

Voices & Views



Youth Speak Out

Theme report for the Boulder Valley Youth Summit
held in response to the 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Survey

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Boulder Valley Youth Summit
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2003 Youth Risk Behavior Survey

Sponsored by the City of Boulder, Boulder Valley???????

School District and Boulder County???????

May 2006

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About the Youth Summit

The Boulder Valley Youth Summit on Risk Behaviors was sponsored by the City of Boulder, Boulder Valley School District and Boulder County. The youth summit is one phase of a larger community engagement process conducted between January and May, 2006. The process included service provider focus groups, parent discussion groups, interviews with leaders of community organizations, and a Community Summit to develop action strategies to support young people around risk behaviors.

The community engagement process is in response to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted bi-annually in the St. Vrain and Boulder Valley School Districts. It is an effort to encourage the Boulder Valley community to set community priorities for action to support young people rather than just put the data on a shelf.

The youth summit was designed to elicit the perspectives of young people about their health decisions and risk behaviors to help shape the community conversation.

The youth summit conversations focused on four overarching questions:

- ▶ What is it like to be a young person in the Boulder Valley?
- ▶ What is going on with youth health and risk behaviors?
- ▶ What health issues require the most attention?
- ▶ How can the community support young people?

The youth summit included approximately 115 high school students representing each of the public high schools in the Boulder Valley School District. The students were selected, with parent approval, on a somewhat random basis to ensure that those participating in the summit would reflect the student population within the Boulder Valley School District. The conversations at the youth summit were held in small groups with trained facilitators.

The purpose of this report is to highlight the prevailing themes that emerged from the multiple small group conversations. It is not intended to be an exhaustive summary but rather is designed to help focus the ongoing community dialogue. The information represents the perspectives of youth who participated in the summit, not all youth in the Boulder Valley School District.

Key Headlines from the Summit

► **Young people in Boulder Valley feel incredible stress and pressure in their daily lives.** Many youth feel overwhelmed by stress and pressure and report just “keeping our heads above water.” They say it is very challenging to manage expectations about academic performance and that adults simply don’t understand the grade pressure they feel and the academic difficulty of high school. Most youth report feeling crunched for time - they don’t have enough time to do their school work, play sports or exercise, have a job and have any “down time.” Some feel financial pressure to have enough money to buy things others have. Others experience sadness and hopelessness and even contemplate suicide because they can’t handle everything in their lives.

► **Many youth in the Boulder Valley feel like they live in an “unsafe” world.** Many youth report instances of harassment in their lives. They say the harassment is sometimes overt, but is also subtle and nuanced. Many youth feel harassed at school because of the social groups they belong to or because of their grade level. Some young women report receiving unwanted sexual attention and contact. Youth of color say they feel harassed because of their race or ethnicity and hear racist jokes made by peers. Many gay, lesbian, bisexual and questioning youth report verbal harassment

and physical threats. Youth say that they at times even feel subtle harassment from teachers and administrators who make comments about particular youth or social groups, or respond inconsistently with praise or punishment to different groups of youth. Many youth acknowledge that alcohol and drugs are used to escape the pain from the harassment.

► **Young people do express a certain level of optimism and pleasure in their lives.** Youth say they enjoy the new freedoms and opportunities that come with being in high school. However, they also relish the idea that they don’t have to manage all of the responsibilities that adults have to manage. They recognize that some of the challenges they face are just part of growing up and finding one’s



identity and that “figuring yourself out” is one of the greatest joys and challenges of being a young person. Youth also see their high school years as a time when they can make some mistakes and grow from them. As one youth said, you “can screw up BIG, but it is okay as long as you learn from it.”

► **Some young people believe they can make a difference.** However, overcoming stereotypes about youth is a major challenge. Many young people believe they have the power to change how the future could be. They have the unique ability to still dream and have high goals. They believe rebellious minds allow for greater ideas to be explored. Young people also report feeling like adults don’t take them seriously, that they have to work hard to gain trust from adults. Other youth are more resigned and pessimistic about their ability to change the world they live in.

► **Meaningful relationships with family, friends and intimate partners are critically important to youth.** These relationships also bring much angst and stress to the lives of young people. Youth report that as they get older the relationships they have with others become more complex and rewarding. Most youth report they appreciate their family relationships and enjoy having “good friends.” They also say that intimate relationships are important aspects of a fulfilling life. However, managing different expectations between family and friends, negotiating complex social scenes at school, and peer pressure to fit in cause a lot of stress as well. Some use alcohol and drugs to ease social interactions or equate being sexually active with maturity.

► **Young people are impacted by societal values and stereotypes, and by messages in the media.** Most youth feel the impacts of racism, sexism, and classism. They report that they feel the pressure of stereotypes and messages in the media such as: “People who drink are happy”, “Women should be thin”, and “People of color are more likely to be violent”.

Many say that sex and alcohol are glorified in the media and that issues of sadness and depression are rarely addressed.

► **Many young people think of happiness over health and safety.** For many youth being happy is more important than being healthy and safe, although some believe that being healthy is important on the path to happiness. Most youth do make the connection between stress, drinking, smoking, sleep deprivation, poor eating habits and unhealthy relationships and their health. However, the drive to be happy, to have fun, and to fit in is so important that sometimes youth make unhealthy and unsafe decisions.

► **Young people identify Sadness and Hopelessness/Suicide, Alcohol Use/ Drinking and Driving, and Harassment/ Safety at School/Violence as the top three issues that need attention to help them lead happier, healthier, safer lives.** Youth say that many of the risk behaviors identified in the survey are inter-related. Feelings of sadness and hopelessness, navigating the complex social scene at high school, and coping with the effects of harassment lead youth to use alcohol and drugs, and to engage in unhealthy sexual relations. Community support and new resources to help youth and their families address these issues in their lives, change the high school environment and provide substance-free recreation opportunities will go a long way in helping youth lead happy, healthy and safe lives.

What Is Going On with Issues Known as Risk Behaviors?

Participants in the youth summit were asked to consider several issues known as risk behaviors. The topics included: Feeling Sad and Hopeless/Suicide, Alcohol Use/Drinking and Driving, Harassment/Safety at School/Violence, Tobacco/Marijuana/Other Drug Use, and Sexual Behavior.

Feeling Sad and Hopeless/ Suicide

- ▶ Many youth summit participants say that a certain amount of sadness is healthy, as long as it does not go on too long.
- ▶ Stresses, managing expectations from family, school and friends and just trying to “keep your head above water” were the main reasons identified for sadness and hopelessness. Feeling alone and like no one values you were identified as the main reasons for youth considering suicide. Many youth say that many of the risk behaviors are to escape stress and sadness, particularly drug and alcohol use and unsafe sex.
- ▶ Many youth feel most disconnected from their parents on this issue. They say parents either over-react to sadness and “send kids off to a therapist,” dismiss sadness as “teen drama,” or minimize the feelings of youth by saying, “This is just a phase” or “I have been through worse.” Other youth say their parents simply don’t know what to say or how to deal with this issue so young people “put on a happy face” around their parents.

- ▶ Some young people say that suicide is an issue that is seldom talked about in school and when it is, they say, it’s often an over-reaction – e.g. after a suicide there is lots of “dramatic talk” and then the topic disappears. Other students from schools where there have been no suicides say the issue is simply never discussed.
- ▶ Some youth believe that boys are less likely to talk about their feelings but more likely to attempt and succeed at suicide, while girls may talk about sadness more but are more likely to inflict self harm through things like “cutting” than to actually attempt suicide.
- ▶ Most youth believe that youth of color and gay, lesbian, bisexual and questioning youth experience more sadness and hopelessness because of the harassment and pressures they feel.

Alcohol Use/Drinking & Driving

- ▶ Alcohol use is commonplace in Boulder Valley high schools and youth say that it is ingrained in the high school culture. Many youth report that they drink because they are bored, and they acknowledge that alcohol use becomes part of their social experience and a focal point of their social interactions.
- ▶ Youth who use alcohol say they do so to have fun, to feel “giddy”, and to relax in social situations. Youth also use alcohol to help them escape the stresses and pressures they feel. Some youth observe that younger high school

students may drink to fit in to certain social groups, while seniors often drink to “prepare for college.”

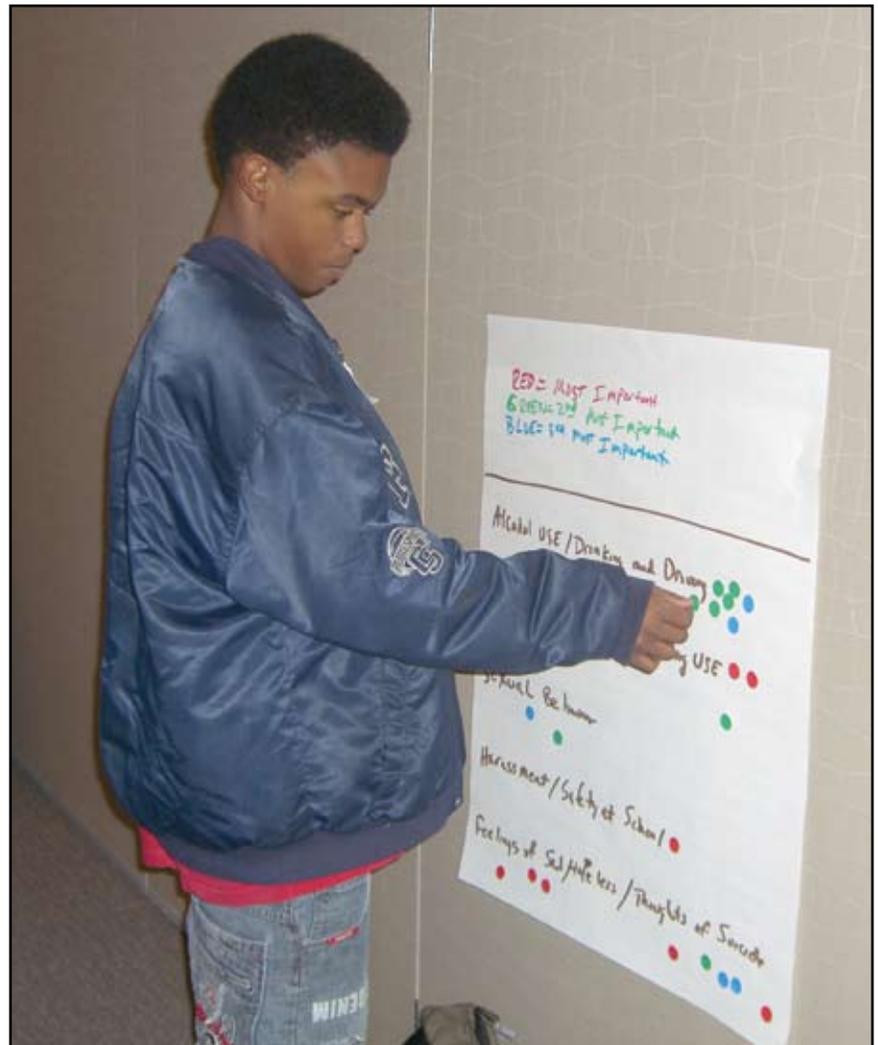
- ▶ Nearly all youth acknowledge the dangers of excessive drinking, and of drinking & driving. The definition of “binge” drinking is somewhat unclear to youth and they say that most, if not all, alcohol use is done as binge drinking, often with hard liquor.
- ▶ Some youth report that alcohol use has an impact on sexual behavior with the goal of the weekend to “get drunk and hook up.”
- ▶ Efforts to make it home by curfew lead some youth to get in the car with drivers who have been drinking.
- ▶ Parental guidance on this issue varies from supplying the alcohol to the youth, to “It is ok to drink, just do it safely,” to encouraging complete abstinence.

reported feeling much more connection with the different grades and social groups in their schools.

- ▶ A majority of youth believe that people who harass others are driven by ignorance, are immature, and are often reacting to stereotypes.
- ▶ Many youth say the root cause of harassment is that there are very few meaningful opportunities for the youth in Boulder Valley to get to know youth in other social groups, grades, or of different races and sexual orientations.
- ▶ Some youth report feeling like teachers will make comments about certain students or praise particular students in unfair ways. Youth believe that this type of behavior by teachers gives license to students to harass one another. Many youth report not trusting teachers and administrators to deal with harassment because they are not consistent in their response to harassment.

Harassment/ Safety at School

- ▶ Harassment can be very subtle, yet is pervasive at the high school level. Verbal harassment and “gossip” are somewhat accepted by most youth as a normal part of high school, however many youth report feeling constantly harassed and persecuted by peers and adults. Physical harassment does occur at the high school level and is not ever acceptable. However, youth who participated in the summit voiced much greater concern about the constant badgering and harassment they feel than concern about their physical safety.
- ▶ Most youth describe a definite “pecking order” that exists in high school and say that a lot of harassment arises between different groups and cliques. Many students from the smaller high schools in the district did not feel this issue as strongly and



- ▶ Many young women report experiences with unwanted sexual attention and touching. Media portrayal of women as objects and as weak contribute to the harassment.
- ▶ Racial jokes and racial harassment do occur in the teen population. Some youth of color report feeling like their identities as youth of color are not honored in the predominately white communities of Boulder Valley with one youth even reporting a peer telling him, “You can’t be black; you live in Boulder.”
- ▶ Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning youth report significant instances of harassment and threats of physical violence.

- ▶ Some youth say they think their parents expect them to know that drugs are wrong, so they don’t talk about them.

Tobacco/Marijuana and Other Drug Use

- ▶ Youth say that marijuana is very common, easy to come by, and considered by many to be “better for you than alcohol and cigarettes.” Marijuana use is driven mostly by boredom and by youth seeking other ways to have fun.
- ▶ Other drugs identified included cocaine, ecstasy, methamphetamine, LSD, acid, mushrooms and prescription pain medications. Many youth believe students who use these “hard” drugs are trying to “self medicate” and to escape the stresses and pressures of life. Additionally, cocaine is used by some girls to control their weight.
- ▶ Some youth say they also want to try drugs in high school where they know they can find “clean” drugs and try the drugs in a safe setting with friends they know well.
- ▶ Youth participating in the summit expressed the most fear and reservation about drug use saying the consequences of trying hard drugs are just too great to justify the risk. However, there also is some experimenting with drugs out of “curiosity.” Some youth say that a death of a youth from a drug overdose does make other youth stop experimenting with that drug.

Sexual Behavior

- ▶ Most youth believe that sexual activity is a healthy part of young peoples’ lives and that adults should not consider it a risk behavior. Moreover, they say that sex is not a “taboo” topic for most of the community so it feels like a more accepted issue.
- ▶ Many youth acknowledge that sex in the context of substance use and multiple partners is unhealthy and unsafe. They also say that some people equate being sexually active with being mature. Youth also mentioned that some youth exchange sex for drugs.
- ▶ Many youth say the education and resources about sexual behavior are good in the Boulder Valley and that many of them know where to go to get information and resources. Some youth say accessing support related to sex might seem easier because they don’t necessarily have to share their feelings or situation, they can simply ask for a condom, for example.
- ▶ Ideas about sex are heavily influenced by the media including television shows, commercials, and especially music videos.
- ▶ Some youth say they don’t talk much about sex with their parents unless they get caught, then they are “lectured.”

What Issues Are Most Important to Young People?

When asked to prioritize the issues that require the most attention from the community, youth who participated in the summit ranked the issues in this order:

1. Feeling Sad and Hopelessness/Suicide
2. Alcohol Use/Drinking & Driving
3. Harassment/Safety at School/Violence
4. Tobacco/Marijuana/Other Drugs
5. Sexual Behavior

Youth were adamant, however, that they believe all of these issues are highly interconnected and are a “cry for help.” They believe that in order for these issues to be successfully addressed, in general adult perceptions of youth must shift in a positive direction. Too often, youth feel that adults are fearful of them, ignore them, or let their behavior be influenced by negative stereo-types about teen-agers.



Conclusion: What Type of Support Do Youth Want?

Youth who participated in the summit offered five broad ideas for how the community can offer support to youth.

Address isolation and stress as the core issues underlying risk behaviors, not just the behaviors themselves. Youth believe that parents and the broader community must recognize isolation and stress as major issues for youth in the Boulder Valley. Youth in this community feel tremendous pressure from themselves, their families, their schools and society, and they do not feel they have adequate support structures to help them deal with these pressures. Youth truly believe that the amount of sadness, suicide, alcohol & drug use and unsafe sexual activity would be reduced if young people felt more connected to each other and to the adults in their lives.



Create opportunities for youth to talk openly about what is going on in their lives and their feelings. Many youth do not feel like they have many “real” conversations with non-judgmental adults. They do not want the adults to “freak out” or the conversations to turn into sermons from the adults. Many youth are not sure they can ever have this type of conversation with their parents and are not particularly trusting of teachers, administrators and other adults. Some believe they might be able to have this type of conversation with young adults such as college aged youth, siblings or “cool” older adults.



Build community understanding about teen sadness/hopelessness and suicide. Youth report feeling most concerned about and least equipped to deal with sadness and suicide. Youth say that the community needs to open up the

conversation about this “taboo” topic. The entire community – youth, families and schools – needs to begin to talk about it. Important questions to address include:

- ▶ What amount of sadness is ok for a young person to experience?
- ▶ When has someone been sad for too long?
- ▶ What are the signs that people should know about to identify a youth that is in need?
- ▶ How can individuals get help?
- ▶ How can peers best support one another?
- ▶ What can families do?



Youth say, “Depression is scary because it is not so obvious and we don’t know how to solve it,” and suggest, “even posters on the wall could help.” Youth want more substance-free social activities in the community. Youth desire to have more substance-free recreation opportunities. They are interested in more fun, cheap (free) late-night activities similar to the after-prom activities created by parent groups. Youth had ideas that local businesses might create “teen nights” or host specific activities designed to attract youth. While youth acknowledge that these activities might be hard to get going, they suggest that something needs to be tried or youth will just continue to go to private residences and drink and smoke.



Develop a more honoring and inclusive environment in the schools. Youth in this community want to be part of a more honoring and inclusive environment. They acknowledge that high school is traditionally a time for “cliques”

and divisions, but have hope that their generation can change this dynamic. Youth believe a chance to develop real relationships between youth of different social groups, grades, races, and sexual identities will help the groups be more tolerant of one another. Youth desire a more consistent approach to harassment from administrators and teachers and want to be in a school environment where single students or groups of students are neither harassed by teachers and administrators nor treated preferentially.

