study, and suggests how deep-seated and deeply felt Americans' anxieties about the next generation are. But while identifying and describing public concerns—and calling the country's attention to them—is important, it is merely a first step.

Ronald McDonald House Charities plans to use the research results to effect change in the communities it supports by awarding grants to organizations whose programs will significantly impact the lives of children and their families.

For the Ad Council, the results of this year's study only strengthen the need for communications programs that "help parents help kids." The Ad Council will continue to apply the research findings to its public service advertising campaigns that target parents and kids, and will actively develop new media partnerships aimed at positively influencing attitudes and behaviors towards these two critical segments of American society.

Kids These Days '99 was prepared by Ann Duffett, Jean Johnson, and Steve Farkas of Public Agenda. An online version of this report is available on Public Agenda's Web site at www.publicagenda.org. More information about Ronald McDonald House Charities, the Ad Council and Public Agenda can be found on page 11.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

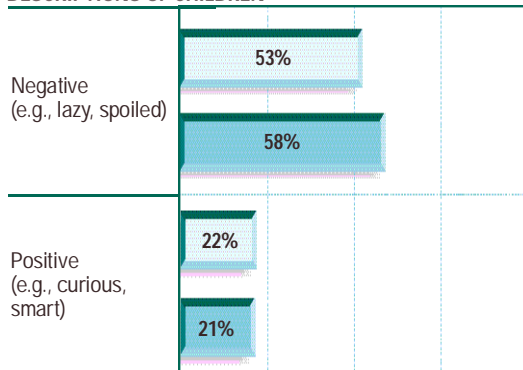
Public Agenda would like to thank the following individuals for their support and assistance during the preparation of *Kids These Days '99*: Ken Barun, Susan Kerr and the Board of Trustees of Ronald McDonald House Charities; Ruth Wooden, Paula Veale, Ken Ulmer, George Perlov, Katie Guillory and Pat Mitchell of The Advertising Council; Alex Kroll, Chairman Emeritus, The Advertising Council; Deborah Wadsworth, Margaret Suzor Dunning, Matthew Schuerman, Scott Bittle, Claire Aulicino and Patrick Foley of Public Agenda; and Dan Yankelovich, Public Agenda's co-founder and president.

FINDING ONE: Negative Reactions

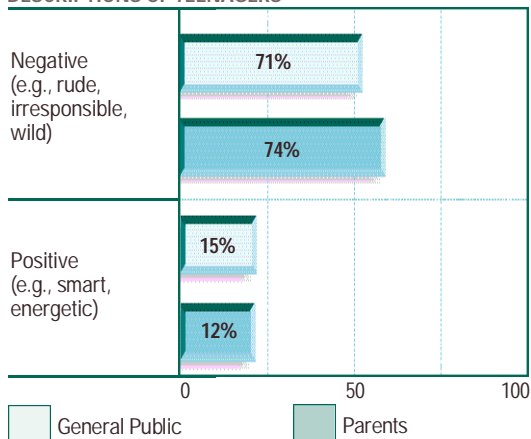
Most Americans are deeply disappointed with “kids these days.” More than seven in ten adults resort to words such as “rude,” “irresponsible,” and “wild” to describe today’s teens, and more than half also describe young children disapprovingly. On the whole, high hopes for kids are wanting—no more than two in five adults, parents or teens themselves say youngsters today will grow up to make America a better place.

Most Americans describe children and teens in negative terms.

DESCRIPTIONS OF CHILDREN

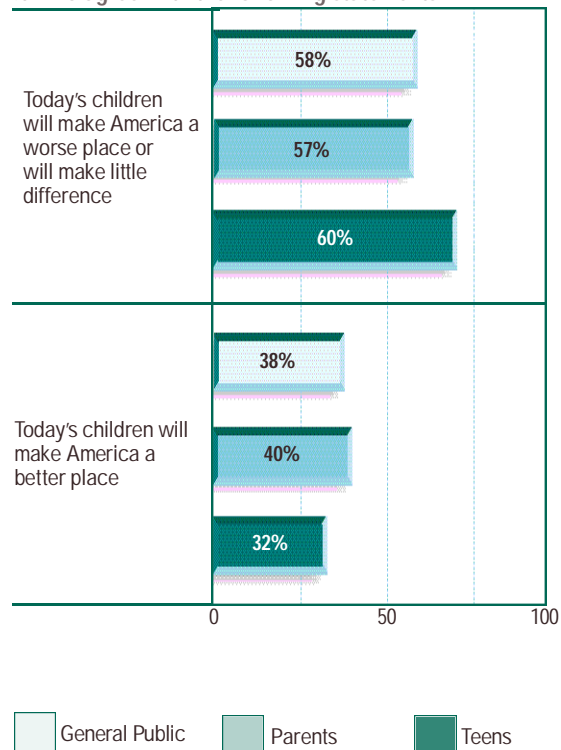


DESCRIPTIONS OF TEENAGERS



Neither adults nor teens believe the next generation will make America a better place.

% who agree with the following statements:



Readers wishing to obtain more detail about the findings outlined in *Kids These Days '99* can refer to the benchmark study Public Agenda prepared in 1997. See page 11 for more information.

Note: Question wording in charts may be slightly edited for space. Percentages may not equal 100% because of rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

FINDING TWO: A Focus on Values and Respect

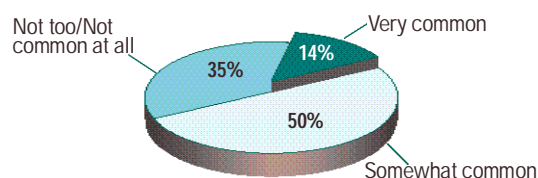
The American public believes too many youngsters today lack values and character and are severely short on basic civility. More people today than two years ago pick “failing to learn such values as honesty, respect and responsibility” as the number one problem affecting kids, and an overwhelming majority say this problem is widespread, not confined to kids from lower income families.¹ Only a handful of adults say it’s typical to come across children or teens who are friendly and helpful towards their neighbors, or who treat people with respect. These findings are consistent among both white and minority Americans.

Not learning values tops the public’s list of problems facing kids.

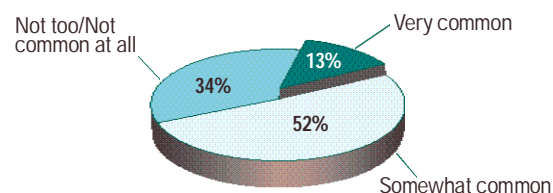
% ranking item as “most serious” out of 10 very serious problems	White Adults	Minority Adults
Not learning values like honesty, respect, and responsibility	33%	31%
Drug and alcohol abuse	23	29
Crime and gangs	9	10
Welfare programs that encourage single-parent families and teen pregnancy	9	6
Too much violence or sex in the media	7	3
Poor public schools	4	5
Fewer families teaching religious faith and values	3	4
Economic pressures on parents	3	3
Shortage of strong communities	3	5
Shortage of government programs that support kids	3	1

It’s not very common to come across friendly, helpful, respectful young people.

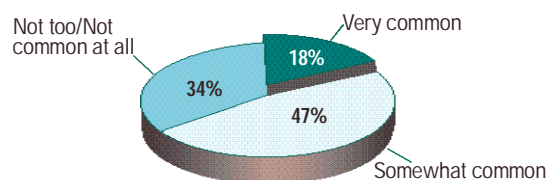
Teens who are friendly and helpful towards their neighbors



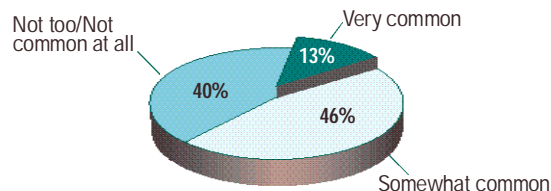
Teens who treat people with respect



Children who are friendly and helpful towards their neighbors



Children who treat people with respect

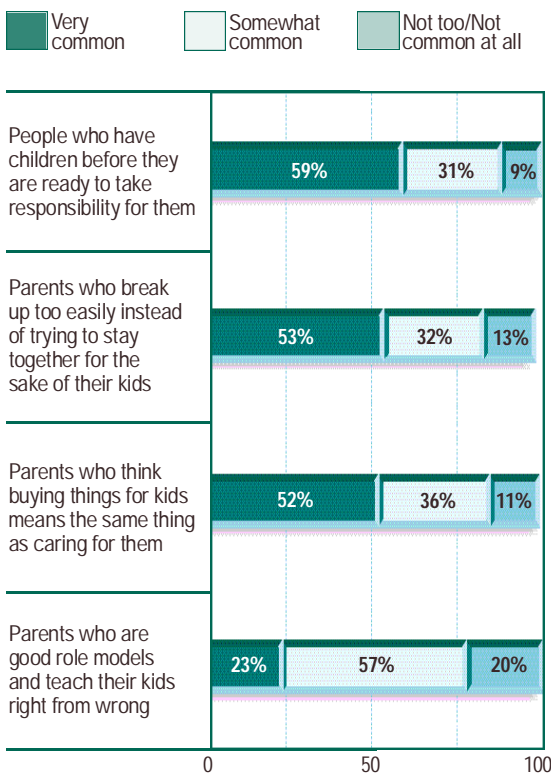


FINDING THREE: Putting the Blame on Parents

The public holds parents fundamentally responsible for how well—or not so well—kids are doing. Criticism about parents is plentiful—majorities believe that too many parents have children before they are ready, that too many hastily divorce without regard for their kids, and that too many equate buying things for kids with caring for them. Fewer than one in four say parents who are good role models are very common. If anything, the poor reviews for today’s parents are getting worse. People are more likely to blame parents—rather than social forces—for problems with kids than they were just two years ago.

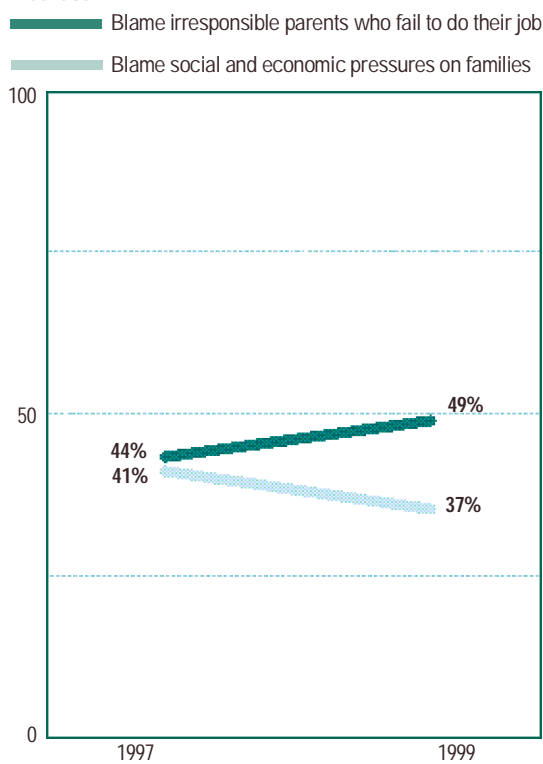
Americans think too many parents fail to do their job.

% of general public saying each item is:



Today, more Americans blame irresponsible parents rather than economic pressures for the problems kids face.

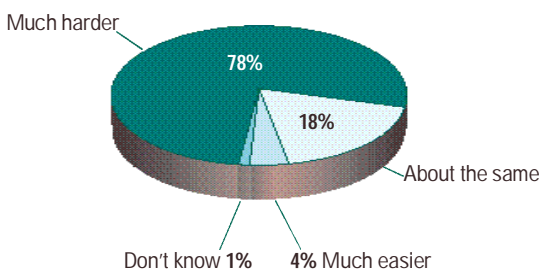
% of general public who blame the following for the problems kids face:



FINDING FOUR: Difficult Circumstances

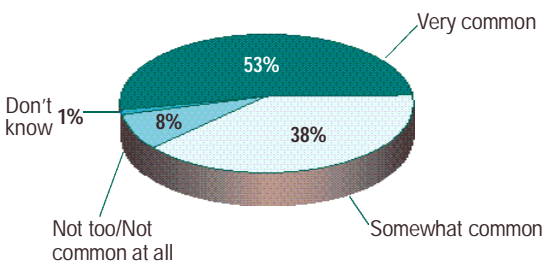
Despite their criticism of parents, most Americans acknowledge that families have a tough job to do under difficult circumstances. More than three in four adults believe it's much harder for parents to do their job these days, and a majority says it's not unusual to find parents who make sacrifices for their children. Likewise, the public is sympathetic to parents, recognizing that outside forces—such as drugs, violence and crime—sometimes undermine their efforts to raise good kids.

People believe it's harder to be a parent today...



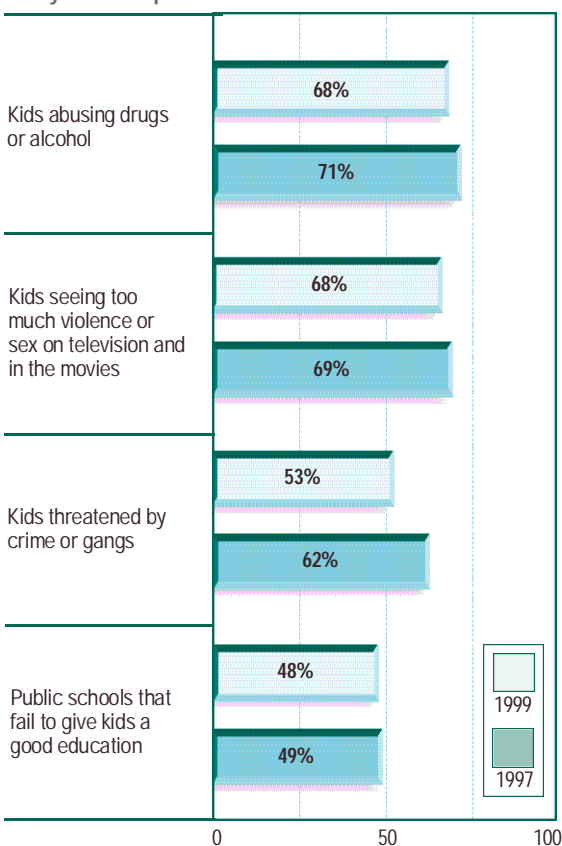
...And that many parents make sacrifices.

How common is it to find parents who sacrifice and work hard so their kids can have a better life?



People also recognize that kids face many dangers and temptations.

% of general public saying item is a "very serious" problem:



FINDING FIVE: Little Willingness to Write off Kids

Despite their pessimism and concern about children and teenagers today, Americans believe that helping kids get a good start in life is one of the most important issues facing the country, even more important than creating jobs or reducing crime. And, by a margin of 13 to 1, the public believes that given enough attention and the right guidance, even the most troubled teenagers can get back on track.

Americans say helping kids is a top priority.

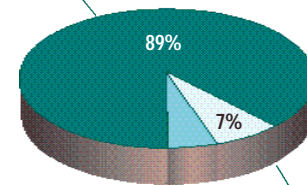
Asked to choose among four priorities, respondents easily rank helping kids as #1.

% saying each item is "the most important" priority	1999	1997
Trying to help kids get a good start in life	55%	52%
Trying to protect citizens from crime	14	18
Trying to create more jobs	14	16
Trying to help the poor and the homeless	13	10

And they believe even the most troubled youngsters can be reached.

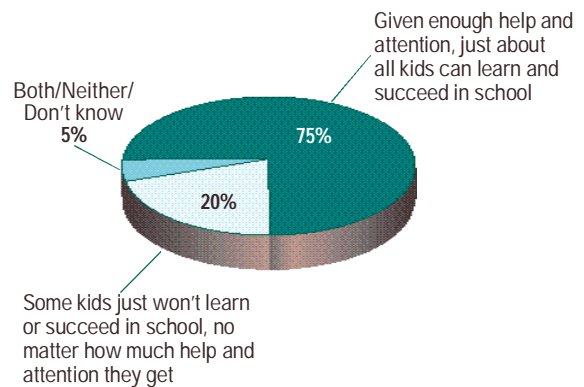
Which comes closer to your view?

Given enough attention and the right kind of guidance, almost all teenagers can get back on track



Some teenagers are beyond the point where they can be helped

Both/Neither/Don't know



Given enough help and attention, just about all kids can learn and succeed in school

Both/Neither/Don't know

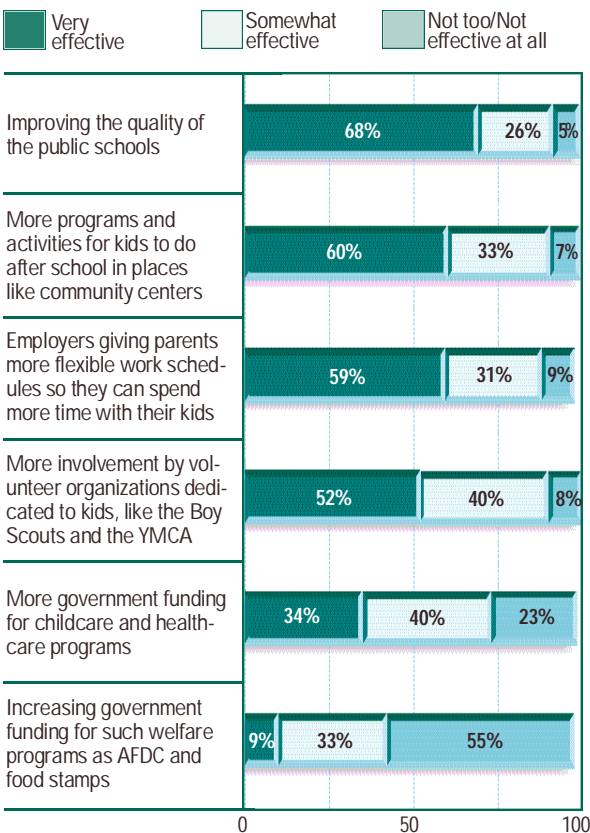
Some kids just won't learn or succeed in school, no matter how much help and attention they get

FINDING SIX: The Role of Government

Americans endorse a variety of solutions to the problems facing youngsters, but they focus mainly on those that build character and involve children in structured activities. The public is most likely to look to schools, employers, and community-based organizations for solutions, not government. On the whole, the public steers clear of traditional government programs to help kids, and relatively few consider a shortage of government programs as a major concern. Minority Americans, however, are more likely to see such programs as effective² and to believe a shortage of government assistance is a very serious problem.

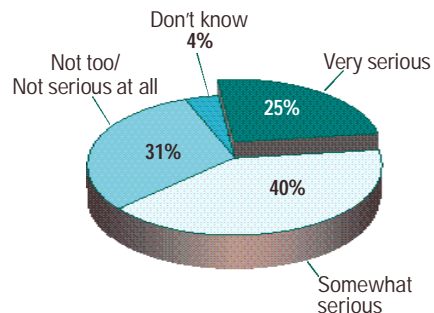
People support solutions close to home.

% of general public saying each item is:

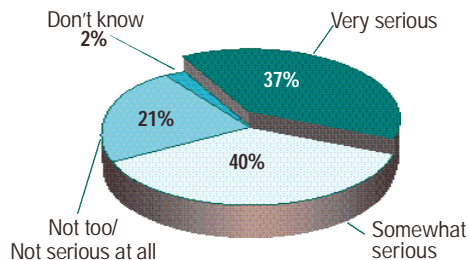


Few see a shortage of government programs as a very serious problem for kids.

How serious a problem is: families facing a shortage of government programs that support kids?



But minority Americans are more concerned.

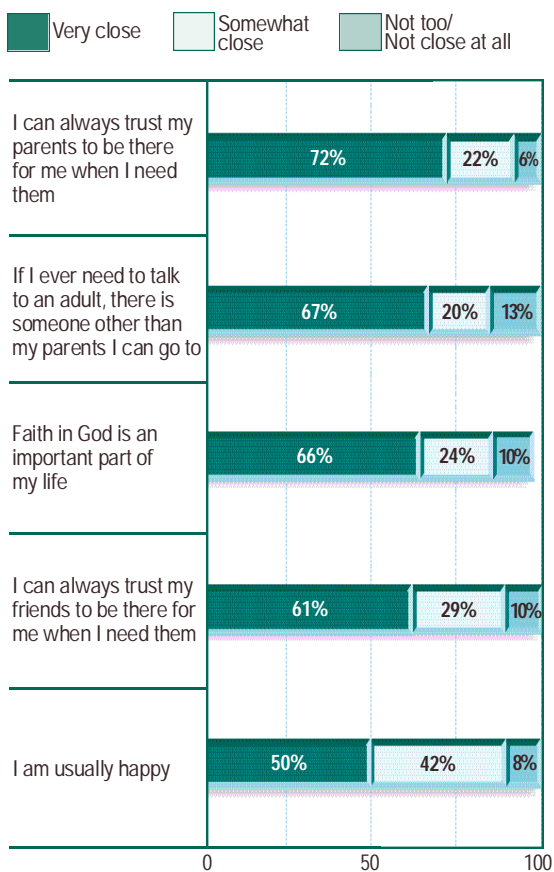


FINDING SEVEN: Positive Attitudes among Teens

Teenagers today, just as they did two years ago, say they have warm relationships with parents and other adults, strong faith in God, and reliable friends. Few say they confront gangs on a daily basis, and no more than a handful are frequently worried about being hungry or having a place to sleep.³ Nevertheless, teenagers do report they have a lot of time on their hands, suggesting that potential trouble is not far away.

The news from teenagers is good...

% of teenagers saying how close each item is to how they feel:



...But they have plenty of time to go astray.

% of teenagers who say they:	
Do <i>not</i> belong to any clubs or organizations outside of school such as the Scouts or the Y	75%
Usually get together with friends to hang out without anything specific to do	74
Feel bored every day or almost every day	42
See people their age using drugs or alcohol every day or almost every day	39

METHODOLOGY

This analysis is the second part of a multi-year survey being conducted by Public Agenda to document the American public's attitudes regarding the nation's youth. It is based on two national telephone surveys: one with 1,005 adults age 18 years or older, including 384 parents of children under 18, and one with 328 young people age 12 to 17 years old. In essence, it is a repeat of the benchmark study, *Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation*, prepared by Public Agenda in 1997.

The telephone surveys were fielded between December 1 and 8, 1998. The adult interviews averaged 31 minutes, the youth interviews 21 minutes. For the survey of young people, 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 study.

The surveys were conducted using national random samples 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 sample of adults is plus or minus three percentage points; for the sample of young people, plus or minus six. The margin of error is higher when comparing percentages across subgroups.

The questionnaires were designed by Public Agenda, and all interpretation of data reflected in this analysis 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.

Sample was supplied by Survey Sampling, Inc., of Connecticut. Interviews were conducted by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc., of South Dakota.

ENDNOTES

1. Ninety-three percent of adult respondents described "kids failing to learn such values as honesty, respect and responsibility" as a very or somewhat serious problem for today's kids. Of these, 91% said the problem is widespread, and 8% said it mostly affects kids from lower income families.
2. Fifty-one percent of minority respondents described "more government funding for child care and health care programs" as a very effective way to help kids, compared to 31% of white respondents.
3. Nine percent of teenagers said they "come across gangs" every day; 3% said they "worry about having enough food or a place to sleep" every day.

ABOUT RONALD MCDONALD HOUSE CHARITIES

Ronald McDonald House Charities (RMHC) provides comfort and care to children and their families through its 27-country network of local charities. RMHC makes grants to not-for-profit organizations and provides support to the Ronald McDonald House program. Nearly \$200 million in grants to children's programs has been awarded by RMHC and its global network of local charities. Its cornerstone Ronald McDonald House program, with 195 Houses in 15 countries, has provided a "home-away-from-home" for nearly two million family members. In conjunction with America's Promise, RMHC has committed to award \$100 million in grants over five years.

ABOUT THE ADVERTISING COUNCIL

The Advertising Council is a private, nonprofit organization, which has been the leading producer of public service communications programs in the United States since 1942. The Ad Council supports campaigns that benefit children, families and communities. The communications programs are national in scope and have generated strong, measurable results. Ad Council campaigns have helped to save lives and resources and to educate the public about issues and concerns of the day. The Ad Council is financed through contributions from more than 300 corporations. In 1995, it launched a 10-year children's initiative to focus the majority of its resources on developing campaigns which improve the circumstances for children in this country.

ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U.S. 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.

An online version of this report is available on Public Agenda's Web site at www.publicagenda.org. For additional information please contact: Public Agenda, 6 East 39th Street, New York, NY 10016; (212) 686-6610.

Readers wishing to obtain more detail about the findings outlined in *Kids These Days '99* can refer to the benchmark study Public Agenda prepared in 1997. Contact Public Agenda for copies.



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