



ASK THE CHILDREN

YOUTH & VIOLENCE

COLORADO STUDENTS
SPEAK OUT FOR
A MORE CIVIL SOCIETY

SUMMARY OF
MAJOR
FINDINGS



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School shootings, bullying and other acts of youth violence have been reported as an epidemic both in Colorado and across the country. Yet the debate, until now, overlooked and often excluded young people themselves. *Youth and Violence: Colorado Students Speak Out for a More Civil Society* is the first study to ask Colorado's young people what they think can be done to stop the violence that affects them at home, at school and in their community. The Colorado Trust and the Families and Work Institute joined together to produce this first-of-its-kind study. In addition, the National Conference of State Legislatures helped frame the study questions so that the findings are relevant to policy and action. A parallel study was conducted with a nationally representative group of young people around the country during the same time frame. These results and videos of the findings of both studies are also available.

OVERALL FINDINGS

We asked a sample of 1,012 young people in the fifth through twelfth grades in Colorado this question: **"If you could make one change that would help stop the violence that young people experience today, what would that change be?"** Their responses inform the following **three major findings**:

- Although public discussion about violence has focused on **extreme violence**—such as school shootings—as emblematic of a major societal problem, the largest proportion of young people report teasing that goes beyond being playful, cruel put-downs and rejections as being very real violence to them. They say this **emotional violence** hurts and triggers more extreme violence.
- While blame and remedies for youth violence have been focused on parents and/or the schools, many young people have a larger focus: **a seemingly inescapable culture that celebrates sameness**, the one right way to be "in." They feel they need to join in to protect themselves.
- **Relationships are important.** Young people with better relationships with mothers, fathers, teachers and friends are much less likely to experience violence, either as victims or as aggressors. Positive support from important people in kids' lives can be an important factor in preventing violence.

In addition, a significant proportion of students call for measures to keep them safe, such as gun control, better security and stricter punishments for offenders. Students are clearly speaking out for a more civil society. They are

also saying they **need** and **want** appropriate help in combating these problems.

SELECTED FINDINGS

Young people were asked how often in the past month they had experienced some type of violence—either because someone had done it to them *on purpose* or they had inflicted violence on someone else *on purpose*.

Many young people experience emotional violence:

- Two-thirds of young people (67%) have been teased or gossiped about in a mean way *at least once* in the past month and 29 percent have had this experience *five times or more*. Over half (57%) of young people have teased or gossiped about someone else *at least once* and 12 percent have done so *five times or more* in the past month. There are no overall differences between boys and girls with regard to how often they experience this kind of meanness.
- 61 percent of young people have been rejected or ignored *at least once* and 21 percent have had this happen *five times or more*. 49 percent have rejected or ignored others *at least once* and 10 percent have done this *five times or more*. In addition, almost one-third (32%) have been bullied *at least once* and 13 percent have been bullied *five times or more* in the past month; 29 percent have bullied someone else *at least once* and 6 percent *five times or more*.

Almost half of young people experience physical violence:

- 46 percent of young people have been hit, shoved, kicked or tripped *at least once* and 18 percent have had this happen *five times or more* in the past month. Almost two in five (35%) have carried out this behavior *at least once*, and 10 percent have done so *five times or more* in the past month.

One in 12 young people experience extreme violence:

- 9 percent of young people have been attacked with a weapon *at least once* and 2 percent have had this experience *five times or more* over the past month; 5 percent have done this to others *at least once* and 2 percent *five times or more*. Eight percent of young people have been forced to do sexual acts *at least once* and 3 percent have had this experience *five times or more* in the past month. 4 percent have forced someone else to do sexual things *at least once* and 2 percent have done this *five times or more*.

Emotional and physical violence go together:

- Victims of emotional violence are more likely to be victims of physical violence. Similarly, aggressors of emotional violence are also more likely to be aggressors of physical violence. For example, 49 percent of young people who have rejected or ignored someone else *at least once* have also hit, shoved, kicked or tripped someone—compared with 22 percent of those who have not rejected or ignored others.

Young people who have been harmed are much more likely to harm others:

- There is a clear and strong connection between being hurt and hurting others. Those young people who have been victims are much more likely than non-victims to be aggressors. For example, 31 percent of those who have been attacked with a weapon *at least once* attack others—compared with only 2 percent who have not had this experience.

Clearly, there are connections between being harmed and harming. Violence seems to create a vicious cycle—it's hard to know where blame and responsibility begin and end.

Young people with supportive relationships with mothers, fathers, teachers and friends are much less likely to be either victims or aggressors:

- Specifically, our analyses show that features of supportive relationships that make a difference include: paying attention to, monitoring and communicating well with young people, encouraging their interests and helping them learn to solve problems constructively.

COLORADO FINDINGS COMPARED TO NATIONAL FINDINGS

In developing these studies, we wanted to know how and if Colorado children's experiences with violence differ from those of children around the country. It is good news that we find very few differences between the Colorado and national samples; this means that our findings very much capture the experiences of children around the country. However, a few differences do emerge. These differences lead us to *speculate* that, perhaps in response to the Columbine High School shootings, there is increased awareness and more safety precautions in place in Colorado schools. While this study cannot test such theories it will perhaps serve as the impetus for additional research around the noted differences. Our findings show that:

More young people in Colorado feel very safe at school

- More young people in Colorado feel *very safe* at school than young people do nationally (47% in Colorado versus 39% in the national sample). This finding is significant since young people in Colorado do not report being victims or aggressors of physical or extreme violence less frequently than young people nationally.

Principals in Colorado are more likely to report serious violent incidents

- 40 percent of Colorado principals report that serious violent incidents have occurred at their schools versus 29 percent of principals in the national sample; however, children here are not necessarily more likely to report experiencing serious violence than are young people around the country. This could indicate that increased awareness on the part of principals, rather than the amount of actual violence, is influencing these results.

Colorado youth report they are slightly more likely to bully, reject or ignore others

- 29 percent of Colorado kids say they have bullied someone else *at least once* compared to 23 percent of youth nationally. Young people in Colorado are also more likely to have been rejected and ignored (61% versus 54%) and to reject and ignore others (49% versus 43%). However, these are the **only** differences we find in regard to frequency of victimization and aggression of any form of violence between the Colorado and national samples. Again, we can speculate that as a result of Columbine, awareness of what constitutes bullying has increased in the state, so that youth are more likely to report this than are youth in the national sample.

SPECIFIC IMPLICATIONS

As authors of this study, we recommend the following implications be considered.

For PARENTS:

- Help children see the commonalities in people that go beyond how we look, where we live and what we wear. Be a role model by treating others with respect and being respectful of differences, so that children grow up knowing that it is unacceptable to make fun of or exclude others, and are instead encouraged to appreciate, and in fact celebrate, diversity.

- Discipline young people in ways that will help them learn coping skills. Discipline also involves handling your own angry feelings in constructive ways.
- Make every effort to not only know what is going on with your kids, but to be engaged and involved in their lives. Find out what captures their interests and build on it—whether these interests are science, performing in a rock band, baseball, skateboarding or volunteering.

For **TEACHERS:**

- Make an effort to get to know each of the young people in your classroom as individuals.
- Set aside time on a regular basis to give young people experiences that truly engage them. In addition to classroom activities, engagement can take place through service-learning projects or youth leadership programs.
- Set good examples of civility and respect in your classroom and discipline young people in ways that will help them learn coping skills.

For **SCHOOLS:**

- Promote civility in the school and a respect for differences.
- Work toward reforms that let children feel known and understood in school, such as smaller schools and classrooms, “schools within schools,” better teacher-student ratios, more counselors and mentor programs.
- Provide training for educators in violence prevention and begin violence prevention efforts in the early childhood years and continue them for children of all ages.

For **COMMUNITIES:**

- Offer good-quality support groups and parenting programs for parents with children of all ages—beginning in the pre-natal period and continuing into the pre-teen and teen years—that help families develop and maintain effective parenting skills.

- Create positive community-wide youth development initiatives. Establish and invest in youth centers where young people can gain leadership skills, express themselves in a variety of ways and are listened to.

For **GOVERNMENT AT ALL LEVELS:**

- Invest in raising awareness of the importance of emotional violence and discrimination as potential triggers for more serious violence. Provide a range of good mental health services for young people who are involved in violence, either as victims or aggressors.
- Invest in effective violence prevention efforts for children of all ages; ensure that promising practices are evaluated.
- Invest in programs that provide constructive activities during out-of-school time for children of all ages, including youth community centers and other positive youth leadership development efforts.

AND IMPORTANTLY, for EVERYONE:

- **Listen to children—and include them in the process of stopping violence.** Ask them what they think. Do something with what they tell you. Create processes where kids can find their own solutions to solve problems and work on implementing them. As one young person said, “If we are PART OF THE PROBLEM, then we need to be PART OF THE SOLUTION.”

RESOURCES/SHARE AND LEARN ABOUT WHAT WORKS

For a selected listing of resources and programs that address violence, diversity and civic engagement, please see the full report, *Youth and Violence: Colorado Students Speak Out for a More Civil Society*, available via The Colorado Trust’s website, www.coloradotrust.org.

If you are or have been part of an effort involving young people in stopping or reducing violence, please share it with others by submitting a brief description of what you have done to www.askthechildren.org. Check out what others have done or post questions that others can answer.

To order a full copy of *Youth and Violence: Colorado Students Speak Out for a More Civil Society*, please contact The Colorado Trust at 303-837-1200 or go to www.coloradotrust.org or www.familiesandwork.org.