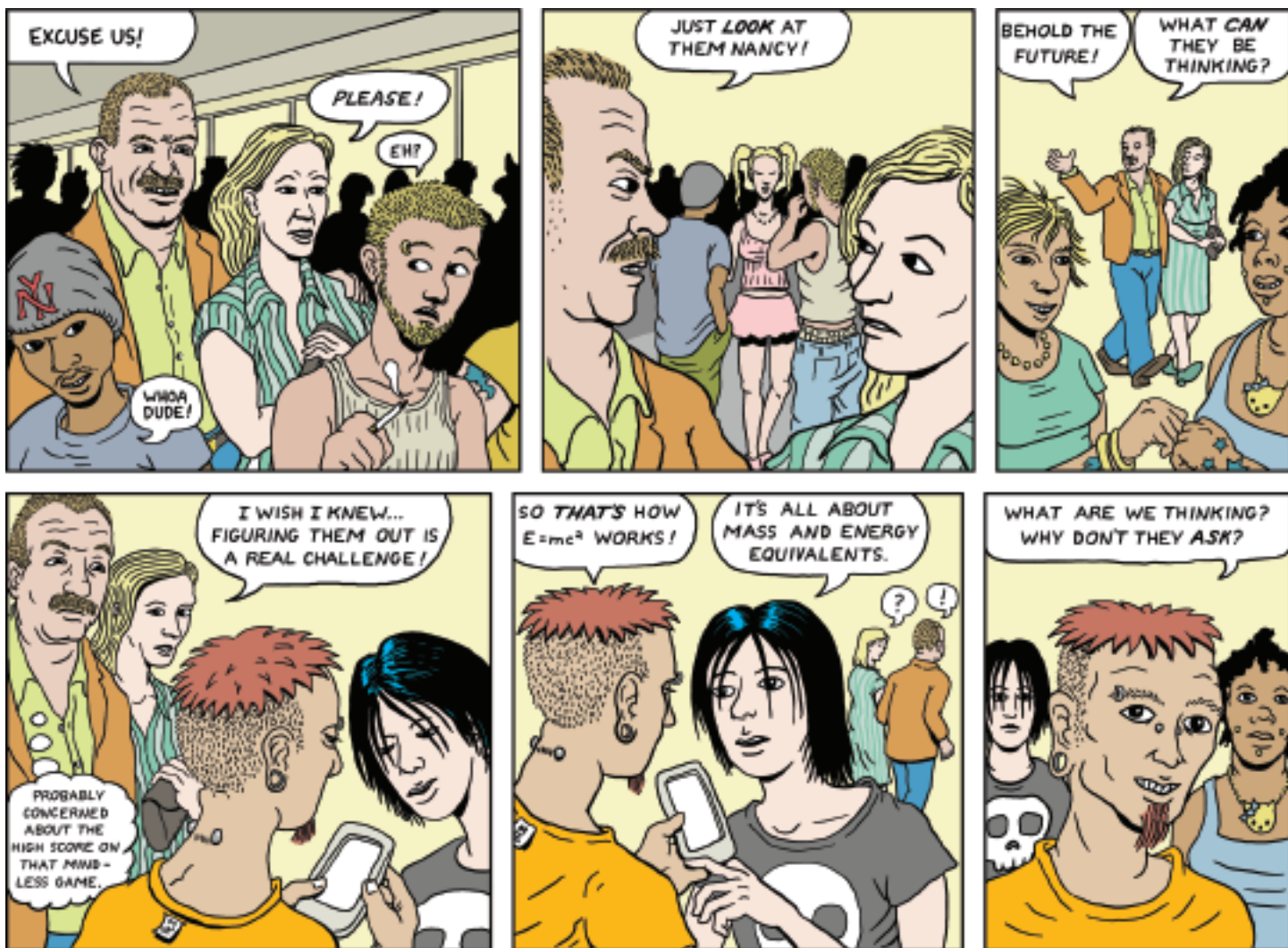


FORUM 411

Engaging Arizona's Leaders

GREAT EXPECTATIONS: ARIZONA TEENS SPEAK UP



MORRISON INSTITUTE
FOR PUBLIC POLICY
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Forum 411 is a quarterly briefing series offering policy, business, and community leaders information on Arizona's critical issues. Forum 411 refers to Morrison Institute's location on the ASU Downtown Phoenix campus, at 411 North Central Avenue. Morrison Institute seeks to be a source of public policy ideas and provide a venue for discussion. Morrison Institute invites everyone to be part of Forum 411.



NOTABLE EVENTS AS TODAY'S TEENS GREW UP

1998

President Bill Clinton impeached
Apple started selling iMac

1999

Columbine shootings occurred
Craigslislist incorporated

2000

Dot.coms went bust
Sony released Playstation 2

2001

World Trade Center attacked
U.S. invaded Afghanistan
iPod, Xbox introduced
iTunes introduced

2002

Third-generation cell phone network launched in U.S.
Friendster founded

2003

U.S. invaded Iraq
MySpace launched

2004

Flickr and Facebook founded

2005

YouTube launched

2006

Twitter began

2007

Recession started



Understanding teenagers can be a challenge. Are they big children or little adults? Heroe-in-training or apprentice slackers? But it's a challenge their elders cannot avoid. Call them Millennials, Echoboomers, or Generation Y, Arizona's 600,000-plus teenagers constitute the entrepreneurs, employers, and workers of tomorrow. They are the stewards of our future, pioneers already coping with our new digital universe and the myriad social transformations it entails. Unfortunately, there's no shortage of adult opinion that too many Arizona teens are morally adrift and socially unconscious. There also are discouraging statistics about educational achievement. It's enough to cause one juvenile court judge to remark: "I remain hopeful. But it's hard not to get nervous thinking [that] these are the ones who will be in charge." So which should we be: Hopeful or nervous?

There's evidence for both. Morrison Institute for Public Policy surveyed teens themselves about what they think about their lives and the major issues facing the nation today. The survey, completed by more than 900 teenagers across the state, offers a largely positive image of Arizona's adolescents.¹ It found most respondents to be reasonably content, trusting, and optimistic. Many are religious, and most express positive attitudes about parents, school, and police. Virtually all acknowledge a college education as a key to a successful life.

No one denies the serious challenges they face. Government-sponsored surveys note high levels of risky behavior among Arizona teens, including substance abuse, violence, and sexual activity. Even with the wealth of teen programs across the state aimed at reducing and preventing such behaviors, they persist. But there's an even more serious question affecting our teenagers' future – and thus Arizona's future: Are we willing to match opportunity with aspiration? Are we providing the social, economic, and educational infrastructure our young people need to match their expectations with reality? That's one for all Arizonans to answer.

Who are Arizona's Teens?

Arizona's teenagers were born between 1990 and 1996. Aged 13 through 19, they make up just more than 9% of the state's population, and form the smallest of the four major population groups (children, teens, working age, and retirees). While the sector has been growing along with the rest of the population, projections show its share will not increase during the next few decades. Today's teens have grown up during a period of heady prosperity and dizzying technological advances, but also have experienced two recessions, two wars, and the rise of international terrorism.

Arizona's teens also reflect the state and nation's increasingly diverse future. At present, Arizona's total population includes 59% Non-Hispanic Whites and 30% Hispanics. Among teens, however, school enrollment figures show Non-Hispanic Whites account for just 45% of the total, while Hispanic adolescents comprise 41%. The issue here is not diversity, but disparities born of historic inequities. Although they are catching up, Hispanic students have lagged behind Non-Hispanic Whites and some other groups in educational achievement. As the former approach majority status among Arizona's teens, their performance becomes of even greater importance to the state's future.

¹ Data from the *Survey of Young Arizonans* are based on analysis of 951 questionnaires completed in December and January. The questionnaires were distributed statewide through established groups ranging from teen leadership organizations to family-service agencies to a variety of high school classes. Most respondents live in Maricopa and Pima counties. However, 23 organizations from seven counties participated, representing urban and rural Arizona male and female teens of all ages, socio-economic backgrounds, races, and ethnicities. Thus, the sample is not a random one. Given the large number of responses and the broad diversity of participants, it provides a useful snapshot of teen opinion. The questionnaire and further information are available at www.morrisoninstitute.org.

If national trends continue, Generation Y may become the first generation in U.S. history to be less educated than the one before. At the same time, Arizona teens will be entering key workforce and leadership positions just as the state's population of retirees expands rapidly. Arizona is already second in the nation (behind Utah) in its "dependency ratio," meaning that it has nearly the highest percentage of children and retirees compared to its working-age population. As workers, today's teenagers – skilled or not – will have a very high percentage of young and old "dependent" upon them.

Some Views from Professionals Who Work With Teens

Many parents consider themselves experts on their own children, but few Arizonans deal regularly with large numbers of teenagers. Interviews with selected educational, religious, and justice professionals from throughout the state revealed some common – and familiar – themes.

Technology Powers Opportunity

For the most part, interviewees praised the impact of new technology. "I think the education teenagers are getting is much better," said a Maricopa County child psychologist. "Their expectations are higher, and I think the course content is certainly much more advanced." A high school counselor said, "[Kids'] lives are more complicated today, but also contain many more opportunities. These kids can see what the world's like through TV, computer, and video resources that weren't available to me."

Haves and Have-nots Remain

"Poverty is at the core of what's wrong with everything (concerning teens)," a juvenile court judge said. "There is a huge division between the haves and have-nots." The director of a Boys & Girls Club in western Arizona said: "The kids say there's not a prayer in the world for them to get out [of poverty]. They feel defeated already."

Family Remains Central

Virtually all agreed that the apparent increase in troubled families with few coping mechanisms is a major contributor to teen issues. "The whole family structure from when I started teaching to now has totally changed," said a high school counselor from southwestern Arizona. "Many parents today seem more interested in their own lives and not so much in their teens." Nor are teens in troubled families necessarily willing to talk about it, a Boys & Girls Club staffer said. "[They] fear getting their family in trouble and being taken away," she said. "Being even in a dysfunctional, abusive family is better than being taken away."

Risky Behavior Persists

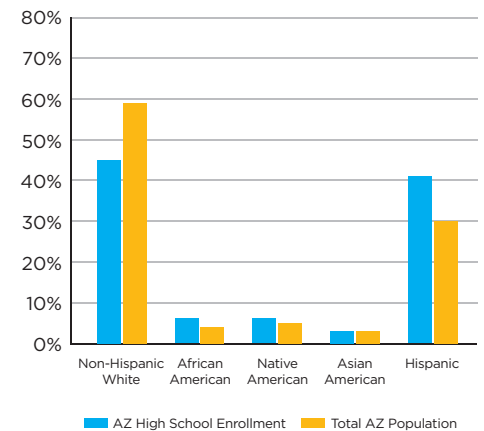
"Risk-taking behavior" involving alcohol, drugs, sex, and cars is a perennial concern. A Flagstaff high school counselor said, "Pot seems to be accepted, like past generations used to smoke cigarettes. And kids are coming to school high or drunk – pushing the envelope."

Ethics Must Catch Up

Instant communication technologies are a double-edged sword. "There is an enormous amount of technology available to teens, but the social norms haven't necessarily caught up," said an East Valley high school counselor. "You'll have teens bullying over the Internet social sites, posting inappropriate pictures, blogging about behaviors that are inappropriate – and we haven't caught up to teaching teens that this is still not OK." In a broader sense, the interviewees noted that the effort to teach young people right from wrong continues. The head of a Christian academy in Maricopa County had one solution: "I really sense that our kids need direction from the truth of the Bible," he said. "I don't know where [else] you base your foundation for what's right and wrong."

TEENS REFLECT INCREASING DIVERSITY

Race/Ethnicity in Arizona



Source: Arizona Department of Education, 2007-2008 and U.S. Census Bureau, 2007.



Hope Springs Eternal

All of the interviewees stressed that the large majority of Arizona teenagers are good kids with hopeful futures. “I think what encourages me is there are lots of great kids out there who are overlooked,” said the head of a Boys & Girls Club in central Arizona. “They’re out there doing community service and mentoring others, but unfortunately they are overlooked because you only hear about the bad things.” The Christian academy director added: “If you can get them to believe in something, they will really rally behind it and cross gender, cultural, and socio-economic lines and join hands. But the key is, can we engage them?”

Teens Speak for Themselves

Morrison Institute also asked a sample of Arizona teens their thoughts about a variety of issues. What follows are some results from a questionnaire completed recently by 951 teenagers from across the state.

A Good Life

Asked about the essential elements of a “good life,” most respondents passed over such answers as “being a celebrity” and “having lots of money” to choose “doing work that you enjoy” and “having a happy family.”

WHICH OF THESE IS MOST IMPORTANT FOR YOUR IDEA OF A GOOD LIFE?*

Outcome	Percent Choosing
Doing work that you enjoy	58%
Having a happy family	57%
Doing good for others	33%
Having lots of money	20%
Being a celebrity	4%

* Respondents could choose more than one.

Source: Morrison Institute for Public Policy, 2009.

Two-thirds (67%) of respondents said they do volunteer work. Asked why, 55% chose “because it helps other people,” while a third (31%) also acknowledged that they are “expected to or required to at school or work.” Answers to other, related questions seemed to reflect a group of teens who are generally optimistic, trusting, and comfortable. Most of them say they have lots of friends (84%), enjoy diversity (93%), trust the police (61%), and look forward to the future (78%).

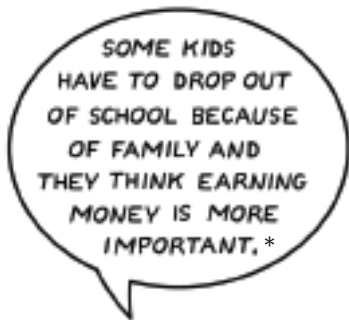
OUTLOOKS ON FRIENDS, PARENTS, AND POLICE

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
I enjoy being among people with different backgrounds and lifestyles.	93%	3%	4%
I have a lot of friends.	84%	11%	5%
The future holds many good opportunities for me and my friends.	78%	11%	11%
My parents usually notice when I do a good job and praise me for it.	70%	25%	6%
Most police officers try to do their jobs fairly and legally.	61%	27%	12%
My family has enough money to live comfortably and afford some luxuries.	59%	35%	7%
Most people in my neighborhood can be trusted.	51%	29%	20%

* Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: Morrison Institute for Public Policy, 2009.

Respondents did not primarily blame gangs or police for teenagers who get in trouble, instead citing boredom as the primary cause. They also noted a lack of parental involvement.



* These and other comments are quotes taken from survey questionnaires.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN REASONS ARIZONA TEENS GET IN TROUBLE WITH THE LAW?*

Reason	Percent Choosing
They're bored and looking for excitement.	67%
They don't have enough parental love and support.	55%
They want to make quick money.	54%
They're forced to do illegal things by gangs.	38%
They are unfairly targeted by police.	24%

* Respondents could choose more than one.

Source: Morrison Institute for Public Policy, 2009.

Education

Most teenagers spend much of their waking lives in school or in activities related to school. So it's not surprising that they have plenty to say about it. Survey respondents were split in their views on mandatory AIMS testing (Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards). A majority, 58%, said that passing the AIMS test should be a requirement for graduating, while 42% said it should not.

The respondents also had different explanations for Arizona's high dropout rate. Respondents placed the greatest responsibility on parents. Some wrote in additional reasons, including pregnancy, drug and alcohol problems, laziness, and lack of self-confidence.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN REASONS ARIZONA TEENS DROP OUT OF SCHOOL?*

Reason	Percent Choosing
Their parents don't encourage or require them to stay in school.	63%
They don't think school will help them in life.	59%
They want to get a job and make money.	53%
They don't like or respect the teachers.	44%
It's too hard to get good grades.	40%

* Respondents could choose more than one.

Source: Morrison Institute for Public Policy, 2009.

Asked how best to improve their schools, nearly four out of 10 respondents called for a more interesting selection of courses. Just as many argued for smaller classes.

WHICH OF THESE WOULD MOST IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION AT YOUR SCHOOL?*

Action	Percent Choosing
A better selection of courses	39%
Smaller classes	39%
Better teachers	32%
Better discipline among students	28%
Nicer classrooms and buildings	18%

* Respondents could choose more than one.

Source: Morrison Institute for Public Policy, 2009.

Overall, the responses seemed to reflect a generally benign view of high school. Only 16%, for example, chose "bad schools" as "the greatest problem facing Arizona and the nation today" (top choices were a weak economy, 63%; crime, 35%; and poverty, 23%). Nearly two-thirds of respondents (64%) agreed that most of what they're being asked to learn is in fact worth learning. Also notable were the responses concerning pursuit of a college degree. Asked whether a college degree is key to a good future, 88% agreed. Asked "Do you expect to go to college?" 89% of those who answered said they do.



Religion

Nearly half of respondents acknowledged the importance of religion in their daily lives, while a slightly smaller percentage did not. Most teens seemed to express tolerance for other paths to living a moral life, and an inclination to keep church and state separate. Just more than one-third agreed that religion is the only basis for morality, and only 23% agreed that religion should have a larger role in public policy making.

OUTLOOKS ON RELIGION

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
My religious faith plays an important role in my daily life.	48%	40%	12%
A firm religious faith is necessary for a person to live a moral life.	36%	49%	15%
Religion should play more of a role in public policy decisions.	23%	57%	21%

* Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: Morrison Institute for Public Policy, 2009.

National Issues

One of teens' main tasks is to learn to think for themselves. Some of their outlooks on major national issues agree with those of adults, while others do not. Their "don't know" responses also suggest that some have not yet formed opinions on all issues.

WHERE DO YOU STAND ON THESE NATIONAL ISSUES?

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
Illegal immigrants should be given the chance to become citizens.	75%	17%	8%
Global warming is a long-term crisis caused mostly by human action, not just natural temperature changes.	72%	14%	14%
The choice of whether or not to have an abortion should be left up to the woman involved.	65%	29%	7%
There should be more legal restrictions on gun ownership.	56%	27%	18%
The theory of evolution best explains how life developed on earth.	43%	31%	26%
I think marriage should be allowed only between a man and a woman.	39%	51%	10%
The value of the death penalty outweighs the danger of executing an innocent person.	36%	32%	32%
Society is too generous to poor people, who would be better off if made to stand on their own two feet.	20%	64%	16%

Source: Morrison Institute for Public Policy, 2009.

Problems and Risky Behaviors Remain

Despite their aspirations, Arizona's teens face serious challenges arising from their own behavior and from the realities of growing up in Arizona. For example, education is often cited as the single most effective means of enhancing opportunities. But many Arizona teens begin falling behind in grade school. Only one-fourth (24%) of Arizona fourth-graders score "proficient" in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, while about the same percentage of eighth-graders (26%) were judged "proficient" in math. And college? A recent report on the college readiness of high school graduates in Maricopa County found that 23% were not ready for college-level English and 49% were unprepared for college-level math.² Further, despite the 89% of survey respondents who expect to go to college, only about 43% of Arizona young adults either held a degree or were enrolled in postsecondary education in 2007, according to *Education Week*. The journal's 2009 report ranked Arizona 43th among states on its overall "chance-for-success" index. Research has shown repeatedly that poverty, lack of educational achievement, and becoming a teen parent are major barriers to a productive, self-sufficient adulthood. In Arizona, more than half of all children (46%) live in families with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level. Arizona also has the nation's fourth-highest rate of births to teen mothers.



Nor were teens' survey responses all positive on other issues. Only 26% of respondents agreed that "adults will leave the world in good shape for people my age" (a nearly equal percentage said they don't know). As one 11th-grader wrote on her questionnaire: "Stop trying to make us look bad when we only pay for your dumb mistakes." More than seven out of 10 agreed that society doesn't do enough to help poor people, and 59% said there's a lot of prejudice and mistrust among Arizona's racial and ethnic groups. More than one-third (36%) said they expect to remain in Arizona; another 36% said they did not expect to stay, while 28% said they didn't know.

And revisiting the minority responses to some of the survey questions noted above, nearly one in three of teen respondents said they do not feel they can trust most of their neighbors. One-third said their families lack enough money to live comfortably. A quarter of these teens do not feel safe walking in their neighborhoods at night. In addition, two government-sponsored surveys³ found that substantial minorities of Arizona teens are abusing drugs and alcohol, smoking cigarettes, carrying weapons, and having sex. The teenage years are for many a period of experimentation, and most don't develop long-term problems. Still, the latest findings concerning 10th-graders on the *Arizona Youth Survey* and the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* reveal a number of concerns for all Arizonans.

For example:

- 38% of 10th-graders said they had drunk alcohol within the preceding month.
- 29% said they had ridden during the preceding month with a driver who'd been drinking.
- 21% said they'd been drunk or high at school during the preceding year.
- 15% said they had smoked marijuana during the preceding month.
- 38% said they had had sexual intercourse at least once.
- 29% said they'd been bullied at school during the preceding year.

On the other hand, the number of those 17 and younger arrested for serious crimes in Arizona has declined since 2000, according to the Arizona Department of Public Safety. Secondly, the rate of death among adolescents (leading causes are vehicle accidents, homicide, and suicide) stayed flat or dropped between 1997 and 2007, according to the Arizona Department of Health Services. Still, Arizona continues to have high rates of teen deaths compared to other states.

Eyes on the Future

Much of the data in this report describe a population of teenagers who seem reasonably happy, optimistic, and attuned to the challenges and opportunities that await them. Most survey respondents express positive attitudes about parents and school. They seem to value such things as service, friendship, tolerance, a happy family, and fulfilling work. Virtually all acknowledge a college education as key to a successful life. The professionals who work with them see the majority as likely to be successful. At the same time, the persistence of risk-taking behavior



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² For more information, see Arizona Indicators at <http://www.arizonaindicators.org/pages/education/readiness/college-readiness.html>.

³ The *Arizona Youth Survey (AYS)* is sponsored by the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission; the Arizona Department of Education conducts the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)*. The latest AYS report summarizes findings from questionnaires administered to 54,734 Arizona students in the 8th, 10th, and 12th grades during the spring of 2008. The most recent YRBS is based on questionnaires completed in 2007 by 3,095 high school students throughout the state. For the sake of brevity, the data in this report are limited to 10-graders, but reflect the issues facing other grades as well.



and other barriers to success make clear the need for renewed efforts to provide opportunities and actively promote positive choices. The professionals interviewed, for example, proposed such measures as mandating career education, campaigning against cyber-bullying and other technological misconduct, doing more to address the problems of high-conflict families, and providing more programs to combat substance abuse and bolster self-esteem.

The ultimate question is how Arizona's decision-makers can use the insights offered by professionals and teens themselves to forge a renewed commitment to public policies that address risks such as substance abuse, reward good outcomes such as school achievement, and expand opportunities such as affordable paths to college and other post-secondary learning. Even in these tough budget times, it seems a small price to pay for a state whose future will depend so heavily on the achievements of today's teenagers. More than a statistical curiosity, the "dependency ratio" may begin affecting Arizona's economy and communities in the very near future. If more of its young people were able to imagine and choose a positive path to achievement and well-being, and have sufficient resources to act on it, Arizona would reap untold rewards.

Take Action

Share your ideas by sending them to morrison.institute@asu.edu.

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