

# 1999

## Oneida County

### Teen

### Assessment

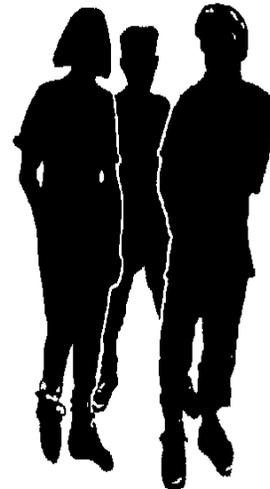
### Project Survey

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#### **Tapping into Teen Concerns, Perceptions and Behaviors**

in Oneida County, New York

February 2000



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*Sponsored by:*

Oneida County School Partnership  
For Youth Policy (SPFY) Committee

*Funded by:*

Oneida County  
Department of Social Services

*Administered by:*

Herkimer-Oneida Counties  
Comprehensive Planning Program  
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Program Cornell Cooperative Extension

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## **Sponsor:**

Oneida County School Partnership For Youth (SPFY) Policy Committee

## **Funding and Organizational Support:**

Oneida County Department of Social Services

Oneida County Youth Bureau

Oneida-Herkimer-Madison BOCES

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## **Youth Participants:**

Without the active participation of the 5,200 plus youth from 13 school districts, the two catholic schools, two alternative schools and the House of the Good Shepherd, there would be no TAP Survey. They are the source of the data. In appreciation of their cooperation, we promise to share what they told us with others who want or need to know the information and we will encourage more opportunities for youth to be involved in the public discussion and decision making regarding youth issues.

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# PURPOSE

The Oneida County TAP Survey examines teen concerns, perceptions and behaviors on a wide variety of topics - how they spend their time, the importance of their education, what worries them, how closely parents monitor their behavior, substance abuse, sexuality and more. The combined results provide an accurate picture of life for today's teens. Over 5700 youth in Oneida County participated in the survey. This report analyzes their responses and for the first time in Oneida County documents what our youth are experiencing. The purpose of the Oneida County TAP Survey and Report is to provide the community with accurate information about our youth, so that together - government, public and private agencies, schools, businesses, churches, parents and youth - can engage in sound local planning that can affect positive change in the lives of children, youth and families in Oneida County. Current, accurate information that comes directly from our youth is essential to identifying needs, and this is a critical first step to good planning.

The media reports disturbing news, quotes national surveys and highlights issues that follow trends seen across the country. Different trends emerge, fade, then re-emerge. Our local focus changes with these trends, but what really affects our youth locally - the family, schools, peers, drug abuse, risky sexual behavior, school violence, teen suicide, or something else? Where do our youth turn for solace and help? What seems to work? The TAP Survey helps answer these questions.

Before parents, educators and policy makers can effectively address the problems that young people face and provide appropriate support, they need to better understand our young people, their concerns and their perceptions. With this information that our youth have revealed:

- parents can better understand, guide and communicate with their children;
- school staff can more effectively promote learning and social development;
- planners can better assess the needs of our youth;
- grant writers can better document the condition of our youth and therefore can more effectively seek financial assistance for program development;
- funders can better prioritize their funding allocations;
- human services administrators can better tailor programs to meet the needs of children and their families;
- human service providers can be more aware of issues possibly facing their young clients; and
- youth can better understand themselves and more clearly see ways that they can help each other.

This is the first county-wide survey of youth in Oneida County. As such, it provides a baseline of data so that future surveys can determine changes and trends in youth concerns, perceptions and behaviors. The Herkimer-Oneida Counties Comprehensive Planning Program, in collaboration again with Cornell Cooperative Extension, intends to conduct the TAP Survey, or a similar youth survey, every four years. The community will then be able to discern emerging issues and intervene, as needed, in a more timely manner. Through the regular administration of a county-wide survey, agency heads, program administrators and funding agents, who are increasingly expected to demonstrate program effectiveness, will be better able to determine whether programs and services are actually achieving their intended impact, at least at the county-wide level.

Various counties throughout New York State and localities across the country have utilized the TAP Survey and similar surveys for the same purposes. Several nationally recognized community development and youth development programs feature as an initial step a student survey. Two programs promoted by New York State - the Search Institute from Minnesota and the Communities That Care

Project from Washington State, strongly recommend student surveys. Both programs also promote an organized, collaborative community response to address the identified needs. There are several existing collaborative groups in Oneida County which focus on youth issues - one being the SPFY Policy Committee which sponsored this survey. One hope is that this survey will help motivate an organized effort which will bring together all of the essential players leading our community toward a consensus and guide us to action.

# TAP METHODOLOGY

## Initiation

The first step in implementing a survey of youth requires building support for the idea among community leaders, particularly among school administrators. Staff of the Herkimer-Oneida Counties Comprehensive Planning Program (HOCCPP) first presented the idea of a student survey to the School Partnership For Youth (SPFY) Policy Committee in 1996. This group represents a unique collaboration that brings together school administrators, county officials as well as public and private agency heads. The group is jointly chaired by the Oneida County Department of Social Services Commissioner and the district superintendents from both the Madison-Oneida BOCES and the Oneida-Herkimer-Madison BOCES. Interest was piqued, though members expressed some concerns. Many schools conduct their own surveys; school officials were reluctant to disrupt class time; and some questioned what would be done with the data. The SPFY Policy Committee, after a full review of the idea, decided not to conduct a county-wide youth survey at that time.

Meanwhile in April of 1997, HOCCPP staff, in collaboration with staff from the Cornell Cooperative Extension Area Youth Development Program, successfully conducted a TAP Survey in Herkimer County. Over 80% of all the 7th, 9th and 11th grade students in eleven Herkimer County school districts, almost 2300 youth, participated in the survey. After the release of the Herkimer County 1997 TAP Report, a growing number of influential people became interested in conducting a similar survey in Oneida County. The SPFY Policy Committee expressed renewed interest and in November 1998 members stated their support for the TAP Survey to be conducted in both Oneida and Madison counties. With that, the level of community support was sufficient but issues remained regarding the survey administration and the nature of the report.

HOCCPP staff recommended that trained volunteers administer the TAP Survey to all 7th, 9th 11th grade students in a school during the same day. The school districts associated with the Oneida-Herkimer-Madison BOCES accepted this arrangement, however, the schools associated with the Madison-Oneida BOCES preferred to have the survey administered in health classes by the health teacher. Some of these schools have their health classes in 8th and 11th grades, some in 7th and 10th grades; in either case, just two grades would be surveyed instead of three. Staff at Madison-Oneida BOCES, in collaboration with the Madison County Youth Bureau, implemented the survey in those schools according to this arrangement. They agreed to share with HOCCPP staff the survey data of the Oneida County school districts that are associated with the Madison-Oneida BOCES so that their data could be included in the Oneida County TAP Report. In the end, this included Rome City School District and Camden Central School District.

There were issues also regarding how the data would be presented in the report. Some school officials and other leaders expressed strong opposition to any breakdown of the data by school district or in any other way geographically, or even if students were identified simply as urban, suburban and rural. Thus, before any steps were made to secure the participation of all the Oneida County schools, it was agreed that the data would not be broken down geographically.

## Project Design

After members of the SPFY Policy Committee agreed to sponsor the project, the HOCCPP staff secured arrangements with Cornell University and confirmed the alliance with the Cornell Cooperative Extension.

sion Area Youth Development Program. A professor with the Department of Rural Sociology at Cornell University served as a consultant for the TAP Program and tabulated the data. The Area Youth Development Program Specialist at Cornell Cooperative Extension had shared responsibilities for the administration of the Herkimer County TAP Survey and assumed those responsibilities again for the Oneida County TAP Survey. Once the staffing was arranged between the two allied agencies, the Oneida County Department of Social Services generously provided the funding for the survey, thus demonstrating the County's commitment to this project.

HOCCPP staff and the staff person from Cornell Cooperative Extension Area Youth Development Program formed the Oneida County TAP Steering Committee and served as co-chairs. This group of educators and service providers assumed responsibility for adapting the local TAP survey instrument and for reviewing the survey implementation process. They used the Herkimer County TAP survey instrument as a basis for drafting the Oneida County TAP survey instrument and made minor modifications.

All of the school administrators in Oneida County were contacted and invited to participate in the TAP Survey. The introductory letter explained the process and ensured school officials that no data or information from the survey would be broken down by school districts, instead the analysis would only examine county-wide data. A Memorandum of Understanding among school districts, HOCCPP, and Cornell Cooperative Extension Area Youth Development Program outlined each party's responsibilities. Schools agreed to dedicate one class period for students to fill-out the survey and to provide sufficient space to ensure confidentiality. Plus, they agreed to notify parents in advance of the survey. Parents could review the survey and choose to not allow their children to participate. Parents were informed that the survey was confidential and anonymous and that students could withdraw from the survey at any time. HOCCPP and Cornell Cooperative Extension Area Youth Development Program agreed to administer the survey through trained volunteer administrators. HOCCPP staff agreed to analyze the county-wide data and release a report to the community.

Once these agreements were secured, all but two school districts (the Vernon-Verona-Sherril and the Adirondack school districts) in Oneida County agreed to participate in the survey. In addition, the two Catholic schools, Rome Catholic and Notre Dame, as well as the Oneida-Herkimer-Madison BOCES - Brookside/Midway alternative schools and the House of the Good Shepherd agreed to participate. Whitesboro School District had just conducted a TAP survey during the fall 1998, so instead of participating in another TAP survey, they allowed their student data to be included with the Oneida County TAP data. In the end, over 5700 students from 13 school districts, the two Catholic schools, the two alternative schools and the House of the Good Shepherd participated in the TAP Survey.

## **Survey Implementation**

In each school, trained volunteer survey administrators introduced the TAP survey, distributed the materials, supervised the students, answered questions, and collected the survey instruments and answer sheets. A senior planner for HOCCPP recruited and coordinated the volunteer survey administrators and the Cornell Cooperative Extension Area Youth Development Program Specialist provided training.

In the three week period from March 29 to April 16, 1999, all the students were surveyed. It was apparent from their down-turned eyes and serious looks that students, with few exceptions, took the survey seriously. The administrators reported few problems. Most 11th grade students were able to finish the survey in one-half hour; 9th graders took, on average, a little longer; and all but a few, including the 7th graders, were able to complete the survey in the allotted time.

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Cornell University electronically scanned and tabulated the data. The data was then tabulated for both counties and separately for each school district. The Herkimer-Oneida Counties Comprehensive Planning Program received the Oneida County tabulation; the Madison County Youth Bureau received the Madison County data; and each of the school district superintendents received their respective tabulations. Planning staff of the Herkimer-Oneida Counties Comprehensive Planning Program assumed primary responsibility for conducting the analysis, for presenting the survey results and for preparing this report.

## **Comparative Analysis**

Where appropriate, two other data sources are used for comparative analysis within the TAP report. The first, the Massachusetts Department of Education 1997 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (MYRBS), was administered to approximately 4,000 students across the state. The MYRBS is a student health survey that has been conducted every two years by the Massachusetts Department of Education with funding and technical assistance provided by the Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH) of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Massachusetts is one of 33 state educational agencies that administered a youth risk behavior survey in 1997 to monitor the prevalence of adolescent risk behaviors which have a potentially negative impact on student learning and may ultimately lead to life-threatening illness and injury. Data generated by the MYRBS are used to determine statewide changes in the prevalence of adolescent risk behaviors over time. Additionally, the results of the MYRBS, which was first administered in 1993 on a biennial basis, contribute to a national database on adolescent risk behaviors.

The second source of comparative data comes from the National Center for Disease Control (CDC). The CDC has administered a biennial national Youth Risk Behavior Survey since 1991. The CDC survey is a national school-based survey conducted to assess the prevalence of health risk behaviors among high school students. The specific purpose of the CDC study is to: determine the prevalence and age of initiation of health-risk behaviors; focus the nation and relevant agencies on specific health-risk behaviors of young people; assess whether health-risk behaviors increase, decrease, or remain the same over time; and provide comparable national, state, and local data.



# 1999 ONEIDA COUNTY TAP RESULTS

## Demographics

The survey instrument asked youth for a variety of demographic information. Not surprisingly, the number of females and males responding was broken almost evenly between genders. Most respondents came from two parent households (65%), while slightly less than a quarter (23%) came from single parent households. An additional 10% were in "step" families. An additional 10% were in "step" families. The respondents were somewhat over-represented among younger grade levels. For example, 39% of the youth responding stated that they were in the 7th grade. As many as 33% said that they were currently in the 9th grade. Only about 22% indicated that they were in the 11th grade. Approximately 15% of the youth indicated that they had some sort of "special need." About 7% felt that they were learning disabled, 2% emotionally/behaviorally disabled, and 1% physically disabled. See Chart 1.

## Mental Health

Mental health issues were narrowly defined by the survey instrument. For purposes here they were limited to issues of despondency, as defined by a prolonged bout of depression, and suicide.

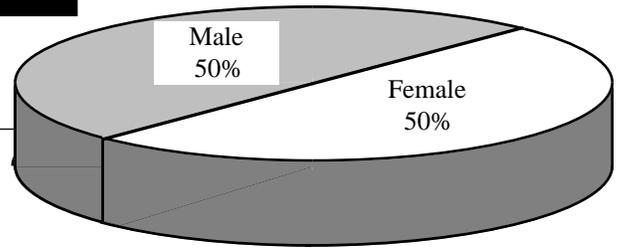
Adolescence is a difficult time for many youth as they rapidly develop emotionally, physically and socially. Not surprisingly, many of the youth in the sample experienced various levels of self doubt and despondency. For example, about 20% of all youth responding indicated that they were not particularly happy with themselves most of the time. As many as 40% indicated that they had been despondent in the past six months (i.e. felt depressed, helpless, hopeless or very sad for period of two weeks or longer). More than one in ten youth (11%) said that they had felt this way many times over the past six months.

A major concern is how youth deal with these issues of despondency. One common escape from such feelings is to run away from home in order to avoid situations that may be contributing to these feelings. Nearly 40% of all youth said that during the past year they had seriously thought of running away from home. Among youth thinking of running away, almost one in ten said they actually did leave the home at some point during the past year.

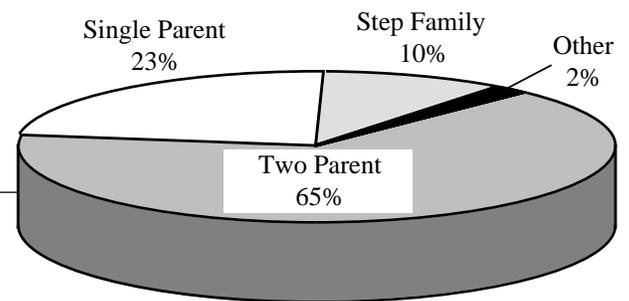
A more serious reaction to despondency is the consideration of suicide by youth. Respondents were asked a series of questions concerning suicide as well as potential actions they might have taken as a

CHART 1

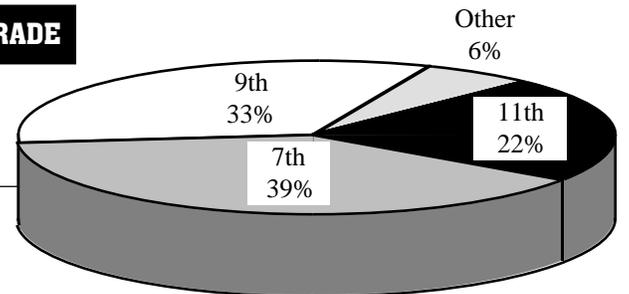
### SEX



### FAMILY TYPE



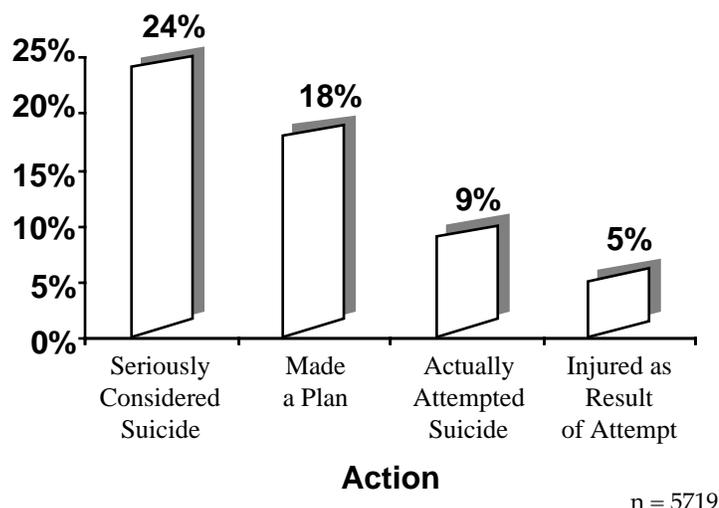
### GRADE



n = 5719

**From Suicide Ideation to Attempts:  
Percentage of Youth Thinking of, Planning for,  
and Attempting Suicide in Past 12 Months**

**CHART 2**

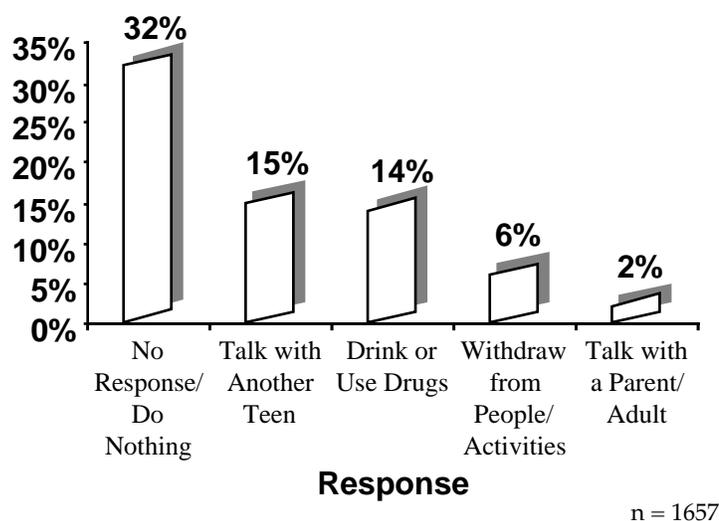


result of these feelings. Almost one quarter (24%) of all youth indicated that they had seriously considered suicide in the past 12 months. This number is identical to that found in a 1997 Youth Risk Survey of high school students done in Massachusetts (MYRBS). However, it is somewhat higher than the number found among youth from across the country who participated in the Center for Disease Control (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior study (20.5%) done in 1997.

About one out of every five youth (19%) in the Oneida County survey said that they had actually planned how they would commit suicide. Among those that had expressed suicide ideations this equates to two out of every three youth saying that they had seriously considered the act. Almost one out of every ten (9%) surveyed youth said that they had actually attempted to commit suicide in the past 12 months. This is slightly higher than the number found in the 1997 CDC survey, in which 7.7% of a national sample of youth said that they had attempted suicide in the past year. See Chart 2.

**Choices of Response to Suicide Ideation:  
Percentage Breakdown by Choice of Response  
for Those Considering Suicide**

**CHART 3**



Does this mean that one out of every ten youth in the County has actually injured themselves in an attempted suicide? According to the respondents, apparently not. The instrument did not define what constituted an “attempt” at suicide. Consequently everything in the realm of an “attempt,” from driving too fast or taking too many aspirins to drug overdose to self-inflicted injury, may be seen as an “attempt.” Despite this loose definition, it is important to realize that about 15% of all youth who claim to have attempted suicide indicated that they required medical attention as a result

of their suicidal actions. This equates to about one out of every twenty youth in the general population (4.6%). Again, this number is somewhat higher than that found in the 1997 CDC survey (2.7%) and the MYRBS survey (3.7%). See Chart 3.

Another issue of concern is what youth do, or perhaps what they don’t do, in response to these feelings of despondency and suicide ideation. The most common response to these types of feelings is for youth to do nothing or simply try to solve their problems on their own. As many as one out of every three youth (32%) take this approach. A significant number (15%) said that they turn to a peer or teen friend

for help. Almost as many said that they specifically turn to alcohol or drugs as a result of these feelings. About one out of 20 said that they withdraw from people and activities. Only one out of every 50 youth said that they seek help from a parent or other caring adult.

## Perceptions of Self and Peers

Adolescence is often a tumultuous journey from youth to young adulthood. Accompanying this trip is a wide range of emotions, often full of self doubt one moment and self confidence the next. For some youth the transition is very difficult, for others relatively smooth. But it is a transition that all must experience as a part of the maturation process. The issues they deal with are as wide ranging as the feelings they experience.

Many youth go through a process of self-examination in terms of their physical appearances, intellectual growth and emotional stability. They also begin viewing themselves as more social beings and place themselves within the context of their friendships. The TAP survey asked youth several questions dealing with perceptions of self and their social standing.

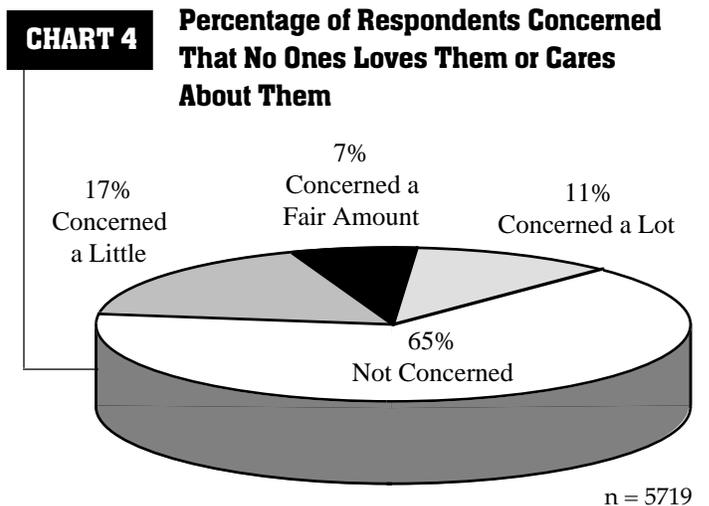
A majority of youth (51%), for example, worried about how they looked. About one out of every four respondents (23%) said that they worried about fitting in with their peers; more than one in three (36%) worried that they don't do things as well as others.

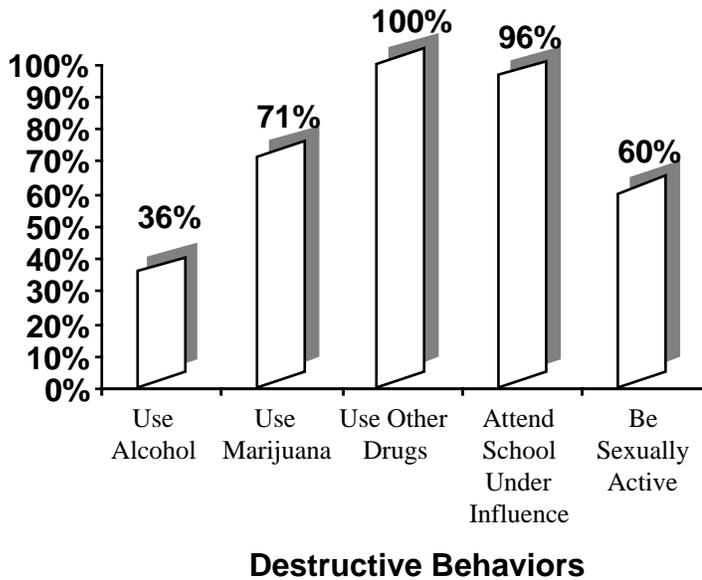
In contrast, despite this angst in terms of their place within the social setting, less than one out of four youth (24%) felt that they were influenced to participate in things they really didn't want to by their friends. Almost nine out of ten youth were happy with the number and quality of their friendships. Clearly, self doubt varies widely over issues.

There is an issue which deserves attention, however, and that is the degree to which some youth feel that no one cares about them. More than one in three youth (35%) said that they were at least "a little" concerned that no one loves them or cares about them. More than one out of every ten youth said that they felt this way a lot. See Chart 4.

The result of this key issue, a lack of self worth, is often two very undesirable responses. The first involves a subculture of silence among youth facing the pressures of adolescence. Many youth remain silent when faced with the difficulties of adolescence, turning not to those that might help them but often keeping to themselves thereby isolating themselves. Almost 60% of all youth who indicated that they had seriously considered suicide said that they either withdrew from people and activities, did nothing, turned to drugs and alcohol, or made a plan as to how to commit the suicide. Only about one out of every six youth considering suicide (16%) reported that they talked to anyone about the issue, and even then only about one in 20 reportedly talked to an adult.

A second course of action for many teens is to turn to other destructive behaviors. One clear finding of the data is that many of the youth who are dealing with issues of suicide and despondency are often the same youth exhibiting other intentional or unintentional high risk behaviors, such as drug and alcohol



**CHART 5****Increased Risk of Participation in Various Destructive Behaviors for Youth Seriously Considering Suicide**

use and dangerous sexual activity patterns. In terms of their percentages, youth who have had serious suicide ideations are:

- about one third (36%) more likely to have used alcohol;
- about 70% more likely to have every tried marijuana;
- about twice as likely to have attended school under the influence of a substance;
- about 60% more likely to be sexually active. See Chart 5.

Please note that there are no issues of causation being addressed here; whether a youth begins to use drugs or alcohol, for example, as a result of his feelings of dependency or whether their feelings of dependency follow bouts of drug and alcohol consumption are not of issue here. Rather, the purpose is to draw attention to the high correlation of these various behaviors with one another.

**Sexual Behaviors and Perceptions**

Teen sexuality, and issues of birth control and abstinence, are one of the most contentious social issues of our time. Among the youth in the Oneida County TAP survey it is clear that many are sexually active and many have sexual relations without taking precautions against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Among respondents more than 30% indicated that they have had intercourse. This is considerably lower than the numbers found among the national 1997 CDC sample (48.4%) or in the 1997 MYRBS survey (44.7%).

Many youth in the Oneida County survey stated that they have had multiple partners in their lifetime. More than half (53%) of all sexually active youth indicated that they have had more than a single sexual partner. More than a quarter of all sexually active teens said that they have had four or more partners in their lives. While this is about one out of every 12 youth (8%) in the general population, it is half the number found in the 1997 CDC national survey (16%). See Chart 6.

While certainly students become more sexually active as they get older (for example, only 20% of all 7th graders are sexually active versus 44% of all 11th graders), what is interesting to note is that the level of promiscuity, specifically the percentage of sexually active teens in each grade that have had four or more partners, is statistically identical. Among teens, regardless of grade level, about one out of every four sexually active teens (25%) has had four or more partners. So while overall fewer numbers of 7th graders may be sexually active, those that are sexual active have similar patterns to their older peers.

One concern with these numbers is, of course, the potential consequences of this sexual activity. While issues of abstinence are important, several questions focussed on the use of birth control in terms of

preventing pregnancy and the transfer of STDs. Almost two thirds (63%) of all sexually active youth indicated that they always, or almost always, use some form of birth control during sexual intercourse. A similar number indicated that they use condoms as a means of preventing STDs. Unfortunately, however, a large number of sexually active teens indicated that they never use any form of birth control (23%).

While this may be both frightening (in terms of the number of sexually active teens not using any form of birth control) and encouraging (given that more than 60% said they use birth control regularly and as many as 70% of youth claim to have abstained from sexual intercourse), what remains alarming is the apparent level of disregard many students have concerning one of the days most pressing issues - namely HIV and AIDS.

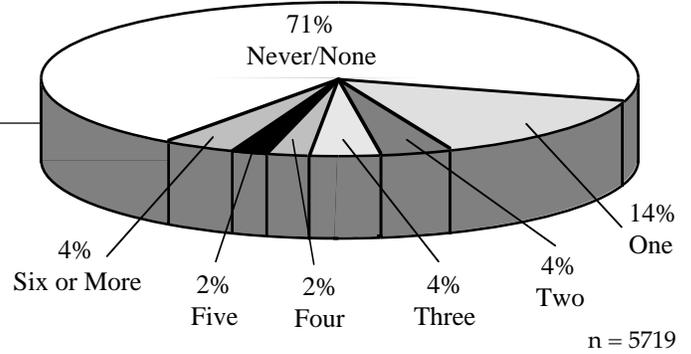
While many students have a reasonable level of concern about HIV and AIDS, and either abstain from sex or protect themselves through the use of protective barriers, a large percentage of youth still have little or no concern about the danger of these or other sexually transmitted diseases. Among the entire sample of youth, three quarters of all students (76%) reported little or no concern about getting AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases. Among those teens experiencing sexual relations, two thirds (68%) had little or no concern. These numbers suggest a serious lack of appreciation of both the gravity of the disease and the dangers of transmission. See Chart 7.

### Sexual and Physical Abuse

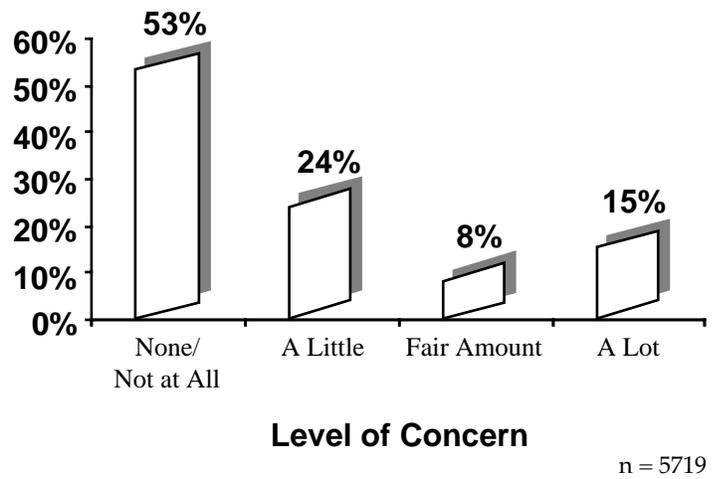
The TAP survey asked youth several questions about their experiences with sexual and physical abuse that is, occasions where youth received unwanted sexual advances or were physically harmed by another teen or adult. The sexual abuse sections are divided into two subcategories dealing first with teen against teen sexual abuse and the second dealing with adult against teen sexual abuse.

Teen-Teen Sexual Abuse: Teen against teen sexual abuse occurs most frequently between teens that know one another and, in fact, where they may well have a relationship. The notion of a stranger as the perpetrator of the abuse is considerably less likely than is the likelihood of a date or friend doing it. While most youth have not had to experience the terror of such abuse, about one in six (18%) have been subject to some form of teen-teen sexual abuse. While most of the abusive behavior took the form of unwanted touching and/or kissing (80% of these cases), as many as one in eight (14%) resulted in unwanted sexual intercourse. The majority of teen-teen sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone the

**CHART 6** Numbers of Sexual Partners of All Respondents

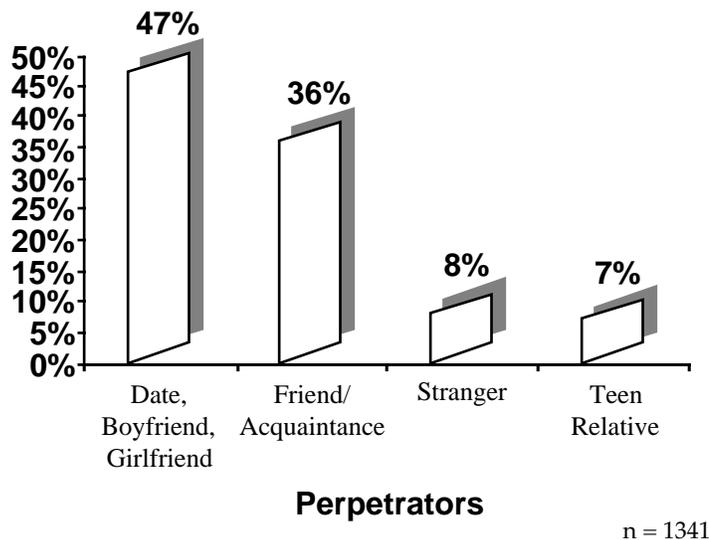


**CHART 7** Levels of Concern About Contracting HIV/AIDS and Other Sexually Transmitted Diseases Among All Respondents



**For Cases of Teen-Teen Sexual Abuse, the Percentage Breakdown by Type of Perpetrator**

**CHART 8**

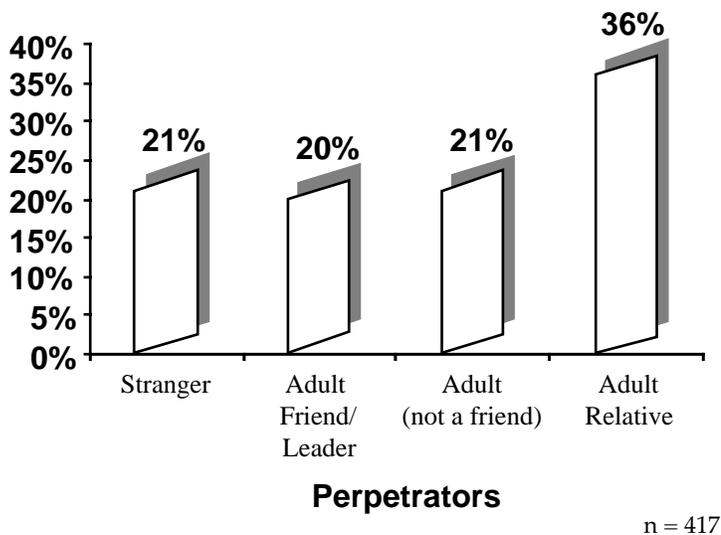


victim is dating, or a close or casual friend of the victim, only about one in 15 cases involves a perpetrator perceived to be a stranger. Hence, teens are more than ten times as likely to be sexually assaulted by a teen they know than one they don't. See Chart 8.

**Adult-Teen Sexual Abuse:** About 7% of the respondents indicated that they had been subject to some form of adult-teen sexual abuse. Not quite two thirds of all of these cases (62%) involved unwanted kissing and touching. Forced sexual intercourse was considerably more likely in the case of adult-teen abuse than it was in teen-teen abuse situations. Whereas 14% of all teen-teen abuse situations involved sexual intercourse, nearly 23% of adult-teen abuse included unwanted sexual intercourse. See Chart 9.

**For Cases of Adult-Teen Sexual Abuse the Percentage Breakdown by Type of Perpetrator**

**CHART 9**



In terms of the perpetrators of such abuse, again, most (75%) were known by the victim; in fact, in more than a third of the time the abuser was an adult relative (38%). Assaults by strangers, while higher than with teen-teen abuse cases, was still one of the least likely scenarios, with about 17% of all cases involving a stranger as the perpetrator.

**Physical Abuse of Teens:** Physical abuse, as well as the threat of physical abuse, is a growing concern among many parents, community members and educators. This is due, in large part, to a growing sensitivity toward violent youth behavior that has played out nationally through the media. Much abuse takes the form of the threat of violence as a precursor to actual physical altercations. The TAP survey asked youth to identify the frequency with which they experienced threats as well as acts of physical

violence from other youth and adults.

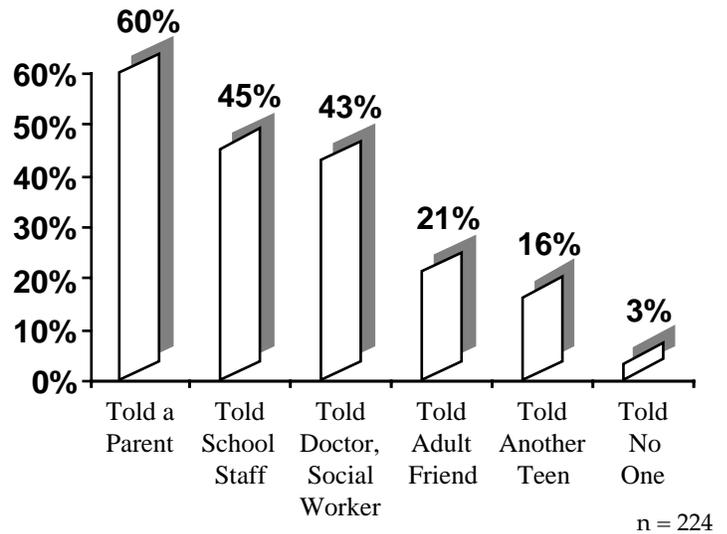
In regard to verbal forms of sexual harassment, the vast majority of youth (73%) report never having experienced sexual harassment. However, a portion (about 14%) are subject to such harassment with some regularity. In addition, while less than half of all youth (40%) indicated that they had been verbally threatened, nearly one in five youth (18%) stated that they were threatened on multiple occasions.

Unfortunately, such threats often translate into physical altercations in which the youth are injured. Typically, teen-teen physical abuse occurs almost four times more often than adult-teen incidences. So, while one out of five youth have been physically hurt by another teen, only about one out of twenty respondents said that they had been hurt by an adult in a physical confrontation.

What happens to these victims of sexual and physical abuse? The TAP survey asked youth if they had ever told anyone of their abuse and, if so, in whom did they confide. In essence, three avenues were most commonly cited by youth seeking help to curtail the abuse they were receiving: they talked to other teens (39%), they talked to parents or other adults (34%), or they told no one (27%).

**CHART 10**

**Percentage of Cases of Sexual and Physical Abuse Where Abuse Stopped Based on Action Taken**



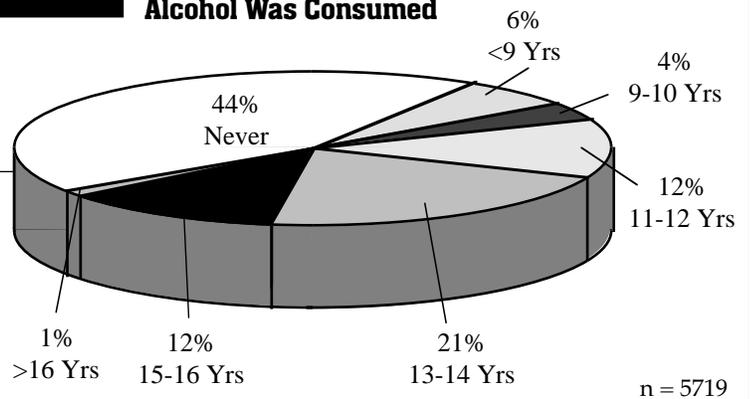
Of concern with these choices is the degree to which each option can potentially help the victim of the abuse. Among respondents who indicated that they had told someone about their abuse, it is clear that if a youth turns to an adult (be it a parent, teacher, physician, religious leader, etc.), they are far more likely to have action taken to stop that abuse than if they turn to another teen or just keep quiet about the situation. In cases where youth turned to an adult, action to stop the abuse was taken four times more often than if they were to turn to another teen, and 20 times more likely to stop than if they did nothing at all. See Chart 10.

### Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs

**Tobacco:** While tobacco use continues to show declines in many markets, youth smoking is an area which has generally increased over the past decade. Among the survey respondents, less than half (44%) indicated that they had ever smoked. This is considerably less than the number found in the 1997 CDC survey that had ever smoked (70.2%). In Oneida County, more than half of all respondents who have smoked stated that they began smoking before the age of 13. About one out of ten youth are habitual smokers, smoking in excess of 5 cigarettes per day.

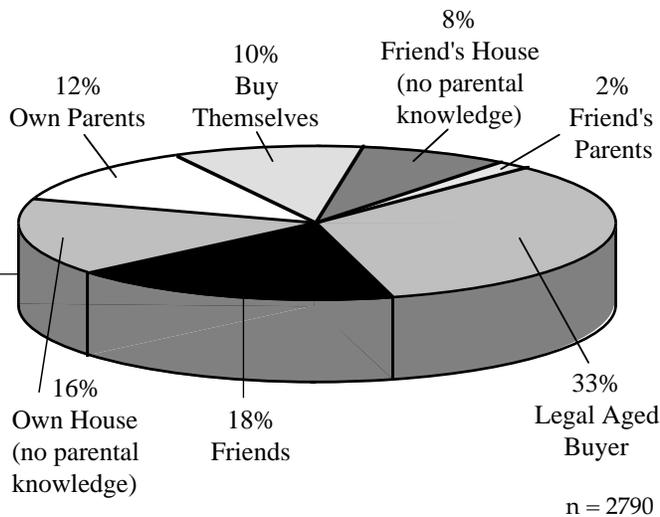
**CHART 11**

**Age of Respondent When First Drink of Alcohol Was Consumed**



**Alcohol:** Among Oneida County TAP respondents, more than half (54%) indicated that they have ever had a drink of alcohol. This is much lower than the number found to have ever used alcohol in the MYRBS 1997 survey (77%). More than one third of all youth in the Oneida County survey who have had a drink (37%) did so before the age of 13. See Chart 11.

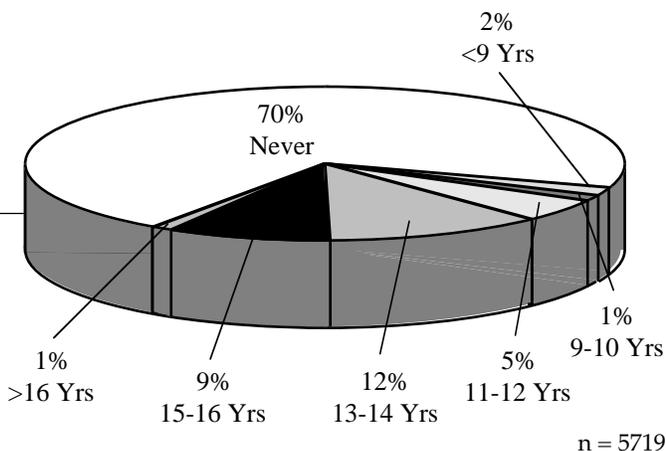
**CHART 12** Source of Alcohol for Respondents That Have Had a Drink



In terms of drinking frequency, among drinkers, more than half (51%) said that they have had a drink at least a few times per year. Many (49%) said they had used alcohol at least a few times each month. More than 1 out of every 5 (23%) reported having been drunk (had five or more drinks over a two to three hour period) in the past month. This is considerably lower than the national figure (33%) found by the CDC.

Where and how youth acquire alcohol is an issue of concern to many parents, educators and law enforcement personnel. According to the survey, among alcohol users the most common source of alcohol is through legal aged buyers (30%). About 17% of alcohol users said that they got their alcohol from friends. Almost as many (14%) claim that they typically take alcohol from their own homes without parental knowledge. More than one in ten youth who use alcohol (11%) indicated that they received the alcohol from their parents, with another 7% saying that they got the alcohol from a friends house without parental knowledge. See Chart 12.

**CHART 13** Age of Respondents When First Using Marijuana



Among youth using alcohol, a large number (36%) indicated that they most typically consumed it while at a friend's house, while another 15% said that they most often used alcohol while in their own home. Almost 20% said that they used alcohol in some other setting. While a very small number indicated that

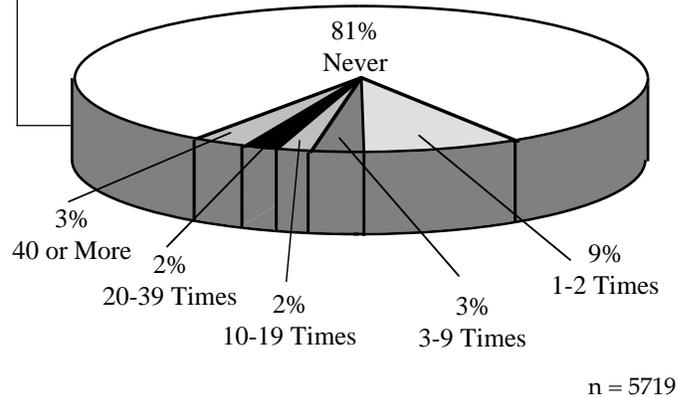
they used alcohol most often in a vehicle (1%), as many as one third of all youth using the substance stated that they had ridden in a vehicle in the past six months in which the driver had been drinking.

**Other Drugs:** Marijuana continues to be used rather widely in our culture and its use among youth is substantial. Three out of every ten respondents (30%) said that they had at least tried marijuana, with two thirds of users (67%) trying it before the age of 15. This is less than the 51% of youth who reported that they had ever tried marijuana according to the 1997 MYRBS survey. See Chart 13.

Among marijuana users the frequency of use is fairly high. About 44% of all youth who use marijuana claim to use it at least on a monthly basis and as many as one out of four users smoke marijuana at least weekly. This corresponds to approximately 13% and 7% of the total student population, respectively. Interestingly, more than a third (38%) of all youth who have tried marijuana claim to now refrain from its use. The TAP survey also asked youth about their use of other drugs as well, such as cocaine derivatives and inhalants. Use rates for these substances is considerably lower than for such things as alcohol and marijuana. They do appear to have some appreciable use levels among respondents, however, ranging from one out of twenty youth that have tried cocaine, to one out of ten who have tried inhalants.

Almost one out of every five youth (19%) indicated that they had attended school in the past year (1998-99) while under the influence of some substance or alcohol. One out of every ten youth stated that they had done so in excess of three times during that period. See Chart 14.

**CHART 14** Frequency of Attendance at School Last Year While Under the Influence of a Drug or Alcohol



## Violence in Schools and Communities

An unfortunate reality in many communities across the country has been a need for increased sensitivity and awareness of the potential for deadly violence by youth, often against youth. There have been a plethora of accounts of youth attacking other youth and adults with deadly force, often within school settings. While a number of sources, notably the Federal Bureau of Investigation, has indicated that, in fact, the number of violent youth incidences in school settings has been declining in the past decade, the growing awareness of such events has necessitated a heightened level of concern and demand for safer environments for our children.

A sense of comfort and safety in one's surroundings is seen as an important element in the development of positive self esteem and as necessary in creating an environment conducive to the learning process. The TAP survey, which was conducted a few weeks before one particular incident in which two students were responsible for the deaths of more than a dozen people in Colorado, provides some interesting insights as to youth perceptions and realities in terms of their comfort levels in their communities and while at school.

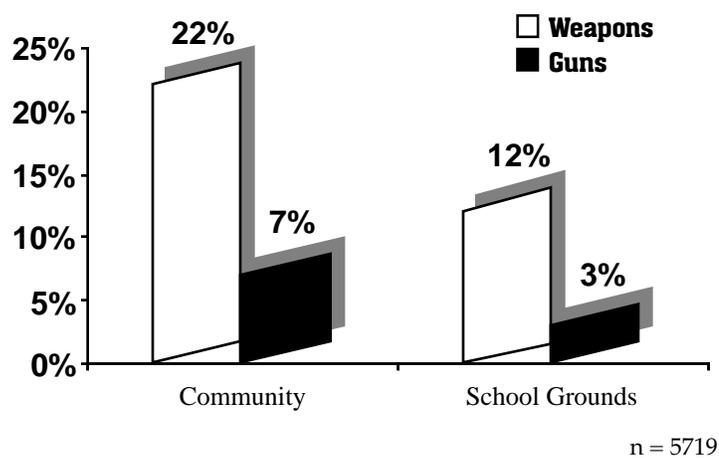
While the vast majority of youth felt safe within their homes (94%), their communities (83%), and their schools (82%), there are some youth who clearly experience a sense of fear for their safety while in each of these locations. In terms of schools and community settings, most of the fear for their safety appears to be based upon altercations with other youth. As many as one in five youth indicated that they had been physically assaulted by another teen. This is less than the percent of youth in the MYRBS who indicated that they had been in a fight during the past year (36%). In Oneida County, many of these assaults appear to be within the framework of existing relationships - 18% of all youth indicated that they had been hit, slapped or kicked by a girlfriend or boyfriend. Obviously, the concern within the home setting tends to be more focussed on adult-teen interactions. Almost 10% of all youth said that they had been physically hurt by an adult in the home within the past year.

The impact of this fear is apparent given the responses to several other TAP survey questions. With about 40% of all youth indicating that they had been threatened with violence and nearly 20% claiming to have been assaulted in the past year, many youth are trying to protect themselves through one of two options: weapons or avoidance. While the carrying of a weapon (loosely defined as a gun, knife, or club) may violate the law in many communities and schools, many youth indicated that they had still carried them.

For example, more than one in five youth (22%) stated that they had ever carried a weapon while in the community. In addition, more than one in ten Oneida County youth (13%) claim to have done so at least once while on school property. While one third of the time the weapon carried in the community is a

**CHART 15**

**Youth and Weapons:  
Percentage of Youth Carrying Weapons in the  
Community and on School Grounds During  
the Past Year**



identified as a gun, within the school ground setting, guns are a less likely choice of weapon. Among youth that have carried weapons on school property, a gun is the identified weapon less than a quarter of the time. Only about 3% of all youth indicated that they ever brought a gun onto school property. See Chart 15.

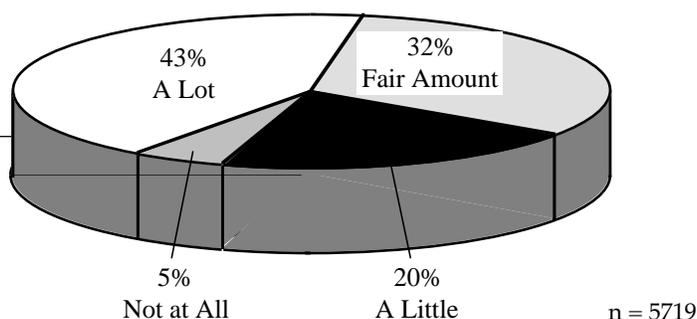
It is important to note that the wording of the question was whether a student had ever brought a weapon or gun onto school property, not necessarily into the school building itself. If a youth had a weapon and was either on school property, perhaps passing by on the way to another location, or perhaps had a weapon in the trunk of a car when they subsequently parked for classes, it could technically be considered "bringing a weapon onto school property."

The question makes no distinction in terms of where upon the property the weapon was carried. Despite the low number of youth carrying a weapon on school grounds, the obvious potential for trouble is, of course, still alarming.

The second alternative to violence is avoidance. Some students indicated that they had, at least once, not gone to school because of a fear for their safety. One out of every ten teens said that they had stayed home at least once in the past year because of this fear. One out of every twenty five youth (4%) said that they had avoided school for this reason at least several times in the past year.

**CHART 16**

**Degree to Which Respondents Were  
Concerned About Getting Good Grades  
in School**



**Perceptions of School and Future**

Perceptions of youth's performances in school are relatively positive based on the responses to the TAP survey. The majority of youth (75%) said they had a "fair amount" to "a lot" of concern about their grades in school. Two thirds (67%) of all respondents said that they found school to be an enjoyable experience and as many as 4 out of five (81%) felt that they were getting a good, high quality education. See Chart 16.

Unlike many other topics, youth do discuss their future education and work plans with their parents. More than 90% of all youth indicated that they have had some discussions with their parents about their post-graduation plans; similarly, more than 9 out of 10 youth feel that their parents are interested in their school performance and offer them encouragement. The interaction of most youth with school personnel is also viewed, for the most part, in a positive manner. Eight out of ten youth said that they agreed that teachers in their schools treated them respectfully and an even greater number (nearly 90%) felt that they treat their teachers with similar

respect. Interestingly, while a majority (56%) of youth felt that the rules in their schools were evenly applied to everyone, it represents a significantly lower number than those that felt that they had a respectful relationship with teachers.

Many youth reported that their educational experience is taken perhaps less seriously than would be hoped. For example, more than half (54%) spend an hour or less on homework or studying each week. An even greater number (60%) reported that they have cheated on school work and quizzes over the past year.

## Parent-Child Relationships

Families, and parent-child relationships, are the basic building blocks of a child's development. Parents are the single greatest contributors to the social, emotional and intellectual development of our youth. Many different institutions and people, such as extended families, neighbors, community, religious organizations, and schools, all play a part in the development of youth. Parents and immediate families, however, are the centers from which youth assimilate all these influences.

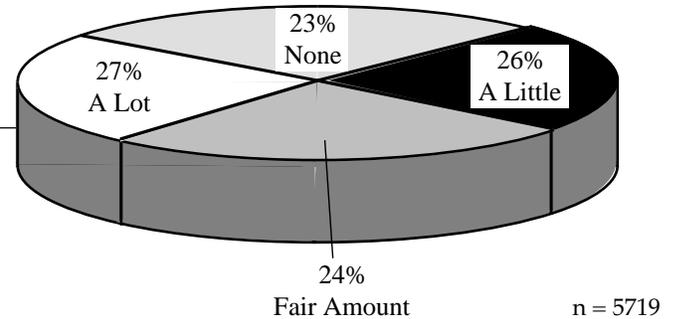
Youth gain a sense of self-identity from families. Many receive a sense of their cultural and historical selves through interactions with their parents. Among TAP respondents, three quarters (75%) reported that they have had some discussions with their parents about their family's history, faith and/or values.

Families are also where youth learn about limitations. Nearly all of the respondents (92%) stated that they were aware to some degree of the rules that parents established for them to follow. And if these rules were broken, as many as 87% indicated that there was an expectation of punishment. These limitations also extend beyond a youth's personal realm. They also impacted their social lives. As many as 93% stated that when they were away from home, there was an expectation that they would call to keep their parents informed as to their whereabouts, and that, in most cases (71%), parents usually knew where they were when they weren't at home.

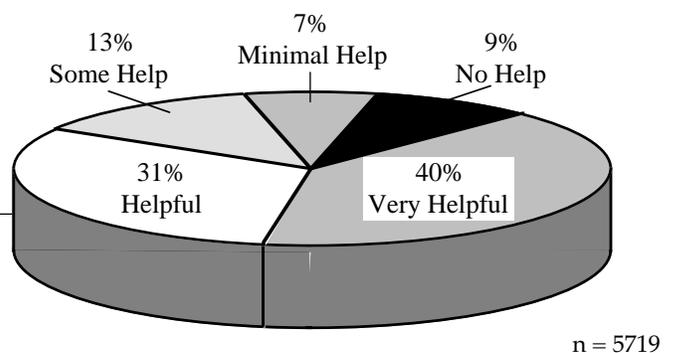
Many youth felt involved in the decision-making process within their families and expressed concern about familial issues. For example, more than 80% of all respondents said that their parents made important decisions in conjunction with their input. In addition, about half were concerned about their family's fiscal ability to get by.

Many of the issues that concerned youth weren't based on material life, however, but rather were focused on the emotional relationships that existed at home. More than half (51%) worried a "fair amount"

**CHART 17** Degree to Which Youth Worried About Getting Along With Their Parents



**CHART 18** Level of Help That Youth Believe Involved Parents Have in Detering Them from Negative Behavior



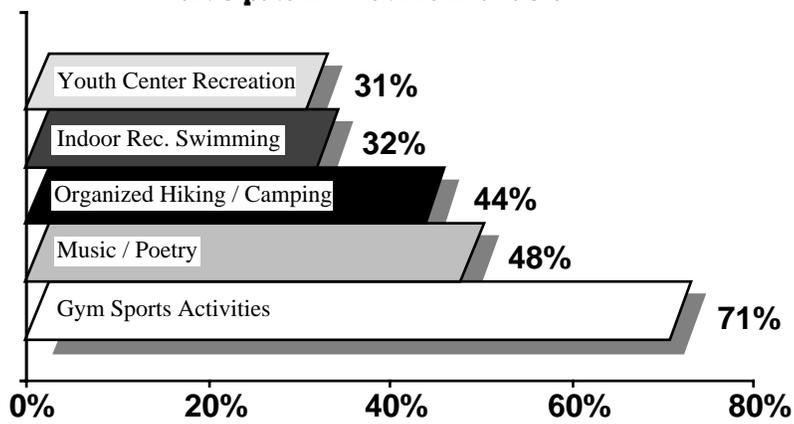
to “a lot” about getting along with their parents. Almost a third (31%) said they worried to a similar extent about how well their parents got along with one another. See Chart 17.

While almost 85% of youth said that involved parents and families were at least “some” help in deterring them from becoming involved in negative, illegal or harmful behaviors, parents ranked lower than a youth’s peers as a resource for dealing with problems. When asked who they turn to generally when faced with a problem, more than half of all youth (53%) stated that friends were their number one resource. Parents, albeit they ranked second, ranked considerably lower; only about 31% of all youth said that they turn to parents, brothers or sisters, or another relative for help when faced with a problem. See Chart 18.

This doesn’t mean that parents are held necessarily in disregard. Given the number that view parents as a positive influence in some way in keeping them from becoming involved in negative behaviors, parents certainly have influence. In fact, among students who have role models, parents ranked first among possible heroes / role models. Almost half of all kids with role models (45%) indicated that parents were their first choice.

**CHART 19**

**What Youth Want:  
The Top Five Activities Youth Said They Would  
Participate in That Are Available**



**Program Involvement and  
Activities**

An advantage of adolescence is the freedom to pursue a number of leisure activities and activities defined as important from a youth’s perspective. While some activities are readily available, others may be difficult to participate in or simply don’t exist within a youth’s community. The TAP survey gave youth a chance to indicate what they’re doing (in terms of activities that ARE available) as well as what they might like to do (for example if certain otherwise nonexistent activities were made available).

Youth were asked whether six different activities (recreational indoor swimming, gym activities, recreational youth center activities, music/poetry in a cafe/youth center, peer discussion groups, and hiking/camping/outdoor recreation) were available to them and, if they were, if they participated in them. In addition, if such activities were unavailable, but were made available, would they participate in them.

Among youth where such programs were available, the most popular activity by far was gymnasium-based recreation programs. More than 70% of all youth participated in gym activities if they were available in their community. Listening to music/poetry was the second most popular activity, 48% of all youth participated in these activities when available. This was followed closely by hiking/camping. Indoor recreational swimming was accessed by about a third of all respondents (32%) followed by recreational youth center activities (31%) and youth discussion groups (26%). See Chart 19.

While indoor gym-based recreation was most sought after by those living in communities where such programming isn’t currently available (65%), indoor recreational swimming was a close second. Almost

two thirds of youth not having access to such facilities (64%) expressed a desire to do so. Another sought after activity was organized camping/hiking. As many as 62% of youth who don't currently have such programs available said they would participate in them if they were. Live music/poetry programs (47%) were followed by recreational youth center programs (41%) and peer discussion groups (28%) as activities that youth desired that weren't currently available.

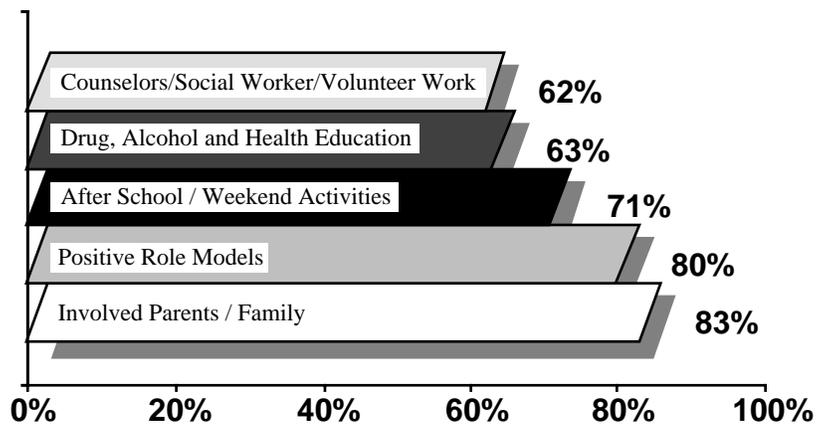
While the value of all of such options is undeniable to the development of well-rounded social and emotional youth, the question remains "what works"?

Specifically, what works in helping keep youth from being involved in some of the various less desirable activities that coincide with a passage to adulthood? While the answer may vary depending upon which expert is approached with the question, it's clear when you ask youth themselves - parents and involved families are the single most important factors in their lives.

When asked directly to indicate the degree to which a variety of resources were helpful in deterring them from becoming involved in various negative behaviors, the number one resource cited was involved families and parents. Nearly 85% of all youth said that parents were at least "some" help as a guiding force. Second most influential were positive role models (81%). Interestingly, as may be recalled, the role model most commonly identified by participants in the survey were parents. The third most influential factor helping youth to avoid harmful behaviors was after school programming (73%). Tied for fourth and fifth as positive factors were drug and alcohol education programs, as well as counselors and social workers (60% each). So while a variety of programs are helpful to youth in finding their way through the difficult period called adolescence, involved families and parents are clearly, in youth's own words, the single most influential factor available to them. See Chart 20.

**CHART 20**

**What Works:  
In Youth's Own Words, the Top Five Factors That  
Can Keep Them from Engaging in Negative,  
Harmful or Illegal Behaviors**



# TAP CONCLUSIONS

The TAP Survey represents a very special means for opening discussion with our young people about the issues and concerns that envelop their lives. Because it is a survey of the youth directly, as opposed to service providers or other professionals who interact with youth, it is, in many ways, a direct conduit to the needs and the desires of youth.

With over 5,700 students in the County participating in the survey, their responses are clearly representative of the opinions and experiences of our youth. The data offers information not just about the negative experiences and behaviors that are a part of the maturation process in our culture, but also many of the positive influences that help make that process a valuable one.

Based on the results of the TAP Survey, it appears by most accounts that the vast majority of youth are navigating their way through adolescence fairly successfully. Many have very healthy home lives and relationships with their families, and most see their future with a positive attitude. At the same time, however, there are sizeable numbers of youth who are having difficulties along the way. These include difficulties avoiding the pitfalls of drug and alcohol abuse, risks of unprotected or undesirable sexual activity, fear for their personal safety, and pain of depression and despondency. By and large, the County's youth appear by all accounts to be similar to youth from other parts of the country. They exhibit behaviors and attitudes that are similar to youth who have responded to other surveys conducted nationally and on the state level.

It is important to realize, however, that this similarity shouldn't suggest that we simply find such involvement in various negative or harmful activities as acceptable. Indeed, one of the dangers of engaging in a survey such as the TAP Survey is that it breeds complacency; that by confirming that our youth are not much different than most other youth that we simply accept that these less desirable experiences are simply the price of adolescence. In fact, it is hoped that just the opposite is true. The ultimate purpose of this endeavor is to call government, schools, service providers, communities, families and youth themselves to action, to find new and innovative ways of addressing the difficult issues that youth face.

This survey, being the first of such magnitude in the County, represents a baseline of information. It is hard to say where we've been and just as hard to predict where we're going. However, assuming that the survey will be replicated in the future, it is important that the Oneida County TAP Survey establishes a ruler by which to measure ourselves and to assess our progress. It provides an opportunity to begin tracking local trends and determine the progress of youth-oriented services.

While many themes and foci have been a part of the TAP Survey, youth clearly identify one factor more than any other as being the primary positive influence in their lives - involved families and parents. This in many ways confirms something that experts in the area of youth development have been saying for years: that a primary factor in the social, emotional and intellectual growth of our youth is family. It is clear from the youth that responded to the survey that involved families and parents are what they desire and what they see as their best hope in negotiating the difficult path of adolescence.

This is based, of course, on a number of responses, the clearest of which was a direct question about the degree to which several variables help in keeping youth from involvement in negative, harmful behaviors. Parents and involved families ranked first among 10 factors. The second biggest help in keeping youth from becoming involved in dangerous activities is positive role models, of which parents ranked first among youth having a role model. Youth, for the most part, clearly see their families as being a positive influence and a primary resource in their lives.

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While youth appear to rely on parents and families for many of the more positive experiences of adolescence, when faced with some of the more difficult and often dangerous situations accompanying growing up in our culture, they often shun parental involvement and instead turn to those with whom they feel most comfortable, their peers. When youth generally have a problem, more than half (53%) said that they tend to turn to a friend for help. While parents still ranked highly (23%), the tendency is to turn to a peer, at least initially, if they turn to anyone at all. Among youth seriously considering suicide, some choose to ignore the feelings; some turn to drugs and alcohol; others plan out how they might commit such an act. Some, of course, seek out a person to talk to about their feelings. Among those seeking someone to talk to, the vast majority primarily turn to other teens. More than 85% of all teens who choose to talk about the feelings of suicide that they were experiencing chose to talk to a peer as opposed to an adult.

This doesn't mean that youth and their families are not communicating at all. In fact, in terms of some topics, the avenues of communication appear to be open. But for the most part, parents and youth don't experience the same levels of communication when it comes to more difficult topics such as suicide, drug abuse, sexual activities, etc.

Recognizing this barrier to communication need not be a stumbling block but instead may be an opportunity for at least two potential solutions. First, given the existing low level of communication taking place between parents and youth about some of the most difficult and personal issues any person faces, it offers an opportunity to try to re-invigorate our family support systems. Schools, social service agencies, churches and all of those other institutions which serve the social and emotional development of our families and youth, must recognize the increased need for promoting the parental involvement in the decision-making process of our kids. By working not to supplant but to enhance avenues of communication between parents and children, such agencies will be strengthening families and it is parents and families that is cited by TAP respondents as the single greatest factor that keeps them from becoming involved in undesirable activities.

Second, the data should represent a call to parents to step forward even more than they currently do in trying to help our youth navigate their way to adulthood. Many parents see themselves as having an important role in encouraging good grades in school, in paving the way to better college and job opportunities for their kids, and in transmitting a sense of family history and values. But, parents need to also see themselves as the single best chance that their youth have in avoiding the pitfalls of drugs and alcohol, dangerous sexual activity, and despondency. We seem to culturally buy the argument that we can affect positive change in our youth's outlooks concerning many of the more exciting aspects of our lives such as college and careers. We, as parents, don't seem to believe, however, that we can also prevent a variety of negative behaviors from occurring with those same mechanisms. What is most troubling about this inconsistency is that those that most need our help, our young people, are telling us in their TAP responses that in fact involved parents and families are what make the difference to them. Involved parents and families are the most important factor in helping them when they need it most. Involved parents and families are what they seek.

It seems clear, then, from the respondents' perspective, that strengthening families is a primary means for helping our youth deal with the pressures of adolescence. It does not, however, represent the only means for helping young people. Youth, themselves, represent another less relied upon avenue for assistance.

Given how youth are far more likely to turn to one another when faced with difficult issues, it becomes important that the peers that they are turning to become part of a solution and not just an empty opportunity. Teens need to recognize that they hold tremendous potential as resources for their peers to get assistance and guidance in dealing with the issues before them. The use of teens as "peer helpers" is not

without precedent and operates successfully in many places across the country. The key, in terms of this report, is not to call for specific programming, but to suggest that the peers of those teens that are dealing less successfully with the stresses of adolescence represent an enormous conduit for directing troubled youth to the services and people that can help them the most.

Many youth clearly are more comfortable turning to peers who may be experiencing similar stresses, or who might best relate to these stresses, than they are to turning directly to an adult. In many ways, peers represent an untapped gateway for addressing the needs of the youth. Undoubtedly, many youth are very capable of helping a friend negotiate their way through a variety of daily difficulties. It is important that youth also recognize, however, their limitations, or at least recognize the greater potential for affecting positive change that exists within the social service community when it comes to dealing with many of the more serious problems their peers are facing. The ability of teens, as friends, to get friends to the resources that can help them most is an important role and one that can be promoted and enhanced. Since young people facing problems may be hesitant to come forward alone to talk to an adult about an issue, it becomes all the more important that the peers to whom they turn know how to get them to the resources they need.

### **Special Focus: Violence in Youths' Lives**

Given the number of high profile violent events that have played themselves across our national psyche over the past several years (e.g. Paducah, Columbine, etc.), youth violence is of particular concern to many families and public policy makers. While nationally such violent incidents by youth have been declining this past decade, the level of violence, or at least potential for mass violence, by youth has become a focal point for many schools and communities. It is important to note that this survey was conducted prior to the Columbine tragedy and hence offers some insight into the perceptions of youth concerning their safety in our community without undue focus on this national tragedy.

The percentage of the County's youth that report carrying weapons and the percentage that say they fear for their physical safety is similar to that of other national surveys. For example, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported in their 1997 national survey of youth that about 18.3% of respondents had carried a weapon in their community in the past 30 days. In the Oneida County TAP survey as many as 22.1% of youth responded that they had carried a weapon in the community in the past year. Given the differences in timeframe, the higher numbers of Oneida County youth carrying weapons isn't particularly alarming.

Similarly, while the percentage of youth carrying weapons on school property is higher in Oneida County than the national CDC sample, the time references are again different. Nearly 13.4% of all Oneida County respondents indicated that they had carried weapons on school property in the past year; about 8.5% of the national CDC sample reported to have done so, but again, within the past 30 days, not year.

In terms of perception of danger, about 9% of all County youth said that they had avoided school because they felt unsafe either at school or on the way there during the past year. Nationally, about 4% of all youth said they had missed school for one out of the last thirty days. While these numbers are considerably different, again, they are not horribly divergent, given the differing timeframes.

In light of these numbers, it appears our youth are somewhat similar to the norm when it comes to the carrying of weapons and in terms of their perceptions of danger when in public settings. Most youth in the rest of the nation seem to have somewhat similar experiences. But are these experiences acceptable ones? Is it acceptable that so many youth find it necessary to carry weapons in our communities? Is it acceptable that youth avoid school because of a fear for personal safety? Is it ok that youth fear for their

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well-being in their own homes, communities and school? These are the issues that not just Oneida County but the rest of the country is grappling with in light of recent violent outbursts by youth.

In the end, youth have told us at least one important piece of information: that there ARE factors which help them develop to their fullest potential. There are influences which keep them from becoming involved in a plethora of problems. Youth see involved parents and families as the single best way to help them avoid the pitfalls of adolescence or, at least, to help them navigate their way with the least amount of damage in the process. In addition, other teens represent an amazingly untapped resource, one that presents fewer access barriers for youth in need of help.

Both of these facts - that involved parents and families make a difference in our youths' lives, and that teens' peers represent the most likely resource that troubled youth willingly turn to - are not ends in and of themselves. They represent observations that need to be utilized by all of our community components, including families, churches, schools, and human service agencies, in providing the means for youth to mature as productive members of our culture. This is not the voice of distant experts: it is the voice of our own kids. It is what they are telling us works and what they are telling us they want and need.