

# The World According to Our Kids

## Results from the Arlington County "Assets" Survey, March 2003



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## THE WORLD ACCORDING TO OUR KIDS 2003

### Executive Summary

In March of 2003, the Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families conducted the second survey of “assets” among youth in Arlington’s public middle and high schools. Since the first survey was done in 2001, the Partnership has focused its efforts on educating the community on *what assets are* and *why they matter*, rather than on building assets. As a result, we expected to see similar asset levels among young people. Data from the most recent survey confirms that little has changed in Arlington since the Partnership first surveyed youth in June of 2001.

#### *Overall Findings*

- Most Arlington youth in grades 6, 8, 10 and 12 report fewer than half of the 40 developmental assets. In both years, the average number of assets reported was 19. In both years, only eight percent of youth report having the ideal level of assets (between 31 and 40.)
- The *external* asset most frequently and least frequently reported by youth remained the same. The three most-frequently reported *external* assets in both years are family support, positive peer influence, and youth programs. The three least-frequently reported external assets in both years are community values youth, creative activities, and youth as resources.
- The *internal* assets most frequently and least frequently reported by youth also remained the same. The three most-frequently reported *internal* assets in both years are positive view of personal future, integrity and homework. The three least-frequently reported internal assets in both years are reading for pleasure, planning and decision-making, and personal power.

#### *Asset Patterns by Grade Level and Gender*

In the most recent survey, we also see the same distinctive pattern of assets by grade and by gender.

- Young people in 6<sup>th</sup> grade consistently report higher asset levels than those in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. In 2003, the largest difference in *external assets* between grades 6 and 10 were for positive family communication (47% in 6<sup>th</sup> grade vs 21 % in 10<sup>th</sup> grade), school boundaries (70% in 6<sup>th</sup> grade vs 41% in 10<sup>th</sup> grade) and positive peer influence (89 % in 6<sup>th</sup> grade vs 59% in 10<sup>th</sup> grade).
- The largest differences in *internal assets* between 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade were for restraint (74 % in 6<sup>th</sup> grade vs 34 % in 10<sup>th</sup> grade), resistance skills (59% in 6<sup>th</sup> grade vs 39% in 10<sup>th</sup> grade), and school bonding (68% in 6<sup>th</sup> grade vs 50 % in 10<sup>th</sup> grade).
- In both years of data, girls are more likely to report each asset except safety. Differences are particularly pronounced for achievement motivation (girls, 70%; boys, 55%), equality and social justice (girls, 65%; boys, 49%), interpersonal competence (girls, 60%; boys, 29%), cultural competence (girls, 59 %; boys, 43%) and peaceful conflict resolution (girls, 56%; boys, 40 %.)

### *Developmental Deficits*

The survey also contains information about five developmental deficits that work against the positive development of youth. Among deficits, there was a significant decrease in the percent of young people left home alone for more than two hours per day. The figure for 2001 was 56 percent; for 2003, 47 percent. (A six-point difference is significant, given the size of the samples we drew.) Other deficit levels were unchanged.

### *Thriving and Risk Behaviors*

Young people with many (that is, 30 or more) of the developmental assets are far *more likely* to demonstrate the thriving behaviors (such as leadership and overcoming adversity) and far less likely to engage in the risk behaviors that may compromise their health, education or futures.

The latest survey shows that:

- There was no change between 2001 and 2003 in levels of thriving behaviors. Young people continue to be most likely to report “helps others” and “exhibits leadership.” They are least likely to report “gets mostly A’s in school” and “resists danger.”
- There was no change between 2001 and 2003 in overall levels of risk behaviors or high-risk behaviors. Young people in Arlington are most likely to report hitting someone in the past year and riding in a car driven by a driver who had been drinking. About 1/3 of young people reported this behavior.
- Other common risk behaviors, reported by between one-fourth and one-third of youth include: alcohol use (in the past 30 days); sexual intercourse (ever); shoplifting (past year); threatening to hurt someone (past year); skipping school (past month) and gambling.

## **THE WORLD ACCORDING TO OUR KIDS**

### **Findings from the Arlington County “Assets” Survey**

In March of 2003, the Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families conducted the second 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:

- 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**

### **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. Both the Assets Survey and the Youth Risk Behavior

Survey give County decision makers a source of reliable, comprehensive information on many of the needs, characteristics, and behaviors of young people.

### **In Search of a Common Language: The Assets Framework**

Much of the Partnership's work has been guided by 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."<sup>1</sup>
- *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 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 2003 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 Assets survey asks students about many aspects of their lives, including:

- *Assets* or the 40 key real-life, positive experiences and qualities that *all* our young people need in order to become healthy, caring, responsible adults.

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<sup>1</sup> More detailed definitions of each of the 40 developmental assets appear in the Appendix.

- *Deficits* or experiences such as being a victim of violence that work against a young person’s development.
- *Thriving behaviors* such as demonstrating leadership or helping others that are widely valued and accepted indicators that a young person is doing well, not merely getting by.
- *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 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 ASSETS SURVEY ARLINGTON YOUTH

### More is Better: Average Number of Assets

<b>Figure 1. Number of assets by students in grades 6, 8, 10 and 12 Arlington County, March 2003</b>	
	<b>Average Number of Assets</b>
<b>All grades</b>	19
<b>Grade 6</b>	23
<b>8</b>	19
<b>10</b>	18
<b>12</b>	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, in each grade except grade six, students report fewer than half of the 40 assets<sup>2</sup>.

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 only a slight increase, if any, 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 21 percent (“community values youth”) to 65 to 67 percent

<sup>2</sup>All 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

(“family 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 and Gender**

Arlington County External Assets, March 2003	Total Sample	Male	Female	Students in grades:			
				6	8	10	12
<i>Support</i>							
Family support	65	65	66	81	65	60	58
Positive family communication	27	26	29	47	25	21	20
Other adult relationships	42	40	43	50	40	39	39
Caring neighborhood	36	36	37	51	38	33	26
Caring school climate	31	28	34	42	30	24	28
<i>Empowerment</i>							
Parents involved in school	28	29	27	48	27	25	14
Community values youth	21	20	23	36	18	18	15
Youth as resources	27	26	29	40	22	25	23
Service to others	45	40	50	53	43	42	43
Feels safe in community	50	59	41	40	47	49	60
<i>Boundaries and Expectations</i>							
Family boundaries	40	37	43	47	39	38	36
School boundaries	50	48	52	70	50	41	43
Neighborhood boundaries	46	43	49	64	48	42	32
Adult role models	31	27	36	43	27	27	31
Positive peer influence	67	64	70	89	74	59	50
High expectations	49	48	49	66	50	46	36
<i>Constructive Use of Time</i>							
Creative activities	23	19	26	30	22	21	20
Youth programs	61	61	60	64	58	60	60
Religious community	53	49	57	65	56	48	44
Time at home	60	56	65	68	61	62	52

Several notable patterns are evident in figure 2:

- Half or more of students report experiencing the following seven assets: “positive peer influence,” “family support,” “youth programs,” “time at home,” “religious community,” “safety,” and “school boundaries.” By grade twelve, over half of students report five of these assets.
- 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 21 percent of students report that the community values youth. Fewer than one in five students in grades eight, ten, and twelve report this asset.
- 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.
- Boys and girls are equally likely to report the following ten external assets: family support, positive family communication, other adult relationships, caring neighborhood, parent involvement in schooling, community values youth, youth as resources, school boundaries, high expectations, and youth programs. Girls are more likely to report having nine of the ten other external assets, including caring school climate, service to others, family boundaries, neighborhood boundaries, adult role models, positive peer influence, creative activities, and religious community. The sole exception is “safety” reported by 59 percent of boys but only 41 percent of girls.

The results for external assets closely mirror the results for other participating communities, as reported by Search Institute. These other communities do not comprise a nationally representative sample so we know only how Arlington youth differ from youth in these selected areas, not all youth in these grades. In addition, the data from these other communities was gathered in earlier years: for assets, Search has summarized data from communities that participated in the survey during the 1999-2000 school year. For deficits, risk behaviors, and thriving behaviors, the most recent comparable data are from the 1996-97 school year.

The main differences between asset levels in Arlington and other communities include the following:

- Youth in other communities are more likely to report “parent involvement in school” (34% vs. 28% for Arlington), “service to others” (51% vs 45% for Arlington), “family boundaries” (48% vs 40% in Arlington), and “religious community” (63% vs. 53% for Arlington).
- Youth in other communities are less likely to report “time at home” (52% vs. 60% 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 28 percent (“reading for pleasure”) to 70 percent (“positive view of personal 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.”

How does the percent of students reporting each asset change, as grade level changes? There is no single pattern. Focusing on changes from 6<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, some assets show strong declines (e.g., restraint, reading for pleasure, resistance skills, bonding to school); some show no

particular pattern (e.g., equality and social justice, responsibility); and some show modest increases (e.g., homework).

- Of notable concern are strong declines in two assets: “reading for pleasure” (declining from 38 percent in 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 22 percent in 10<sup>th</sup> grade), “bonding to school” (declining from 68 percent in 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 50 percent in 10<sup>th</sup> grade) and restraint with respect to the use of alcohol, drugs, and sexual activity (declining from 74 percent in 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 34 percent in 12 grade).
- Resistance skills, the ability of young people to resist peer pressure and stay away from dangerous situations, drops from 59% in 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 39% in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. This pattern, the opposite of what adults want for young people, clearly merits immediate attention.
- In 17 out of 20 cases, a significantly higher proportion of girls report having the internal asset than boys. Differences are particularly marked for the positive values and social competencies. In the other three cases, boys and girls are equally likely to report having the asset.

**Figure 3. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Each Internal Asset**

Arlington County Internal Assets, March 2003	All	Male	Female	Students in grades:			
				6	8	10	12
<i>Commitment to Learning</i>							
School engagement	53	46	58	61	50	51	50
Homework	66	61	72	63	73	68	62
Bonding to school	54	51	57	68	48	50	51
Reading for pleasure	28	24	32	38	31	22	22
<i>Positive Values</i>							
Caring	52	43	59	58	47	50	53
Equality & social justice	57	49	65	66	53	53	58
Integrity	67	59	74	65	60	65	77
Honesty	63	59	67	71	58	60	64
Responsibility	59	54	64	64	54	57	63
Restraint	44	39	49	74	50	34	24
<i>Social Competencies</i>							
Planning and decision making	32	27	36	34	31	29	33
Interpersonal competence	45	29	60	52	41	40	47
Cultural competence	51	43	59	53	51	48	52
Resistance skills	45	39	49	59	44	39	39
Peaceful conflict resolution	48	40	56	60	41	46	48
<i>Positive Identity</i>							
Personal power	42	40	43	44	38	37	48
Self-esteem	47	49	45	52	42	44	49
Sense of purpose	54	56	52	56	50	54	57
Positive view of future	70	66	73	73	67	68	71

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 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 6<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, physical abuse stays relatively steady (but far too high), victim of violence declines, and the other three increase steadily. Young men are much more likely to report 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 2003	Total Sample	Male	Female	Students in grades:			
				6	8	10	12
Alone at home	47	49	45	31	52	49	53
TV overexposure	37	39	34	32	44	35	36
Physical abuse	28	28	28	29	31	27	25
Victim of violence	28	35	22	33	31	27	23
Drinking parties	44	44	45	10	27	59	76

*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 2003, the percent of youth reporting “Alone at home” declined from 56 to 47 percent. This decline was particularly largest for students in grades 6, 10 and 12. Other deficit levels remain largely unchanged from 2001.

Compared to youth in other communities that participated in the survey in 1996-97, a higher percentage of Arlington youth report “TV overexposure” (30% in other participating communities vs. 37% in Arlington). Fewer Arlington youth (across all grades) report “drinking parties” (51% in other communities vs. 44% in Arlington). However, this difference is much smaller (only 4 percentage points) in 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

## Taking Chances: Risk Behaviors and High Risk Patterns

The Assets Survey contains 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.

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 (except inhalants), sexual activity, and school truancy tend to be higher in high school while hitting, fighting, and related behaviors tend to be lower.

**Figure 5. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Risk Behaviors, March 2003**

Arlington County Risk Behaviors, March 2003	Total Sample	Male	Female	Young people in grades:			
				6	8	10	12
Alcohol use in past 30 days	27	26	27	6	21	32	45
Got drunk once or more, last 2 weeks	16	19	14	4	11	17	30
Smoked cigarettes in past 30 days	14	15	14	2	9	15	28
Used smokeless tobacco, past 12 months	3	4	1	1	2	3	4
Inhaled substances to get high past 12 months	9	9	8	11	14	7	3
Marijuana use in past year	19	21	17	1	9	25	34
Other illicit drug use, past year	7	8	6	3	5	8	11
Drove after drinking, past 12 months	11	13	9	1	4	8	28
Drinking and driving (as passenger)	30	29	30	17	26	31	42
Sexual intercourse, ever	27	29	24	6	16	29	51
Shoplifted in past year	26	29	23	16	32	29	28
Committed vandalism in past year	17	24	11	13	22	18	16
In trouble with police in past year	19	24	13	11	19	18	25
Hit someone in last year	34	45	23	37	43	30	27
Physically hurt someone in last year	14	20	8	15	16	16	9
Used weapon to get something, last year	4	6	2	3	3	5	3
Been in a group fight in last year	18	6	2	21	20	18	15
Carried a weapon in past year	11	24	13	8	13	12	10
Threatened to hurt someone	26	17	6	23	31	26	23
Skipped school in past month	27	33	19	12	15	24	56
Gambling	29	42	17	22	32	30	31
Eating disorder	17	16	18	15	14	20	18
Depressed or sad most or all of the time	17	13	21	12	18	17	20
Attempted suicide, ever	16	11	20	10	19	17	17

Boys and girls are equally likely to report many of these risk behaviors, including alcohol use, cigarette smoking, and having sexual intercourse. Boys are more likely to report shoplifting, vandalism, getting in trouble with the police, hitting or hurting someone, carrying a weapon and gambling. Girls are more likely to report being depressed or attempting suicide.

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 shoplifting reported by middle school students are alarmingly high. Alcohol use increases from six percent in 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 45 percent in 12<sup>th</sup> 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 various high-risk patterns and compares those figures with rates reported by other participating communities.

**Figure 6. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting High-Risk Behaviors**

Arlington County High -Risk Behaviors, March 2003	Total Sample	Male	Female	Young people in grades:			
				6	8	10	12
Alcohol	19	21	17	5	13	21	35
Tobacco	8	10	7	1	4	8	18
Illicit Drugs	14	16	12	2	6	18	28
Sexual intercourse	20	20	19	3	7	20	44
Depression/suicide	26	20	31	18	27	26	30
Anti-social behavior	20	25	15	11	24	21	23
Violence	28	39	18	28	33	29	24
School problems	23	25	21	15	18	19	38
Driving and alcohol	15	16	14	5	11	15	26
Gambling	13	21	5	8	12	15	16

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. In the case of suicide/depression and violence, 20 percent or more of students report high risk patterns *at three of four grade levels*. Finally, over one-third of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students report a high-risk patterns related to alcohol use, sexual intercourse and school problems. Over one-third of eight graders report a high-risk pattern of violent behavior.

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 the 1996-97 experience of these communities, youth in Arlington

County are *more likely* to report high-risk patterns related to drinking and driving and *less likely* to report high-risk patterns related to alcohol, tobacco, and gambling. 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.

### 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 defines eight behaviors, skills or dispositions to serve as markers of successful development. Figure 7 displays the percent of youth that report each of these indicators. Ideally, youth should demonstrate at least six of the eight thriving indicators.

**Figure 7. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Each Thriving Indicator**

Arlington County Thriving, March 2003	Total Sample			Students in grade:			
		Male	Female	6	8	10	12
Succeeds in school	24	20	28	29	28	20	19
Helps others	78	75	82	84	76	75	79
Values diversity	65	59	70	70	64	61	64
Maintains good health	54	55	53	66	54	49	48
Exhibits leadership	71	69	73	77	67	67	72
Resists danger	24	18	29	27	20	23	25
Delays gratification	49	51	48	57	49	47	44
Overcomes adversity	66	68	65	66	65	65	68

Young women are more likely to report five thriving behaviors with significant differences in school success, helping others, valuing diversity and resisting danger. 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.”

### 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. 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 8. Percent of Arlington Youth Reporting Thriving Indicators or Risk Behaviors, by Asset Level, March 2003**

Thriving Indicator	All Youth	Youth reporting given level of assets			
		0-10	11-20	21-30	31-40
Succeeds in school	24	9	18	32	55
Helps others	78	64	75	87	93
Values diversity	65	41	61	74	89
Maintains good health	54	29	46	71	82
Exhibits leadership	71	57	68	79	86
Resists danger	24	9	21	31	38
Delays gratification	49	29	44	58	76
Overcomes adversity	66	54	64	75	81
Risk Behavior	All Youth	Youth reporting given level of assets			
		0-10	11-20	21-30	31-40
Current alcohol use	27	51	35	15	4
Got drunk in past two weeks	16	36	21	7	1
Current cigarette smoking	14	35	17	5	2
Smokeless tobacco use, past year	3	5	3	1	1
Use of inhalants, past year	9	16	9	5	2
Use of marijuana, past year	19	39	26	9	1
Other drug use, past year	7	19	8	2	0
Drinking and driving, past year	11	22	14	5	2
Rode with drinking driver	30	47	37	20	4
Sexually experienced	27	47	32	16	4
Shoplifted, past year	26	54	31	12	4
Vandalism, past year	17	42	18	8	2
In trouble with police	19	41	21	7	4
Hit someone, past year	34	61	35	23	11
Physically hurt someone, past year	14	28	14	7	3
Used weapon to get something	4	12	4	0	0
Been in group fight	18	37	19	10	5
Carried weapon for protection	11	29	12	3	2
Threatened to harm someone	26	52	30	15	4
Skipped school, past month	27	46	33	18	7
Gambled once or more, past year	29	51	33	19	15
Eating disorders	17	23	19	12	7
Felt sad most of time, past month	17	31	20	10	4
Attempted suicide at least once	16	31	18	8	3

## 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 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 10<sup>th</sup> (with some modest increases between 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> 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 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 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.

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 (22%) and adult role models (30%). More generally, 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 12<sup>th</sup> graders report family boundaries, an external asset. Only 27% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders report the internal asset “restraint” with respect to the use of drugs, alcohol, and sexual activity. Half of 12<sup>th</sup> graders had used alcohol in the 30 days leading up to the survey.
- From 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 10<sup>th</sup> 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 12<sup>th</sup> 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 6<sup>th</sup> 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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