

balancing worlds

Voices of Adolescence

Findings from Focus Groups with
Teenagers in Communities of Color
and the American Indian Community



**The Urban Coalition
Executive Summary**

Over the course of 2002, The Urban Coalition, in partnership with several Twin Cities community-based organizations, conducted 18 focus groups with adolescents (mostly between the ages of 14 – 18), in an attempt to go beyond the quantitative data often available about young people and to explore personal experiences. We talked with boys and girls (separately) who identify as African American, American Indian, Cambodian, Hmong, Mexican/Mexican-American, Lao, Oromo, Somali and Vietnamese. Our conversations with these young people centered around their perspectives on their own cultural identity, health issues facing adolescents in their community, and their perspectives on September 11th, 2001.

Cultural Identity...pluses

When we asked young people what they liked most about their cultural identity and what they liked least, they shared a diverse set of responses. Young people listed culture, food, clothes, music, working and living together, speaking two languages and religion as some of the positive aspects of their cultural identity. Youth like being part of a culture that is unique and that they feel is their own. Many teens expressed pride in their culture:





“I like Somalis, the way they respect each other, listen to each other, and like informing each other of things and advising each other.”

Young people feel that people outside their group do not know about or appreciate their culture and frequently mis-identify them as members of another group.

...and minuses

What did young people find troubling about their identity?

- Racism by other communities and within their own culture;
- Separation between parents and youth;
- Strict family and social rules;
- Mistaken identity as part of other cultural groups; and
- A common experience of oppression.

In all groups, young people expressed dislike for the negative stereotypes, false assumptions and faulty information that other people had about their culture. When asked what made them uncomfortable about being from their culture, the negative stereotypes came up again and again. Young people shared that it can be demoralizing to be judged by what you look like on the outside rather than who you really are inside:

“Once you are outside [your culture], it’s a different thing. Because, you know, outside, they judge you by your color. You’re an immigrant or Mexican or Chicano, and they’ll just try to treat you bad or be mean to you...That’s how people see you—the color of your skin.”

Yet, some youth were able to turn these negative experiences into positive motivation to prove people wrong:

“I like being African American because most other cultures stereotype us for...stealing and doing drugs. I like to prove those other cultures wrong every day by...succeeding in school and getting my education and getting a good job one day.”

Living in Two Worlds

Teens from all groups, immigrant and non-immigrant, felt they had to balance between two very different worlds—their own culture and mainstream American culture. Most teens seemed to feel there was nothing unusual about having one’s life divided or split up this way, as if this were a natural or normal part of life. This is the reality in which they have grown up. Young people have shown strength and resilience in finding ways to balance their lives and adapt to the different cultures in which they live.





Living in two worlds gives young people a broader perspective, a wider view, of what culture is like and what each culture has to offer. They are not constrained by living their entire lives within one frame of reference. They want to take advantage of the best that both cultures have to offer:

"I can decide...oh, this is a good thing from this culture and this is a good thing from that culture, and I can take it and make myself a better person." –Vietnamese youth

Many young people, especially the children of immigrants, disliked what they saw as overly strict rules and unrealistic expectations held by their parents, the older generation clinging to their more traditional culture. They wanted more understanding and support and trust from their parents. But many young people also recognized that their parents had gone through harrowing experiences, had lived all their lives in the traditional culture, and were having much greater difficulty adapting to life in America. These teens urged their fellow teens to learn more about the traditional culture and to help their parents understand more about the lives of young people in America.

In some communities, girls in particular expressed strong dislike for some of the customs and attitudes in their cultures that limited opportunities for girls or placed girls in an inferior position.

Teen Pregnancy

We also talked with young people about their perspectives on health issues in their community—specifically teenage pregnancy, dating relationships, and violence. Youth shared that education, cultural expectations, income, family and religion influenced teen pregnancy rates in their communities. Most young people felt that their cultures had strong messages against teen pregnancy and against bringing a child into the world before you were ready to care for the child:

“I’ve always been taught that you’re supposed to wait until you can take care of yourself before you bring someone [else] into the world...” –American Indian youth

But some teens felt that the message itself was not enough. They said that:

- peer influence often overwhelmed what parents were saying;
- strict rules sometimes backfired; and
- many parents were not willing to have open discussions about sex and pregnancy prevention.





“Our parents taught us...not to get pregnant before you get married....but all they say is not to have sex. That’s the only thing they teach us...They don’t teach us about using condoms or birth control or anything else.” –Lao youth
“We need more educational classes teaching about sex, because we only get health class one semester out of your high school years. People are gonna forget.” –Cambodian youth

Violence

When we asked about violence, adolescents shared that the level of violence by youth in their community was influenced by racism, fear for safety, gang activity and ease of access to weapons. Most young people felt their cultures counseled against engaging in violence or using violence to solve disputes.

“The Hmong culture is against the violence and stuff, because there’s always a philosophy or stories passed down from generation to generation telling you that revenge is bad...nothing good is going to come out of it...It’s going to ruin your life.”

Youth also pointed out that some young people carry weapons because they are scared or feel they need protection or want to bolster their self-image as a strong person who is on top of things.

Ethnic Differences

When we talked with young people about these health issues, they expressed a significant concern that all of the different cultural and ethnic groups were being lumped into categories that were not appropriate. For example, society tends to define Oromo and Somali immigrants and American-born Blacks as African American, despite important differences in culture and history. This is a problem for most of the youth who spoke with us. It was clear that youth want to be understood and valued as members of their own culture and/or ethnicity and not aggregated together into some convenient category.

“Well I think it’s kinda sad how they group us all into one category like we’re all the same and everything’s going fine...cause um we’re so totally different, our values and everything...”

-Oromo youth





September 11th

Our last issue for discussion was September 11th, 2001. When we asked youth about how this event had impacted them, we heard a number of different views—some youth were more impacted than others. Many teens felt that the events of September 11th had divided people in the U.S. rather than bringing them together, and they were upset by the stereotyping and hatred they saw being directed against immigrants in general and Muslims in particular:

“September 11th, or the next day, all the people got together as one nation and then suddenly it turned against immigrants that don’t have papers and they were being kicked out.” –Mexican/Mexican-American youth

Most youth said that their parents were also affected by this event. Some offered that their schools had been a really safe space in which they could engage in open discussions about this event and share their true feelings.

Conclusion

The young people who participated in these focus groups cannot be considered representative of their entire communities. Further, we only spoke with two groups of youth in each community. As a result, these findings are not intended to be representative or

generalizable to all adolescents. Although these caveats are important, they do not diminish the value of the knowledge shared by these young people.

What shall we do with this knowledge? First, we acknowledge that the young people who spoke with us possess a remarkable degree of personal strength and versatility that deserves respect. They are perceptive about each other, their families and their communities, and are constantly learning.

Second, we need to take seriously their description of balancing between two worlds. As role models, teachers and guiders of youth, we must use special care when approaching youth issues, understanding that many young people are confronted by a myriad of different voices and influences in their lives.

Third, young people need more opportunities to talk with each other within their communities, across communities, and across generations. Fourth, young people are one of the best resources for improving prevention and intervention activities. Adolescents in these focus groups, for example, offered explicit advice about how to prevent or reduce teen pregnancy and violence. Listening to the voices of our youth may better inform our attempts to strengthen adolescent health and well-being and may ensure receptiveness to our efforts.



