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Richard E. Isralowitz  
*Case Western Reserve University*

Mark Singer  
*Case Western Reserve University*

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Teenagers' Problems: An Examination  
of Youth and Adult Perceptions

Richard E. Isralowitz  
Mark Singer

Human Services Design Laboratory  
School of Applied Social Services  
Case Western Reserve University

ABSTRACT

It has been pointed out by the Task Force on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (1976) that too often programs have been planned and implemented on the basis of uninformed speculation. In order to determine the major concerns of youths for purposes of delinquency prevention and resources allocation, a study was conducted in the Cleveland area of Ohio. This study was designed to compare the perspectives of youths and adults toward teenage problems.

While the exact ranking of problems were not identical, the eleven problem statements ranked highest by both populations were highly similar. The problems that are drawing the most concern and attention include alcohol and drug abuse as well as unemployment. As a result of this concordance, it may be asserted that program planners, administrators and direct service workers are able to reflect accurately the needs and perceptions of youths. It must be recognized, however, that the findings of this effort may vary over time and across geographic locations.

INTRODUCTION

While much interest is being generated over youth problems including unemployment, delinquency, teenage pregnancy and education, a frequently overlooked issue is the extent to which program planning and service provision accurately reflect young people's concerns. It has been pointed out by the Task Force on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (1976), for example, that this issue has relevance to delinquency prevention efforts because too often programs have been planned and implemented on the basis of uninformed speculation.

In order to determine the major concerns of youths for purposes of delinquency prevention and resources allocation, a study was conducted in the Cleveland area of Ohio. The study was designed to compare the perceptions of youths and adults toward teenage problems. In other words, the congruence between two populations was examined--i.e., youths who were potential and actual consumers of services and adults who were planners and providers of such services.

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLING

For the purpose of measuring teenagers' problems as perceived by youths and adults, a questionnaire was developed with 30 problem statements covering issues such as: alcohol and drug use, education, police and the juvenile court system,

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social service information and resources accessibility, and a number of special youth related problems such as suicide and pregnancy. The statements were chosen through an examination of common neighborhood problems reported by the mass media and professional publications. A list of these problems was formulated, then cast into statements which could be understood by adolescents. Respondents to the questionnaire were asked to rate the seriousness of each statement in terms of whether they believed it to be: no problem, a small problem or a serious problem.

The study was comprised of two youth samples--youths participating in delinquency prevention programs (program youth) and youths residing in the neighborhoods served by the prevention programs, but not participating in prevention programming. Both cohorts were considered "high risk" due to the large number of youths residing in lower socio-economic, urban neighborhoods (over 90% of the total sample). As reported by project staff who were familiar with youths in both samples, neither cohort was comprised of a noteworthy number of official (adjudicated) delinquents. More objective measures of delinquency were considered but not deemed feasible. If official records were investigated, it would have been necessary for subjects to identify themselves on the questionnaire, thus biasing the validity of the self-reported data. The alternative of asking youths whether or not they were ever found guilty of committing an illegal or delinquent act was rejected because such a question was bound to produce a high percentage of "false negative" responses.

The youths responding to the questionnaire were representative of those participating in delinquency prevention programs providing such services as: employment counseling, tutoring, arts and crafts, sports, and alternative education. As previously stated, an effort was made to include youths not participating in any of the organized programs being provided at the neighborhood level. Nearly an even proportion of program and non-program youths completing the questionnaire was achieved. Of the 700 questionnaires distributed, 499 or 71% were satisfactorily completed. It must be noted, however, that while the respondents to the questionnaire represented a population of youths considered to be of a "high risk" nature in terms of delinquency prevention, the use of non-probability sampling prohibits the findings of this study to be used for making generalizations about the area's entire "high risk" youth population.

The adult sample was comprised of 138 delinquency prevention program staff. Many of these staff served in the capacity of administrators and planners as well as direct service providers. Since the respondents to the questionnaire represented a wide variety of programs, it is believed that the sample reflected the larger universe of adults working in the County's network of delinquency prevention programs. A limiting characteristic of this study's adult population is that respondents worked closely with youths, and therefore, may not have reflected the views of adults whose exposure to youths is more limited.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Youths' Perceptions of Neighborhood Problems

The background characteristics of the 499 youth respondents included the following: average age was 15.5 years; the survey population was almost equally

divided by sex -- i.e., 243 were male and 239 were female; most youths indicated they were unemployed -- i.e., 64% or 288 of respondents reported they were not working; and, the most commonly reported public school grade level was 9. The race of the respondent population is reported in Table 1.

Table 1  
Racial Composition of Youth Respondents

<u>Race</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Black	265	60.8
White	83	19.0
Hispanic	43	9.9
Other (including Oriental and American Indian)	45	10.3
Missing	<u>63</u>	<u>---</u>
Total	499	100.0

Table 2 lists the 30 problem statements and shows the percentage of youths rating each as a "serious problem" in their neighborhood. For reporting purposes, the problem statements are discussed by content or cluster areas (i.e., drugs and alcohol, schools, the legal system, information and resources, and special problems).

The use of drugs and alcohol among adolescents has been recognized by many adults as a serious problem and the data in Table 2 indicate that youths perceived the use of these substances as detrimental to their welfare. A clear majority of respondents believed that drugs and alcohol were serious contributors to "kids getting into trouble."

The most significant school-related problem reported by the respondents was students' lack of interest in their education. Approximately 55% of those surveyed indicated this issue as being a serious problem. The expulsion or suspension of youths from school also ranked quite high--nearly half of the respondents saw this as a serious problem. Additionally, about 46% of the youths believed that youngsters being hurt by other students constituted a serious school problem. Racial discrimination in the public schools was seen as the least serious problem. It should be pointed out, however, that the full impact of busing in Cleveland had not been evidenced at the time the study was conducted. The present status of racial discrimination relative to other school problems, therefore, may be different.

The most pressing problem in the legal system cluster was police accessibility. A majority of youths indicated that access to police when they were needed was a serious problem. The high percentage of respondents who perceived police as being inaccessible appears to be a clear statement on the part of youths for greater police visibility as well as a more effective means of summoning and obtaining police aid. Other issues addressing the legal system and seen as serious problems included: lack of respect for police, police hassling or

"Youth Perceptions"  
 Problem Statements Ranked By Seriousness

X Serious Problem	Problem Statement
68.7	1. Kids using drugs. <sup>1</sup>
64.2	2. Kids getting into trouble while on drugs. <sup>1</sup>
62.7	3. Police aren't around when you need them. <sup>3</sup>
58.3	4. Kids getting into trouble while drinking alcohol. <sup>1</sup>
58.1	5. Kids using alcohol. <sup>1</sup>
56.5	6. Kids can't find jobs. <sup>4</sup>
56.3	7. Teenage pregnancy. <sup>5</sup>
55.0	8. Students are not interested in school. <sup>2</sup>
53.6	9. Not enough adults who understand kids' problems. <sup>5</sup>
50.7	10. Not enough neighborhood activities for kids to be involved in. <sup>2</sup>
49.3	11. Kids being expelled or suspended from school. <sup>2</sup>
49.1	12. Parents not spending enough time with their kids. <sup>5</sup>
45.6	13. Kids being physically hurt by other students in school. <sup>2</sup>
43.9	14. Kids don't show enough respect for police. <sup>3</sup>
42.3	15. Teachers can't control students. <sup>2</sup>
41.7	16. Too many centers are closed after 5:00 p.m. <sup>4</sup>
41.6	17. Schools don't prepare you for a good-paying job. <sup>2</sup>
38.3	18. Services for personal problems kids may have (including mental health). <sup>4</sup>
37.2	19. Police hasseling or picking on kids. <sup>3</sup>
36.7	20. Not enough alternative school programs such as vocational education, special tutoring, etc. <sup>2</sup>
36.0	21. Classes are boring. <sup>2</sup>
35.6	22. Teachers not spending enough time with their students. <sup>2</sup>
35.3	23. Juvenile Court sending too many kids away. <sup>3</sup>
34.9	24. Teachers don't care about students. <sup>2</sup>
31.2	25. Teachers being hurt by kids. <sup>2</sup>
27.5	26. Kids being physically hurt by teachers. <sup>2</sup>
27.3	27. Teenage suicide. <sup>5</sup>
26.8	28. Racial discrimination in schools in your neighborhood. <sup>2</sup>
25.6	29. Juvenile Court letting kids off too easily. <sup>3</sup>
24.1	30. Too hard to find information on sex and birth control. <sup>5</sup>

1 drug and alcohol problem  
 2 school problem  
 3 legal system problem

4 information and resources problem  
 5 other special problems

picking on young people, and juvenile court institutionalizing too many adolescents. Juvenile court letting kids off too easily was not viewed as a serious problem relative to others in this cluster.

Among those problems related to information and resources, youths' difficulty in finding jobs was rated as the most serious problem. This rating is consistent with national perceptions of the youth unemployment issue. Presently, unemployment rates among black teenagers in poverty areas are reported as being between 35% and 50%. Since over 60% of the surveyed population was black, most of whom resided in low-income areas, respondents' concern for employment opportunities was quite understandable. The lack of neighborhood activities was reported by more than half of the respondents as being a serious information and resource problem.

In the special problems cluster, a considerable degree of concern was expressed for teenage pregnancy. While teenage pregnancy was seen as a serious problem by over half of the respondents, less than 25% expressed difficulty in finding information on sex and birth control. A majority of the respondents perceived many adults as not understanding youths' problems and felt strong concern about parents not spending enough time with their children. The issue of teenage suicide was not viewed as a major problem.

In sum, Table 2 indicates that four of the five highest ranked problem statements were alcohol and drug related. From this ranking, it is apparent that youths perceived substance abuse as being a serious issue. Inaccessibility of police was also viewed as one of the most serious problems.

#### Adult Perceptions of Neighborhood Problems

Table 3 indicates that adults in this study overwhelmingly agreed that the use of alcohol and drugs by teenagers was a very serious problem. Substance abuse among young people has been well publicized by magazine and newspaper articles, television documentaries, and movie portrayals. The findings of this study therefore reflect local concern for a problem that is being experienced throughout all regions of the country. Also, the responses imply an awareness that alcohol and drugs may be contributing factors to teenagers' misconduct and their involvement in delinquent/criminal activities.

Although there have been publicized incidents of violence in local schools, relative to other problem statements, school violence was not perceived to be a major issue. Respondents believed that teenagers being hurt by other students was more of an issue than were incidents of teachers being physically injured by students. While adults expressed concern about students being expelled or suspended, they indicated that the predominate school-related problem was youths' lack of interest in school. The majority of those surveyed thought classroom discipline was a serious problem and felt teachers were not spending enough time with their students.

Adults expressed a considerable degree of concern for the quality and type of education being provided by public schools. One of the goals of the educational system is to prepare students for employment; yet, a considerable percentage of the adult respondents perceived the high schools as not providing their

TABLE 3  
"Adult Perceptions"

All Problem Statements Ranked By Seriousness

Z Serious Problem	Problem Statement
86.6	1. Parents not spending enough time with their kids. <sup>5</sup>
83.7	2. Kids using drugs. <sup>1</sup>
79.3	3. Kids can't find jobs. <sup>4</sup>
76.7	4. Students not interested in school. <sup>2</sup>
76.3	5. Not enough adults who understand kids' problems. <sup>5</sup>
75.0	6. Kids using alcohol. <sup>1</sup>
74.6	7. Kids getting into trouble while on drugs. <sup>1</sup>
71.6	8. Teenage pregnancy. <sup>5</sup>
68.4	9. Not enough neighborhood activities for kids to be involved in. <sup>4</sup>
68.4	10. Police aren't around when you need them. <sup>3</sup>
67.2	11. Kids getting into trouble when drinking alcohol. <sup>1</sup>
66.2	12. Schools don't prepare you for a good-paying job. <sup>2</sup>
60.4	13. Teachers can't control students. <sup>2</sup>
60.2	14. Services for personal problems kids may have (including mental health). <sup>4</sup>
59.2	15. Not enough alternative school programs such as: vocational education, special tutoring, etc. <sup>2</sup>
57.4	16. Teachers not spending enough time with students. <sup>2</sup>
53.5	17. Too many centers are closed after 5:00 p.m. <sup>4</sup>
53.1	18. Classes are boring. <sup>2</sup>
52.2	19. Kids being expelled or suspended from school. <sup>2</sup>
45.8	20. Kids being physically hurt by other students in school. <sup>2</sup>
43.1	21. Kids don't show enough respect for police. <sup>3</sup>
42.6	22. Juvenile Court letting kids off too easily. <sup>3</sup>
41.1	23. Teachers don't care about students. <sup>2</sup>
33.6	24. Juvenile Court sending too many kids away. <sup>3</sup>
25.6	25. Teenage suicide. <sup>5</sup>
25.4	26. Teachers being hurt by kids. <sup>2</sup>
23.8	27. Racial discrimination in schools in your neighborhood. <sup>2</sup>
20.3	28. Too hard to find information on sex and birth control. <sup>5</sup>
18.1	29. Police hasseling or picking on kids. <sup>3</sup>
10.2	30. Kids being physically hurt by teachers. <sup>2</sup>

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graduates with the skills needed to obtain good paying jobs. They also believed there were not enough alternative school programs such as vocational education, high school equivalence study, or special tutoring being offered. Relatively few adults viewed racial discrimination in the neighborhood schools as a serious problem.

Among the legal system questions, a majority of the adults perceived police as not being available when they were needed. Locally, two problems have exacerbated this perception: 1) fewer police officers have been assigned to "patrol the beat;" and, 2) police response time has been less than adequate. While conflict between "cops" and teenagers has been popularized by movies and television, adult perceptions did not strongly endorse this notion. Less than half of the respondents, in fact, viewed young people's lack of respect for police as a serious problem. Most adults did not perceive the juvenile court as letting too many youths off easily nor did they think the court was institutionalizing too many teenagers.

According to the adults surveyed, there was a lack of resources available for the youth population. Youth employment opportunities, for example, was perceived to be the most serious problem (79.3%) in the information and resources group of questions. Other issues receiving considerable attention included the limited amount of neighborhood activities for youths, a lack of services for youths' personal problems, and youth centers being closed after 5:00 p.m.

Among the "special problems" questions, respondents strongly expressed their concern for the adult/youth relationship. Parents not spending enough time with their children and too few adults understanding teenagers' concerns ranked among the five most serious problem statements. While only 20.3% of the respondents perceived the availability of sex and birth control information to be of major concern, 71.6% of the adults stated that teenage pregnancy was a serious problem in the neighborhood. Thus, the difference between these two percentages appears to indicate that more than birth control information is needed to minimize the teenage pregnancy problem.

In sum, two of the five highest ranked problem statements focused on adult-youth relations. The other three highly ranked issues addressed drugs, youth unemployment, and a lack of interest in school.

#### Comparing Youth and Adult Responses

Table 4 compares youth and adult rankings of neighborhood problems. These rankings achieved a Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient of .37 ( $p < .05$ ) which indicates a statistically significant, but modest, agreement among those surveyed. Since there were 30 problem statements, it is somewhat surprising to find that the 11 highest ranked problems identified by both groups almost identical. A possible explanation for this congruence of perceptions is the adults surveyed worked closely with youths and therefore may have been "sensitized" to many of their problems.

While there was almost complete agreement of the most serious problem statements, disparities existed in how they were ranked. Adults, for example,



TABLE 4

YOUTH AND ADULT RANKINGS OF NEIGHBORHOOD PROBLEMS BY SERIOUSNESS

Rankings		Problem Statement
Adults	Youth	
1	12	Parents not spending enough time with their kids. <sup>5</sup>
2	1	Kids using drugs. <sup>1</sup>
3	6	Kids can't find jobs. <sup>4</sup>
4	8	Students are not interested in school. <sup>2</sup>
5	9	Not enough adults who understand kids' problems. <sup>5</sup>
6	5	Kids using alcohol. <sup>1</sup>
7	2	Kids getting into trouble while on drugs. <sup>1</sup>
8	7	Teenage pregnancy. <sup>5</sup>
9	10	Not enough neighborhood activities for kids to be involved in. <sup>4</sup>
10	3	Police aren't around when you need them. <sup>3</sup>
11	4	Kids getting into trouble when drinking alcohol. <sup>1</sup>
12	17	Schools don't prepare you for good paying jobs. <sup>2</sup>
13	15	Teachers can't control students. <sup>2</sup>
14	18	Services for personal problems kids may have. <sup>4</sup>
15	20	Not enough alternative school programs. <sup>2</sup>
16	22	Teachers not spending enough time with their students. <sup>2</sup>
17	16	Too many centers are closed after 5:00 p.m. <sup>4</sup>
18	21	Classes are boring. <sup>2</sup>
19	11	Kids being expelled or suspended from school. <sup>2</sup>
20	13	Kids being physically hurt by other students in school. <sup>2</sup>
21	14	Kids don't show enough respect for police. <sup>3</sup>
22	29	Juvenile Court letting kids off too easily. <sup>3</sup>
23	24	Teachers don't care about students. <sup>2</sup>
24	23	Juvenile Court sending too many kids away. <sup>3</sup>
25	27	Teenage suicide. <sup>5</sup>
26	25	Teachers being hurt by kids. <sup>2</sup>
27	28	Racial discrimination in your neighborhood. <sup>2</sup>
28	30	Too hard to find information on sex and birth control. <sup>3</sup>
29	19	Police hasseling or picking on kids.
30	26	Kids being physically hurt by teachers. <sup>2</sup>

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ranked "parents not spending enough time with kids" as the most serious problem and youths ranked it much lower (12th). This disparity may be accounted for by recognizing adolescence as a developmental stage when peer group relationships assume great importance. During this period, it is not uncommon to find youths spending less time in familial activities and more time with their friends (Erikson, 1963; Weiner, 1970).

The problem of "kids getting into trouble while drinking alcohol" was also ranked differently by youths and adults. One possible explanation for this difference is youths who have consumed alcohol may try to avoid contact with adults while being intoxicated. They may be more likely to display acting out or deviant behavior in the company of peers than with adults. Adults, therefore, may have an inaccurate awareness of problematic adolescent behaviors resulting from alcohol consumption. The relationship of deviant or illegal behavior and drinking is a major national concern. Over 40% of all arrests made by the police are for offenses directly related to the use of alcoholic beverages, (e.g., public drunkenness and drunken driving) and an additional 12% are for disorderly conduct and vagrancy, offenses frequently associated with excessive use of alcohol. In addition, a considerable number of juveniles have reported committing serious delinquent acts under the influence of alcohol (Haskell and Yablonsky, 1978; Alexander, 1967).

A difference of opinion existed between youths and adults regarding police accessibility. This discord is consistent with that reported in a national crime survey, i.e., 80% of the 16 to 19 year-old population rated police performance as less than good while older populations had more positive opinions (Garofalo, 1977).

The rankings of youths and adults were quite similar with regard to drug use--youths identified it as the most serious problem and adults as the second most serious problem. This concern is well founded. From 1977 to 1978, Cuyahoga County reported a 46% increase in male drug offenses and more than a 100% increase in female juvenile drug offenses (Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court Annual Report, 1978). The increase of drug use among teenagers has been documented in other reports (Blum, 1970; Brown, 1969; Lerner and Linden, 1974).

Both populations viewed the use of alcohol among teenagers as a very serious problem. Youths ranked alcohol use fifth while adults ranked it sixth. On a national level, adolescent alcohol use is generating much attention. In 1972, liquor offenses were committed by more than 11,000 youths in the 13 to 14 age group and rose steadily for each older age class of juveniles to over 50,000 for the 17 year olds (Van Dyke, 1975). A 1977 survey of alcohol use among high school seniors found that 71.2% of the surveyed population reported using alcohol at least once during the past month (Johnston, Bachman and O'Malley, 1978). The National Council on Alcoholism reports that the proportion of high school students who drink has more than doubled from 1969 to 1976 and that in the same period the age of the youngest group of alcoholics had dropped from age fourteen to twelve years of age (Haskell and Yablonsky, 1978).

#### CONCLUSION

This article has examined, in a descriptive manner, the congruence between youth and adult perceptions of those problems facing teenagers in the Cleveland

area of Ohio. While the exact rankings of the problems were not identical, the eleven problem statements ranked highest by both populations were highly similar. This similarity is important because it reflects the agreement among youths and adults in identifying those problems that must be addressed by the planning and service provision process. The problems that are drawing the most concern and attention include alcohol and drug abuse as well as unemployment.

The results of this study have important implications for planning and developing youth services. The degree of agreement among both study cohorts was surprising. As a result of this concordance, it may be asserted that program planners, administrators and direct service workers were able to reflect accurately the needs and perceptions of youths. It must be recognized, however, that the findings of this effort may vary over time and across geographic locations.

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