

## inside

- 2...research update
- 3...on the ground
- 3...voices from the fields
- 4...key resources

## feedback requested

As we move into the new year, we at the Forum for Youth Investment want to know what our readers think about *Forum Focus*! Please take a few minutes and answer the following questions to help us improve *Forum Focus*. In appreciation of your time, you will receive a free copy of *Unfinished Business: Further Reflections on a Decade of Promoting Youth Development or Students Continually Learning: A Report of Presentations, Student Voices and State Actions*. Thank you, Karen Pittman, Executive Director, the Forum for Youth Investment

## Forum Focus/Youth Today readers:

1. Do you pull *Forum Focus* from the centerfold and keep it for your files? Would you be more likely to keep each issue if they were not stapled within *Youth Today*?
  2. Do you find the topics interesting, current and useful?
  3. Have you ever gone to the Forum's Web site for more information after reading *Forum Focus*?
  4. Did you know that *Forum Focus* is published by the Forum for Youth Investment?
  5. Are there any specific improvements you would like to see made to *Forum Focus*?
- Send your responses to [communications@forumforyouthinvestment.org](mailto:communications@forumforyouthinvestment.org) or fax them to 202.207.3329, ATTN: Communications. Please indicate which free publication you would like and be sure to include a mailing address.

## Is the Glass Half Full or Half Empty?

The National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth just released *Celebrating America's Youth: The Facts are Positive*, an important reminder that most American youth are participating in the community, succeeding academically, forming positive relationships with their families, and choosing healthy behaviors.<sup>1</sup> Yet pick up almost any newspaper these days and you will find a headline sounding an alarm about a serious challenge facing young people today.

No one can argue with the fact that there have been dramatic improvements in child well-being in this country over the past century, thanks to immunizations and other scientific advancements. Yet while life has gotten better for most Americans since 1950, we can not necessarily say the same for young people. As the bar gets higher in terms of the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed, the child poverty rate is increasing, teen employment is decreasing, the high school dropout rate is staggering, and the challenges and pressures facing young people are becoming increasingly complex and dangerous.

In some cases, relatively new risky behaviors like physical inactivity and

gambling have joined smoking, alcohol abuse and unprotected sex in the big league of national youth problems. In addition to new risks, we are also seeing a new spin on some old ones. For example, while negative body image has always been a challenge, concerns about bulimia and anorexia must now expand to include things like plastic surgery and diet pills. Additionally, all of the risky behaviors teens contend with today — new and old — now play themselves out in a context that may fuel their prevalence or increase the consequences of involvement (see Table 1: 21st Century Risks, page 1).

### MEDIA, MARKETING AND POLICY CONTEXTS

In some cases, risks are being created or exacerbated by the media, with programs like *Extreme Makeover* and *The Swan* taking body image concerns to a whole new level. It is also easy to point the finger at corporate marketing practices. Teenagers spent \$175 billion in 2003, making them a highly attractive niche market for corporations and essentially the core of American consumer culture.<sup>ii</sup>

The amount of money spent on marketing to children doubled from 1992 to 1997, from an estimated \$6.2 to \$12.7 billion.<sup>iii</sup> The scope and nature of advertising have also changed, with young people consuming an unprecedented amount of commercially-driven media via the internet, print, television, music and film, and with marketers getting more creative about infiltrating once "safe havens" like schools.

But in addition to pressures generated by the media and marketing industry, federal, state and local policies influence risks and, in some cases, increase the consequences associated with risky behaviors. In California, Proposition 14 increased schools' dependence on outside

HIGH-RISK BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES – OLD AND NEW		21ST CENTURY CONTEXT
Physical Development	Unhealthy eating habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased access (more fast food restaurants, junk/fast food in schools)</li> <li>• Increased marketing of junk food, fast food, caffeine to youth</li> <li>• Decreased time for recess in schools</li> </ul>
	Physical inactivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in tv watching, computers, video games</li> <li>• Unsafe neighborhoods</li> </ul>
	Substance abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased access to prescription and over-the-counter drugs</li> <li>• Direct marketing by pharmaceutical companies</li> </ul>
Social/Emotional Development	Negative body image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased access to and marketing of diets, diet pills</li> <li>• Make-over television shows like <i>The Swan</i>, <i>Extreme Makeover</i></li> </ul>
	Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in the prevalence and intensity of violent media</li> <li>• Ineffective rating systems</li> <li>• Increased lethality of weapons</li> </ul>
Economic Self-Sufficiency	Incarceration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies that allow young people to be tried as adults</li> <li>• Policies allowing young people to be incarcerated in adult prisons</li> </ul>
	Casual sexual activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in sexual activity outside of committed relationships</li> <li>• Policies that reduce access to contraceptives</li> </ul>
Intellectual Development	Dropping out of high school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High stakes testing</li> <li>• Narrowing of school curricula</li> <li>• "Push-out" effect of No Child Left Behind</li> </ul>
	Disengagement from learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Narrowing of school curricula</li> <li>• Decline in reading rates</li> <li>• Increasing costs of higher education</li> </ul>
Economic Self-Sufficiency	Gambling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proliferation of casinos and "casino nights"</li> <li>• Online gaming</li> <li>• Televised professional and celebrity poker</li> </ul>
	Excessive spending and borrowing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased access to credit</li> <li>• Increased marketing to teens</li> <li>• Increasing higher education costs</li> <li>• Highest teen unemployment rate in 56 years</li> </ul>

revenues, making contracts with soda companies difficult to turn down. Abstinence-only policies may put youth at increased risk. A recent study revealed that youth who took a virginity pledge were one-third less likely to use contraception when they did become sexually active than their peers who had not pledged.<sup>iv</sup>

Accountability pressures resulting from No Child Left Behind have had the adverse effect of creating incentives for districts to "push out" students who might bring down test score averages or increase dropout rates. In Florida, the number of students referred by their district to GED programs (and therefore are not designated dropouts) increased last year from 11,615 to 17,144.<sup>v</sup> Increasing higher education costs and challenges to affirmative action have made attaining post-secondary education more difficult, at a time when economic analysts are underscoring its importance. Changes in juvenile justice policies have increased the consequences of delinquent behavior, with states increasingly transferring juveniles to adult courts and incarcerating youth (disproportionately

youth of color) alongside adults.

### RESPONDING TO THE NEW LANDSCAPE

**The public is concerned.** A vast majority of participants in a recent national public opinion poll believe that the youth marketing industry is harmful to children and has questionable ethical practices, and that most advertising in schools is unacceptable. Eighty percent of those polled believe marketing to children eight and under should be prohibited and 61 percent believe such a ban should extend to children under twelve.<sup>vi</sup>

**Doctors are concerned.** The American Academy of Pediatrics' policy statement about the "New Morbidity" expands the scope of pediatric practice to include a range of social, behavioral and developmental difficulties, including the effects of media exposure.

**Parents and teens are concerned.** The Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood is one of a number of coalitions with an interest in protecting children from exploitative marketing. Many young people are breaking ground in responding to

continued on page 2

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research update THE SCOPE OF THE CHALLENGE

Ensuring that every young person be **Ready by 21 — ready for work, college and life™** — requires fundamental changes in the way that funders, providers and advocates do business. But it also has implications for the research community. To the extent that “what gets measured gets done,” it is critical that the research community track the prevalence, measure the impact, and explore the context of those risks that may pose the biggest threats or barriers to young people’s life trajectories.

After decades of national attention, elaborate data collections systems are now in place in communities and states across the country to track things like teen pregnancy and substance abuse, and the risk factors that contribute to these behaviors. And while these certainly still represent important risks, our understanding of how to prevent them has increased dramatically.

While anecdotal reports of caffeine addiction, gambling and credit card debt among teens are cropping up repeatedly in major newspapers, where is the research community in tracking these issues? In this research update we explore the prevalence of a handful of risks, new and old, and what is known about their potential impact on developmental outcomes.

**UNHEALTHY EATING HABITS**

While fast food has been around for a long time, consumption by children increased five-fold during the past 30 years. Researchers estimate that children now get ten percent of their total energy intake from fast foods, compared with two percent in the late 1970s. In addition to the proliferation of fast food restaurants — they more than doubled between 1972 and 1995 — fast food and junk food are increasingly available in school cafeterias. In a survey of 23 San Diego middle schools, more than 15,000 “fast food items” — some brand name, some school-pre-

pared — were available each week.<sup>vii</sup> Not surprisingly, several studies have established a link between fast food consumption and increased risk of obesity.

**PHYSICAL INACTIVITY**

The other major culprit in the struggle against obesity is physical inactivity. With fewer schools offering recess periods, fewer kids walking to school or playing outside because of safety concerns, and the increasing popularity of television, American children and youth (not to mention adults) are alarmingly inactive. Children ages 2–17 watch television almost 25 hours per week or 3.5 hours per day. Almost one in five watch more than 35 hours of TV each week.<sup>viii</sup> In 1999, 65 percent of 14- to 18-year-olds had a television in their bedroom.<sup>ix</sup> Neighborhood factors such as safety and the presence of safe and affordable recreational opportunities also play a role, placing low-income youth disproportionately at risk.<sup>x</sup>

**VIOLENCE**

While youth violence has declined significantly since 1993 as measured by law enforcement data, it remains a serious problem.<sup>xi</sup> Confidential self-reports suggest that 39 percent of boys and 23 percent of girls engage in violent behaviors, and these figures have remained constant over the past decade.<sup>xiii</sup> One important backdrop to this issue is increased access to violent media. Video games, in particular, have become one of the most popular forms of entertainment for young people. Ninety percent of all U.S. households with children have rented or own a video or computer game, and the average youth spends 20 minutes per day playing video games. While they certainly have potential constructive uses and outcomes, a vast majority (80 percent) of the games young people prefer contain violent content. While research on the impact of

video games and other media is still relatively new, studies raise significant concerns about links to aggressive behavior and desensitization to violence.<sup>xvii</sup>

**DROPPING OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL**

While conflicting statistics about the scope of the dropout problem have clouded conversations designed to address it, the problem has clearly reached crisis proportions. Recent research suggests that only 70 percent of students in public high schools graduate. Even more alarming, graduation rates for minority males average under 50 percent nationally.<sup>xv</sup> With schools and districts facing enormous pressure from No Child Left Behind, stories of students being “pushed out” in order to reduce dropout rates abound. The consequences of not graduating from high school are significant and growing, as high school completion becomes a non-negotiable in terms of achieving stable workforce participation. From a financial perspective, a high school dropout will earn \$300,000 less over a lifetime than a high school graduate.<sup>xvii</sup>

**EXCESSIVE SPENDING/BORROWING**

Eighty-three percent of college students have at least one credit card, and 47 percent have four or more. The average undergraduate has three credit cards and \$3,000 in debt, not counting student loans.<sup>xviii</sup> This problem does not begin in college, however. While designer labels account for about seven percent of clothing purchases, that figure doubles to 14 percent for teens. And African-American teens, a core target audience for marketers, spend six percent more a month than the average teen because of the heavy emphasis on trendy, high-end clothing, jewelry and footwear. It is important to note that this spending is taking place at a time when teen employment is at a 56-year low; in the summer of 2003 only 20 percent of black teens and 40 percent of white teens had jobs.<sup>xix</sup> The good news is that the beginnings of an upsurge in financial literacy may be under way: JumpStart’s nationwide survey suggests that for the first time since 1997, high school students are demonstrating an increased ability to manage financial resources.<sup>xx</sup>

**TABLE 2: 21ST CENTURY RISKS: ESTIMATED PREVALENCE**

Unhealthy eating habits	• Children get ten percent of their total energy intake from fast food. <sup>xi</sup>
Physical inactivity	• Children 2–17 watch an average of almost 3.5 hours of television daily. <sup>xii</sup>
Substance abuse	• Prescription drugs are second only to marijuana in terms of illicit substances abused by teenagers. <sup>xiii</sup>
Negative body image	• From 2002 to 2003, the number of girls 18 and under who got breast implants increased from 3,872 to 11,326. <sup>xiv</sup>
Violence	• 39 percent of boys and 23 percent of girls in grades 7–12 report being involved in violent behaviors during the past year. <sup>xv</sup>
Incarceration	• In 1997, 7,400 new admissions to adult prisons involved youth under age 18. Seventy-five percent of these youth were minorities. <sup>xvi</sup>
Casual sexual activity	• 60 percent of 11th graders who have had sex say they have had sex with someone who was no more than a friend. <sup>xvii</sup>
Dropping out of high school	• Only 70 percent of students in public high schools graduate, and graduation rates for minority males average under 50 percent nationally. <sup>xviii</sup>
Disengagement from learning	• The literacy reading rate among 18- to 24-year-olds decreased from nearly 60 percent in 1982 to 43 percent in 2002. <sup>xix</sup>
Excessive spending/borrowing	• The average combined credit card and education debt of a college senior in the United States is more than \$20,000. <sup>xx</sup>
Gambling	• More than half (53 percent) of 14- to 22-year-olds report gambling in an average month, and 16 percent gamble in an average week. <sup>xxi</sup>

commentary continued from page 1

the consumer culture through social marketing, peer education and organizing efforts.

**Corporations are concerned.**

Whether truly concerned about misuse of their products or concerned about potential boycotts and restrictions, we are seeing industry responses in the form of public education, targeted prevention programs, shifts in market-

ing practices, and product specifications. Next year will likely see a host of campaigns and legislation addressing issues like obesity, exercise, bullying and truancy. This could spark a twenty-first century trip down a twentieth century path — a flurry of single-issue advocacy efforts following more than a decade of efforts to create comprehensive policies and programs that build competencies and address

problems that we know co-vary.

This is an extremely complex set of topics, more than can be tackled in one issue of *Forum Focus*. The question we pose here is: Is it time to recalibrate what services, supports and opportunities young people need in order to be “problem free and fully prepared?” **research update** explores the prevalence and potential impact of a range of

risks, some new and some familiar. **on the ground** features short profiles of three innovative programs designed to respond to various risks. **voices from the fields** features conversations with Bob McCannon, executive director of the New Mexico Media Literacy Project, and Juliet Schor, author of the best-selling book *Born to Buy* and a professor at Boston College.

## on the ground INNOVATION AROUND THE NATION

**T**he Strategic Alliance for Healthy Food and Activity Environments (Strategic Alliance) is a coalition of nutrition and physical activity advocates in California that is working to shift the debate on nutrition and physical activity away from a primary focus on personal responsibility and choice to one that looks critically at corporate practices, public policy and the role of the environment in influencing eating and activity behaviors. The Strategic Alliance has built important bridges within the advocacy and practice communities and created significant momentum around environmental change in schools and after-school programs, government, industry, health care, and the media.

While education and awareness are important in helping people make more informed choices, the Strategic Alliance's emphasis on community-level interventions recognizes that physical activity and nutrition are inextricably linked to the environments we spend time in. "We live in a very sedentary society," said Arnell Hinkle, Alliance steering committee member and director of the California Adolescent Nutrition and Fitness Program (CANFit). "Our transportation infrastructure is focused on getting cars from place to place, not people. Many kids get rides everywhere they go, often because of crime or lack of sidewalks. TVs, video games and computers encourage kids not to be active. And gym and recess are being cut from schools."

In addition to building awareness of the issues, the Strategic Alliance has developed the Environmental Nutrition and Activity Community Tool (ENACT) — an assessment process and menu of strategies designed to help improve nutrition and activity environments. According to Sana Chehimi, project coordinator, "the tool gives organizations and communities a sense that change is possible and that there are concrete things they can do." The Alliance recently received funding from Kaiser Permanente to pilot the tool in five communities around the Bay Area. CANFit has also developed a range of tools for improving the nutrition and physical activity environment specifically in after-school programs.

**The MeDiA Activism Club**, housed in the Bronx High School of Science in New York, is a youth-run project that gives young people opportunities to critically examine marketing and media practices and to create their own brand of youth-centered media projects. "I started the club because I felt like students didn't have a voice," says club founder Sara Vogel. "I thought the quickest and easiest way to get youth opinion out there was to use the media." The group uses film, print and alternative media to communicate their perspectives.

Caroline Kim, the group's advisor, suggests that the club and similar efforts are key to helping young people and adults respond to negative media imaging. "Young people need to examine information that is fed to

them through media for its bias and accuracy."

Club members share concerns about how teens are portrayed by mainstream media. Recently, Vogel was interviewed on National Public Radio about the youth marketing industry, specifically about the tactics of *Look-Look*, a market research firm that publishes a magazine featuring youth-driven content. "On one hand, *Look-Look* does get teen perspectives out there. They do have uncensored content. But it's a question of who is choosing the information that is going into the magazine and why are they choosing it."

According to the group, the best way to advocate for positive images is to create their own. Club member Zaro Bates describes the unique challenge of using the media to critique the media. "There is a difference between the media we produce, which I think of as good media, and corporate media. We do not want to sell an unrealistic image or story. We want to tell the truth."

**Community IMPACT!** Nashville's (CI! Nashville) commitment to increasing educational and economic opportunities began with a scholarship program for low-income teens in East Nashville. Quickly realizing more was needed, the organization launched the first Individual Development Account (IDA) program in Tennessee — a combination of financial education with a matched college savings programs. They also began teaching leadership skills, conducting community service

projects and launched a youth-led coffee business.

An unexpected result of the skills young people developed was that they began to take note of the financial practices of their families and peers and become more aware of the economic conditions of their neighborhood. Young people encouraged their parents to open savings accounts through a local credit union, and discouraged the use of check cashing establishments and other predatory lenders that were abundant in their community.

While researching economic issues affecting his neighborhood, CI! Nashville youth mobilizer James Clayborne learned about a volunteer tax assistance program in Chicago. He also learned that electronic filing through the IRS could yield a refund check in as little as three to five days, and that 80 percent of the EITC benefit is spent in communities where eligible individuals live.

Because of Clayborne's work, CI! Nashville now serves as a free tax assistance site, involving more than 30 youth and adult volunteers. Additionally, youth took the lead in building a citywide coalition to assist citizens with their taxes, gathering data from across the city and leveraging additional resources to support this work. This youth-inspired neighborhood tax preparation site prepared 25 percent of the tax returns done by the coalition, bringing more than \$100,000 into the low-income households in the community through 2003 tax returns.

## voices from the fields AN INTERVIEW WITH BOB McCANNON AND JULIET SCHOR

We talked with Bob McCannon, executive director of the New Mexico Media Literacy Project, an activist nonprofit conducting education and advocacy efforts in New Mexico and around the country, and Juliet Schor, a social analyst and the best-selling author of *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child in the New Consumer Culture*.

**Forum:** *Should media consumption be considered a serious risk factor facing young people today?*

**McCannon:** Research tells us that kids' "media diet" correlates with their success or lack thereof. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that doctors take patients' disease history and a media history because it is indicative of potential health problems they will have. The deadly combination of debt, materialism and the pressure to consume alcohol and ever larger quantities of sugar and caffeine —

the "new morbidities" — are making kids sick. If it weren't for these socially injected morbidities that are promoted by an advertising system gone berserk, people would be living much longer lives and happier lives.

**Schor:** The growing materialism among young people in America is a risk with much more wide reaching ramifications than most people recognize. For example, teens who hold more materialistic values — keeping up with trends, brand allegiance — are much more likely also to be involved in traditional risky behav-

iors such as early unprotected sex, drug use and alcohol use. In addition to risky behaviors, it turns out that children, teens and adults who are more materialistic are more likely to be depressed, have low self-esteem and have poorer social connections.

**Forum:** *How have media exposure, imaging and marketing influenced the way that young people look at the world and themselves?*

**Schor:** Exposure to media leads kids to become more psychically connected with the consumer culture, with brands, with materialist values, with the idea that you are what you have. Advertising and marketing have been powerful in leading kids to adopt many of those views. It's not only advertising — it's also fun-

damental realities about our society and culture. Adult consumer culture replicates this ideal and kids are learning this from their parents.

**McCannon:** It's hard to generalize about all young people. Some have a healthy outlook. Unfortunately, others consume a very negative, rebellious, violent media diet that makes them feel worse about themselves, their relationships and teaches them negative skills for how to deal with the opposite sex. Media overemphasizes the superficial aspects of sex and downplays the long-lasting gratifying satisfaction of real relationships. It emphasizes simplicity instead of complexity. These are all obstacles to young people's success, any way you want to define it.

**voices from the fields**

continued from page 3

**Forum:** *Are the risks you are talking about on the radar of parents and the general public?*

**Schor:** There's a widespread feeling among adults that kids are too materialistic, but part of the problem is that adults often feel these larger cultural patterns are like the weather — something you can't do anything about. There are groups of activist parents, and interestingly they are at two ends of the political spectrum. You have the 60s generation progressives and, on the other hand, quite conservative religiously-oriented people who are both appalled and quite restrictive about their children's access to consumer culture. For the mainstream, there's a sense that something not good is happening, but a little bit of denial and a loss as to what to do about it.

**Forum:** *How can parents, young*

*people and communities begin to change this culture?*

**Schor:** I think it would be very powerful for adolescents to approach younger kids on these issues, much more powerful than adults. This is a real cross-generational opportunity among young people that could be pretty amazing.

**McCannon:** Doing something real and important empowers kids and builds self-esteem. The New Mexico Media Literacy Project runs a series of trainings that have reached 900 people who have now exerted a lot of influence on principals, school boards and superintendents. This has worked its way up the legislature and we now have media literacy standards and probably more media literacy work going on than in any other state.

**Forum:** *At what point does this become a matter of public policy?*

**McCannon:** The question comes down to who bears the responsibility.

The philosophical answer to this question is that nothing is that simple. Parents have the responsibility to guard more closely their kids' media diet, but Hollywood and the video game industry say parents can always turn it off. There is tremendous research that says the single most powerful influence leading youth to smoke these days is Hollywood. If the movie industry can influence kids to smoke, don't you think it can influence their choices about sex or make them want to lap up all that sugar and high-fat food?

**Schor:** What we currently have in terms of policy is a mess. Corporations are free to market dangerous products to kids and youth and that's what they do. There is a big loophole in the way that the Federal Trade Commission deals with addictive products such as alcohol and tobacco — they are not supposed to be marketed to children and teens, but they are allowed to be marketed in magazines that huge numbers of children

and teens read. It turns out that youth are actually disproportionately exposed to alcohol advertising compared with legal drinkers. The rating system is also in a shambles. Once they tightened up on R-rated movies, you had a big shift of violence, sex, and smoking into PG-13 movies. That's not an accident.

Junk food is arguably the most dangerous product being marketed to kids at this point, and there's virtually no restriction on marketing to youth. One-third of kids born in 2000 are estimated to develop type-2 diabetes, a killer disease. Next year, Senator Kennedy will reintroduce the Childhood Obesity Prevention Act, an effort to stop junk food marketing in schools. The Republicans, who have taken huge amounts of money from the obesity lobbyists or what some call "big food," have been quietly trying to dismantle the work public health advocates have been trying to do. So it's a challenging political environment.

**key resources** REVISITING RISK IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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