



WHAT TEENS REALLY THINK

The Washington Post

By Richard Morin

They're a generation in a hurry, hurtling headlong to adulthood but not yet shed of youthful innocence or naivete. They're mixed up -- and the girls in particular are stressed out. They view the future through cracked rose-colored glasses, anxious about the direction of the country and the world. Most predict another terrorist attack as big or bigger than September 11 sometime in their lives. One in four expects a nuclear war.

At the same time, teenagers in the Washington area are brimming with youthful optimism and self-confidence about their own futures in the dangerous world they will inherit, according to a survey of high-school age teens and their parents conducted by The Washington Post, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University.

Sometimes their confidence borders on delusional: The vast majority say it's likely they will be rich. Sometimes it is poignant: Most are convinced they will be married to the same person till death do them part. But more often their expectations are sensibly realistic: Most expect that just about everything, from a new house to a college education, will cost more when they are their parents' age.

Their world is good. Area high schoolers agree that it's a great time to be a kid. Looking forward, they believe the country's best years lie ahead. Big majorities predict the world will be more racially and sexually tolerant and accepting when they are in charge, a place where people will be more free than they are now to live and love as they wish. Few teens -- black or white, male or female -- see their race or gender as a roadblock to success. Many expect to have a richer, fuller, better life than their parents, a prospect particularly vivid for area teens who are first-generation Americans.

"My mom was born in El Salvador," says Blanca Pacheco, 17, a senior at Albert Einstein High School in Kensington. **"I have much more opportunities. I have so many doors open to me. I just have to work for it. It is there for me, if I want it and I try."**

But she worries that the United States is drifting in the wrong direction, and fears another cataclysmic terrorist attack. **"Life is very unpredictable. Anything can happen. I have a lot of things I want to accomplish in life, and that takes me past the bad things that are happening."**



Kiera Clarke, from left, Bjorn Begelman, Emily Doubt, and Reid Erickson form a discussion group during their American government honors class "Contemporary Problems," at Nathan Hale High School in Seattle. (AP Photo/Cheryl Hatch)

Like Blanca, and despite the general optimism, the majority of local teens say the country now is seriously off course. Most say pollution, AIDS, drug abuse, immorality and divorce will be worse, not better, by the time they are middle-aged. Majorities expect it will be harder for them to find a job, raise a family or buy a house than it was for their parents.

Seniors Ali Asgar Kharodawala, right, and Jaclynn Croyle, left, listen during their Advanced Placement Psychology class at Canton High School in Canton, Mich. (AP Photo/Paul Sancya)



Are they conflicted and more than a little confused? You bet, says Rod Fisher, 17, who was born in Brazil and is a senior at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School.

"It's a confusing time, rather than bad or good. I'm stuck in the middle of so many things -- college things, the war, the economy, other things that are going on," says Rod, who wants to postpone college to chase fame and riches with his punk rock band Anada ("Like 'Canada,' but without the 'C,'" he explains).

"I think most teenagers 13 to 18 are very confused right now," Rod says. **"It's hard to know what direction you want to go in when the country doesn't know what direction it wants to go in."**

These views are far from unique to teens in the Washington region, according to a separate Post survey of teens nationally. While this region is richer, better educated and more diverse than the country as a whole, one of the biggest surprises of the surveys

was how closely the attitudes of area teens mirror the views of high school-age teenagers across the country.

Similar majorities of teens say the country is headed in the wrong direction. But virtually the same proportion of young people locally and nationally confidently predict that the country's best years are ahead of it. More than six in 10 teens nationally agree it's a good time to be growing up, and about an equal proportion of area high schoolers agree.

Both groups have similar dreams and delusions. About two-thirds locally and nationally say there's a good chance they will be rich someday. Nearly one-third also predict they'll be famous, including a majority of local African American teens, who expect both celebrity and riches. Even many less affluent black teens foresee wealth and fame: a finding that may indicate reassuring confidence - or media-fed delusions.

Washington teens differ from their peers across the country in one troubling way: The girls here are far more stressed out. More than four in 10 local girls say they "frequently" experience stress in their daily lives; nationally, fewer than three in 10 teenage girls feel similarly harried. Only about one in four boys locally or nationally says he is frequently stressed out.

Even so, when compared with their parents, Washington teens are consistently more optimistic on a range of issues - or, more precisely, they are less pessimistic. Across the survey, local teens express broadly negative views about the future.



Mashael Majid, 17, a senior at Taft High School at the "College Office" at her school in the Woodland Hills area of Los Angeles. Majid will attend Moorpark Community College for the next two years, and later she would be eligible to transfer to the University of California, Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes)

"This country is headed in the wrong direction," says Kristin Spring, a 10th-grader at Chantilly High School in Fairfax County, echoing many of her peers. **"There is more pollution. The population keeps growing. People are stealing. Crime seems to be getting worse."** In the face of these problems, Kristin says, she relies on her **"religious faith and my family"** to sustain her. **"They are always there for me."**

It is puzzling that today's young people are so sour on these issues. In their lifetimes the violent crime rate has plummeted; so has the property crime rate. The divorce rate peaked in the early 1980s and has trended downward since. The story is more mixed on AIDS and on pollution. The advent of the "cocktail" treatment for AIDS has sent the AIDS death rate spiraling downward, though no cure seems on the horizon and the epidemic continues to rage abroad. On some key measures, the air and water are cleaner today than when these teens were born, though wetlands, old-growth forests and other natural areas continue to vanish, the amount of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere continues to grow, and dirty water and foul air remain a growing problem in some parts of the world.



Melba Munguia listens to World History teacher Martha Waters during her Advanced Placement class at Miami Senior High School in Miami. The Advanced Placement Program, which began as a tiny experiment for top seniors seeking college courses and credit, has swelled to the point of altering the high school experience. Over nearly 50 years, the number of students taking annual AP exams has grown from about 1,000 to more than 1.1 million. (AP Photo/David Adame)

But in some ways, teens see the world improving. Kristin was born in South Korea and says race is not an issue for her and her multiracial, multiethnic group of friends. **"I think those times are pretty much over,"** she says. **"Most people in this generation know that race doesn't matter. And we'll pass [tolerance] on to our children."**

Like Kristin, local high schoolers surveyed were optimistic about racial progress: Eight in 10 predicted that the races would get along better when they were adults. That's not surprising for kids a generation or two removed from the bitterness that festered in the wake of the battle for civil rights in the 1960s. Almost all say they have had a friend of another race, and 45 percent say they have dated someone of another race, nearly double the proportion of their parents, and a sign that racial barriers, once virtually insurmountable, slowly continue to fall.

Despite the number of teens who say race doesn't matter, teens' view of the world remains nearly as divided between black and white as their parents'. Three out of four white teens (76 percent) say now is a good time to be growing up, while slightly more than half of blacks (54 percent) agree - among the largest racial difference found in these data and a gap that remains wide even among poor blacks and whites.

Nearly half of black teens (45 percent) say the country's best years are in the past; just over one-third of white teens are similarly pessimistic. Black teenagers also are far less trusting of major institutions than white teens, with one notable exception: organized religion. Here, a clear majority of blacks say they have

great confidence in religious institutions while slightly more than one-third of whites are equally enthusiastic. (But even among blacks, the influence of religion is waning, with African American teens significantly less likely than their parents to say religion played a critical role in their lives.)

Big majorities of boys say they have "a lot of" confidence in the military; just less than half of girls are similarly trusting. And girls are significantly more likely than boys to say there will be another terrorist attack on the scale of September 11.

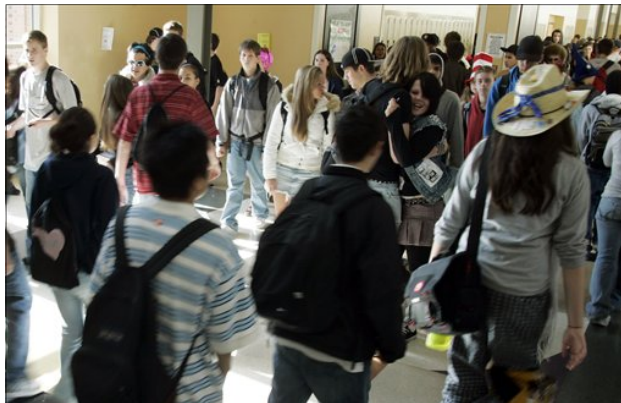
It's always been tough to be a teen, perhaps even more so today, say a majority of area teens. Slightly more than half have a friend who has dropped out of school, and nearly as many have a friend who became pregnant. About half these teens say they know someone who is in a gang, and one in five report personally being the victim of crime or violence.

A similar percentage say they know someone who has been shot - including nearly half of black teens.

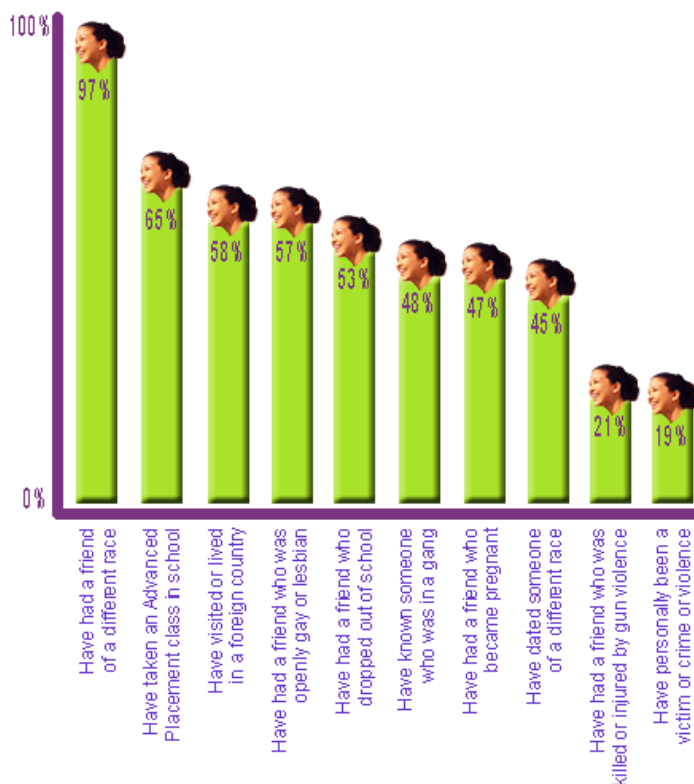
"No doubt about it, it's hard for any teenager to grow up," says Ben Litoff, of Northwest Washington, a 10th-grader and varsity basketball player at Kingsbury Day School. **"Any time is a hard time to be a teenager, only now drugs are a more serious problem, there are more diseases and crime, lots of bad things waiting out there. But you only have one life. I'd rather be optimistic than pessimistic."**

Excerpted with permission from The Washington Post from October 23, 2005 article titled, "What Teens Really Think."

The survey of local high school-age students and their parents was conducted among 800 randomly selected pairs of teenagers and parents or guardians living in the Washington, DC, region: 102 pairs in the District, 391 in Maryland and 307 in Virginia. High school-age teenagers were defined as those 14 to 18 years old. Teenagers were interviewed with their parents' permission. Interviews were conducted by telephone from April 26 to May 29. Hispanic and Asian teenagers were represented in the sample in proportion to their percentage in the local population. However, the resulting subsamples of each group were too small to draw statistically valid characterizations.



Above and below: Students at Ballard High School in Seattle move through the halls between classes. The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the Seattle School District's use of race as a tiebreaking factor in high-school admissions. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)



One feature cuts across the survey - a yawning gender gap. Two-thirds of all boys say the country's best years lie in the future. Only half of all girls agree. A big majority of girls say it's harder growing up today than it was for their parents; fewer than half of all boys agree.

Win a Prize!

To win a prize answer this question:

Who is more stressed out in the U.S.—teenage boys or girls?

Send your answer to zoom@usinfo.pl.

Give your name and address.

The deadline is January 31.

Good Luck!

The winners from the previous issue will soon receive their prizes by mail.

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The national survey was conducted by telephone August 3 to August 8 among a nationally representative sample of 570 respondents in the same age group. The margin of sampling error for results based on national teens, local teens or local parents is plus or minus four percentage points. The fieldwork for both surveys was conducted by ICR/ International Communications Research of Media, Pa.

This project was conducted jointly by The Washington Post, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University as part of an ongoing collaboration. The three sponsors worked together to develop the survey questionnaire and analyze the results but are publishing independent summaries of the findings. Each organization bears sole responsibility for the work that appears under its name. The Post and the Kaiser Family Foundation -- a nonprofit organization that conducts research on health care and other public policy issues -- paid for the surveys and related expenses. The project team members from KFF included Drew E. Altman, president; Mollyann Brodie, vice president for public opinion research; and Elizabeth Hamel, associate director for public opinion research. Harvard project team members included Robert J. Blendon, a professor at the School of Public Health and John F. Kennedy School of Government, and John Benson, managing director of the Harvard Opinion Research Program.

Discuss

- What are American teenagers optimistic and what are they pessimistic about?
- Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the same issues?
- Do you feel life is "unpredictable"? How do you try to deal with this feeling?
- Is being rich in the future one of your goals? Is being famous one of your goals?
- Who do you think is more stressed out in Poland—teenage girls or boys? Why?
- Do you think your generation is more tolerant than the generation of your parents? Can you give examples?

Activity Page

Find answers to activities on this page at www.usinfo.pl/zoom/

■ Glossary

This time our glossary is arranged not alphabetically but in the order the words appear in the article.

- to hurtle** - to move quickly
- shed of** - without something
- naivete** - simplicity
- to brim with** - to be full of
- delusional** - based on false belief
- poignant** - moving, touching
- gender** - condition of being female or male
- riches** - wealth
- affluent** - wealthy
- harried** - distressed
- sour** - displeased
- to plummet** - to fall down
- advent** - arrival
- to spiral downward** - to fall
- bitterness** - disappointment
- to fester** - to form (about something very unpleasant)
- in the wake of** - as a consequence of
- insurmountable** - impossible to overcome
- yawning** - very wide
- sample** - a set of people analyzed to estimate the characteristics of a whole group

■ Sour Sample

Use words or phrases from the glossary on the left to complete the sentences below. Pay attention to the correct form.

- We had to wait as an express train _____ past our car.
- Jack lost all his _____ during the first year of working for a multinational corporation.
- The National Museum _____ with tourists.
- Are there still _____ people in your class who think they can get into college easily without putting any effort towards it?
- I don't think _____ of the prospective employee should matter to the employer.
- The book presents a classic "rags to _____" story.
- The Johnsons aren't just well off, they are truly _____.
- Not only teenagers are distressed; in fact their parents can be even more _____.
- After so many terrible events in her life, Mrs. Derrick became quite _____.
- After the media reported numerous failures of the new government, the stock market _____.
- The _____ of the Internet era forever changed the way people seek information.
- _____ the disaster no one knew how many people had lost their lives.