

misc.

VARA

Virginia Adolescent Resiliency Assessment

Executive Summary

Risk and Resilience: Positive Youth Development In Orange County, Virginia

April 2008

Updated by:
Jerry Tracy, President
Stillmeadow-Benchmark Associates, Inc.

Revised from the report originally developed by:
Angela J. Huebner, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor & Extension Specialist,
Department of Human Development
Virginia Tech

Maria E. Perozzi
Research Assistant
Department of Human Development
Virginia Tech

For the full report, contact the Orange Office On Youth at 540-672-3313,
or online at <http://orangecountyva.gov/officeonyouth>

I. INTRODUCTION

Researchers have identified factors at different levels within the community that have the potential to put young people at risk for developing problems (risk factors), but also those which help to insulate or protect them from problems (protective factors or assets). Recognizing the importance of risk and protective factors, Orange County began tracking youth behaviors and community characteristics through the VARA (Virginia Adolescent Resiliency Assessment) in 2003. This approach goes straight to the source by asking teens themselves about perceptions of their families, education, values, friends, and community. In addition, in 2007 and early

2008, Orange surveyed adult community members and those working in agencies serving families and youth, and conducted a community meeting to gather community impressions as to the greatest needs and assets of our youth. The information provided in this report should be viewed as a whole. It should not be used to applaud or blame any individual institution for the attitudes and behaviors of Orange County teens. Rather, the plan is to use the information provided by the whole community to create a sustainable long-range plan for creating and maintaining a healthy environment for teens in the Orange County, by building on identified strengths.

This is a summary of the full report available from the Orange Office On Youth. The information provided should be used to create a plan for a healthy environment for Orange County teens by building on identified strengths and assets.

II. ADMINISTRATION OF THE ORANGE COUNTY VARA AND SUPPORTING ACTIVITIES

This report is the result of a joint effort between the Orange County Public Schools, and the Orange County Office on Youth with support from Virginia Tech's Department of Human Development and Stillmeadow-Benchmark Associates, Incorporated.

A 145-item survey, based on a survey process developed by Dr. Stephen Small, University of Wisconsin- Madison/ Extension, was adapted to assess teen perceptions of the community and school, aspirations, concerns and attitudes about various aspects of their lives, mental and physical health, and the frequency of engaging in both dangerous and desirable behaviors. Questions from the 1998 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Center for Disease Control) were also adapted for inclusion.

The most recent survey was conducted in Orange County in November of 2007. A total of 313 completed computer answer forms were included in the analysis. This number is much lower than the sample for 2005, due to the new requirement for written parental permission (versus written desire to opt out), but the sample is still sufficient to

provide insight, patterns and trends within the youth community. Statements in this summary as to percentages of behavior in Orange indicate the percentage and numerical responses to the VARA.

The perspective of parents and other adult community members was gained through two surveys conducted by mail. Ninety-three community members and 12 agency staff responded. Because of the relatively small number of responses to both surveys, the results are used as indicators and supplementary information to the VARA rather than being assumed to establish any trends or definitive answers on their own.

Additional information is also provided from the Community Planning Night held on November 29, 2007. The parents, teens and agency members who attended that meeting identified what they saw as the primary concerns and assets of the Orange community.

III. CHARACTERISTICS OF ORANGE COUNTY TEENS AND THEIR FAMILIES

The 7th through 12th graders in Orange County public schools participated in the

VARA survey. Forty-eight percent (48%) of all the students surveyed were female, and 52% were male. Ten percent (10%) reported their ethnicity as “Black or African-American,” 76% as “White or Anglo or Caucasian,” 6% as “Mixed race/biracial,” 3% as “Other,” nearly 3% as “Hispanic or Latino,” 1% as “Native American,” and 1% as “Asian.” The percentage of minority youth decreased slightly as compared to 2005, except for a 1% increase in those identifying themselves as Hispanic/ Latino.

Nineteen percent (19%) of respondents are 7th graders, 29% are 8th graders (20% in 2005), 18% are 9th graders, 16% are 10th graders, 9% are 11th graders (15% in 2005), and 9% are 12th graders.

Of the 93 individuals completing the community survey, the majority of respondents were white (65), with 26 identifying themselves as minorities, and 21 of those being black. The majority (40) were 26 to 42 years old or above 42 (38). Another 11 were 19 to 26 years old, and 4 were under 19.

Eighty of those who took the survey had children, and 25 were single parents, with 38 having preschool age children, 26 having elementary school age kids, 17 with kids in middle school and 24 with children in high school.

Attendees at the Community Planning Night included: middle and high school youth as well as parents; community agency staff; and members of worship groups and community businesses.

IV. HOW ORANGE COUNTY TEENS SPEND THEIR TIME

Each school day, America’s more than 20 million adolescents decide how they will spend at least forty percent of their waking hours when they are not in school. Those without adult supervision during this time stand a significantly greater chance of becoming involved in problem behaviors.

- 34% of Orange teens spend at least 1-2 hours daily at home with no adults present.

- 55% said they “never” participated in school-based (non-sport) extra-curricular activities.
- 50% spend time studying or doing homework less than an hour a day or not at all. This is a 13% drop from the prior survey.
- About 32% reported participating in “non-school clubs” once a month or more.
- 32% said they watched television at least 3-4 hours a day, down from 41%.
- The community members, agency respondents and planning night participants all see the lack of available activities as one of the greatest problems facing youth.

V. PERSONAL SAFETY AND VIOLENCE

Motor vehicle accidents, homicide, and suicide are the most prevalent causes of death for adolescents; they are also the most preventable. Research reports indicate that the majority of youth violence peaks during the after school hours weekdays and in the evenings on nonschool days.

Automotive Safety

- 67% of Orange County teens said they wear seatbelts “most of the time” or

83% said of youth said they had never ridden in a car with an intoxicated driver, one in ten had done so in the past month.

One in ten youth reported being slapped or hit by a boyfriend / girlfriend and more than a third of girls reported sexual harassment.

97% had not tried to force someone else to have sex or other physical contact without consent, 3% had done so in the past year.

"always.", compared to three quarters in 2005.

- The great majority (83%) report never riding in a car driven by someone under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, up from 77% previously. However, more than one in ten (11%) had done so more than once in the past 30 days.
- 93% of respondents had not driven under the influence in the past 30 days.

Weapon Carrying

- 92% reported that they did not carry a weapon during the past 30 days, up

Concern over the lack of safe activities outside of school hours and school sports was significant in all three surveys, and ranked as one of the top three problem areas at the Community Planning meeting.

The reasons more youth are not involved in these activities varied. The group least involved included more than one in five who did not participate due to the opinions of their peers.

somewhat from 88% in 2005.

Violence

- 52% reported picking on others in the past year. Eleven percent (11%) reported being physically abused by an adult caretaker.
- 16% reported worrying about gangs in school "quite bit" or "very much."
- 97% reported they had not tried to force someone else to have sex or any physical contact without their consent.
- Each area of violence showed a drop of 2-5% as compared to 2005.
- 42% of community members were concerned about youth being abused by parents, 32% identified youth violence as a concern and 37% were concerned about youth being bullied.

- Gangs, Domestic Violence and Bullying at school were all identified as issues by the youth group in at the planning night.

VI. MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Depression

The Virginia Department of Health found depression was the leading cause of hospitalization for 10-14 year-olds and the second leading cause for 15-19 year-olds. Depression is a serious problem that affects teenagers by negatively impacting their life if not diagnosed and treated properly.

Grades and appearance were the greatest stressors for youth, with ¾ worrying about getting good grades and 1/2 concerned about how they look (2/3 of the girls).

Compared to 2005, there was a drop (of over 10%) in the number of boys worried about getting a job and a comparable increase in the percentage of girls worried about how their parents get along.

"Try not to think about it" is the most common coping strategy overall with a large (21%) increase over 2005.

- 19% of students answered "yes" when asked, "During the past 12 months did you ever feel so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that you stopped doing some usual activities?" Thirty three percent answered "yes" in 2005.

Suicide

Nationally, suicide rates among older teen girls, those aged 15-19, recently shot up by 32%; rates for males in that age group rose by 9%.

- Overall, 11% of Orange County teens said they had made a suicide plan within the past year (17% in '05).
- In the Community Survey, 40% saw "youth attempting suicide" as a serious

problem; and 3 of 12 agency staff surveyed concurred.

- 9% of both girls and boys responded that they had attempted suicide in the past year, atypical of the usual gender pattern. (7% lower for girls and 4% lower for boys than in the '05 survey.

Teen Worries

What do most Orange County teens worry about?

- Getting good grades was the greatest worry (72% of boys, 76% of girls), followed by how they look (39%, 61%), getting a good job and their family having enough money (35% overall for both issues). Changes from the prior survey are minimal, under 10% in most cases.
- Among the planning night youth, looks and peer pressure were identified as stressors.

Coping Methods

Orange County teens were asked how often they used a variety of coping strategies; the effectiveness of any one coping strategy depends on the type of stress.

- Trying not to think about it and talking to a friend were the most common answers (27%, 25%)
- There was not a great difference in male and female responses, except in the greater tendency among girls to talk to one of their friends.
- Notably, both boys and girls report relying on their parents as a coping strategy in very few cases (0 to 3%).

VII: ALCOHOL, TOBACCO & DRUG USE AMONG ORANGE COUNTY TEENS

According to their reports, alcohol is the drug of choice among Orange County teens. More Americans die each year from alcohol and alcohol-related illnesses and accidents than from the use of all illegal drugs combined.

Alcohol Use

Nationally, teen drinking continued to drop gradually in 2005, and nearly a quarter of teenagers are smoking by the time they leave high school.

- 25% of Orange County students said they use alcohol at least once a month.
- 25% of those who reported drinking said they had their first drink at age ten or younger, 26% said they had their first drink between 11 and 14. These were small decreases of 5-8%.

Occurrence of Heavy Drinking

Heavy drinking (sometimes referred to as

Most substance use is down slightly as compared to 2005, as is the perceived ease of acquiring alcohol and other drugs.

Substance use/abuse behaviors show significant and even dramatic spikes in tenth grade, including heavy drinking and coming to school intoxicated.

Heavy or 'binge' drinking, while down, was still reported by more than one in ten students, and one in three 10th graders.

Rates of use/abuse remain among the top concerns for Orange adults and youth.

binge drinking) was defined as having five or more drinks in a row at one time.

- 13% of boys and 11% of girls reported heavy drinking at least once during the past month (19% in 2005).
- Heavy drinking spikes dramatically in 10th grade, reported by nearly one in three students, and tenth graders were most likely to have come to school under the influence (27%).

Tobacco Use

Teen smoking has been in steady decline since the mid-1990s, but the rate of decline has been decelerating over the past several years.

- Tobacco (smoked or chewed) appears to be the second most commonly used

substance by Orange County teens: 4% report using tobacco on a daily basis, 11% report using tobacco more than once in the past month.

- 60% of Orange County teens said that they had never tried cigarettes (6% more than in 2005).
- 26% reported having their first cigarette between age eight and ten, 56% between age 11 and 14.
- The pattern of a spike at tenth grade continues here.

Other Drugs

Reduced percentages of both boys and girls are relying on fasting, diet pills or other risky methods to lose weight than they were in 2005.

More boys now report eating less as a means of losing weight – the percentage doubled from 27% to 54% since 2005.

The percentage of girls exercising to lose weight has remained steady, while the percentage of boys has dropped by 5%.

- In the Orange County survey, 7% of all students said they had smoked marijuana at least once during the past 30 days (less than half of the 15% from 2005).
- Usage rates for inhalants and marijuana are comparable in Orange, and comparable for Orange and the nation in terms of marijuana usage.
- Orange does have lower rates of inhalant use than we see nationally.
- Of the 93 community survey respondents, 66 identified *Abuse of Drugs / Alcohol / Tobacco by youth* as a serious problem facing the community, ranking it #2 (with one less vote than *insufficient recreational opportunities*) and 28% of that group also cited substance abuse prevention education as an unmet need.

- Agency respondents also identified the issue as #1, in a tie with insufficient recreational opportunities, and adult and teen responses made substance abuse a priority at the planning night.

VIII. DIET & EXERCISE

Diet

The 1997 Youth Risk Behavior Survey showed that teenage girls were only slightly more likely to identify themselves as overweight than were males (26% and 21% respectively). But the majority of female adolescents (55%) were attempting to lose weight, with 28% of the boys giving that answer.

- Most notable in Orange is the doubling in the percentage of boys who eat less to lose weight, versus 2005, and the decrease in the number of boys and girls who fast, with the percentage dropping by 2/3 in each case (though small to begin with).

Exercise

- 56% of Orange County teens reported “exercising or participating in physical activity for at least 20 minutes” three or more days a week, and 47% of those who exercised three times a week or more reported feeling satisfied with their current weight.

Team Sports

- 58% of Orange County teens reported involvement in at least one school or community based sport during the past year.

IX. PERCEPTION OF COMMUNITY, SCHOOL, AND FRIENDS

Young people do not grow up in isolation; they grow up in environments. Their families influence children first and foremost, but friends, school, work, and the communities in which they live are also major influences.

- Surprisingly, considering the strong anecdotal information gathered at the community meeting, and the consistent responses in the community and agency surveys identifying the need for more activities, only a third of youth said they

felt there were not “*enough fun things for kids my age to do*”.

Perceptions of School

The Search Institute identifies two developmental assets: “School provides a caring, encouraging environment” and “Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school”.

- Half of Orange County students say they “*often attend school events such as football games, dances, or concerts.*”
- 75% report feeling encouraged by their teachers, but more than a third (37%) report that they do not enjoy school.
- 39%, as opposed to 30% in 2005, feel a lack of respect from teachers.
- Just over 2/3 (67%) report being satisfied with their education.
- The community surveys and planning discussions indicate that schools are both a source of pride (quality of system) and of concern (effects of growth).
- Half of the agency surveys indicated that local schools were one of the top things going well in Orange.

Educational Plans

- Attending a four-year college was by far the most common choice for both girls and boys in both surveys (70% up from 63% for girls and 60% up from 53% for boys).
- Attending a two-year college was the next most common choice.
- Youth at the planning meeting had concerns related to acquiring higher education (grades, tuition).

Friends

Because friends are so influential, we want to understand how teens perceive their friends. Despite friends’ influence on daily decisions, research shows teens are still more likely to go to adults than to friends for advice about decisions with long-term effects, such as college choice and career

- Significant numbers (70-91%) found finishing high school, continuing their education past high schools, being

involved with extracurricular activities and getting a good job as somewhat or very important.

- Very little change has occurred in comparison to the results of the 2005 VARA.

Friends and Delinquency

We know conformity with peers increases from middle childhood to middle adolescence and peers can be especially influential in situations involving problem behavior.

- 31% of Orange County teens said they were at least “*sometimes*” afraid of doing things their friends wouldn’t approve; 24% do not participate in more in extracurricular activities because their friends might disapprove.
- 59% of boys and girls reported cheating on a test in the past 6 months, nearly a third cut class, and 1 in 4 boys and over 1 in three girls took something without paying for it.

Community Attitudes

The need for more after school and community activities was echoed throughout the surveys and the community meeting, ranking as the number one priority for adults and youth.

Schools are a source of pride and a valued resource, but the demands on those schools, including increasing numbers, presents a significant problem.

4 Year and 2 Year Colleges remain the predominant plan for most high schoolers and middle schoolers after graduating high school.

Although friends and family are important, teens' attitudes and behaviors are also shaped by their community's values.

- 65% said *"dropping out of high school is not acceptable behavior in the opinion of most people in our community."*
- When asked about teen pregnancy, 35% reported they thought it was *"not encouraged, but is acceptable behavior in the opinion of most people in our community"*.
- 53% agreed that *"If I were to do something wrong, adults in my town, school, or community would probably tell my parent(s)/guardian(s)"*. This decreased from 2005 substantially.

Community Activities

- About 40% (17% more than in '05) of youth said they spent three hours or more a day at home alone.
- 71% said they never participated in non-school related clubs, such as 4-H.
- The majority of those completing the Community Survey and the youth at the planning meeting, as well as 9 of 12 agency respondents, saw teen pregnancy as a priority problem.

Finishing high school and continuing their education past high school were valued most highly (87-91%)

Patterns are very similar to those of the 2005 survey.

X. PARENT-TEEN RELATIONS

- 90% reported their parents were good parents, and cared about them, *"most of the time"* or *"always"* and 81% felt that their parents respected them *"most of the time"* or *always"*.
- 55% say they worry at least some about their family's level of income, which is a 7% increase over 2005.
- 28% say they worry at least some about how well their parents get along with each other; and 9% worry at least some about violence in the home (7 to 8% decreases in each case from '05).

Communicating with Parents About Personal Problems

- 60% spoke to their parents at least "sometimes" about personal problems as distinguished from the 3% or less who say they rely on their parents as a coping strategy.
- Sixty percent (60%) of Orange County teens said they *"never"* or *"rarely"* talk to their parents about sex or birth control, 52% responded in the same manner regarding drugs and alcohol.

Decision-making

By involving youth in making decisions,

Thirty-five percent (35%) of youth reported they thought teen pregnancy was *"not encouraged, but is acceptable behavior in the opinion of most people in our community"* and there is a corresponding concern over rising pregnancy rates.

The number of youth who felt: *"If I were to do something wrong, adults in my town, school, or community would probably tell my parent(s) / guardian(s)"* has decreased by 22% from 2005, with nearly half disagreeing with that statement.

parents teach their teens how to make important and wise decisions under their watchful supervision.

The survey question, *"In general, how are most important decisions made between you and your parent(s) or other adult you live with (for example, what time you need to be home at night or where you can go with your friends)?"* reveals different patterns of decision making between parents and teens:

- 35% said *"they ask my opinion, but they have the final say"*; 28% said *"We talk about it and together we come to a decision"*; 18% said their parents tell them *"exactly what to do"*; 7% said *"They trust me to decide for myself"*; and

2% said, "They don't care what I do, so I decide for myself."

Parental Monitoring

Researchers found higher levels of parental monitoring are related to lower rates of sexual activity and to lower levels of alcohol and drug use.

- Orange County teens generally perceive a great deal of monitoring by their parents.
- With regard to knowing their friends' parents, television, and especially Internet use, Orange County teens perceive less monitoring.

Perception of Parental Values

- Approximately 95% of students believe their parents think it is "somewhat important" or "very important" to finish high school, get good grades, go to college and get a good job.
- 66% reported that parents think it is "somewhat important" or "very important" to be involved with sports, school events, or afterschool activities.
- Among the concerns identified by youth were unemployed parents, parenting abilities and role modeling, and divorced/single parents.

XI. SEXUALITY

Although the rate of sexual activity among U.S. teens is similar to other developing countries, the use of contraception is lower. Studies suggest that about one-third (34%) of all U.S. boys and girls have had sexual intercourse by ninth grade.

- In Orange County, 23% of students said they had had sexual intercourse, a 12% decrease from 2005.
- In general, the percentage of teens reporting intercourse increases with increasing grade level, 4% of 7th graders (a significant drop from '05) to 68% of 12th graders (an increase).
- Of those teens that reported having had sex, 17% (a drop from 28% in '05) had their first experience at or before age 12, and 55% said they had their first experience between ages 13 and 15.

Contraception

In U.S. studies, 70 percent of women and 69 percent of men ages 15 to 19 reported condom use at first sex.

- Of those teens saying they were currently sexually active, 55% did not use birth control consistently, an 18% increase over 2005, and 27% did not use a condom during their last sexual encounter.

Communication

- Remember that sixty percent (60%) of Orange County teens said they "never" or "rarely" talk to their parents about sex or birth control, during the past year.

Perceptions of the Reasons Teens Do and Do Not Engage In Sexual Intercourse

Youth report a very high percentage of parents who know where they are after school (90%) and in the evening (88%). A much lower percentage report that their own parents know the parents of their friends (47%).

70% of Orange County teens reported having both communication and some input as part of the decision-making process, and increase from just over half in 2005.

There is a concern among parents, youth and agency members alike that parental guidance and involvement is insufficient.

In Orange County, the responses from sexually active and sexually non-active teens as to why teens do not have sexual intercourse were very similar.

- Fear of pregnancy was the most commonly cited reason for not engaging

in sex. A large percentage of both groups ranked curiosity and pleasure as the main reasons why teens engage in sexual intercourse.

- Those who are sexually active are 3 times more likely to feel that “*It’s part of a mature, loving relationship*”.
- Changes from the prior VARA are 4% or less in all cases for this question.

Nearly a quarter (23%) of Orange youth have been sexually active, ranging from 3% of 7th graders to 25% of 10th graders and 68% of 12th graders.

Of those youth who had sex within the past 30 days, more than half (55%) did not use birth control consistently

Sixty percent (60%) of Orange County teens said they “*never*” or “*rarely*” talked to their parents about sex or birth control, during the past year.