

The World According to Our Kids

**Results from the Arlington County “Assets” Survey,
March 2006**



For questions or more information, please contact
Amy Graham, Data Coordinator at (703) 228-1668 or agraha@arlingtonva.us
Arlington Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO OUR KIDS 2006

Executive Summary

In March of 2006, the Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families conducted the third survey of developmental assets among youth in Arlington's public middle and high schools. Since the last survey in 2003, the Partnership has focused on helping the community to act on their knowledge of assets as it continues to educate and build awareness of the Assets Model. Thus, we expected modest improvement in the levels of assets reported by young people. Data from the most recent survey shows that, while much remains to be done, progress has been made.

Some real progress

The survey data show a number of promising developments:

- In 2006, the average number of assets reported was 20, up from 19 in 2001.
- Today, more youth (10 percent) report the ideal level of assets (between 31 and 40) than in 2001 when only eight percent did.
- At the same time, fewer youth reported the lowest levels of assets (between 0 and 10). From 2001 to 2006, the percentage decreased from 15 to 11 percent.
- These seemingly modest changes have a potentially large impact on the community given the tremendous differences in behavior between young people with different levels of assets. For example, low asset youth are six to 20 times more likely to engage in risky behavior.
- Since 2001, there has been a significant increase in five of the external assets and eight of the internal assets. There have been no significant decreases in *any* of the other assets.
- Young people this year also reported improvement in three of ten high-risk behaviors, two out of five developmental deficits, and in two of eight thriving behaviors than five years ago. The other indicators showed no change.
- These improvements are more remarkable given the decidedly mixed picture for youth in Virginia since 2000. According to Kid's Count, during the past six years, Virginia improved in three of ten measures of child well-being, declined in six measures and showed no change in the other.

More work to be done

The 2006 survey also found, once again, some disturbing patterns in the distribution of assets among Arlington youth.

- Youth are less likely to report many of the assets as they grow older. This suggests that adults (including, but not limited to, parents) are withdrawing support and guidance too soon and that young people are not developing the values and skills they need to be caring and responsible adults.
- Girls are more likely than boys to report having assets. This is true for 11 of the 20 external assets and 16 of the 20 internal assets. Not surprisingly, then, boys are also more likely than girls to engage in five of six high risk behaviors. Girls are more likely to report only one of these behaviors.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO OUR KIDS

Findings from the Arlington County Assets Survey

In March of 2006, the Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families conducted the third survey of “assets” among youth in Arlington’s public middle and high schools. This report summarizes the findings from this survey, focusing on the following questions:

- How is our community changing? There are signs that efforts to improve the developmental foundation for our youth are having an effect. But more work needs to be done.
- What specific assets in the community are having a positive effect on the development of our youth? What kinds of deficits are weakening our efforts to help young people grow up to be caring, responsible, and healthy adults? While the survey reveals real strengths, such as high levels of family support, few young people have the ideal level of assets.
- Are youth in our community thriving or are they engaging in risky behaviors with potentially serious consequences for their health and safety? The data show that in most cases, less than one-third of youth are engaged in a particular risk behavior. But there is real cause for concern for those engaged in multiple or high-risk behaviors.
- 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 this survey will benefit the community in several ways, by:

- Helping shape the Partnership’s recommendations to the County and School Boards;
- 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

About 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.

The Partnership is responsible for reviewing and disseminating data on the status of county youth. To meet this charge, the Partnership sponsors two surveys of young people enrolled in Arlington Public middle and high schools. Together, the Assets Survey and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey give County decision makers reliable and comprehensive information on the needs, characteristics, and behaviors of young people.

Using The Assets Framework to Guide Our Work

Much of the Partnership's work has been guided by the Assets Framework. This framework emerged from research by Search Institute ("Search") 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."

The Assets Framework was chosen because research showed that the assets help *all* young people develop positively. The assets promote positive outcomes, cushion the impact of negative influences such as poverty on children's lives, and allow young people to thrive, rather than merely survive. In contrast, the lack of assets is associated with behaviors, such as repeated alcohol use and violence, 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 a young person'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 youth.

Collecting the Data

The level of assets among young people in a community can be measured using the responses to a 156-item questionnaire (known formally as the Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors Survey and informally as the Assets Survey). The Partnership most recently administered this questionnaire in March of 2006 to a random sample of about 2300 students in grades six, eight, ten and twelve. As in past surveys done in 2001 and 2003, the sample included students from all public middle and high schools in Arlington County.

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

The Assets survey asks students about many aspects of their lives, including:

- *Assets* or the 40 positive experiences and qualities that *all* our young people need to become healthy, caring, responsible adults.
- *Deficits* or experiences that work against a young person’s development. An example is being a victim of violence.
- *Thriving behaviors* that indicate that a young person is doing well. Examples include demonstrating leadership and helping others.
- *Risk behaviors* such as use of alcohol and getting in trouble with the police that threaten to compromise the health or well-being of youth.

The Partnership took a number of steps to ensure that the results of the survey would be reliable and valid. We used scientific methods to sample students so the results would be representative of all young people. We consulted with cultural experts and hired translators to ensure that each eligible student understood the survey. We held information sessions for teachers to explain the purpose of the survey and the need to use a consistent set of procedures.

FINDINGS FROM THE ASSETS SURVEY OF ARLINGTON YOUTH

More is Better: Average Number of Assets

Figure 1. Number of assets by students in grades 6, 8, 10 and 12 Arlington County, March 2006

| | Average Number of Assets |
|------------|--------------------------|
| All grades | 20 |
| Grade 6 | 24 |
| 8 | 20 |
| 10 | 19 |
| 12 | 18 |

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, young people in our community have about half, with sixth grade students reporting the most and 12th grade students reporting the least.²

Search believes all young people should have 31 or more of the 40 developmental assets. Only 10 percent of youth in the Arlington County reported this level, compared to 8 percent in 2001. During

that same period, the percent of youth who reported the fewest assets (i.e. from zero to ten) fell from 15 to 11. While these increases are modest, they are statistically significant or very unlikely to have resulted simply from random differences in the two samples.

The pattern of asset levels across grades is similar to the pattern found in other communities – highest at grade six and then falling as young people grow older. The data from other communities also shows that the greatest part of the decline happens by 8th grade – a time when young people begin to push away their parents and spend an increasing amount of time with peers. While separation from parents is natural and inevitable, it does not mean young people no longer need guidance or support from family and other caring adults.

²The data in this report comes from “Developmental Assets: A Profile of Your Youth for Arlington, VA” © 2001 by Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN. The data were collected with the survey Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors, copyright ©1996, Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN

Creating a Safe, Supportive Community: External Assets

Findings

Figure 2 shows the percentage of youth in each grade reporting each of the *external* assets; that is, the assets that grow from relationships and opportunities created by adults and peers. The external assets reflect the support and concern young people receive in their families, their neighborhoods, and in school.

In most cases, less than half of young people in Arlington County report having each external asset. For example, only 40 percent of youth report having a caring neighborhood and only 23 percent of youth report that they feel valued by the community.

There are eight external assets reported by at least half of young people. These eight assets are family support, safety, school boundaries, positive peer influence, high expectations, youth programs, religious community, and time at home. But fewer than one third of students report six of the external assets: positive family communication, parent involvement in schooling, community values youth, youth as resources, adult role models, and creative activities.

Figure 2. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Each External Asset

| Arlington County External Assets, March 2006 | All Students | Male | Female | Students in grade: | | | |
|---|-----------------|------|--------|--------------------|----|----|----|
| | | | | 6 | 8 | 10 | 12 |
| <i>Support</i> | | | | | | | |
| Family support | 70 | 69 | 70 | 83 | 68 | 65 | 64 |
| Positive family communication | 29 | 27 | 32 | 46 | 32 | 23 | 18 |
| Other adult relationships | 43 | 41 | 46 | 50 | 44 | 41 | 41 |
| Caring neighborhood | 40 | 39 | 41 | 55 | 43 | 37 | 27 |
| Caring school climate | 35 | 31 | 39 | 45 | 35 | 28 | 33 |
| Parents involved in school | 28 | 28 | 27 | 47 | 32 | 22 | 12 |
| <i>Empowerment</i> | | | | | | | |
| Community values youth | 23 | 21 | 25 | 40 | 21 | 19 | 14 |
| Youth as resources | 31 | 29 | 34 | 43 | 31 | 27 | 26 |
| Service to others | 48 | 44 | 52 | 55 | 47 | 46 | 46 |
| Feels safe in community | 50 | 60 | 41 | 38 | 47 | 53 | 61 |
| <i>Boundaries and Expectations</i> | | | | | | | |
| Family boundaries | 39 | 36 | 41 | 43 | 40 | 41 | 31 |
| School boundaries | 50 | 49 | 51 | 71 | 54 | 39 | 37 |
| Neighborhood boundaries | 44 | 42 | 46 | 60 | 49 | 39 | 30 |
| Adult role models | 30 | 26 | 34 | 41 | 29 | 24 | 29 |
| Positive peer influence | 66 | 62 | 69 | 90 | 75 | 54 | 46 |
| High expectations | 52 | 51 | 53 | 66 | 54 | 44 | 44 |
| <i>Constructive Use of Time</i> | | | | | | | |
| Creative activities | 24 | 19 | 29 | 26 | 25 | 21 | 24 |
| Youth programs | 66 | 67 | 65 | 68 | 67 | 62 | 66 |
| Religious community | 53 | 50 | 55 | 63 | 57 | 48 | 44 |
| Time at home | 62 | 59 | 64 | 72 | 63 | 63 | 49 |

Changes since 2001

Young people in 2006 were significantly more likely than County youth in 2001 to report five of the external assets. In particular,

- 70 percent of young people reported family support, compared to 66 percent in 2001;
- 31 percent reported youth as resources, compared to 26 percent in 2001;
- 52 percent reported high expectations, compared to 46 percent in 2001;
- 66 percent reported youth programs compared to 60 percent in 2001;
- 62 percent reported supervised time at home, compared to 55 percent in 2001.

The data also show *no* significant declines in the percent of youth reporting any external asset since 2001.

Findings for specific groups of students

The data also show that boys and girls and students in different grades report different levels of assets. In 2006, we found that:

- With a few exceptions, most notably “safety,” the percent of students who report each external asset is highest for students in grade six and lowest for students in grades ten or twelve.
- Girls are more likely than boys to report 12 of the 20 external assets. (In general, differences of four percentage points or more are significant when comparing boys and girls.) Boys are more likely than girls to report one of the external assets: safety.

Comparisons with other communities

Several hundred communities have done the Assets Survey. How do Arlington’s findings compare to those of other locations? The results for external assets in Arlington are very similar to the results for other participating communities, as reported by Search Institute in its publication, *A Fragile Foundation*. Like Arlington, other communities also find that :

- In most cases, young people are less likely to report assets as they grow older.
- Where there is a difference between boys and girls, the girls are more likely to report the asset.

It’s tricky to make more detailed comparisons with other communities that have done an Assets Survey. There are two reasons for this:

- First, these other communities were not chosen scientifically to represent the entire nation. That means that we only know how Arlington youth differ from youth in these selected areas, not all young people.
- Second, the data from these other communities is older (specifically, from the 1999-2000 school year) than the data from Arlington. Some of these communities did the survey to establish a baseline for an asset-building initiative and may have increased asset levels significantly since 2000 .

Because of these problems, this report focuses on current findings and changes within Arlington since 2001. However, Appendix A has information on how these results compare with the experience in other communities.

Strength from Within: Internal Assets

Findings

Figure 3 shows the percentage of youth in each grade reporting each of the *internal* assets. These assets reflect the values and competencies that young people need to be self-regulating adults. Between 32 percent (“reading for pleasure”) and 71 percent (“positive view of personal future”) report each of the internal assets.

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 three of the four Positive Identity assets. Fewer than one third of students report experiencing “reading for pleasure” and exactly one-third report “planning and decision-making.”

Changes since 2001

Since 2001, more young people report eight of the 20 internal assets. Specifically,

- 68 percent of youth report achievement motivation, compared to 64 percent in 2001;
- 57 percent report school engagement, compared to 51 percent;
- 62 percent report bonding to school, compared to 50 percent in 2001;
- 56 percent report caring, compared to 51 percent in 2001;
- 61 percent report equality and social justice, compared to 56 percent in 2001;
- 66 percent report honesty, compared to 60 percent in 2001;
- 63 percent report responsibility, compared to 56 percent in 2001;
- 59 percent report a sense of purpose, compared to 54 percent in 2001.

There were no statistically significant declines in the internal assets reported by youth in Arlington.

Findings for Specific Groups of Students

How does the percent of students reporting each asset change, as grade level changes? There is no single pattern. Focusing on changes from 6th to 10th grade, some assets show successive declines (e.g., restraint) while the remainder first decline and then increase somewhat (e.g. responsibility). Of notable concern are strong declines in four assets between 6th and 10th grade:

- restraint (i.e. with respect to the use of alcohol, drugs, and sexual activity), which declines from 79 to 30 percent;
- reading for pleasure, which declines from 40 to 25 percent;
- resistance (which refers to the ability to resist peer pressure and avoid dangerous situations), which declines from 60 to 39 percent; and
- “peaceful conflict resolution,” which declines from 60 to 41 percent.

In 16 out of 20 cases, a significantly higher proportion of girls than boys report having the internal asset. Differences are particularly marked for the positive values and social competencies. In the other four cases (the positive identity assets), boys and girls are equally likely to report the asset.

Figure 3. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Each Internal Asset

| Arlington County Internal Assets, March 2006 | All | Male | Female | Students in grade: | | | |
|---|-----|------|--------|--------------------|----|----|----|
| | | | | 6 | 8 | 10 | 12 |
| <i>Commitment to Learning</i> | | | | | | | |
| Achievement motivation | 68 | 60 | 76 | 78 | 67 | 66 | 62 |
| School engagement | 57 | 49 | 64 | 64 | 50 | 56 | 56 |
| Homework | 64 | 57 | 71 | 61 | 66 | 65 | 64 |
| Bonding to school | 62 | 59 | 65 | 76 | 56 | 57 | 59 |
| Reading for pleasure | 32 | 26 | 38 | 40 | 38 | 25 | 26 |
| <i>Positive Values</i> | | | | | | | |
| Caring | 56 | 47 | 64 | 60 | 50 | 54 | 59 |
| Equality & social justice | 61 | 53 | 69 | 61 | 59 | 60 | 65 |
| Integrity | 69 | 62 | 75 | 63 | 65 | 70 | 76 |
| Honesty | 66 | 58 | 73 | 72 | 61 | 63 | 67 |
| Responsibility | 63 | 57 | 68 | 65 | 59 | 61 | 65 |
| Restraint | 45 | 40 | 50 | 79 | 54 | 30 | 20 |
| <i>Social Competencies</i> | | | | | | | |
| Planning and decision making | 33 | 28 | 38 | 38 | 30 | 31 | 33 |
| Interpersonal competence | 47 | 32 | 60 | 54 | 45 | 42 | 47 |
| Cultural competence | 52 | 48 | 56 | 55 | 54 | 49 | 51 |
| Resistance skills | 44 | 39 | 49 | 60 | 44 | 39 | 36 |
| Peaceful conflict resolution | 47 | 37 | 57 | 60 | 44 | 41 | 45 |
| <i>Positive Identity</i> | | | | | | | |
| Personal power | 44 | 42 | 46 | 44 | 40 | 44 | 49 |
| Self-esteem | 51 | 52 | 50 | 54 | 47 | 49 | 53 |
| Sense of purpose | 59 | 60 | 58 | 60 | 57 | 58 | 60 |
| Positive view of future | 71 | 69 | 73 | 75 | 70 | 71 | 70 |

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. Search Institute has identified five deficits that work against positive development by limiting young people's access to external assets, blocking the development of internal assets, or leading to risky behavior. For example, kids who spend too much time home alone may not be participating in constructive activities or developing strong relationships with peers and caring adults.

These five deficits can be measured with a self-report survey. However, because young people fill out the surveys in school, the sample does not include dropouts. These young people are likely to experience these deficits more often than young people who stay in school. 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 shows Arlington County data on the five deficits and how this changes by grade. From 6th to 10th grade, physical abuse stays relatively steady (but far too high), victim of violence declines, and the other three increase steadily. Boys are much more likely than girls to report TV overexposure and being the victim of violence. Young men and women reported similar levels of the other deficits.

Figure 4. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Developmental Deficits

| Arlington County Deficits, March 2006 | All Students | Male | Female | Students in grades: | | | |
|--|-----------------|------|--------|---------------------|----|----|----|
| | | | | 6 | 8 | 10 | 12 |
| Alone at home | 45 | 46 | 44 | 30 | 46 | 49 | 53 |
| TV overexposure | 31 | 34 | 27 | 24 | 32 | 35 | 30 |
| Physical abuse | 26 | 27 | 25 | 27 | 28 | 26 | 21 |
| Victim of violence | 30 | 36 | 24 | 33 | 36 | 28 | 22 |
| Drinking parties | 44 | 44 | 43 | 6 | 28 | 60 | 79 |

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

Between 2001 and 2006, the percent of youth reporting “Alone at home” declined from 56 to 45 percent and the percent of youth reporting “TV overexposure” declined from 37 to 31 percent. These declines are statistically significant, and so extremely unlikely to have resulted from random differences in the sample. Other deficit levels remain largely unchanged from 2001.

Taking Chances: Risk Behaviors and High Risk Patterns

The Assets Survey contains many questions on twenty-four risk behaviors; that is, actions that young people take that put their health or safety at risk. Examples include drug and alcohol use, fighting, and early and unprotected sexual intercourse.

Findings

Figure 5 shows the percent of Arlington youth who report each risk behavior. Overall, less than one-third of young people in Arlington report each of these behaviors. In some cases, however, the figure for a particular grade is much higher than the overall number. For example, overall, 28 percent of youth report using alcohol in the past month. But in 12th grade, 52 percent of youth report alcohol use. By 12th grade, more than one-third of youth report using marijuana, driving with a drinking driver, sexual intercourse, school truancy, and gambling. And more than one-third of eighth graders report hitting someone.

Changes since 2001

While some of these figures are clearly cause for concern, there has been no worsening of risk behaviors over the past five years. And there has been a significant decline in tobacco use, depressive symptoms, suicide attempts, shoplifting and truancy. These findings are consistent with the modest but significant improvements in assets.

Figure 5. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Risk Behaviors, March 2006

| Arlington County Risk Behaviors, March 2006 | Total Sample | Male | Female | Young people in grade: | | | |
|--|-----------------|------|--------|------------------------|----|----|----|
| | | | | 6 | 8 | 10 | 12 |
| Alcohol use in past 30 days | 28 | 27 | 29 | 4 | 19 | 37 | 52 |
| Got drunk once or more, last 2 weeks | 17 | 19 | 15 | 2 | 9 | 22 | 34 |
| Smoked cigarettes in past 30 days | 12 | 13 | 12 | 1 | 5 | 15 | 27 |
| Used smokeless tobacco, past 12 months | 3 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 4 |
| Inhaled substances to get high past 12 months | 10 | 10 | 9 | 12 | 14 | 10 | 4 |
| Marijuana use in past year | 21 | 24 | 18 | 1 | 10 | 28 | 43 |
| Other illicit drug use, past year | 7 | 8 | 5 | 2 | 4 | 9 | 11 |
| Drove after drinking, past 12 months | 10 | 12 | 9 | 1 | 2 | 7 | 29 |
| Drinking and driving (as passenger) | 30 | 31 | 30 | 19 | 25 | 32 | 44 |
| Sexual intercourse, ever | 27 | 29 | 24 | 5 | 14 | 30 | 56 |
| Shoplifted in past year | 23 | 29 | 18 | 11 | 23 | 32 | 26 |
| Committed vandalism in past year | 16 | 23 | 10 | 9 | 19 | 21 | 16 |
| In trouble with police in past year | 19 | 25 | 13 | 10 | 17 | 21 | 26 |
| Hit someone in last year | 32 | 44 | 20 | 30 | 38 | 32 | 27 |
| Physically hurt someone in last year | 13 | 20 | 6 | 13 | 14 | 14 | 10 |
| Used weapon to get something, last year | 3 | 6 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 | 3 |
| Been in a group fight in last year | 17 | 23 | 11 | 17 | 19 | 18 | 14 |
| Carried a weapon in past year | 12 | 18 | 6 | 7 | 12 | 15 | 13 |
| Threatened to hurt someone | 26 | 35 | 19 | 19 | 32 | 28 | 26 |
| Skipped school in past month | 28 | 27 | 29 | 10 | 13 | 31 | 56 |
| Gambling | 30 | 47 | 15 | 21 | 31 | 35 | 34 |
| Eating disorder | 15 | 12 | 18 | 13 | 16 | 16 | 15 |
| Depressed or sad most or all of the time | 15 | 11 | 18 | 9 | 16 | 16 | 17 |
| Attempted suicide, ever | 12 | 8 | 15 | 8 | 11 | 13 | 14 |

Findings for Specific Groups of Students

Because boys report *fewer* assets than girls, we expect to find that boys report *more* risk behaviors. The data confirm this. Boys are more likely than girls to report 14 of the 24 risk behaviors shown in Figure 5. These behaviors include shoplifting, vandalism, getting in trouble with the police, hitting or hurting someone, carrying a weapon and gambling. Girls are more likely to report eating disorders, persistent feelings of depression and attempting suicide. Girls and boys are equally likely to report alcohol use, cigarette smoking, and skipping school.

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

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. However, some Arlington youth are not merely experimenting, they are developing a risky lifestyle.

High-risk Behaviors

To make this point clear, Search has defined “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 high-risk alcohol use. Figure 6 shows the percent of Arlington youth who report each high-risk pattern.

Figure 6. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting High-Risk Behaviors, March 2006

| Arlington County High -Risk Behaviors, March 2006 | Total Sample | Male | Female | Young people in grade: | | | |
|--|-----------------|------|--------|------------------------|----|----|----|
| | | | | 6 | 8 | 10 | 12 |
| Alcohol | 20 | 22 | 18 | 3 | 11 | 26 | 39 |
| Tobacco | 6 | 6 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 12 |
| Illicit Drugs | 16 | 19 | 12 | 1 | 6 | 21 | 34 |
| Sexual intercourse | 19 | 20 | 18 | 1 | 7 | 21 | 46 |
| Depression/suicide | 21 | 16 | 26 | 14 | 21 | 24 | 25 |
| Anti-social behavior | 17 | 24 | 11 | 7 | 17 | 24 | 20 |
| Violence | 26 | 37 | 16 | 19 | 31 | 29 | 25 |
| School problems | 22 | 24 | 19 | 12 | 15 | 21 | 38 |
| Driving and alcohol | 15 | 16 | 14 | 5 | 10 | 15 | 28 |
| Gambling | 14 | 25 | 4 | 6 | 12 | 18 | 19 |

Twenty percent or more of Arlington youth report high-risk alcohol use, depression/suicide, violence and school problems. Between 15 and 19 percent of youth report high-risk illegal drug use, sexual intercourse, anti-social behavior, and driving and alcohol. These problems often worsen as young people grow older. Over one-third of 12th grade students report high-risk patterns related to alcohol use, illegal drug use, sexual intercourse and school problems.

Not Just Surviving: Thriving Indicators

Helping young people to avoid risk behaviors 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 has defined eight behaviors, skills or dispositions to serve as markers of successful development. Figure 7 shows the percent of youth that report each behavior. Only one in four report school success and resisting danger. In contrast, eight out of ten report helping others and three out of four report leadership.

Figure 7. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Each Thriving Indicator

| Arlington County Thriving, March 2006 | Total Sample | Male | Female | Young people in grade: | | | |
|--|-----------------|------|--------|------------------------|----|----|----|
| | | | | 6 | 8 | 10 | 12 |
| Succeeds in school | 25 | 20 | 29 | 29 | 31 | 21 | 19 |
| Helps others | 79 | 76 | 82 | 83 | 78 | 79 | 76 |
| Values diversity | 65 | 59 | 70 | 66 | 64 | 62 | 67 |
| Maintains good health | 58 | 58 | 57 | 66 | 60 | 56 | 50 |
| Exhibits leadership | 74 | 73 | 75 | 73 | 73 | 73 | 76 |
| Resists danger | 25 | 18 | 31 | 31 | 22 | 24 | 24 |
| Delays gratification | 49 | 50 | 49 | 62 | 49 | 44 | 44 |
| Overcomes adversity | 69 | 70 | 69 | 69 | 68 | 68 | 73 |

Young women are more likely than young men to report school success, helping others, valuing diversity and resisting danger. Young men and women are equally likely to report the other thriving behaviors.

Since 2001, there were significant improvements in two of the thriving indicators – maintaining good health and overcoming adversity. Several others showed improvement but we can't rule out statistical issues as the cause. None of the thriving indicators declined.

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 8 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.

- Young people with *many* assets (that is, 31 to 40) are two to four times *more likely* than youth with *few* assets (that is, 1 to 10) to report each thriving behavior.
- Young people with *few* assets are six to more than twenty times *more likely* than youth with many assets to report each risk behavior.

More specifically, only thirty five percent of young people with the lowest asset levels (zero to ten assets) report maintaining good health. But 88 percent of the young people with the highest asset levels (31 to 40) report this measure of thriving. And at most five percent of youth with many assets report any given high risk behavior compared to 20 to almost 60 percent of youth with few assets. For example, 43 percent of low-asset youth but only 3 percent of high-asset youth report high risk use of alcohol. The numbers in Figure 8 also suggest that simply moving kids from the lowest-asset category to the next (i.e. 11 to 20 assets) would result in significant declines in risk behaviors. For example, 21 percent of youth with zero to ten assets use tobacco but only seven percent of youth with 11 to 20 assets.

As in other communities, the same pattern holds for each thriving indicator and risk behavior defined by Search Institute – more assets mean fewer risk behaviors and more thriving. While these patterns don’t establish a cause and effect relationship between assets and behavior, other research does.

Figure 8. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Thriving Indicators or High Risk Behaviors, by Number of Assets, March 2006

| Thriving Indicator | All Youth | Number of assets reported | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------|---------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| | | 0-10 | 11-20 | 21-30 | 31-40 |
| Succeeds in school | 25 | 7 | 20 | 30 | 56 |
| Helps others | 79 | 60 | 75 | 87 | 95 |
| Values diversity | 65 | 38 | 60 | 75 | 81 |
| Maintains good health | 58 | 35 | 46 | 69 | 88 |
| Exhibits leadership | 74 | 54 | 71 | 81 | 92 |
| Resists danger | 25 | 10 | 19 | 31 | 43 |
| Delays gratification | 49 | 27 | 40 | 59 | 79 |
| Overcomes adversity | 69 | 55 | 65 | 80 | 86 |

| High-Risk Behavior | All Youth | Number of assets reported | | | |
|----------------------|-----------|---------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| | | 0-10 | 11-20 | 21-30 | 31-40 |
| Alcohol | 20 | 43 | 27 | 12 | 3 |
| Tobacco | 6 | 21 | 7 | 2 | 0 |
| Illicit drugs | 16 | 36 | 21 | 10 | 2 |
| Sexual intercourse | 19 | 33 | 26 | 13 | 2 |
| Depression / suicide | 21 | 38 | 27 | 13 | 2 |
| Anti-social behavior | 17 | 46 | 21 | 7 | 2 |
| Violence | 26 | 58 | 31 | 16 | 5 |
| School problems | 22 | 47 | 27 | 12 | 3 |
| Driving and alcohol | 15 | 30 | 19 | 9 | 2 |
| Gambling | 14 | 30 | 17 | 8 | 5 |

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 particular:

- In an ideal world, all kids would experience 31 or more assets. While there has been some improvement since 2001, only ten percent of Arlington County youth report this ideal 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 after 6th grade. Few of the internal assets show the kind of increase we would like to see as young people grow.

As the community begins to wrestle with these problems, we must recognize another clear conclusion from the data. Families can do much to firm up the developmental foundation of our youth but they cannot do everything.

What *can* families do? Data on both risk behaviors and assets suggest that parents may be prematurely reducing their involvement in the lives of their children. Parents need to think about how they communicate with their kids, how they set boundaries, and their involvement with school. Fewer than half of young people report these assets. 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.

But there are limits to what families can do. Many young people already report high levels of family support. What's missing is support from the community as reflected in the low percentage of youth who report having assets like community values youth (23%) and adult role models (30%). More generally, with six exceptions, at most half of Arlington County youth report having any given external asset, the assets provided by family, neighbors, school, and community. For six of the external assets, the results were even less satisfying with fewer than one-third of students reporting the asset. In other words, many young people here don't feel supported or valued and lack clear boundaries, a voice in what happens in their schools and community, and caring adults to guide them.

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

- Only 31% of 12th graders report family boundaries, an external asset and even fewer (20%) 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 and 43 percent had used marijuana in the past year.
- From 6th grade to 10th grade, parent involvement in school (an external asset) falls from 47 to 22 percent. At the same time, school engagement (an internal asset reflecting whether a young person is actively engaged in learning) also declines from 64 to 56 percent. School success, a thriving measure falls from 29 to 19 percent and school problems (a high-risk pattern) increases from 12 to 38 percent.

Both research and many discussions with teens 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. Adults in the community have a clear responsibility to respond to this information.

Any Good News?

The good news is that we can strengthen the developmental foundation for our youth by building assets in our community and our efforts to do so appear to be working. 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 has begun working with community members to establish goals for selected assets and to identify asset-building strategies. To date, working groups have established goals for the seven assets listed below. These goals are long-term; i.e., expected to take ten or more years to reach. The goals were established relative to 2003 baseline levels.

- *positive family communication* from 27 to 47 percent of youth;
- *caring school climate* from 31 to 75;
- *parent involvement in schooling* from 28 to 36;
- *youth as resources* from 27 to 50;
- *safety* from 50 to 67;
- *youth programs* from 61 to 75;
- *peaceful conflict resolution* from 48 to 77 percent of youth.

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, and time at home. We can talk to young people about what it means to be a good friend one who has a positive influence on peers. 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.
- 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 young people, 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

Benson, Peter L., Judy Galbraith, and Pamela Espeland. (1998) *What Teens Need to Succeed*. Free Spirit Press.

Benson, Peter L., Peter C. Scales, Nancy Leffert, and Eugen C. Roehlkepartain. (1999) *A Fragile Foundation: The State of Developmental Assets Among American Youth*. Minneapolis: Search Institute.

Grant, BF, Sawson DA. Age of onset of alcohol use and its association with SDM-IV alcohol abuse and dependence: Results form the National Longitudinal Alcohol Epidemiological Survey. *Journal of Substance Abuse*, 9: 103-110.

Scales, Peter C. and Nancy Leffert. (1999) *Developmental Assets: A Synthesis of the Scientific Research on Adolescent Development*. Minneapolis: Search Institute.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control, (June 9, 2000) Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance – United States, 1999*.

Appendix A

The main differences between the survey results for Arlington and the results for other communities include the following:

- Youth in other communities are more likely to report parent involvement in school (34% vs 28% for Arlington), family boundaries (48% vs 39% in Arlington), and religious community (63% vs. 53% for Arlington) and neighborhood boundaries (49% vs. 44% for Arlington.)
- Youth in other communities are less likely to report caring school climate (29% vs 35 percent for Arlington), youth programs (58% vs. 66 percent for Arlington) and time at home” (52% vs. 62% for Arlington).

For internal assets, Arlington County youth are much more likely than young people in other communities to report

- Cultural competence (52 percent in Arlington vs. 42 percent in other communities,
- Homework (64% in Arlington vs 53%), bonding to school (62 percent in Arlington vs. 54%) and
- Equality and social justice (61% in Arlington vs 52 percent)
 - 63 percent report responsibility, comapred to 56 percent in 2001; and
 - 59 percent ereport a sense of purpose, compared to 54 percent in 2001.

Arlington youth experience four of the five deficits at about the same rate as young people in other communities (as measured in 1996-97). However, far fewer Arlington youth (across all grades) report “drinking parties” (51% in other communities vs. 44% in Arlington). Even in this case, however, the difference is essentially eliminated by 12th grade.

How does the Arlington County experience with high-risk patterns compare with other communities where the Assets survey has been administered? The only data available are from the 1996-97 school year. Youth in Arlington County in 2006 were less likely to report high-risk patterns related to six of the ten behavior patterns; specifically, alcohol use, tobacco use, antisocial behavior, violence, driving and alcohol and gambling.

Appendix B

Definitions of Assets, Deficits, Thriving Behaviors and High-Risk Behaviors

Definition of Developmental Assets

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 advice and counsel from parents.
 3. **Other adult relationships** - Young person receives support from 3 or more nonparent adults.
 4. **Caring neighborhood** - Young person experiences caring neighbors.
 5. **Caring school climate** - School provides a caring, encouraging environment.
 6. **Parent involvement in school** - Parent(s) is actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.
 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. **Safety** - Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood.
 11. **Family boundaries** - Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the 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.
 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 the community.
 19. **Religious community** - Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities 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.
- The commitments, passions, and values that young people need to internalize as they grow.*
21. **Achievement motivation** - Young person is motivated to do well in school.
 22. **School engagement** - Young person is actively engaged in learning.
 23. **Homework** - Young person reports doing at least an hour of homework every school day.
 24. **Bonding to school** - Young person cares about his or her school.
 25. **Reading for pleasure** - Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.
 26. **Caring** - Young person places high value on helping other people.
 27. **Equality and social justice** - Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.
 28. **Integrity** - Young person acts on convictions and stands up for his or her beliefs.
 29. **Honesty** - Young person "tells the truth even when it is not easy."
 30. **Responsibility** - Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
 31. **Restraint** - Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.
 32. **Planning and decision-making** - Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.
 33. **Interpersonal competence** - Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.
 34. **Cultural competence** - Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds.
 35. **Resistance skills** - Young person can resist negative peer pressure & dangerous situations.
 36. **Peaceful conflict resolution** - Young person seeks to resolve conflict non-violently.
 37. **Personal power** - Young person feels he/she has control over "things that happen to me."
 38. **Self-esteem** - Young person reports having high self-esteem.
 39. **Sense of purpose** - Young person reports that "my life has a purpose."

40. **Positive view of future** - Young person is optimistic about his or her personal future.

Definition of Developmental Deficits:

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Alone at home: | Two or more hours per school day |
| TV Overexposure | Watches TV or videos three or more hours per school day |
| Physical abuse | Reports one or more incidents of physical harm (resulting in scars, bruises, welts, bleeding or a broken bone) by a family or household member |
| Victim of violence | Victim of physical abuse (causing pain or injury) in past 2 years |
| Drinking parties | Attended one or more parties where other kids the same age were drinking. |

Definition of High-Risk Behaviors

| Risk Behavior | Definition |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Alcohol | Alcohol use 3 or more times in last 30 days or got drunk one or more times in last 2 weeks |
| Tobacco | Smokes cigarettes every day or uses chewing tobacco frequently |
| Illicit drugs | Used illicit drugs three or more times in the past 12 months |
| Sexual intercourse | Has had sexual intercourse 3 or more times in lifetime |
| Depression/suicide | Is frequently depressed and/or has attempted suicide |
| Anti-social behavior | Three or more incidents of shoplifting, trouble with police, or vandalism |
| Violence | Three or more acts of fighting, hitting, injuring a person, carrying or using a weapon or threatening physical harm in past 12 months |
| School problems | Has skipped school two or more days in last four weeks and/or has below a C average |
| Driving and alcohol | Has driven after drinking or ridden with a drinking driver three or more times in the last 12 months |
| Gambling | Has gambled three or more times in the last 12 months |

Definition of Thriving Behaviors

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| 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/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 for something special rather than spending it all right away |
| Overcomes adversity | Does not give up when things get difficult |