
balancing worlds

Voices of Adolescence

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



The Urban Coalition
March 2004

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The Urban Coalition

The Urban Coalition was born out of the optimism of the civil rights movement. Established formally in 1968 by business, community, and political leaders, The Urban Coalition works for lasting systemic change. Every year, The Urban Coalition empowers leaders, produces research, and advocates for public policies to address issues of racism, poverty, and injustice. The result is a tradition of expanding the public dialogue and building better communities. We envision an inclusive society that honors and draws strength from the cultures and aspirations of its many different peoples and where everyone enjoys economic and social justice. The mission of The Urban Coalition is to advocate for systemic change, in public and private institutions, in order to improve the political capacity and the economic and social well-being of Minnesota’s communities of color, immigrants, refugees, and low-income communities. The Urban Coalition fulfills this mission as a research, policy, and advocacy non-profit organization through its goals:

- Engaging in a wide range of issues that impact low-income communities and communities of color;
- Developing strategic interventions that will improve the quality of life for low-income communities and communities of color; and
- Building the capacity of low-income communities and communities of color to be full partners in systemic change.

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.

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.

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.”

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.

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, that strict rules sometimes backfired, and that 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

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.

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

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.

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.

Methods

Participants

The thoughts and feelings expressed in this report are based on the contributions of 155 young people (83 boys and 72 girls) who participated in 18 focus groups held in 2002. One group for boys and one for girls were organized in each racial/ethnic community. Teens were recruited through community-based organizations, cultural centers and youth programs. Over 90 percent were between the ages of 14 and 18. The average age was 16.3 years. More than half (64%) lived in Minneapolis, while 22 percent lived in St. Paul and 14 percent lived in such suburban cities as Bloomington, Brooklyn Center, Brooklyn Park, Hopkins and Mounds View. All but one of the groups were held between April and July of 2002.

Structure and Questions

The questions used in the focus groups were developed by Urban Coalition staff working in consultation with the project's advisory committee. (See acknowledgments.) A pilot group consisting of Hmong and African American youth was held to test and refine the questions. The general plan for the focus group discussions was to start with questions about the culture of each racial/ethnic group, then move on to health-related issues such as teen pregnancy and violence, and finish up with questions about the September 11th attack. (The Focus Group Guide listing all the questions appears below.)

Each focus group was facilitated by two people of the same gender and racial/ethnic group as the participants. Two training sessions were held for facilitators, and 40 individuals were trained to lead the groups. Both facilitators and the youth participants were compensated for their time.

All sessions were taped. Full transcripts, excluding names, were prepared from the tapes. The summaries that appear in this report were prepared by a careful reading of transcripts, with occasional reference to the audio tapes as needed. Special attention was paid to themes that were described by more than one

participant in the group or that elicited expressions of agreement from other members of the group.

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 the knowledge shared by these young people. The knowledge shared by youth through these focus groups is important on its own as well as in its ability to influence future research and advocacy activities.

Focus Group Guide

[Instructions for Facilitators: Introduce yourselves by giving your name and your cultural or ethnic background. Give an overview of the purpose of this group. Then ask the youth to introduce themselves. If you are having difficulty getting a response from the primary questions, use the probes identified by the bulleted text. Try not to lead youth to answers, and let them do the talking. Add ethnic group in blanks.]

A. Cultural Identity – Introduction (30 minutes)

1. What is your cultural or ethnic background?
 - What do other people see as your cultural/ethnic background?
2. What do you like about being _____?
 - What are some positive things about being _____? What's cool about being _____?
3. What don't you like about being _____?
 - What is not cool about being a(n) _____ youth?
 - What experiences have you had which made you feel uncomfortable with your cultural identity?
4. Some people say that being (_____) and living in the U.S. is like walking in two

worlds. How do you deal with that? (e.g., mainstream culture and your culture).

- What makes it easier to move between two worlds?
- What are some things you do to stay balanced?
- What can adults or people that care about you do to make it easier for you?

B. Community & Health – 30 minutes

[Instructions for Facilitators: Pass out data sheet and point out graph regarding teen pregnancy, then ask question #1 – Explain percentages and statistics: that 17% teen pregnancy rate means about 1 in 6 teens.]

1. What are some reasons for differences between groups of young people based on their race/ethnicity?
 - Do these trends make sense to you based on your own experience(s)?
 - What evidence do you see that these are real differences between groups?
2. What does your culture teach you about teen pregnancy?

[Then turn to graph regarding teens carrying weapons to school.]

3. What are some reasons for differences between groups of young people based on their race/ethnicity?
 - Do these trends make sense to you based on your own experience(s)?
 - What evidence do you see that these are real differences between groups?
4. What does your culture teach you about violence and conflict?
5. What does your family or community say about your dating and relationship choices?
 - Do you agree with them? How do you feel about their opinions?

[Here it may be helpful to give examples. We are talking about who they choose to date, when they feel they can date or have a serious relationship, and if culture plays a role in that.]

6. *[Go back to data]* In 20 years (2021), what do you think these trends will look like?
 - *[If they will change]* How do you think we will get there? What needs to happen for them to change?
 - *[If they will not change]* What things will make trends stay this way? What will happen to make them stay this way?

C. September 11, 2001 – 20 minutes

[Give a general overview of September 11 and related events. Then ask question #1.]

1. What do you think about what happened? How has it affected you?
2. How have your parents talked with you about 9/11?
 - How have other people in your community talked about 9/11?
 - How do you feel about the way they are talking or acting about it?
3. *[Some people feel that 9/11 brought people closer together.]* How have you felt about other groups of people since 9/11?
 - How do you feel about the way people act towards you at school?
 - How have you felt in public places or in your community?
4. How do you think adults should be dealing with 9/11?
 - How could adults help you deal with some of these issues?
 - What ideas do you have about making sure 9/11 doesn't happen again?

Last question: What other stress do you face in your lives? What do you wish we had asked?

Thank you for participating!

Adolescent Health

To stimulate discussion, each focus group was presented with statistics, drawn from earlier Urban Coalition reports, on such health issues as teen pregnancy and violence (bringing weapons to school). In this section, we discuss the latest research information on trends in these and other areas of youth health.

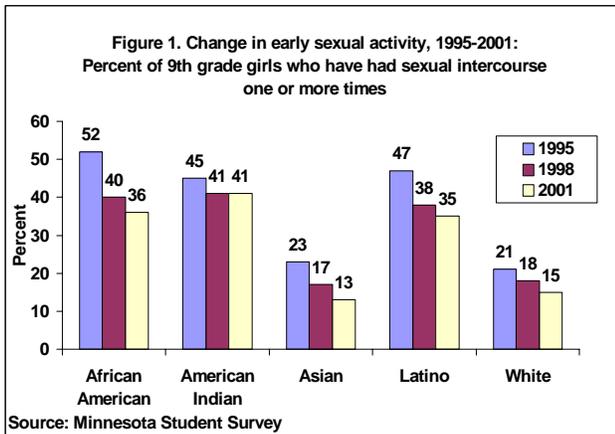
The most complete data on teen pregnancy and birth rates comes from birth certificates. Table 1 shows that pregnancy rates for teens 15-19

years of age declined substantially since the beginning of the 1990's for all major racial-ethnic groups except the Latino community. For example, in the African American community the yearly pregnancy rate fell almost in half, from 232 pregnancies for every 1,000 females 15-19 years old in 1990-1992 to 132 pregnancies per 1,000 females in 1999-2001. Disparities still remain, however, and teen pregnancy rates in communities of color continue to be two to four times higher than in the white community.

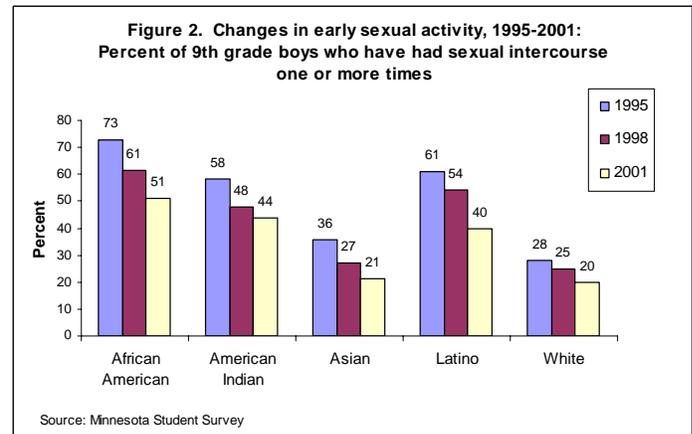
Table 1. Pregnancy rates for females 15-19 years of age

	Pregnancies per 1,000 population		
	1990-92	1999-2001	% Change
African American	232	132	-43%
American Indian	154	112	-27%
Asian	84	71	-15%
Latino	109	119	+9%
White	47	32	-32%

Source: Minnesota Department of Health



Involvement in early sexual activity has also decreased, according to the Minnesota Student Survey, which is given every three years to students in sixth, ninth and twelfth grades at participating schools. Between 1995 and 2001, the percentage of ninth grade students reporting that they have had sexual intercourse at least once declined in all racial-ethnic groups.

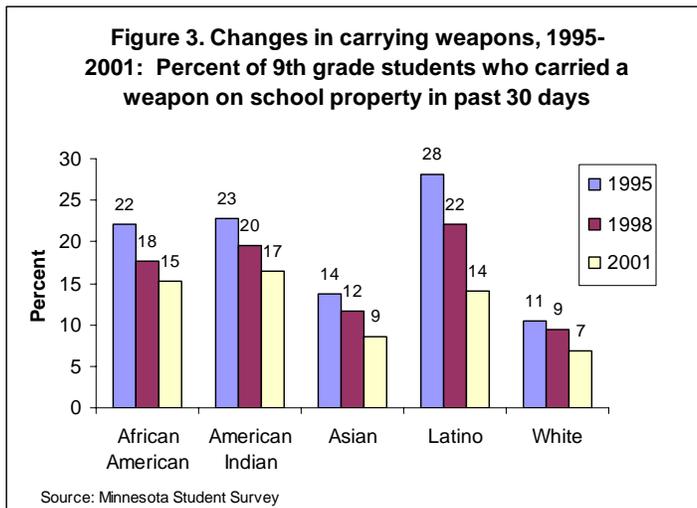


For example, the percentage of Latino 9th grade girls who have had sexual intercourse fell from 47 to 35 percent, while the percentage of Latino 9th grade boys fell from 61 to 40 percent. Twelfth grade students showed much smaller reductions or no change at all, in sexual activity (Figures 1 and 2).

The Student Survey also found that fewer students are bringing weapons to school than in the 1990's. In each racial-ethnic group, the percentage of 6th and 9th grade students who brought a weapon to school in the previous 30 days fell sharply between 1995 and 2001. In the 9th grade, for example, students who reported bringing a weapon to school dropped from 28 to 14 percent in the Latino community and from 23 to 17 percent in the American Indian community (Figure 3).

There was also a modest decline in reported fighting ("hitting or beating up another person") in some racial-ethnic groups, but not all. However, these positive trends did not translate into greater feelings of safety—the percentage of students who said they skipped school because they felt unsafe at school or on the way to and from school increased in some racial-ethnic groups and remained the same in others between 1998 and 2001. Students of color consistently felt less safe than white students.

Other health trends:



- There has been a sharp decline in cigarette smoking in all racial-ethnic groups between 1998 and 2001, particularly among 6th and 9th grade students.
- Between 1998 and 2001, use of alcohol by 9th grade students declined in the African American and Latino communities, and use of marijuana declined in the Latino community.
- The Minnesota Student Survey revealed no change in the percentage of students who report high emotional distress. In all communities of color, students continue to report high emotional distress far more often than do white students. American Indian and Latino communities continue to have the highest percentage of students who say they have tried to kill themselves.

Minnesota Student Survey trend data can be found in "Adolescent Health Among Minnesota's Racial/Ethnic Groups: Progress and Disparities," published in the newsletter of the Center for Health Statistics at the Minnesota Department of Health (Volume 4, No. 1, Summer 2003). The article is available on the web at <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/chs/data/popassess.htm> and further information can be obtained by calling Pete Rode at 651-296-6036.

Findings

In this section we offer the thoughts, experiences and stories shared by young people in the 18 focus groups. Although we talked with boys and girls separately, their data are

generally combined here unless important to separate out. For each community, we discuss teen perceptions of cultural identity, teen pregnancy and relationships, and violence.

African American

Cultural Identity

Participants in these focus groups all thought of themselves as African American. One boy described his background as both African American and Haitian. Another said his father is Black and his mother is White, so he would describe himself as African American.

Boys and girls felt that there were many positives about being African American and many reasons why they liked being African American. These included:

- Being more independent. Many adults are raising families on their own. "My mom....she's way more independent. She didn't need nobody in her life to raise me [and two brothers]." Her mother's example tells this girl: "I ain't gotta depend on nobody."
- Being the underdog and defying white society's stereotypes of African Americans. One boy said: "I like being Black because....We the underdog...I'm not average to society." Another boy went further: "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."
- Being "the most creative culture," and the "trendsetters in our society."
- Having unique skills, like dancing and hair-braiding, that are easy to learn because they are all around the African American culture.

Young people are very aware of stereotypes. As shown above, many youth took delight in turning those stereotypes into positive feelings about themselves. But there was no denying that

African American youth feel strongly about the negative effects of stereotypes and discrimination.

When asked what they did not like about being African American, most of the boys' comments were about feeling stereotyped and disrespected by other people. They felt people were always watching them, expecting them to do something wrong. Or people made assumptions about them, that they were not "much of an intellectual" or not able to "hold a conversation." One boy summed it up this way: "Every time a Black person gets born into the world, it's like they get born with a ball and chain....Before they ever get a chance, people [are] tearing them down." Sometimes you get to prove somebody wrong, but "when you outnumbered, you don't get no chance to prove nobody wrong."

Girls also felt they had "less opportunity." One girl talked about her experiences at a local department store. She said most of the Black employees were put on the basement floor, where the cheaper merchandise was sold, as if they couldn't be trusted to sell more prestigious or expensive items.

Even though they are not immigrants like the Oromo or Somali, African American youth felt strongly that they were living in two distinct cultures. When asked how they walk in both cultures, young people talked primarily about adapting to mainstream white culture:

- "It's a way you gotta carry yourself and a way you gotta talk....You got to be what they want you to be....We have to know their world, but they don't have to know anything about us, where we are from, what we've overcome, etc. They ain't lived on this side."

- One girl talked about putting on a “white” face. “Like, if you go to a job interview, you feel like you gotta act white. You can’t really be yourself....Maybe it’s not so much ‘white face,’ but a ‘proper’ face.” Another girl told about being warned in orientation not to use Black language at work, as if Blacks were the only culture that used slang.
- “When we around a lot of Europeans, we gotta flip the script....change our appearance....not be ourselves....just try to blend in.” In contrast, when you are around your own people, “you can just speak freely.”

Teen Pregnancy and Relationships

Teens were presented with statistics that showed that African Americans had the highest teen pregnancy rate of major racial/ethnic groups. Even so, at least one girl thought the statistics were too low. “All my friends got kids, except me.”

As young people talked about why teen pregnancy happens so often, they discussed family structure in two ways. The first perspective is that teens may not be as well-educated about sexual prevention and safe sex because they often don’t have two parents in their lives. The second perspective, offered by one of the boys, is that girls “look for that attention” from men who may have been absent in their life.

An even larger theme was the role-modeling (often by older teens) and the norms that young people see acted out. As one boy said, “You gonna do what you see, until you get old enough to realize that you doin’ wrong.” Another explained: “When we came in as freshmen and we seen seniors....with all the girls with them and all that, we wanted to get down like that.” It might also be an older brother: “You see him coming in with different girls....can’t wait until I get old.” The picture you get from the culture and the music is that you’re supposed to have lots of girls. The girls play right into this, according to some of the boys. They want to be in the in-crowd and considered cool. Then peer pressure on the boys also kicks in: “And then, if you don’t get none, the homeboys start making fun of you.”

Young people had different opinions about the role of parents. Some said parents can have a

powerful influence: “I’ve never been pregnant and I never had a baby, never had an abortion....and it’s the way my mom brought me up, because she told me to be cute you don’t have to hold a baby.” Others acknowledged that parents lose influence as peers become more important: “It’s all about looking good in front of them....You looking to prove a point to your friends, not your mom.”

Several of the girls felt that few would get pregnant if they really knew how hard it was to take care of a baby. One new mother said: “I see how hard it is; I ain’t trying to have no more kids.” Another girl added: “If they honestly really see how hard it was to take care of a baby...they wouldn’t even think about getting pregnant...or probably having sex again.”

Many young people felt that their culture doesn’t teach very much about teen pregnancy:

- “Man, I think our culture basically don’t teach us nothing about teen pregnancy.”
- “All we learned is that it happens.”

Parents seem to take different approaches to teen pregnancy, according to the teens themselves. One girl was critical of parents who are too willing to take care of the teen’s baby, relieving the girl of a sense of responsibility: “They keep having kids, they know their moms gonna take care of their kids or it’s gonna be somebody there to do it....It ain’t their responsibility; they just pregnant and having the baby.”

Other parents were described as very strict and disapproving. But many girls felt that this approach often backfired. A new teen mother described her mother as concerned and strict, yet she got pregnant anyway. She added: “If I would have listened a lot....I probably wouldn’t be in the situation I’m in....When somebody tells you ‘no’, you gonna do it anyway, cause of the curiosity.”

Girls seemed to be saying that an overly strict approach--coming down hard on teens--gets in the way of understanding and makes it harder for kids to listen to parents. They urged more open communication. “If they tell you ‘no’, they should at least explain why.”

Some of the boys acknowledged that their culture says that it's the man's responsibility to take care of the baby if he gets someone pregnant. And it can be a very heavy responsibility. As one boy said: "Those [carefree] days—it's over, man." But other boys disagreed that the impact would be so dramatic. "You can still do what you used to do, and still hang with the fellas." There is another responsibility added onto those you already have, but things just become "a little harder."

Violence

Young people also reviewed statistics on fighting and carrying weapons to school. African American youth had among the highest rates. Boys pointed out that Black youth bring weapons to school primarily for protection, because they feel their life is in danger. A girl noted that having a bad reputation could protect you. "You wanna be big and bad so don't nobody pick on you."

When asked what their culture teaches about violence, boys had this to say:

- "If somebody hits you, hit them back."
- "It's about respect. If you get socked up, you lose respect, and they think they can gain it back on the street."

A girl offered this sobering response: "Well, when you be around it so much, you can't do nothing but adapt to it...Where we come from, you don't see nobody huggin' up on their girlfriend, you see them beatin' up on their girlfriend, or you see drive-bys."

Both boys and girls noted that mass school shootings such as Columbine were carried out primarily by white students. White teens, they felt, may not bring weapons to school as often, but when they do they are more likely to use them. Black youth also expressed criticism of

official violence on the part of the government. They criticized the war on drugs as a war on minorities.

One of the boys graphically illustrated the damage caused by violence: "I had two homeboys die just within two weeks, and another one shot last weekend....I almost lost my life last summer....I was shot in the stomach....That's the biggest stress for me, livin' from day to day, not knowing if I'm gonna die."

Special Topic – Education

The subject of education came up during the course of these discussions. One youth started it off by saying that "we don't value education as much as other races." Most parents, he continued, aren't really "on their kids about school. There's a lot of cats around here that don't do no work" outside of class.

Other youth accepted the challenge and tried to explain why educational achievement is relatively low in the community:

- "In a lot of our homes, there wasn't a mother and father there....to come to the crib and do homework and all that. Moms comes to the crib—she's tired, she don't wanna do no homework."
- At home, said one youth, the focus may not be on education. "The focus, for a lot of people, is the struggle how they gonna make it from day to day." In that environment, kids start focusing on other things, like making money.
- According to one boy, half the teachers don't know what they are talking about.
- Unequal resources to prepare for college entrance tests was cited as a specific disadvantage. "They never teach us anything about the SAT's, while white kids have all these preparation classes."

American Indian

Cultural Identity

Most boys and girls identified themselves by giving their tribal affiliation—Ojibwe or Sioux—and their home reservation. A few identified themselves simply as American Indian or Native

American. One girl described herself as both Ojibwe and Cuban.

One boy noted, however, that other people don't see him as American Indian because his skin is lighter. This clearly bothered him. "All people,"

he said, "just judge by what they think you're about, not what you really are."

When asked to describe what they liked about being American Indian, both boys and girls mentioned ceremonies and pow-wows most often. They liked dancing, winning money, and meeting people. Pow-wows are about "meeting new people, and you see all your family up there every time you go." There was a sense of pride in the way young people talked about these unique cultural events. One boy said, "It's interesting to see, like when white people come to pow-wows, how they react. It's like they've never seen nothing like that before, and their eyes are all big."

Other aspects of their culture that American Indian youth thought were cool were:

- having a different religion
- tribal clothes
- food, such as Indian tacos
- tribal help with paying for college
- programs, like Golden Eagles, that teach about culture and history
- "We were the first people here."

Dealing with negative stereotypes and false assumptions about their culture was the major concern that, in the eyes of the teens, made it difficult to be American Indian. "One person can mess up for us all." Youth felt that the dominant culture will take the faults of one person or a few people and generalize to the whole culture.

Both boys and girls specifically mentioned stereotypes about drinking. A boy said: "You can go down to Franklin, and there's a bunch of American Indians on the bus stop all the time, usually drunk. And then....when other people see that, they start assuming." A girl added: "Some people will be like, 'Oh, it's in your blood to be alcoholics'....It's because they see so many people out in the streets all drunk...They'll say, 'It's in your blood and that's all you're capable of'."

Lack of jobs perpetuates these common stereotypes. It may look like people are lazy, said one youth, but it's just that "there are no jobs."

- "On my reservation, when I would go up there,....all you see is little houses and old

cars....There's only a few places that you could possibly work at [such as a gas station or store]. There ain't much work, unless you drive 50 miles to Bemidji."

Others mentioned the misconceptions and ignorance that people have about Indian life, especially drawn from TV and movies. People will ask if they live in teepees and ride horses. As one boy explained, "It's just that people don't know a lot about Native Americans." A few said they sometimes felt uncomfortable about being the only American Indian in a group, such as a basketball team or in a social situation: "If I go somewhere and I'm the only Indian, I feel like everybody's saying, 'Look at that Indian guy over there'."

While some youth were not bothered by the use of Indian characters as sports logos and mascots, most did not like these images or characterizations of Indians. The tomahawk chop and the "cartoon face" on the Cleveland Indians baseball cap were specifically mentioned. One boy related that in classroom discussions, white students argued that Indians shouldn't be offended. He responded: "You can't say that, because you're not Indian and they're not putting your people's faces [on mascots] and making up chants and stuff." Another boy added: "They don't know how it feels to be....like mocked, almost, so they [shouldn't] comment on it."

Several of the young people discussed how adults had helped them to live more comfortably in both American Indian and mainstream White American cultures. A boy spoke enthusiastically of an adult who takes him to groups, events, pow-wows, and who is writing a book about how the U.S. government used chemical and biological warfare against American Indians. A girl said that her Ojibwe-Cuban background allowed her to see "different ways of doing things." She talked about living in three worlds and about how death and funerals are handled differently in Ojibwe, Cuban and mainstream American cultures.

Teen Pregnancy and Relationships

Most girls thought that the survey statistics that were presented to the group about high teen pregnancy rates in the American Indian community were believable, because of what

they have seen in their schools and neighborhood. But some disagreed, saying that the girls they see getting pregnant are mostly White and African American.

American Indian girls felt, for the most part, that their culture taught that you should wait until you are ready before having a baby:

- “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....You have to learn how not to be selfish.”
- “That’s the way I’ve been taught too, because my mom, she was in her first year of college when she had me and she didn’t finish school. So I should just wait until I’m older and have a house and a career....to have kids.”
- “My mom and my dad and uncles and all of them, they don’t want nobody getting pregnant when they’re young. Cause most people in my family that get pregnant when they’re young, they can barely take care of their kids [and] they’re all living with their moms.”

According to the girls, families have different approaches to dating and relationships. A

couple of girls felt that some parents don’t seem to care or don’t get involved. Others said that their relatives will express opinions about the boys they are dating. Still others said that their parents wanted to know who they were going out with before they approved of them.

Girls also shared concerns about peer pressure. Sometimes, said the girls, there was not direct pressure to engage in unhealthy or risky behavior, but the invitation to do so was always there, the access was always there. “I got cousins....They tell me all the time when I see them, like they’ll be getting drunk or doing something, they’ll tell me ‘Oh, you want to do it?’ They tell me I don’t have to...If I want it, it’s there....It’s always gonna be there—the offer is always on the table.”

Violence

The girls felt that some students brought weapons to school either for protection [because they are “scared”] or because it made them feel more powerful and in control. One said students bring weapons to school because “they feel like they got power over people....not only because of protection.”

Cambodian

Cultural Identity

While all the focus groups participants identified as Cambodian, several also cited Chinese, Lao or Thai as part of their heritage. However, many young people felt invisible as Cambodians—they were often mistakenly identified as another ethnic group and few people knew their culture. One girl said: “When some people see us, they say we’re Hmong or Chinese. They don’t know we’re Cambodian; they don’t know us because most Asians here are Hmong.” Another girl said simply, “They think we all look the same.” “Nobody knows us,” added one of the boys, “They don’t know what Cambodian is, the true meaning of how we are, the inside not the outside.”

Being Cambodian was a source of pride for many. As one youth summed it up: “I like [being Cambodian] because of our history, our

ancestors, what they went through (with the Pol Pot regime), and all that.” Other things that teens liked about being Cambodian were:

- “We’re different—we got our own group”
- Being able to speak two languages
- “How we stand together and unite in the community”
- Different foods, especially spicy foods
- Cambodian clothes, games, traditions.

There were many things that teens did not like about being Cambodian. Some felt that their parents were overly strict and were too bound to traditional ways. One girl said: “Our parents are very strict. They expect too much from us, want [us] to be very ‘Cambodian’ woman. Stay home, come home from school, come home to clean up, cook. Don’t talk to guys or hang out with guys....You’re not supposed to talk to guys—it makes them look bad.” A boy echoed the

pressure of high expectations: “Basically, they expect more from you, like watch the family and try to take care of them and stuff, so they’re all putting pressure on you....expecting you to get a job and stuff and stay home and watch them. It’s hard to go out.”

Several girls also felt they were often judged by their parents or other adults in the community. “When you go out and hang out with boys, they talk bad stuff about you.” Rumors are spread around. Some adults don’t like the way girls dress or the way they color their hair. “They judge us from the outside, [by] how our appearance is.” This made girls feel uncomfortable, as if the adults look badly upon them or thought they were bad girls.

One of the boys expressed dislike for the conflict within the community: “I don’t like how our country [people] always fights each other, like Khmer against Khmer. That ain’t right. I don’t like that.” Another boy spoke against the way Cambodian youth are sometimes stereotyped: “They judge us like we’re gangsters.”

Living in two different cultures can be a difficult balancing act, and Cambodian youth used many approaches to maintain that balance in their lives. One boy said he incorporates parts of both cultures into his life, such as listening to American and Cambodian music and practicing both Buddhism and Christianity. Others keep a clear distinction between the home world and the outside world. One girl explained: “At school, I’m American. I don’t forget that I’m Cambodian, but I don’t have to avoid talking to boys like I do when I’m in the Cambodian community with my parents. At school, I can be myself. I’m myself at home, but....don’t talk about boys as much.” Some girls mentioned wearing more traditional clothes, such as the sarong, when they came home from school. Young people usually spoke English at school, though not always, and then Cambodian at home.

Teens thought that parents could help by lightening up on some of the pressure, having more realistic expectations, listening to teens’ views, and offering more encouragement. They also recognized that parents and teens can help each other to adjust and that good communication is important:

- “I think I should help my mom learn how to speak English and learn about the American traditions, so she will know what I’m going through at school....For example, she thinks a B is a bad thing. She pressures me to do good things, but I work really hard and only get a B, and she gets real mad. But ever since my sister helped me talk to my mom, once she understood how hard it is to get A’s...[it’s been better.]
- “[She should] just encourage me, because she thinks that every kid that’s born here in America...[should] be successful....She’s seen how she had it harder and it’s easier here, [so] why am I failing? She doesn’t understand, and I try to tell her.”

Teen Pregnancy and Relationships

Cambodian youth did not feel that the survey statistics on “Asian” teen pregnancy presented to the focus group reflected their community. They noted that Hmong kids are far more numerous than Cambodian kids or other Asian kids, and they see many Hmong girls getting married and becoming pregnant at an early age.

Most youth felt that Cambodian culture teaches that you should not get pregnant before you are married. You should not become a parent until “you are ready.” You should “finish school first.” One boy said he knew of a dad who kicked his daughter out of the house when she became pregnant. Another said: “If you get pregnant, your family loses trust in you, so then it’s like you don’t belong to them.”

There is much at stake. Many youth thought the older generation expected them to do well in America so they would have money and could support them. One boy summarized the expectations this way: “You’re supposed to be a guy who has a good job, good money, and [can] take care of your mom....If you get a girl pregnant, all the dreams you had is going down the drain. You have to spend time watching the kids and taking care of your baby and go to school at the same time. Plus you need a job to support your kid and your wife. So you need help, and you ask your mom, but they’re already tired and don’t want to do that.”

Cambodian girls reported that their parents would prefer that they married a Cambodian man, especially someone who had an education

and a job and can support them. Some agreed with their parents; others did not. Girls reported different rules about dating. Some girls said they were allowed to date in high school, but several said they weren't allowed to date until after high school: "We can't date during school. After you graduate from high school or something. Guys be messing with your head. You can't get any education." Most of the boys said their parents wanted to pick a wife for them, but most strongly resisted this idea.

Some of the girls suggested that more health education classes were needed about sexuality, especially topics like disease and child support. One said: "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." They suggested that speakers who have sexually transmitted diseases or AIDS be invited to come to classes, so kids could hear from a real person who has been through the experience.

Violence

Some of the boys were skeptical about survey statistics that were presented to the group on how many youth bring weapons to school: "Most of my friends bring a weapon almost every day," said one boy. They thought students brought weapons to school for protection or because they were scared, and felt that carrying weapons would only increase: "It's gonna keep on growing more, like right now, everybody has their own little groups.... There's more hate and stuff, so that's why people start to carry weapons." Another boy added, "If you're in a smaller group, you can't defend yourself against them, so you carry weapons and stuff." After noting that Latinos were slightly more likely than other groups to bring weapons to school, one girl offered this explanation: "You know how they

[Latino people] cross the bridge or the fence, the border, where they aren't supposed to be in the U.S.... Maybe they feel they need to carry it [a weapon] because there are Latino guys in my school who don't speak much English and they don't really get treated like how you would treat a friend. People will say stuff when they walk past."

Most of the youth felt that their culture teaches peaceful ways to deal with conflict, seeing violence or fighting only as a last resort:

- "Use your mind. Learn how to defend yourself with words. [They] taught us how to control our anger. Use our anger for good, when you need it the most, like for self-defense."
- "When you are really in danger, then you use it [violence]."
- "Say someone starts stuff with you and you want to hit them so bad. [My father] taught us to think first, think about if you do this, what would happen? What would the consequences be? Are you willing to make this choice? Is he worth it, getting suspended from school? You have to know when to back off. You could lose everything. If you get into a fight, you go home, you get in trouble with your mom, you get yelled at, and they won't trust you no more. You lose everything if you do that."

Not everyone agreed. One girl, for example, thought these ways of avoiding violence were unrealistic: "When I was younger, my mom said if you get in an argument, tell the teacher. In the real world, that's not how you handle it. If somebody is going to hit you, you're supposed to hit them back. What does it look like if you run to tell the teacher someone hit you in the face?"

Hmong

Cultural Identity

While all participants identified themselves as Hmong, some mentioned that they were born in Laos or Thailand and others said they were "Hmong-Americans" born in the U.S.

Hmong youth talked about what they liked about being Hmong or what was cool about Hmong culture:

- Being part of something unique and different: "I think that Hmong is unique because...there's always family gatherings,

like every weekend....You get to go meet your cousins and stuff."

- Hmong work together and are united. "We like to work together. We like to work in big groups, to farm together, work, any kind of stuff. We stick together. We unite."
- The name Hmong means "free people."
- Tournaments and celebrations, such as New Years and the 4th of July soccer tournament
- Food
- Pride in what the Hmong have accomplished: "It's just that we're really successful, if you think about it, compared to others because we've come a long way."

When asked to describe what they didn't like about being Hmong, young people--especially the girls--responded with very strong feelings. Girls were very uncomfortable about forced marriages, men who had two wives, and the general lack of women's rights. Among their thoughts were the following:

- If a girl and her boyfriend get home late, "your parents....they like force you to marry him even though you are young....I just hate that."
- "My dad has two wives and sometimes when I think about it I wish I'm not Hmong, because it sucks when the guy does that to another woman, especially when the guy does that to your mom."
- There is a belief that the guys are smarter than the girls, even though girls go to college and many guys don't. "They treat them [the guys] like they're much better than the woman."
- "Being female, you have less rights than others."

The girls also discussed how to help other girls not to end up in a forced marriage. They suggested that girls should try to maintain high self-esteem and pride, have an alternative place to stay, and learn about social service organizations that can help if they have to leave home. They urged young people to tell their parents that "this is America" and that the community is not back in Laos or Thailand.

The boys, on the other hand, emphasized unrealistic expectations and lack of trust and understanding by their parents as parts of Hmong culture that they didn't like. One boy shared: "They take everything too seriously.

They want you to be something that you can't be." Another added that parents have "too high expectations.... They expect you to change in a matter of minutes....They expect you to change right then and there."

Several boys said their parents did not trust or understand them. Growing up in America is so different than what the parents experienced growing up in Laos. One boy spoke for many when he asked for less suspicion and more trust:

- "They gotta understand that this is America; it's not Thailand or Laos. When you're out....you know what you're doing, you know the law, you know what's wrong and what's right. You know not to do what's wrong, but they think you don't know. They think every time you're out....you're always out doing something bad....This discourages you and it puts you down."
- Living in both traditional Hmong culture and modern American culture can be very demanding. As one girl explained, whichever way you turn, there are "consequences." Yet, for most of the Hmong girls, coping with life in two different worlds has become an ordinary part of life:
- "I'm just kinda used to it, so it's not hard."
- "So when they're at school, they just be American and talk English....When they go home, they have to switch and be like a Hmong girl."

Several Hmong boys said they turned to other kids for advice more than to their parents. "At school, since you are around people your age and people who have lived in the U.S. longer, they pretty much understand what you go through....That's why I'll always turn to them first to ask what I should do or for advice before I go to my parents." They called on parents to be more understanding, have a "longer temper," and give more freedom. And they thought it was important for teens to understand both perspectives (traditional Hmong and American). It was important for teens to know where their parents were coming from, how hard they were working, and how they had arrived in the U.S.

Teen Pregnancy and Relationships

The focus groups were presented with survey statistics on teen pregnancy rates for different

racial/ethnic groups, including Asians. There were no separate statistics for the Hmong community. The girls generally thought that the pregnancy rate for Hmong teens would be well above the rate shown for Asian teens. One girl observed: "Right now in my school, like the seniors....I mean most of them are pregnant and they're either married or pregnant or have kids already." Another added: "A lot more Hmong girls are pregnant than what it says here."

The general consensus was that Hmong culture teaches that teen pregnancy is generally acceptable if you are married but very bad if you are not.

- "If you are married, then your parents would fully support it....But if you're single and unmarried, then it would be really hard for you because....your friends and family and all the people close to you, they'll be negative....and they'll try to put you down."
- "It's OK to be pregnant no matter what age as long as you're married."

Youth shared the warnings their parents gave about becoming pregnant while young. One girl shared: "My mom always tells me....don't get pregnant when you're so young, because you haven't started your life yet....Well, if you want to get pregnant, at least get pregnant by an older guy so he could support you."

The boys talked about forced marriage if you do get someone pregnant. This not only brings a loss of face but also has practical consequences as you try to support a family earlier than you had intended. One boy said: "It's going to be harder on your life and you might mess up your future plans or your goals."

When asked about dating and relationships, the boys spoke of their parents' preference that they go out with or marry a Hmong woman. The boys thought that the parents wanted to preserve the Hmong ethnicity and more practically wanted them to have a wife with whom they could communicate in Hmong. The boys understood that "you marry not just for yourself," but for the

family and to help support the family. You have to consider something larger than yourself.

Several of the girls said their parents preferred that they dated someone older. One girl said her parents wanted her to date "at least an older dude so like in the long term he'll be able to support me." She then went on to say: "I don't really see the point because I think I'm really capable of supporting myself if I were to get married to a dude my own age." Other girls agreed with this line of thinking about economic independence:

- "Yeah, it's not like back then when you fully depend on the men."
- "Right now, it's all about your brain and it's all your ability and motivation, so it all depends on what you do."

Looking to the future, some girls thought teen pregnancy might increase because they saw some teens as becoming more sexually aggressive. Others thought it would decrease--if teens are exposed to information about the consequences and outcomes, eventually teen pregnancy will start to decline.

Violence

The focus groups also reviewed survey statistics on the percent of youth who have brought weapons to school. Latinos had the highest percentage, while Asians had one of the lowest. Some Hmong youth thought Latinos get picked on more and carry weapons to protect themselves. Not everyone agreed. One girl thought that it was mostly Asians who were getting picked on, but Asian kids tend to have lots of friends to back them up and so do not need weapons.

Hmong youth thought their culture counseled against violence. "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."

Lao

Cultural Identity

All of the focus group participants identified as Lao or Laotian.

Many Lao youth said that few people know anything about their culture and that they are often mistakenly identified as being from another ethnic group. At various times, they have been identified as White, Filipino, Mexican, Chinese, Asian and Cambodian. One youth summed it up this way: "I'm Lao, but people see me as everything else besides Lao, because people don't know what Laotian is.... Most of the time they really know only Chinese or Asian, and they think that's all the same thing."

The focus group participants felt there were many cool things about being Lao:

- Knowing and living within two different cultures was seen as an advantage: "Laotian people are more well-rounded because of their culture."
- Being able to speak two languages
- Just being different from other people
- Coming home, eating rice, hearing Lao spoken, "all the familiar things"
- Lao people have an ability to get along with others
- Pretty clothes, traditional songs and dances, food
- Lao writing

Young people also identified some things that were not so cool about being Lao. There was much discussion about having to deal with stereotyping and discrimination. Name-calling and insults were described by several youth:

- People may laugh at you or "make fun of your language."
- "Well, sometimes, they tell us to go back to our country."
- "Other people just call us dumb cows or dumb brainless Laotians."

One girl added that when one Asian group does something bad, people assume all Asians are that way.

Several boys talked about unequal treatment by the police. They said Lao boys get stopped by the police for no reason, "just because of the number of people in the car and the race we are." They feel that people assume they are going to do bad things and that security people at stores follow them around, thinking they are going to steal.

Another aspect of being Lao that made youth uncomfortable is the gap between parents and children. Youth recognized that their parents have had such different experiences, and it's hard to adapt to "what they've been through and what they've learned." It is also very difficult to live up to the very high expectations and standards that their parents have for them.

Finally, some youth were not happy with the disunity they saw in the community. One boy said: "Some Lao people....don't stick together." People talk about each other, and there is lots of gossip. One girl saw a kind of "segregation" within the community, divided into "distinctive groups" based on income.

Some Lao youth felt that it was not too difficult to adapt to living in two very different cultures. One boy said: "It's not too hard once you get used to it." Another added: "In school, we just do mostly everything that Americans do. Then, once we get out of school...we get with our own groups and do stuff that Laotian people do."

But many youths felt that parents could do more to help kids thrive while balancing between two cultures. They called upon parents to listen to them and gain more understanding of what they are facing, and urged youth to do the same with their parents:

- It would be helpful "if our parents would understand these two worlds we are living in," especially if they realized the negative stuff that stands in our way, such as "racism in schools, outside world, and jobs." Parents need to be educated in American culture.
- "[Parents] need to understand that we are in a different world, and it's nothing like Laos. They have to try to understand what we are going through."

- Parents should have the responsibility of talking to their kids and trying to understand their new life, and the kids should try to express their feelings to their parents.... “and should try to keep alive the old customs and go to temple with their parents.”

Teen Pregnancy and Relationships

Both boys and girls agreed that Lao culture teaches that teen pregnancy must be avoided. The girls agreed that the general message is that you should get your education taken care of, get married, and then you can have a baby. Boys said the message from their culture is to not have sex until married, and to take responsibility for the girl and baby if you do get her pregnant.

Aside from this expectation, most young people felt that Lao parents did not really teach much about sex and pregnancy. Several of the boys thought that American parents had long talks with their kids, but Lao parents gave very little information. One boy said: “I don't think they really teach anything, but they just tell us don't go out there and get anybody pregnant.” Another added: “I doubt we talk about it at all.” And still another: “We just learn that kind of stuff in school.” One girl gave a broader description of what was and was not taught: “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.”

There were exceptions to these general practices. One girl said her mother strongly encouraged her to take sex education classes and talked about protection. She didn't lay down absolute rules, but told her of the consequences, how becoming pregnant could “lose my chance for education and....for succeeding in life.”

The focus groups talked little about dating rules and more about the kind of person their parents hoped they would eventually marry. Several boys said they've been told: “Don't go by looks; go by what's inside of them”—character, respect, and so forth. A girl said she was advised to marry a rich man, “a white guy with money.” Like other girls, she was skeptical of this kind of advice, and felt “you can't be happy with just money.”

Despite the expectations, teen pregnancies do occur. One girl told the group: “My parents used to care about my dating life, but they can't anymore since I already had a kid and moved out on my own.”

To cut down on teen pregnancies, Lao youth felt that health programs at school have been helpful and that even more information about the consequences of pregnancy is needed. They worried that TV shows that highlight “free sex where you don't use condoms” undermines efforts to reduce pregnancies. But most of all, Lao teens said that better communication between parents and teens would be helpful. One girl explained that it's hard to talk to parents “because they expect us to be married before we have sex,” so there's nothing to talk about. “A lot of teenagers in high school,” she continued, “are getting pregnant because they don't have that kind of relationship [with their parents]....and they can't discuss it with their parents because of the expectations.” Another girl described the kind of communication she felt was needed: “If you and your parents have a good relationship with each other, you can talk to your mom about your boyfriend, you can talk with your mom about your first sex,” and your mom could help you with birth control. The girls felt that most teens did not have that kind of relationship with their parents.

Violence

Young people seemed to feel that Lao culture has little use for violence:

- “Avoid fights....Just try to walk away.”
- “Have patience”
- It is best to “talk it out”
- Love one another—“Friend and enemy is the same.”
- Fighting and doing stupid things makes Lao culture look bad.
- “One of the elders says that what you do will always come back to you.”

Some of the youth said there was an unfortunate level of hostility toward Black people on the part of the older generation of Laotian people. The young people said this hostility was based on perceptions of violence, though they noted that Lao boys also get into gangs and do stupid things.

Mexican/Mexican-American

Cultural Identity

Almost all the youth identified themselves as Mexican. One boy has parents from El Salvador and Mexico, and one girl has a Black father and Mexican mother. One boy noted that in Mexico his family was referred to as *Indios*. "When we go to the city, they call us 'Indios'. We're *Indios*....natives." Several youth, in describing their cultural identity, also spoke of what part of Mexico they were from (e.g. Morelos), whether they were born in the U.S. or Mexico, and how long they had been in the U.S.

For many youth, particularly those who grew up in Mexico, culture was described as "Where you are from"--the town, city, region you are from, and how you lived back in that place. For one boy, culture means the life and work he and his family had: "It's taking care of the animals....I take things for the cows to eat—the horses. I wash and brush them."

The young people felt there were many good things about being Mexican:

- The holidays and traditions, such as Christmas, a girl's 15th birthday, Day of the Dead, 20th of November, "parades of the revolutionaries"
- Foods, such as enchiladas, moles, cow's tongue, tortillas
- Being able to speak two languages
- Having a sense of place, of being from a different place. For some youth, that sense of the place they were from was very much alive and sustaining. Said one boy: "We feel different, more free...because we have a place [the place we are from]....And here it is not like that. I walk worrying about what might happen to me with what is happening here in the United States."
- Music from their culture: "I am just always so proud of myself that I am Mexican. I always ...listen to music, to Spanish or Chicano rap, something that relates to [being] Mexican."
- Being part of the variety of peoples and traditions from all over Latin America

When asked what they didn't like about being Mexican, some replied "nothing." As one girl said: "There is nothing that I don't like, because I

am who I am....I'm Mexican, and there is nothing you can do about it. There is nothing I don't like." Another girl added: "I love who I am. I wouldn't change anything."

Several youth mentioned that they were uncomfortable about having to prove to others that they were Mexican. These challenges to their identity came in different forms. The girl whose father is Black has darker skin and said: "I have to prove to people that I am Mexican [even to other Mexicans]. I have to show them pictures of my mom....That makes me uncomfortable, because I know what I am." Some who were born in the U.S. were uncomfortable about their grasp of Spanish. They spoke of relatives who refuse to speak English to them or who ask. "Did you just have lessons or are you really Hispanic?" The Spanish taught in American schools is not always the same as the Spanish spoken in Mexico, and people have questioned whether these youth are really Mexican if they don't speak authentic Spanish.

Stereotypes about Mexicans were another reality that made many youth uncomfortable about being identified with their culture. As one boy said: "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." Other youth said people see Mexicans as criminals and don't see the ways that many Mexicans help the community. One boy noted that there are many Mexicans in the Army and many have gone to war, but "when they come out, they are still treated badly." Another told of a group of Mexican workers who left their jobs because a white manager was bad-mouthing Mexicans all the time.

Stereotyping, they explained, means saying something about "everybody" in the group when one person does something wrong. The majority "pays" because of the actions of a few.

Another disadvantage about being Mexican is the difficulty experienced by many youth born in Mexico who do not have immigration papers.

Among other things, lack of papers makes it very difficult to travel back to Mexico and visit family members.

When asked how they managed to live in two different worlds, Mexican youth offered many different responses. For some, it is not all that difficult: "I'm used to it....When I am at home I am talking in Spanish, but then when I go hang out I'm talking in English and I am talking with my friends." There are real advantages to living in two worlds, because you learn more about people and you see more broadly rather than through the lens of one culture. A girl who has friends "everywhere" said, "You are walking in a number of worlds, but it's just for the better because you understand more." Another noted that there are positives and negatives about all cultures: "If you get a taste of both of them, you can sort of determine what you like" and how you are going to bring up your kids.

For those who haven't learned much English, however, it can be very difficult to negotiate between both worlds. "You can't ask for what you want," said one boy. Some of the girls, on the other hand, felt that they were not yet living in two different worlds. One girl said her mother is bringing her up the Mexican way. "We are so used to just being raised like how we used to be and not like how they are over here." As an example of the traditional way of being raised, she mentioned helping your parents and grandparents instead of thinking about yourself.

Teen Pregnancy and Relationships

Some youth thought that survey statistics presented to the groups showing high teen pregnancy rates among Latino youth were probably accurate. They see lots of pregnancies around them. As one girl said: "More of the Hispanic girls, and me being one of them, are having more kids...and it's mostly always by older guys. They [girls] want to be with them." But other participants thought there were more pregnancies among the Asian and White girls they knew.

Just about everyone felt that their culture was pretty clear about the need to avoid teen pregnancy:

- "You were always supposed to get married first."

- The tradition is getting married with the "white dress first" and then having your kids.
- Speaking of both sides of her family, the girl of Black and Mexican descent said: "They wanted me to wait, not only....until I get married, but they also want me to wait until I'm old enough and until I'm with somebody I love....and somebody who wants to take care of me and I have the right job."
- "My mom's always telling that she had me when she was 14, 15....and to just wait, have fun, go to school."

This boy felt, however, that there were differences in the messages coming from the traditional Mexican culture and Mexican-American culture (those born in the U.S.). He thought the young people born in the U.S. were more "free" and didn't receive the same kind of communication from their families.

The boys said that being "ready" to become a father means having a job and having your own apartment. But they acknowledged that many boys do have sex and some become fathers before they are "ready" in this sense. A 16 year-old boy who is already a father agreed that he wasn't ready, because he doesn't have a steady job and hasn't finished school. He described the pregnancy as an intentional decision by his girlfriend and him, however, and added: "I'm proud of what I did and what I do as a father. It doesn't really matter what people say."

Many girls said their parents were very strict about dating. One girl said she was not allowed to date until she is 17. Another said "My mom doesn't let me date at all, period," and her parents are very suspicious of boys calling. While resenting these restrictions, she also said: "When you really think about it, it's necessary. They have to do it." Another girl, on the other hand, said her mother is okay with dating and that they have a good relationship and good communication with each other: "We talk about everything, the consequences of doing stuff with boys."

One boy noted that education about sexually transmitted diseases and condoms is lacking in Mexico, and needs to be reinforced here in the U.S.

Violence

When presented with survey statistics on youth who bring weapons to school, one boy acknowledged he had brought weapons to school on occasion. The main reason he did this was because his group was going to fight kids from another ethnic group, but he has done it at other times because it makes him feel stronger. "Yeah, I carry more than once a knife--a filero--or a weapon....It gets crazy sometimes....I went to a school....where probably 90 percent were African American, and I was the only Mexican." Other kids would surround and threaten him, so he felt the need to bring a weapon.

The boys knew of kids who were in gangs and who carried weapons. Gangs were seen as a source of some of the violence in the community. One boy shared, "You can't walk around Minneapolis without getting [confronted] by one of them. You walk to the corner store and all of a sudden they start bothering you. ...You can't walk around Minneapolis or St. Paul or West St. Paul without one of them coming up to you saying, 'hey, Que tienes--what do you have?'" One boy stated that "violence is the reputation of the gang member." They use that reputation to scare people off and build themselves up. A girl added: "They're trying to

prove they're tough--don't mess with me." The boys also noticed that some kids like to dress like gang members, so they seem to fit in and don't get picked on, but they are really not in gangs.

To counteract gangs, young people urged more communication, more involvement in the community (working on projects, helping other kids), and more respect for other people.

There was general agreement that the culture teaches that you have to defend yourself and your family:

- "If somebody says something to you, don't just let them say it" and don't let them hit you.
- "You better not let anybody lower you or make you seem like you're lower than them."
- "[We should] make sure nobody messes with us, especially when it comes to our younger brothers and sisters."

One boy received a more explicit version of this message from his father: "He was in the Army for a long time. He doesn't like guns very much. He says that if you have a gun or a knife, you're a punk....That's what you got your fists for, is to fight."

Oromo

Cultural Identity

All the boys and girls identified themselves as Oromo or as being from Oromia. But many feel that people outside their culture mis-identify them as Somali or Ethiopian or Indian or African American. They feel that other people know very little about Oromia.

Young people liked many things about their culture. Food, cultural clothes, and being able to speak two languages were all mentioned, but most of the discussion was about how members of the culture worked together:

- Oromo youth liked that their community was close, that people got along and helped each other out. "I would say the good thing about Oromo people is that they look out for each other no matter which country they are in.....We look out for every single Oromo

there is in our city (Minneapolis)." Another youth added that everyone knows everyone else and has relatives who can look out for them.

- They like the respect that family members have for each other. "We have a lot of respect for our parents and...what they say, and their tradition. We really, like, listen to what they have to say." They are taken aback by the lack of respect they sometimes see in American culture.
- They feel that their culture is "laid-back," easy-going. "We are people that are laid back and take everything people give us [do to us]. Like, we got kicked out of our country...We didn't harm anybody. We're just gonna handle it in a diplomatic way."
- Finally, for some youth Oromo culture was important because it was theirs, it belonged to them. "I like everything that comes with it, that we are unique and different from

everybody else, and we have like our own culture that we can call our own.”

When asked what they didn't like about Oromo culture, young people talked not about the culture itself but about the way it was perceived and treated by others. Many felt that people in America do not know anything about the Oromo. The name they give to their homeland, Oromia, never shows up on the map. Several noted that the Oromo did not come from their own independent country and are often mis-labeled. “People always say that we don't have a country and we're just ‘Ethiopian’ people.”

Some talked about negative images or stereotypes of their culture, and it became clear that they were talking in part about ethnic conflicts tracing back to Ethiopia. One girl said that other ethnic groups in Ethiopia consider themselves to be the “smartest” and “best-looking” and the “true Ethiopians,” and consider the Oromo to be “just the low people” and “dirty, country people.” She concluded, “I love being Oromo....I just don't like how people put us down, just how like long ago people put African Americans down and said that they were lower.” A boy added that he hated “being colonized by other people and, ya know, being underestimated by other cultures in our country.”

When asked how they were able to walk in the two worlds of American and Oromo culture, most youths seem to feel that it was just a natural part of their everyday lives. “What I'm basically getting at is that when we're in school, we have an American attitude [and] when we are at home or in our community center, we are ourselves—Oromo. That's all.”

A girl pointed out that the rest of their community—parents, family members and friends—are in the same boat. The need to balance between two cultures was not felt only by youth.

Several mentioned that having “confidence” in oneself, respecting both cultures, and remembering “that you are Oromo still,” helped them live in two different cultures. They urged young people to make lots of friends in both cultures, tell other people right away that they are Oromo, and tell them about their culture. They urged adults to teach little children about Oromo history and culture, and that they must respect other cultures.

Many of the boys and girls spoke of their desire to have their own country and of the conflict that forced many of them to come to the U.S.:

- “I feel that my country should be free. I don't feel like staying in other people's country. I want to go back to my country one day and live as I want to live.”
- “The stress I feel would be my people being colonized and always being controlled.”
- “I just want to wish one thing—that we will get our own land in Oromia.”
- A girl said that she has relatives in prison in Ethiopia because they are Oromo, and that people are being killed. Her parents came to the U.S., she said, because they didn't want her to be raised in a place “where I'm brainwashed into saying ‘I'm Ethiopian’.”

These comments show that this conflict is very much on people's minds and shed light on the strong objection expressed by youth against being classified as Ethiopian rather than as Oromo.

Teen Pregnancy and Relationships

Boys and girls all expressed the belief that Oromo culture warns very strongly and persistently about teen pregnancy:

- “We have a story passed [from generation to generation] and from our parents to us that we have to wait.”
- “They have told us, probably like every night or two....that you gotta wait until the right time comes.”
- “You gotta wait until you get a job, you get married to her legally.”
- “You get pregnant when you are married, and that's like after you are done with college.”
- It would be “disrespecting your family.” You have “shamed your family” if you get someone pregnant.
- Usually, “our teenagers....don't get pregnant because they don't date, they don't have a boyfriend.”
- Teen pregnancy is a “very bizarre thing” in our culture, “very abnormal.” “It is not seen very much, like we see it here in the U.S.”

Many youth were upset that the Oromo are lumped together with all Blacks or African

Americans when it comes to official birth statistics or survey results. They feel statistics about the high pregnancy rate in the African American community are useless for them and do not fit their reality. This speaker expressed much sympathy for the history of slavery and the economic conditions facing African Americans, and went on to say: "It's kinda sad how they group us all into one category, like we're all the same...They paint us all as one color...and I don't really agree with this."

Several girls said they have been told by their parents not to date until they are much older. "If you're under 18, you cannot date....it's like disrespecting your family." Another was told girls can date "after you're done with college." And still another: "They told us not to date, because....something might happen and if I get pregnant....[it] might mess up the future and all my plans." A boy said he dated in secret, against his parents' wishes. Some girls said that many parents don't talk with their children about sex and pregnancy: "They don't even like to sit down with their children and talk about how they get pregnant and what they're gonna do when they get pregnant." They are too "embarrassed."

But a couple of girls said their mothers talked extensively with them. One said her mother wanted her to know everything, including all the

consequences, so she could be responsible for her own decisions. Another said her mother had a "back-up," which was being informed about birth control. But these were minority views.

Many young people agreed that Oromo parents should talk with their teens much more than they now do. Otherwise, teen pregnancy will happen more often as it does in American society.

Violence

In the focus groups, youth were also presented with survey data on the percent of students who say they carry weapons to school. Again, Oromo youth did not see themselves reflected in these statistics. In general, they thought of their culture as one that is peaceful and does not encourage violence:

- "You can never get peace by retaliating in a violent way...I really don't understand why these guys are taking guns to school."
- "If they want to fight with you...I think you just have to ignore them and be patient."
- "You should try and work it out, cause we're not very violent people, but if you have to, you should fight."
- "Violence doesn't do any good."

Somali

Cultural Identity

All the boys and girls identified themselves as Somali, and almost everyone who spoke identified the Muslim religion as a distinctive feature of their culture. Some also mentioned specific aspects of their faith, such as praying five times a day and fasting during Ramadan. Several said that respect for elders and appropriate dress were important features of their culture. "I was raised in a religious way, and how to dress in an appropriate way, how to respect elders, how to pray and do most of the things that Muslim people do."

When asked what they liked about being Somali, the boys repeated that they liked their religion and culture. When pressed to say what was cool about their culture, boys' responses were both funny and serious:

- Fresh food, samosas, hot muufo
- "Great looking girls"
- "Respecting each other" and getting "the respect you deserve"

For girls, the theme of respect was uppermost. One girl said: "I like being Somali, the way we dress, our religion, the way we listen to each other, and the way we respect each other." Another added: "I like Somalis, the way they respect each other, listen to each other, and like informing each other of things and advising each other." Girls also mentioned other aspects of being Somali that were important or cool:

- The togetherness of Ramadan
- Not using drugs, alcohol or cigarettes
- Clothes that cover the hair and the body.

Girls in particular also made pointed remarks about what was not-so-cool within their culture:

- “A lot of kids don’t like the rules. They [parents, culture] have lots of rules, and some kids just get tired of it.....and they do a lot of different stuff they are not supposed to do in their religion.”
- Unequal or different treatment of boys and girls—girls are “supposed to be staying home, washing dishes and cooking, while the boys are supposed to be out dancing and playing basketball.”
- Somali boys and girls imitating or pretending to be African American
- People who claim to be Muslim but still use drugs or alcohol, or lie or are dishonest
- Lack of unity within the culture—people “claim different clans” and are not “united”

When asked if anything made them uncomfortable about being Somali, boys and girls responded in different ways. For boys, the civil war in Somalia was very much alive and a source of discomfort. One boy said: “There are always innocent people in Somalia getting killed for no reason. A lot of my cousins have been killed.” Another mentioned “the fighting going on in Somalia” and added: “A lot of people are asking about what happened there, and you don’t know what to say.” One boy thought they should be back in Somalia, fighting to end the civil war.

Girls, on the other hand, were uncomfortable with stereotypes about Muslims, dislike or hatred of immigrants, and disrespectful questions about their culture. One girl said that when an individual does something bad, “Americans take it like the whole Somali people did something bad.” The whole culture gets blamed. Another said that in her school “students tell you ‘why did you come from your country? This is not your country; go back to where you came from.’ I am not able to answer them.” Another girl added: “I don’t like it when classmates...ask me why I wear headscarf and wear Hijab (long dress). That is my culture.”

Young people appear to take it for granted that they must live in the two very different worlds of Somali and American culture. This is the only environment they know, and they speak matter-of-factly about how they handle it:

- “When you are outside, you are with your friends and you interact with them while they are acting like they are American. When you come back home, you respect your parents, because they are speaking in their language. You have to do what they expect you to do.”
- “When you are at home, you are a Somali [and] you deal with great things, such as being a girl. You are supposed to be praying. And when you are in America, you are supposed to be an educated girl, willing to speak English and not Somali.”

Several mentioned that the best approach was to follow their religion and culture as a bedrock in their lives, and then “get from [this American] culture an education, and get a good job, and go back to Somalia.”

Teen Pregnancy and Relationships

Boys felt that Somali culture teaches that you shouldn’t get a girl pregnant until you marry her. You have to be able to take care of her and the baby. The girls agreed that this was the position of their culture:

- “They teach you not to have sex without being married, and usually you can’t stay around and do bad things because you’re not even supposed to be with boys.”
- “My own religion....taught me that I could never get...pregnant without marriage.”
- One girl simply said that they did not have teen pregnancy. It is “haram” (forbidden).

Young people reported that their parents had different stances on dating and relationships. One approach was very traditional. One girl said: “In my culture, dating doesn’t exist at all....Our parents didn’t date. [Their parents] chose for you who you can marry and who you can’t marry. So in America we change a little bit, [but still don’t date].” Another girl added: “Mostly, my parents don’t want me to have a relationship with anybody until I am about to get married.” A boy echoed the traditional view: “We don’t do dating and it is not known in our culture.” Courtship, however, is allowed.

One girl said that dating was allowed, though with parent involvement: “The parents allow dating, but...they would like to see who you are dating....If they don’t like the person, they normally discuss with you and advise you and

they like if you follow their advice.” A boy described a similar arrangement: “You can date any girl as long as she is the one you want and [is] good for you. Also, your parents and her parents have to consent to the relationship.” Several boys emphasized that their parents wanted them to date only Somali or Muslim girls.

Violence

While discussing violence and carrying weapons to school, the young people who spoke felt that

Somali culture does not encourage or approve of violence:

- “Our religion....says it is not proper to fight and do acts of violence for no reason....And even if you are fighting, you have to be fighting for a legitimate cause.”
- “Being violent is not going to help you. It makes you wild, and usually the wrong things always [happen].”

Vietnamese

Cultural Identity

Almost all of the youth identified themselves as Vietnamese, although a couple described their background as both Vietnamese and Chinese.

Vietnamese youth liked many things about being Vietnamese, including:

- Being bi-lingual, knowing how to speak two languages
- Having an interesting background and history
- The high value that Vietnamese people place on education
- Foods, such as egg rolls and fresh fruit
- Clothes
- Traditions

There were also many aspects of being Vietnamese that young people didn't like or that made them uncomfortable. Vietnamese youth did not like the stereotypes and prejudices that were directed against them. One person said: “American people say that discrimination is not really that much anymore....Even though they don't say it, they actually, like, show it.”

Boys and girls also felt that their families had overly high expectations and placed too much pressure on them. The message is that you have to exceed American kids: “You're Asian; you're supposed to be smarter and have high grades.”

Some youth were frustrated because even though they tried hard to speak English, American kids still did not understand them. One girl said she felt uncomfortable because “I'm

here in America and there's nothing I can do to help the poor people over there [in Vietnam].”

Living at the same time in two different cultures can be very challenging. Yet, many young people thought that balancing between two cultures was the natural way to live. It is what they know. “It's easy for us, for the young people,” said one of the boys, “When we got here we just learned quick, but the old people....they can't adapt as quick as us.”

Some Vietnamese youth thought that living in two worlds allowed them to take the best that both had to offer. As one girl said, “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.” In their view, immigrant kids are able to see both worlds rather than being immersed or lost in only one.

Many youth acknowledged that this was a difficult process. One girl pointed out that she can be with her American and Vietnamese friends, but the two groups don't talk to each other, so she has to hang out with each group separately. Another said it was hard to please everybody. “Sometimes, though, I'm too Americanized for Vietnamese people and too Vietnamese for American people.” Another girl described the extra effort it takes:

- “When I go to school, I speak English 100 percent. I just make sure that everybody around me feels comfortable....cause I don't want them to think that I talk about them or anything. But when I'm at home I speak Vietnamese 100 percent, because I have a

little nephew who looks up to me....and I want him to learn about Vietnamese culture."

The girls thought adults could help with this balancing act by easing up on the pressure ("stop pressuring us") and by engaging in more communication. "They should support us in a way where we feel comfortable to say anything to them about anything, where we know that they are not going to yell at us or get on our case." More teaching about Vietnamese culture was also suggested.

Teen Pregnancy and Relationships

Both boys and girls thought that teen pregnancy was viewed very negatively by Vietnamese culture. Some said that the culture teaches that you should have sex only after you marry. Girls said that they would feel ashamed and people would look down on them if they became pregnant as teens. They might even be kicked out of the house. Being a teen mother could also make it more difficult to marry later on. One girl described the dilemma of teen mothers as follows: "If I were a teenager and I have a baby and by the time I am like in my twenties, when I'm ready to get married, it's really hard to find a guy to marry me."

In general, Vietnamese youth thought American families had a more open mind about teen pregnancy and were more supportive if their teens became pregnant. Some thought that's the way it should be.

Strict family rules and expectations about dating and relationships were the most hotly discussed issues in both boys and girls focus groups. One girl said she has been told she can't have a date until the second year of college. Another said her mother told her she can date once she graduates from college. Another girl reported that her father thinks that "If you're dating, you screw up your whole education....If you have a social life, then you might get pregnant." Such an outcome would be very shameful for the parents, and Vietnamese culture would say "You can't raise your kids right....You're bad parents."

The girls objected strongly to these rules and felt they were just not right. The period of waiting to date was way too long. They especially worried that they wouldn't have dating experience, or

enough experience with male-female relationships to make a good choice of whom to marry:

- "You don't have good experience and then you just find a guy...and he's the only guy you've dated, and he must be a good one, so you just marry that guy and you may have [made] the wrong choice."
- "You don't date at all, you don't know much about people," and you don't have the experience by which to judge guys.

Boys also said that their parents tell them "we are too young to date." One boy added that if you have a girlfriend, you have to keep it secret.

Both boys and girls felt that many Vietnamese parents did not explicitly teach much about relationships and did not want to talk about sex with their kids. Most of the teens felt this was a mistake. It leaves teens not knowing what to do about relationships and with lots of curiosity about sex.

However, some youth have noticed that some parents, especially those who have been in the U.S. longer, are not as strict about dating. One girl noted that some parents are becoming more Americanized, and are trying to adopt the good things from American culture.

Both boys and girls acknowledged some pressure to marry within the Vietnamese community. The boys were particularly adamant in saying that they would choose their partner, not like back in Vietnam where the parents made that decision. "We marry for us, not for them."

Violence

Vietnamese youth thought that some students brought weapons to school either to protect themselves or because they were in gangs and the gangs expected them to carry weapons.

In their view, Vietnamese culture teaches "respect with honor." You should "just walk away" from trouble. Violence is never the answer. One youth added that when they do fight, Asians usually fight with their fists.

Special Focus: September 11th

We also asked young people to describe their perceptions of September 11th and its impact on their community and society at large. Here we share some of those feelings and experiences.

African American

Most African American youth said September 11th didn't affect them much directly, but they did have thoughts on how it might affect society as a whole. Some thought that the experience of being under attack might show whites what it's like to be Black: "Now you see how we feel, living day to day, wondering what's gonna happen next....You walk out your door, you see if somebody after you or you know a stray bullet gonna come in." Others expressed distrust for the media, noting that the U.S. was stereotyping Arabs just the way Blacks are stereotyped.

When asked if 9/11 had brought Americans together, Black youth who responded disagreed. They felt it split us further apart.

Some young people offered other observations about the aftermath of 9/11. One boy said: "Basically, we're a spoiled country....We're spoiled and we're cocky, and that's why nobody really likes America." Another felt that Muslim fighters were more committed than the U.S. people are: "They're warriors; we're soldiers." One of the girls thought that retaliation by the U.S. won't work and will just prolong the cycle of violence.

American Indian

American Indian girls did not agree that 9/11 brought people together. They felt there was less trust as a result of how people reacted:

- "They were making fun of Somali people."
- "It's just adding to our problems in our society....trying to work with each other, work beside each other and not try to clash together."
- "The day that it happened, they were....saying it was going to change the world. It didn't change nothing."

They suggested that adults could help kids deal with 9/11 by teaching respect and by teaching them "not to be racist" or into "hatred."

Cambodian

Many Cambodian youth felt scared by the events of September 11th and afterwards. Fear of getting anthrax through the mail was specifically mentioned by several. Youth shared that their parents took it very hard. They didn't want their children to go outside, to go to the mall. They worried about their kids going to school and they worried about letters that might contain anthrax:

- "My mom talked about this anthrax thing, made us wear gloves to check the mail."
- "She told me be careful at school. Kids might bring some guns and shoot the school....If you receive a mail that you don't know, don't open it. She's so paranoid."

At least one youth made the connection between their parents' reactions and their experiences under the genocide in Cambodia—"They look back at Cambodia, and how they had to run over here because it happened over there."

Some youth expressed hatred for Osama bin Laden, but were careful to say they did not feel that way about Muslims in general, or Muslim people such as the Somalis. Some felt that people in America are more united after the attacks. Others felt, however, that the attacks had created divisions along racial lines: "Before this, you look at white people and make friends. Now, the white people, they don't trust you. They think you are one of those people. They judge you too much."

For some, 9/11 also served as a somber reminder not to take important relationships for granted: "Anything could happen at any moment to your friends or family members. They might not be there the next day."

Hmong

The events of September 11th have had an impact on Hmong youth. Some said that the economy has gone "down the drain," and that school budgets have been cut. "Our schools....their budgets are getting cut just because of what happened... [and] you don't really have that much privacy anymore." Another youth added, "I don't think that it's our fault that they should raise taxes and cut school budgets."

Both boys and girls were impressed with the altruism they have seen. Students have tried to raise money for the victims. Some have seen people coming closer together, at least "during the first couple of months" after September 11th.

Some youth acknowledged being scared. They felt that the adults in their community didn't understand what was going on, and were not able to help much with their feelings. A few expressed opinions about foreign policy, saying that the U.S. should stop trying to be on top of the world.

Lao

Lao youth felt several impacts from the events of September 11. They mentioned school cuts and other budget cuts because more money was going for war. They have also noticed discrimination and stereotyping directed at Arabs, Pakistanis, and others. One girl knows of a Middle Eastern restaurant owner who is losing business because "people assume automatically he's gonna go out and shoot somebody or knock down a building." Another has a school friend who "would come to school devastated everyday that people are going to bully her, but thank God it didn't happen."

Lao youth had mixed opinions about whether 9/11 brought Americans together. Several thought it did not. One boy said: "I don't think it brought people together; it just brought more hate." Others felt the flags and other symbols did show that people were more united. One girl who shared this opinion pointed out that it was "kind of sick" that it took an event like this for people to come together. It was also sad, another girl added, that it took an event like this to open people's eyes to the fact that terror and violence is happening all over the world: "It's

because it happened to us. That's why we're acknowledging it now."

Mexican/Mexican-American

Mexican/Mexican-American youth felt that the events of September 11th had a very negative impact on Mexicans and on immigrants in general. One said that people started "criticizing every race that wasn't Caucasian." Others pointed out that there were more restrictions on immigrants, and that it was harder to cross the border, to work and to travel, especially for undocumented immigrants. "I have a cousin who worked....and he has false papers, and a week after that [9/11] they threw him in jail because he didn't have papers." One youth noted that 9/11 effectively halted a hoped-for agreement between the U.S. and Mexico that would have allowed more Mexican immigrants to work in the U.S. legally.

Mexican youth also rejected the idea that 9/11 brought the country together. If it did, it was only for a brief moment:

- "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. "For a moment, it was a good thing, and then for a moment it was a bad thing....everything changed all of a sudden."

At the same time, Mexican youth were not giving up on the idea of making a life in this country, and they want the rest of America to realize that. The rallying cry of many young people was perhaps best expressed by one youth who exclaimed: "I'm smart, I got skills, and I'm here."

Oromo

When asked to describe the impact of the events of September 11th on them, many boys and girls talked about the hatred of Muslims that often occurred after 9/11, including within their school. One girl said that Americans were distancing themselves from Muslims, and even her American friends were doing this. Many Oromo are Muslim, but some are Christian. One youth who is not Muslim spoke passionately about how important it is for everyone to stand up and support the Muslims.

Somali

When asked about the impact of the events of September 11th, Somali youth responded unanimously that they were deeply affected by the hate, distrust and stereotyping directed against all Muslims because of the actions of a few. Some said that even their American friends turned against them. They related stories of harassment and physical attacks. They know of people who were fired from their jobs. Somali youth definitely do not think that September 11th has brought people together; they think it has divided people due to stereotyping:

- “I am sorry for what happened in 9/11. At our school, we had our own problem. Students who were like brothers and sisters to me...were fighting us as if we caused 9/11. If a Muslim did something wrong, it doesn't mean all Muslims did that. Students should know better. A Muslim caused the problem of 9/11, and they think we're all the same.”
- “Since it is a Muslim who caused 9/11, the American people think all Muslims are like him or they think we are with them.”
- “That horrible incident we did not cause but it affected us in a big way. It reached to the point where people who were walking in the street will look at us badly....What was even worse [was that] at school students were fighting us for no reason. We could not go to our prayer places because we were told people may cause us harm.”
- “I feel bad about it because there were a lot of schools where there was fighting. They would make jokes on you like – your mama is so bad that she looks like Osama bin Laden. They make jokes about the religion. I don't feel good about it.”
- “What happened on 9/11 was wrong. We feel bad about it. So many people are being mistaken for the Taliban or terrorists.”
- “Some people were fired from their jobs. Some were harassed in schools. So,

honestly, as Somalis it has really affected us.”

- “Somalis were wronged because they don't send money to help terrorists; they send it to their relatives back home who are poor and have nothing. They send it to them to help them, and people here think that we send it to terrorists to support them. Why would we support someone who wants to kill others?”

Vietnamese

Vietnamese young people noticed many impacts of the events of September 11th. They felt that less money was available for schools and more was going for war. They noticed increased stereotyping of immigrants and mentioned stories of immigrants being beaten up. The stricter immigration laws were making it harder for refugees to bring family members to the U.S. so the family could be together. As refugees themselves, these youth do not always feel fully accepted:

- “We're in America, but then they don't consider us as Americans.”
- “We have to fight in wars, but they don't really consider us as part of their country.”

Some youth described their parents as terrified by these events. One youth said his parents worried that people would be forced into internment camps, just as Japanese Americans were during World War II.

When asked if 9/11 helped bring people together, youth responded that it brought families closer together, but not races. One person expressed sympathy for difficulties Somali refugees were now facing just because they were Muslims: “They want to have a good life, just like us.” Others felt that people have come together by donating blood and money for the victims.

Commentary

We hesitated in titling this last section, wavering between “conclusion” and “commentary.” Obviously we settled on the latter. Our reasoning for this choice lies in the fact that the personal experiences shared by young people in our focus groups are not the “end” of this process, but rather the beginning of an opportunity to better understand the lives of youth of color and American Indian youth in our communities. Our obligation now lies in reflecting upon the **knowledge** shared by these young people as well as using the **wisdom** we’ve gained to influence and change how we work with, interact with, support and encourage our adolescents.

Knowledge

What did we learn from spending time listening to youth? Young people like being part of a culture that is unique and that they feel is their own. Many teens expressed pride in their culture. However, 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.

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 only by what you look like on the outside rather than who you really are inside. Yet, some youth were able to turn these negative experiences into positive motivation to prove people wrong.

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.

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.

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. But some teens felt that the message itself was not enough. They said that peer influence often overwhelmed what parents were saying, that strict rules sometimes backfired, and that many parents were not willing to have open discussions about sex and pregnancy prevention.

Most young people felt their cultures counseled against engaging in violence or using violence to solve disputes. They 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.

Wisdom

What does this mean? Clearly the wisdom gained from these voices will be different for each individual, family, organization and community reading this report. From our perspective, the experiences shared by young people teach us and challenge us in a number of ways.

Adolescents of color and American Indian adolescents possess a remarkable degree of personal strength and versatility that deserves respect and reverence, especially given the life challenges many of these young people face. Research suggests that resiliency among young people is a key predictor of future life successes, and these young people demonstrate that resiliency. Our job in working with, supporting, and encouraging youth is to ensure that resiliency is maintained and strengthened.

Young people deserve our admiration for their perceptiveness about each other and about their families and communities. These adolescents are constantly learning from those around them and we, in turn, should be ready to constantly learn from our youth. The experiences shared in this report highlight these youth as generally very positive, hopeful and thoughtful individuals.

Young people maintain a sophisticated balance between the two cultures to which they are constantly exposed. We must be attentive to young people's distinctive cultures and their experience of walking in two worlds. As role models, teachers, and guiders of youth, we must be committed to using special care when approaching youth issues, understanding that many of the youth of color and American Indian youth we work with are confronted by a myriad of different voices and influences in their lives.

Young people need more opportunities to talk with each other within their own community, to talk with youth in other communities, and to talk across generations, with adults and parents of various cultures. We heard from young people that they enjoyed being able to express themselves to each other and to confront challenging questions and to share their perspectives. We must offer more chances for this type of dialogue, discussion, and learning.

As we work to develop prevention and intervention activities, young people are one of our best resources for informing our actions. Adolescents in these focus groups shared explicit advice about how to better prevent teenage pregnancy and violence—through better education within schools, through more frequent conversations with parents and other adult role models, and through improving the social environment in which young people live.

Simply listening carefully to the voices of our youth may better inform our attempts to improve their health and well-being and ensure receptiveness to our efforts. We believe that young people can help point out where, within an institution, a family, or a community, change can happen. We encourage you to reflect upon how this knowledge and wisdom can help you:

- improve a community center to better serve the youth in your neighborhood;
- redesign an educational curriculum to better address the needs of multicultural youth;
- institute a policy that better reflects the needs of young people and their parents;
- evaluate whether young people are receiving adequate support in their schools, their families, their communities, and their activities to maintain a positive sense of self; and
- talk candidly with a young person the next time you face doubt about the resiliency and hope of our next generation.

We thank you for taking the time to learn from and reflect upon this report and the voices and stories shared within.