

Celebrating America's Youth



The Facts Are Positive

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Family and Youth Services Bureau

The word is out!

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America's youth are faring better than ever. With the help and support of families, social institutions, communities, and friends, most young people are building the foundations for healthy, productive lives.

- They participate in community, volunteer, civic, religious, and extracurricular activities.
- They succeed academically.
- They enjoy positive relationships with parents and family.
- They choose healthy behaviors.



Engaged young people are more likely than their peers to do well in other parts of their lives and are better prepared

for the transition to adulthood. The following facts send a clear message: By offering America's youth positive ways to participate in society, to learn, and to grow, we can help every young person have a bright future.

Youth volunteer their services

Adolescents who take part in community service or volunteer in political activities are more likely to have a strong work ethic as adults. Volunteering is also related to overall positive academic, psychological, and occupational outcomes.

- A study by the Corporation for National & Community Service found that 55 percent of 12–18-year-olds volunteered through a formal organization in 2004, compared to a volunteer rate of 29 percent for adults.¹
- According to another study, more than three-quarters (76 percent) of high school seniors volunteered in 2002. Rates for 8th and 10th graders were similar.²
- Regular volunteer activity among 12th grade students increased between 1991 and 2004: the percent who reported volunteering once a month or more increased from 24 to 32 percent.³
- While low-income youth are less likely to have participated in school-based volunteer service, disadvantaged youth who volunteer are more likely to volunteer again, to discuss politics with friends and with parents and other adults, to believe that people can be trusted, and to hold a positive view of the future.⁴

Young people participate in extracurricular activities

Young people who participate in extracurricular activities—whether athletic, musical, or artistic—generally have higher self-esteem, perform better academically, and complete school successfully.

Athletics: A majority of young people report participating in organized sports, an activity associated with increased levels of self-esteem and motivation, overall psychological well-being, and better body image.

- High school students who participated in sports were more likely to have volunteered and to have registered to vote.⁵
- In 2003, about two-thirds (65 percent) of 8th graders played school athletics, as did nearly two-thirds (60 percent) of 10th graders.⁶
- During the last decade, the gap between girls' and boys' participation in sports decreased. For example, among 10th graders, the difference between the percentage of boys and girls who engaged in school athletics shrunk from 17 percentage points in 1991 to 6 percentage points in 2003.⁷

Performing Arts: Many researchers have found a positive association between arts participation and various academic and social outcomes, such as improved school grades and a decrease in negative social behaviors.

- In 2003, nearly half (48 percent) of 8th graders, 40 percent of 10th graders, and 41 percent of 12th graders participated in school music or performing arts programs.⁹

Youth engage in civic and religious activities

Civic Engagement: Young people who participate in voting and other civic activities are more likely to remain civically active as adults.

- About 40 percent of female and 35 percent of male 18–24-year-olds feel they can make a “great deal” or “some” difference in their communities, and 53 percent of young women and 50 percent of young men in that age group report that “voting is an important thing to do.”⁹
- Half (50 percent) of female and 44 percent of male 18–24-year-olds voted in 2004. That translates to 47 percent of young adults voting, a jump of 11 percentage points from 2000.¹⁰

Religious Activities: Religion plays an important role in the lives of many young people. Youth who attend religious services are more likely to volunteer in their communities, participate in student government, and play sports or exercise regularly.

- In 2004, 43 percent of 8th graders and 40 percent of 10th graders attended religious services at least weekly.¹¹
- About one-third of youth report that religion plays a very important part in their lives: 33 percent of eighth graders, 32 percent of tenth graders, and 31 percent of twelfth graders said so in 2004.¹²



Young people succeed academically

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Teens' academic performance and educational attainment are related to how they will do economically later in life.

- Average mathematics proficiency scores for eighth graders increased significantly (from 273 to 279) between 2000 and 2005. The largest gains came from students scoring in the bottom percentiles.¹³
- In 2005, more than 92 percent of young people 16–19 years old were either enrolled in school or employed, and 25 percent were both enrolled in school and employed.¹⁴
- Since 1971, high school completion rates have risen from 59 to 87 percent among non-Hispanic Blacks (25–29 years old)—narrowing the gap with non-Hispanic Whites from 23 percentage points in 1971 to 6 in 2001.¹⁵
- In 2003, 87 percent of young adults 18–24 years old completed high school. In 2004, 28 percent of young adults 25–29 years old attained a bachelor's degree or higher.¹⁶
- In 2002, 9 of 10 students in the 10th grade expected to participate in postsecondary education, and 8 of 10 expected to attain a bachelor's degree or higher.¹⁷

- Almost half (49 percent) of high school students report that they are currently enrolled in a college preparatory class, an advanced placement class, or both.¹⁸

Youth enjoy positive relationships with parents and family

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Teens are more likely to maximize opportunities and avoid risks when parents are involved in their lives.

- In 2003, 91 percent of high school students said that they had at least one family member they could confide in and talk to about things.¹⁹
- When asked who most influences their decisions about sex, teens say parents are more influential (37 percent) than friends (33 percent), the media (5 percent), or teachers (4 percent).²⁰
- More than half (51 percent) of high school students say that they eat a meal with their families every day. Seventy-one percent say they would prefer a home-cooked meal to takeout or fast food.²¹
- When asked to pick a role model, 47 percent of high schoolers said they would select a family member over an entertainer (11 percent), teacher (9 percent), or sports figure (5 percent).²²



Young people choose healthy behaviors

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- Eighty percent of high school students say they feel pressure from their peers to get good grades. Only 35 percent say they feel pressure to drink or do drugs.²³
- In 2003, 53 percent of high school students chose sexual abstinence, compared to 46 percent in 1990.²⁴
- A recent study concludes, "Teens continue to take a more cautious attitude toward casual sex than perhaps media headlines would have us believe." For example, 69 percent of teens do not think it is okay for high schoolers to have sex.²⁵
- The majority of high school seniors perceive a great risk of harm in regularly using any illicit drug (from 58 percent for regular marijuana use to 88 percent for regular heroin use).²⁶
- More than three-quarters (77 percent) of all high school seniors perceive a great risk in smoking one or more packs of cigarettes a day.²⁷
- Between 1994 and 2005, the percentage of youth 16–24 years old wearing seat belts rose from 53 to 78 percent.²⁸



Celebrating America's Youth: The Positive Youth Development Approach

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The Positive Youth Development approach promoted by the Administration for Children and Families/Family and Youth Services Bureau recognizes that young people need chances to exercise leadership, build skills, and get involved in their communities. By engaging in positive activities, adolescents can grow into healthy, happy, independent adults.

The Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) works to increase the leadership potential of young people by supporting programs that promote job and educational attainment, healthy lifestyles, and self-sufficiency. The Bureau collaborates with other Federal agencies to convene conferences, meetings, and forums for youth and youth-serving professionals and to coordinate Federal policies and programs related to the Nation's young people. The Bureau also recruits youth to help review grant proposals from community- and faith-based organizations, believing that young people know best what makes a good youth program. Several crisis hotlines supported by FYSB give young people opportunities to volunteer assistance to their peers and communities. With its research and demonstration program, FYSB encourages State and local collaboration to strengthen the Positive Youth Development approach in local communities and neighborhoods.

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For more information on positive youth statistics and Positive Youth Development, please contact the National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth:

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