

The World According to Our Kids
Results from the Arlington County Youth
Surveys

October 16, 2001

**The Arlington Partnership for Children,
Youth, and Families**



THE WORLD ACCORDING TO OUR KIDS

Findings from the Arlington County Youth Surveys

In June of 2001, the Arlington Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families conducted two surveys of youth in middle and high school. This report summarizes the initial findings from the surveys, focusing on the following questions:

- What factors in the community are affecting the development of our youth, both positively, through assets, and negatively, through deficits? The survey results show real strengths, such as high levels of family support. But the results also show that few young people have the ideal level of assets.
- Are youth in our community thriving or engaging in risky behaviors with potentially serious consequences for their health and safety? The data reveal some cause for concern, with a significant minority of students engaged in persistent and serious behavior patterns that threaten their well-being.
- How do assets and deficits shape the behavior of our young people? Research has shown that key “developmental assets” protect youth from risky behaviors and promote positive outcomes such as school success, healthy lifestyles, and leadership. The survey results for Arlington County confirm and reinforce these findings.

The Partnership anticipates that the data from these surveys will benefit the community in numerous ways by:

- Helping shape the Partnership’s recommendations to the County and School Boards this year and in the future;
- Giving schools, agencies, and non-profit service providers insights into how to improve their programs and target their services;
- Supplying foundations and organizations with data needed to identify the community’s most pressing needs for funding from grants.

We hope that all community members will reflect upon the findings here. We ask that adults, in particular, consider how they can help – as individuals and as part of larger organizations – to strengthen the developmental foundation for youth in our community.

BACKGROUND

What is the Partnership?

The Arlington Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families (“the Partnership”) is an advisory group made up of 16 citizens and eight senior School and County staff who work with youth. The Partnership makes recommendations to the County and School Boards on how to improve the health, well-being and safety of children, youth, and families in the community. As part of its mandate, the Partnership is responsible for reviewing and disseminating data on the status of county youth. The surveys give County decision makers a source of reliable, comprehensive information on the needs, characteristics, and behaviors of young people. The Partnership expects to repeat the surveys on a recurring basis.

In Search of a Common Language: The Assets Framework

Much of the Partnership's work has been guided by a philosophical foundation known as the "Assets Framework." This framework emerged from research by Search Institute ("Search") that attempts to identify the "building blocks" that all children need to become healthy, productive, and caring adults. The Assets Framework gives Arlington a common language for understanding what makes a family-friendly community and how to support young people so they grow in positive ways.

Search has identified two broad types of developmental assets:

- *External* assets are the expectations and opportunities provided by families, individuals, and organizations within the community. Examples are "caring neighborhood," "family support," and "school boundaries."¹
- *Internal* assets are personal qualities, skills and values that youth need to become independent, competent, purposeful and caring adults. Examples include "achievement motivation," "honesty," and "cultural competence."

Both types of assets were chosen because research convincingly demonstrates that they help *all* youth develop positively. Both types of assets help promote positive outcomes, cushion the impact of negative influences on our children's lives, and allow our youth to thrive, rather than merely survive. The lack of assets, in contrast, is associated with behaviors that jeopardize the health, safety, or development of our youth.

The Assets Framework does not cover every community resource or problem. In its research, Search focuses on the relationships, social experiences, and behavioral norms that shape our youth's development. Communities must also consider and shape the effect of economic conditions, human services availability, and social forces such as racism on our youth's passage to adulthood. But the Assets Framework gives communities a place to begin that acknowledges the clear and important role played by parents, teachers, neighbors, coaches, religious leaders, and other caring individuals who come into daily contact with our younger citizens.

Collecting the Data

The Partnership administered the two questionnaires in June of 2001 to a random sample of about 3400 students in grades six, eight, ten and twelve. The sample included students from all public middle and high schools in Arlington County. The sample was split between the surveys:

- The Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors Survey. Search Institute designed this questionnaire specifically to determine the level of developmental assets in a community. The 156 questions ask about the 40 different assets and five "deficits" that interfere with healthy development. To see how assets and deficits are affecting youth, other questions ask about thriving behaviors (such as school success and delaying gratification) and risk behaviors (such as drinking alcohol and getting into fights.)

¹ More detailed definitions of each of the 40 developmental assets appear in the Appendix.

- The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). The YRBS, which was developed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), provides more detailed information on health-related behaviors, including risk behaviors, exercise and nutrition, and safety. The CDC asks questions related to the major causes of death among teenagers and adults. For example, among teenagers, the leading cause of death is motor vehicle crashes and so the survey asks youth how often they wear safety belts.

The Partnership took a number of steps to ensure that the results of the survey would be reliable and valid. We consulted with cultural experts and hired translators to ensure that each eligible student understood the survey. We conducted an information session for all teachers administering the survey and gave them a detailed script to ensure that uniform procedures were followed in the classrooms. And we had on-site representatives from the Partnership at each school to assist with problems and to ensure that confidentiality was maintained at all times.

FINDINGS FROM THE ARLINGTON YOUTH SURVEYS

More is Better: Average Number of Assets

Figure 1. Number of assets by grade	
	Average Number of Assets
All grades	19
Grade 6	22
8	19
10	17
12	19

Research has shown that high levels of assets both protect youth from problem behavior and promote positive attitudes and actions. What level of assets do Arlington County youth report? According to Figure 1, in each grade except grade six, students report fewer than half of the 40 assets².

Search has proposed as an ideal that all young people have 31 or more of the 40 developmental assets. Few communities report such positive results and Arlington is no exception. Only 8 percent of youth in the County reported this level.

The pattern of asset levels across grades is similar to the pattern found in other communities – highest at grade six and then falling to a low during grade ten, with a slight increase in grade 12. This slight increase, however, may reflect the effects of drop-outs, if students with the fewest assets are most likely to leave school before graduating.

Creating a Safe, Supportive Community: External Assets

Figure 2 shows the percentage of youth in each grade reporting each of the *external* assets; that is, the assets that emerge from relationships and opportunities created by adults. The rates reported by students range from 22 percent (“community values youth”) to 66 percent (“family

²All information referring to Assets, Deficits, Thriving Behaviors and High Risk Behavior patterns comes from “Developmental Assets: A Profile of Your Youth for Arlington, VA” © 2001 by Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN. Data collected with the survey Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors, copyright ©1996, Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN

support,” “positive peer influence”). In the case of most external assets, less than half of young people in Arlington County report having the asset.

Figure 2 identifies areas of relative strength and concern for Arlington County. In the absence of clear community norms, we describe the external assets reported by more than half of students as “strengths” and those reported by less than a third as “concerns.” However, some citizens may feel that even 50 percent is “too low” and work to achieve higher asset levels in this community.

Figure 2. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Each External Asset, by Grade

Asset Type	External Asset	Other Commu- Nities	Arlington County All grades	Students in grade:			
				6	8	10	12
Support	Family support	64	66	76	66	56	65
	Positive family communication	26	28	37	31	21	23
	Other adult relationships	41	43	48	43	35	46
	Caring neighborhood	40	39	53	38	33	32
	Caring school climate	25	32	43	32	24	30
	Parents involved in school	29	28	39	31	24	17
Empowerment	Community values youth	20	22	33	17	19	20
	Youth as resources	25	26	31	24	21	27
	Service to others	50	46	51	43	42	47
	Feels safe in community	55	47	37	45	46	59
Boundaries and expectations	Family boundaries	43	40	45	42	37	34
	School boundaries	46	48	66	56	37	34
	Neighborhood boundaries	46	44	60	46	39	31
	Adult role models	27	30	34	32	21	33
	Positive peer influence	60	66	86	67	62	52
	High expectations	41	46	60	54	37	32
Constructive use of time	Creative activities	19	25	24	23	23	30
	Youth programs	59	60	62	56	60	63
	Religious community	64	55	68	55	46	50
	Time at home	50	55	64	59	52	47

Several notable patterns are evident in figure 2:

- More than half of students report experiencing the following five assets: “family support,” “youth programs,” “positive peer influence,” “religious community,” and “time at home.” By grade 12, over half of students report the safety asset.
- Fewer than one third of students report experiencing the following seven assets: “positive family communication,” “caring school climate,” “parent involvement in schooling,” “community values youth,” “youth as resources,” “adult role models,” and “creative activities.”
- Rates for “community values youth” are especially low. Only 22 percent of students report that the community values youth. Fewer than one in five 8th and 10th graders report this asset.
- With a few exceptions, most notably “safety,” the percent of students who report each external asset is highest for grade 6 and lowest for grade ten or twelve.

The results for external assets closely mirror the results for other participating communities, as reported in the Search Institute publication “*A Fragile Foundation.*” These other communities do not comprise a nationally representative sample so we know only how Arlington youth differ from youth in these selected communities, not all youth in these grades. There are some significant differences in the levels at which youth report particular assets:

- Youth in other communities are more likely to report “safety” (55% vs. 47% for Arlington), and “religious community” (64% vs. 55% for Arlington).
- Youth in other communities are less likely to report “caring school climate” (25% vs. 32% for Arlington), “creative activities” (19% vs. 25% for Arlington), “positive peer influence” (60% vs. 66% for Arlington) and “high expectations” (41% vs. 46% for Arlington).

Strength from Within: Internal Assets

Figure 3 shows the percentage of youth in each grade reporting each of the *internal* assets, the assets that reflect the values and competencies that young people need to be self-regulating adults. These rates range from 30 percent (“reading for pleasure”) to 70 percent (“positive view of the future”). At least half of students report experiencing four of the five Commitment to Learning assets; five of the six Positive Values assets; one of the five Social Competencies assets; and two of the four Positive Identity assets. Fewer than one third of students report experiencing “reading for pleasure” and “planning and decision-making.”

Figure 3. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Each Internal Asset, by Grade

Type of Asset	Internal Asset	Other Commu- nities	Arlington County	Students in grade:			
				6	8	10	12
Commitment to learning	Achievement motivation	63	64	70	63	62	62
	School engagement	64	51	58	46	47	53
	Homework	45	65	67	60	66	67
	Bonding to school	51	50	60	46	46	50
	Reading for pleasure	24	30	42	28	19	30
Positive values	Caring	43	51	56	48	52	50
	Equality & social justice	45	56	56	52	58	58
	Integrity	64	69	60	62	71	81
	Honesty	63	60	63	53	59	63
	Responsibility	60	56	56	51	56	62
	Restraint	42	45	70	49	36	27
Social competencies	Planning & decision-making	29	31	34	27	31	34
	Interpersonal competence	43	46	53	45	45	42
	Cultural competence	35	54	57	53	51	56
	Resistance skills	37	46	58	41	37	48
	Peaceful conflict resolution	44	47	52	45	42	49
Positive identity	Personal power	45	44	36	44	40	55
	Self-esteem	47	47	50	45	41	53
	Sense of purpose	55	54	54	53	50	59
	Positive view of future	70	70	70	68	69	74

Rates for internal assets do not display a single pattern by grade. Focusing on changes from 6th to 10th grade, some assets show strong declines (e.g., restraint, reading for pleasure, resistance skills); some show no particular pattern (e.g., homework, equality and social justice); and some show modest increases (e.g., integrity).

- Of notable concern are strong declines in two assets: reading for pleasure (declining from 42 percent in 6th grade to 19 percent in 10th grade) and restraint with respect to the use of alcohol, drugs, and sexual activity (declining from 70 percent in 6th grade to 27 percent in 12 grade).
- Resistance skills, the ability of young people to resist peer pressure and stay away from dangerous situations, drops from 58% in 6th grade to 37% in 10th grade. This pattern, the reverse pattern of what we desire and hope, clearly merits immediate attention.

For internal assets, differences between Arlington County and other participating communities are larger and occur more frequently than for external assets. Arlington County youth report a five percentage point difference (or more) for seven of the 20 internal assets, as shown in figure 3, with especially large differences for homework and cultural competence. Where these large differences exist, Arlington youth are more likely to report having the asset, with the exception of school engagement.

Pulling in the Wrong Direction: Developmental Deficits

While the Assets Framework generally takes a positive approach to youth development, communities must also monitor the negative influences in young people’s lives. According to Search, deficits, such as physical abuse or too much time alone, tend to limit young people’s access to external assets, block the development of internal assets, or ease the way into risky behavior. For example, kids who are fixated on video games may not be participating in the constructive activities that will help them grow into responsible adults.

Figure 4. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Each of 5 Deficits, by Grade

Deficit	Total	Students in grades:			
		6	8	10	12
Alone at home	56	41	54	60	64
TV overexposure	37	31	40	43	32
Physical abuse	26	28	29	27	21
Victim of violence	29	36	33	25	23
Drinking parties	46	6	37	60	77

Note: The “drinking parties” deficit refers to attending parties where other young people are consuming alcohol. Definitions of other deficits appear in the appendix.

Figure 4 shows the Arlington County results for five deficits that can be measured with a self-report survey. However, because the surveys were completed in schools, the sample does not include dropouts, who are likely to experience these deficits more often. For this reason, we believe deficit levels among all county youth are likely to be higher than the rates shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 also shows how deficit levels vary by grade level. Focusing on changes from 6th to 10th grade, physical abuse stays relatively steady (but far too high), victim of violence declines, and the other three increase steadily. Compared to youth in other communities that have participated in the survey, a higher percentage of Arlington youth report “TV overexposure” (30% in other

participating communities vs. 37% in Arlington) and “alone at home” (48% vs. 56% in Arlington), with especially large differences by 12th grade for “alone at home” (50% in other participating communities vs. 64% in Arlington). Fewer Arlington youth (across all grades) report “drinking parties” (51% in other communities vs. 46% in Arlington). However, this difference is much smaller (only 3 percentage points) in 12th grade.

Taking Chances: Risk Behaviors and High Risk Patterns

Both youth surveys contain extensive questions on risk behaviors; that is, negative and potentially life-threatening behaviors including drug and alcohol use, depression and suicide, fighting, and early and unprotected sexual intercourse. In general, the two surveys produced similar statistics, reinforcing our belief that the survey data are giving an accurate picture of these behaviors. For this report, we rely on the results from the Asset survey unless noted.

Figure 5 shows the percent of Arlington youth who report selected risk behaviors. Figure 5 reveals that about one-third or fewer students overall are engaging in any one of these risk behaviors. However, the overall averages mask important differences by grade. Use of alcohol, other substances, sexual activity, and school truancy tend to be higher in high school while and hitting, fighting, and related behaviors tend to be lower.

Figure 5. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Selected Risk Behaviors, by Grade

Risk Behavior	All	Students in grades			
		6	8	10	12
Alcohol use in past 30 days	30	7	24	36	50
Tobacco use in past 30 days	17	2	13	20	33
Marijuana use in past year	19	1	13	24	37
Drinking and driving (as passenger)	31	17	27	32	46
Sexual intercourse, ever	26	7	18	32	44
Shoptifted in past year	29	21	36	33	26
Vandalism in past year	17	15	22	18	13
In trouble with police in past year	18	13	20	18	21
Hit someone in last year	33	37	39	34	23
Hurt someone in last year	12	13	15	10	10
In group fight in last year	18	20	22	16	14
Carried a weapon in past year	9	6	10	10	10
Threatened to hurt someone	26	26	33	23	22
Skipped school in past month	34	12	18	42	62
Gambling	29	24	33	24	34
Eating disorder	17	16	13	22	17
Depressed or sad most of the time	19	16	19	23	17
Attempted suicide, ever	16	13	19	19	13

Are these numbers cause for alarm? Both the levels and patterns suggest that, at minimum, community members should be concerned. Rates of alcohol use, skipping school, and drinking and driving reported by high school students and rates of violence (e.g. hitting someone), gambling and shoptifting reported by middle school students are alarmingly high. Alcohol use

increases from 7% reported by students in 6th grade to 50% by students in 12th grade, fueled in part by a sense of inevitability that parents may share. Finally, as detailed as it is, this table does not give us the full picture – it shows the participation rate for each risk behavior in isolation. It does not show us what percent of students are engaged in at least one risky behavior or what proportion are engaged in multiple risk patterns.

Some adults may dismiss these findings by noting that youthful experimentation is just part of growing up. Indeed, most experts feel that some experimentation in risky activities is part of normal adolescent development. In recognition of this pattern, Search defines “high-risk” patterns of behavior that indicate a more serious and persistent problem (see appendix for details). For example, a student who has used alcohol in the past 30 days is engaging in risk-taking. A student who has used alcohol at least three times in the past month or gotten drunk in the past two weeks is engaged in a high risk pattern with respect to alcohol. Figure 6 shows the percent of Arlington youth who report selected high risk patterns and compares those figures with rates reported by other participating communities.

Figure 6. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Selected High-Risk Behaviors, by Grade

High-Risk Pattern	Other Communities	Arlington County	Students in grade:			
			6	8	10	12
High-risk: alcohol	27	20	6	15	22	36
High-risk: depression / suicide	23	28	23	29	33	25
High-risk: anti-social behavior	23	21	13	28	21	19
High-risk: violence	33	26	27	30	27	20
High-risk: school problems	20	29	14	21	32	46

In the absence of explicit community standards, we note as “problem areas” any high-risk pattern reported by 20 percent or more of students. We use a lower percentage as the “cut-off” for identifying problems because these behaviors are more serious and potentially harmful. Twenty percent or more of Arlington youth report five of the ten high-risk patterns. (Overall rates for all 10 high-risk patterns appear in the appendix.) In the case of suicide/depression and violence, 20 percent or more of students report high risk patterns *at each grade level*. Finally, over one-third of 12th grade students report a high risk pattern of alcohol use and nearly half report school problems.

How does the Arlington County experience with high-risk patterns compare with other communities where the Assets survey has been administered? According to *A Fragile Foundation*, compared to these communities, youth in Arlington County are *more likely* to report high-risk patterns related to suicide and school problems and *less likely* to report high-risk patterns related to alcohol and violence. County youth are slightly less likely to demonstrate high risk patterns in terms of shoplifting and other anti-social behaviors but the difference is probably not significant.

Adults in the community also need to consider the age of onset when assessing the seriousness of risk behaviors. Age of initiation is a powerful predictor of consequences and dependence for both alcohol use and cigarette smoking. For example, adolescents who use alcohol at early ages

tend to use it more frequently and are less likely to stop using it. (See For More Information in the appendix at the end of the report.)

When do risky behaviors begin? The YRBS survey provides some data on that question. About 21 percent of 6th graders reported ever thinking seriously about killing themselves. About 17 percent had ever carried a weapon, and 49 percent had ever been in a physical fight³. Students in the 10th grade indicated that a significant minority begin to experiment with substances before middle school, as shown in Figure 7. Five percent of 10th graders reported having had sexual intercourse at age 11 or younger.

Figure 7. Percent of 10th Graders Reporting Initial Use of Selected Substances, by Age

	Alcohol	Cigarettes	Marijuana
10 years or younger	10	6	2
11 or 12 years old	12	11	4
13 or 14 years old	26	18	12
15 years or older	17	10	14

Not Just Surviving: Thriving Indicators

Helping our youth avoid risks is only one way to enhance their development. As parents, teachers, mentors, and neighbors of youth, we want to do more for our young people. We want to know that they are not just surviving to adulthood, but are thriving.

There is no single, accepted measure of thriving. As a starting point, Search defines eight behaviors, skills or dispositions to serve as markers of successful development. Figure 8 displays the percent of youth that report each of these indicators. Ideally, youth should demonstrate at least six of the eight thriving indicators.

Figure 8. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Each Thriving Indicator, by Grade

Thriving indicator	Students in grade:				
	All	6	8	10	12
Succeeds in school	23	24	25	19	25
Helps others	80	85	80	79	79
Values diversity	65	65	65	62	67
Maintains good health	53	61	55	49	49
Exhibits leadership	71	72	66	67	79
Resists danger	25	21	26	27	25
Delays gratification	46	52	45	44	42
Overcomes adversity	65	69	63	62	69

Like students in other participating communities, youth in Arlington County were most likely to report “helps others,” “exhibits leadership,” “overcomes adversity,” and “values diversity.” As in other communities, they were least likely to report “school success” and “resists danger.”

³ Note that the rates in Figure 5 refer to risk behaviors in the past 30 days or year. The rates in Figure 6, in contrast, depend on whether the student ever participated in the activity.

However, the level of “resists danger” is much lower compared to other communities (25% in Arlington vs. 36% in other participating communities) and increases only modestly from 6th to 12th grade. “Maintains good health” declines markedly from 6th to 10th grade but generally stays at or above one-half. The remainder tend to show decreases as grade level increases from six to 10, then rises in 12th grade (which, like asset levels, may reflect the effect of dropping out by those young people with the fewest assets.)

Other data from the YRBS survey suggest that Arlington youth understand the importance of a healthy lifestyle. Over 70 percent of 6th, 8th, and 10th graders report vigorous exercise three or more times per week. Gang membership (a reverse thriving indicator) ranges from 9 percent of 6th and 8th graders to only 3 percent of 12th graders. And between 72 and 80 percent of students report that they wear a seat belt always or most of the time.

Putting the Pieces Together: How Assets and Deficits Affect Our Kids

Assets are powerful. In communities across the country, Search Institute has found that assets play three critical roles in the lives of young people:

- Preventing youth from engaging in many forms of high-risk behavior, such as alcohol use and violence;
- Enhancing the lives of our youth and helping them to thrive by making it more likely that they will help others, follow a healthy lifestyle, and demonstrate leadership; and
- Helping youth to minimize the effect of deficits in their lives.

Figure 9 demonstrates some of these relationships by looking at measures of risk-taking and thriving for groups of youth reporting different levels of assets in their lives. Students who report high levels of assets (31 to 40) are most likely to thrive and least likely to engage in risky behaviors. For example, only five percent of young people with the lowest asset levels (0 to 10 assets) report school success. But 56 percent of the young people with the highest asset levels (31 to 40) report this measure of thriving. As in other communities, these patterns hold for every thriving indicator and risk behavior defined by Search Institute. While these patterns don’t establish a cause and effect relationship between assets and behavior, other research does.

Figure 9. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Thriving Indicators or Risk Behaviors, by Asset Level

Thriving Indicator	All Youth	Youth reporting given level of assets			
		0-10	11-20	21-30	31-40
Succeeds in school	23	5	19	34	56
Values diversity	65	46	60	75	92
Maintains good health	53	28	48	64	81
Risk Behavior	All Youth	Youth reporting given level of assets			
		0-10	11-20	21-30	31-40
Current alcohol use	30	50	35	21	8
Shoplifted	29	56	34	16	5
Marijuana use in past year	19	37	24	10	3
Sad or depressed, most times	19	26	22	13	4

MIRROR OR MIRAGE? STUDENTS ASSESS THE SURVEY RESULTS

The results of the survey strongly indicate that, like other participating communities, Arlington youth have too few assets. As Search has phrased it, their development rests on a “fragile foundation.” But what do kids themselves say about the survey? Do the results mirror their own experience or present a false picture of youth activities?

To help with these questions, the Partnership held a one-day retreat with a group of 7 middle school and 18 high school students to review the results of the survey. During the retreat, we asked the students to address two questions. First, do the survey results seem reasonable in light of their own experiences and impressions? Second, what do the survey results tell the community about its strengths and weakness? These questions are answered below.

In the Ballpark?

The two groups of students reached somewhat different conclusions about how well the survey data portray the experience of Arlington County youth. The high school students felt the data presented an overly-positive picture. These students perceived that the percentages for many assets, such as restraint and caring neighborhood, were too high, and percentages for many risk behaviors, such as tobacco, alcohol use and vandalism, were too low. The middle school group reported mixed results. They felt that the estimates for some activities (including honesty, neighborhood boundaries, and TV overexposure) were too high. Survey estimates for some other activities or behaviors, both positive and negative, were too low (including abuse, alcohol use, cultural competence, and adult role models).

What can members of the community conclude from this group’s take on the data? For two reasons, the actual rates for risky behaviors are probably between the rate suggested by the surveys and the rate suggested by typical students. First, even in anonymous surveys, some students will be reluctant to report illegal behavior. In that case, reported behavior will be less than the “true” rate, consistent with the views of the retreat participants. Second, some research suggests that students typically overestimate the prevalence of risk behaviors among their peers (i.e. “everybody’s doing it,” whatever “it” is). So, while the survey estimates may be too low, the risk behaviors are probably less common than most kids think.

These considerations have at least two practical implications:

- First, the survey’s estimates of risk behaviors, while our community’s *best* estimates, should be treated as *lower-bound* estimates; that is, the “true” rates are *at least* as great as those indicated. If the percentage of youth who report behaviors such as drinking and driving or suicidal thoughts is cause for even mild concern, we should take action to reduce the behavior.
- Second, we need to educate students on what the surveys say about the behavior of their peers, encouraging them to recognize that they may be making false assumptions about the behaviors of young people in the broader community.

Students' Views of Strengths and Concerns

During the retreat, we also asked participants in each group to think about which assets represented real strengths of the community and which represented top concerns. No clear consensus emerged from this exercise. The facilitators (all high school students) felt strongly that more young people need to be involved in a lengthier process of discussion before a consensus will emerge.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

This report presents a wealth of information about the world according to Arlington County youth – perhaps a very different world than adults expected to find. What can community members conclude from all of this data? Here, we try to focus on broad patterns revealed by the survey results and the implications of those patterns for strengthening and improving the world inhabited by our young people.

First, the Bad News

Assets are too low and the pattern is all wrong. In an ideal world, all kids would experience 31 or more assets. In fact, only 8% of Arlington County youth report this level. In an ideal world, younger kids should experience high levels of *external* assets and that level should stay high as they gradually develop the *internal* assets they need as adults. In fact, the percent of youth reporting the external assets generally falls from 6th grade to 10th (with some modest increases between 10th and 12th that may reflect “drop-outs.”) And instead of seeing consistent increases in internal assets, we see a mixed pattern ranging from strong declines (e.g., restraint) to modest increases (e.g., responsibility) but few large increases.

As the community begins to wrestle with these problems, we must recognize another clear conclusion from the data. Families, as important as they are, can not change these patterns alone. Young people already report high levels of family support. Parents do need to look at how they communicate with their kids, how they set boundaries, and their involvement with school. Far fewer than half of students report these. Parents also need to look at how their role changes as their children grow older. Young people may need adults to change *how* they express their support but do not need it any less. Data on both risk behaviors and assets suggest that parents may be prematurely reducing their involvement in the lives of their children.

What is missing from our kids' world? With five exceptions, less than half of Arlington County youth report having any given external asset, the assets provided by family, neighbors, school, and community. For seven of the external assets, the results were even less satisfying with fewer than one-third of students reporting the asset. In other words, most of our kids don't feel supported, don't feel valued or safe, lack clear boundaries, and adults seem to be too often absent from their lives.

The lack of external assets is mirrored by the lack of internal assets and the prevalence of associated risk behaviors. For example:

- Only 34% of 12th graders report family boundaries, an external asset. Only 27% of 12th graders report the internal asset “restraint” with respect to the use of drugs, alcohol, and sexual activity. Half of 12th graders had used alcohol in the 30 days leading up to the survey.
- From 6th grade to 10th grade, parent involvement in school (an external asset) falls from 39 to 24 percent. At the same time, school engagement (an internal asset reflecting whether a young person is actively engaged in learning) also declines from 58 to 47 percent. School success, a thriving measure falls from 24 to 19 percent and school problems (a high-risk pattern) increases from 14 to 32 percent.

Both research and the discussion at the retreat suggest that young people significantly downplay the life-threatening nature of some of their behaviors. According to the CDC, alcohol is a major factor in over half of suicides, homicides, and accidents among young people aged 15 to 24. Yet nearly half of 12th graders report driving in a car with someone who had been drinking. And the results of both the YRBS and Assets survey show that rates of depression and suicide attempts are higher for youth in our County than in other communities administering the surveys. Adults in the community have a clear responsibility to respond to this information.

Any Good News?

As noted earlier, the good news is that we can strengthen the developmental foundation for our youth by building assets in our community. As in other areas, the more assets that young people in Arlington have, the more likely they are to report thriving behavior and less likely to report high risk patterns. Assets work in a cumulative way to reduce the probabilities that our kids end up in a crisis situation. While we can never guarantee that any individual child will thrive, we can stack the odds in their favor.

We can begin by reaching agreement that the status quo is not acceptable and by setting goals for creating a healthy community for children and youth. The Partnership believes that a shared vision of a healthy community (including specific, measurable goals for both assets and for risk behaviors) is essential for creating the shared effort to build assets in our homes, schools, places of worship, and meeting places. The Partnership will continue with its efforts to build that shared vision, but “ordinary” citizens must be active participants in that process.

With a shared vision, the community can build assets in a number of ways.

- We can start with areas of strength – family support, youth programs, religious community, and time at home. We can use these opportunities with our youth to look for ways to build skills such as planning and decision-making and restraint.
- We can capitalize on the relatively high levels of assets reported by 6th graders in the area of “commitment to learning” and take steps to prevent a downward slide as they move through middle school and enter high school. We can recognize and look for ways to counter the “sophomore slump” evident from the data and affirmed by students during the retreat.
- We can and should applaud our kids for the many positive values they embody: their caring, their honesty, their integrity, and sense of responsibility, equality and social justice and look for ways to further increase these assets.

- We can acknowledge the real strengths and abilities of young people in Arlington County and look for ways for them to make meaningful contributions to the community.

Perhaps most important of all, we must recognize and accept that if we want honest, responsible, caring kids, we need to make sure that they have regular and repeated contact with honest, responsible, caring adults. Without that first step, the survey results show us what to expect and that world – the world according to our kids – is far less than they deserve.

For More Information

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APPENDIX

This appendix contains additional information to help understand the report, including definitions of the external and internal assets, the developmental deficits, high-risk behavior patterns, thriving behaviors. It also contains a comparison of substance abuse rates and sexual activity as measured by the YRBS and the Assets survey.

Figure A. Definition of External Assets

Asset Type	External Asset	Definition
Support	1. Family support	Family life provides high levels of love and support.
	2. Positive family communication	Young person and his or her parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek parent(s)' advice and counsel.
	3. Other adult relationships	Young person receives support from three or more non-parent adults.
	4. Caring neighborhood	Young person experiences caring neighbors.
	5. Caring school climate	School provides a caring, encouraging environment.
	6. Parents involved in school	Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.
Empowerment	7. Community values youth	Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.
	8. Youth as resources	Young people are given useful roles in the community.
	9. Service to others	Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.
	10. Feels safe in community	Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood.
Boundaries and Expectations	11. Family boundaries	Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors young person's whereabouts.
	12. School boundaries	School provides clear rules and consequences.
	13. Neighborhood boundaries	Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.
	14. Adult role models	Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
	15. Positive peer influence	Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.
	16. High expectations	Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.
Constructive use of time	17. Creative activities	Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.
	18. Youth programs	Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in community organizations.
	19. Religious community	Young person spends one or more hours per week in a religious institution.
	20. Time at home	Young person is out with friends with "nothing special to do" two or fewer nights per week.

Figure B. Definition of Internal Assets

Type of Asset	Internal Asset	Definition
Commitment to learning	21. Achievement motivation 22. School engagement 23. Homework 24. Bonding to school 25. Reading for pleasure	Young person is motivated to do well in school. Young person is actively engaged in learning. Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day. Young person cares about his or her school. Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.
Positive values	26. Caring 27. Equality & social justice 28. Integrity 29. Honesty 30. Responsibility 31. Restraint	Young person places high value on helping other people. Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty. Young person acts on convictions and stands up for his or her beliefs. Young person tells the truth even when it is not easy. Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility. Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.
Social competencies	32. Planning & decision-making 33. Interpersonal competence 34. Cultural competence 35. Resistance skills 36. Peaceful conflict resolution	Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices. Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills. Young person has knowledge of, comfort with people of different cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds. Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations. Young person seeks to resolve conflict non-violently.
Positive identity	37. Personal power 38. Self-esteem 39. Sense of purpose 40. Positive view of future	Young person feels he or she has control over “things that happen to me.” Young person reports having high self-esteem. Young person reports that “my life has a purpose.” Young person is optimistic about his or her personal future.

Figure C. Definition of Developmental Deficits

Deficit	Definitions
Alone at home	Two or more hours per school day
T.V. overexposure	Watches TV or videos three or more hours per school day
Physical abuse	One or more incidents of physical harm (that caused a scar, black and blue marks, welts, bleeding or broken bones), by someone in the family or living with the family
Victim of violence	Reports one or more incidents in past 2 years of physical violence causing pain or injure
Drinking parties	Reports attending one or more parties in the 1st year where kids the same age were drinking.

Definition of High Risk Behaviors

Figure 6 of the report shows the prevalence of high risk patterns reported by at least 20 percent of respondents. This figure lists the definitions of all ten high-risk behaviors and the overall level reported by each.

Figure D. Definition and Percent of Arlington County Youth Reporting 10 High-Risk Behavior Patterns.

	Definition of High-Risk Behavior Patterns	%
Alcohol	Has used alcohol three or more times in the last 30 days or got drunk once or more in the last two weeks.	20
Tobacco	Smokes one or more cigarettes every day or uses chewing tobacco frequently.	9
Illicit drugs	Used illicit drugs three or more times in the past 12 months.	14
Sexual Intercourse	Has had sexual intercourse three or more times in lifetime.	19
Depression/suicide	Is frequently depressed and/or has attempted suicide.	28
Anti-social behavior	Has been involved in three or more incidents of shoplifting, trouble with police, or vandalism, in the last 12 months.	21
Violence	Has engaged in three or more acts of fighting, hitting, injuring a person, carrying or using a weapon, or threatening physical harm in the last 12 months.	26
School problems	Has skipped school two or more days in the last four weeks and/or has below a C average.	29
Driving and alcohol	Has driven after drinking or ridden with a drinking driver three or more times in the last 12 months.	15
Gambling	Has gambled three or more times in the last 12 months.	12

Definition of Thriving Behaviors

Figure E gives the definition of the thriving behaviors used to indicate that young people are doing well and not just getting by.

FigureE. Definition of Thriving Behaviors

Thriving indicator	Definition
Succeeds in school	Gets mostly As on report card
Helps others	Helps friends or neighbors one or more hours per week
Values diversity	Places high importance on getting to know people of other racial or ethnic groups
Maintains good health	Pays attention to healthy nutrition and exercise
Exhibits leadership	Has been a leader of a group or organization in the last 12 months
Resists danger	Avoids doing things that are dangerous
Delays gratification	Saves money from something special rather than spending it all right away
Overcomes adversity	Does not give up when things get difficult.

Comparison of Selected, Self-Reported Risk Behaviors from YRBS and Assets Surveys

The YRBS and Assets surveys contain a number of similar questions. Do the two surveys obtain the same results? For the most part, the answer is “yes”, as shown in figure F. The largest difference in responses relates to suicide. However, differences between the surveys probably explain the lower rate for YRBS respondents. The YRBS asks a series of related questions designed to clearly distinguish between thinking about it, making a plan, attempting suicide, and making a suicide attempt that requires medical treatment. The Assets survey only asks about depression and suicide attempts.

Figure F. Comparison of Selected, Self-Reported Risk Behaviors from YRBS and Assets Surveys, For Grades 8 and 10

Risk Behavior	Grade 8		Grade 10	
	YRBS	Assets	YRBS	Assets
Alcohol use in past 30 days	NA	24	34	36
Cigarette use in past 30 days	15	13	24	20
Sexual intercourse, ever	19	18	32	32
Ever attempted suicide	12	19	NA	13

Note: “NA” means not available due to differences in question phrasing between the middle and high school versions of the YRBS.