

URBAN YOUTH OVERVIEW

Urban life and city streets contribute significantly to the youth and popular cultures. Hip hop, for instance, is large in both youth and popular cultures around the world. Current dance styles, fashions, language trace many of their origins to urban culture.

In a sense most young people are urban...they are no longer living a traditional lifestyle but are influenced by the mass media and a knowledge of popular culture. The spread of globalization and urbanization means we must define what we mean by urban youth. For many, wealthy kids living in the city are not urban youth. The general use of the phrase "urban youth" can even exclude "good kids" who may live in tough, inner city neighborhoods, but stay in their apartments to study, go to church and school, and stay out of trouble.

Though you rarely see these terms defined, "urban" in a restricted sense, refers to densely populated, lower socio-economic, inner city neighborhoods with a minimum of social services. "Urban youth" generally refers to young people, mostly minority, whose lives revolve more around the streets than school and home. We can argue with that definition, but that is how it is generally used. Enter "urban youth" into a word or book search in a data base, and that is what you get. Here we will use the term more broadly (while accepting its general connotations) to include all those who live in inner-city neighborhoods.

There are beautiful dynamics to urban life that most rural and suburban folks can't understand. There is variety in its ethnic mixes and this often produces a sense of neighborhood or face-to-face community not known in the suburbs. Suburban residents sometimes don't know neighbors who live only a few doors away. When inner city kids visit the suburbs, they often think it looks like a ghost town: all those empty lawns, swimming pools with no one swimming, decks but no one sitting on them, sidewalks and no one walking.

When urban young people mix with suburban youth, they are often more socially mature. Once walls are broken down, they often become social leaders in the group. They have experienced more of life, become adept at survival, and are quick to express their feelings. They seem more "up front" as to what they're feeling than their suburban and rural peers.

Racism, classism, sometimes ethnic adjustments, and poverty are issues most urban youth confront. The absence of "legitimate" economic opportunity, the seeming irrelevance of school, and the availability of quick and certain cash, can easily lure young urbanites into drug dealing and crime.

Francis Ianni (Search for Structure, 1989:38, 79) found different attitudes toward puberty and sex among girls in suburban and urban areas studied.

(Urban) girls mature sexually and socially sooner than their (suburban) age-mates, and outwardly, at least, seem to be much more comfortable with their new sexuality...While some commentators see this precocity as a factor in the higher rates of teenage pregnancy in urban inner-city areas, it also has the more positive effect of making the psychosexual transition a less secretive and hence as often less troubled one...sexuality and sexual awareness are necessary but far from the only factors involved in teen pregnancy.

(Suburban) parents...described teenage pregnancy as a tragedy in terms of preparation for adult life and

careers, even in those few cases where the pregnant teenager was, or soon planned to be, married. Becoming pregnant too early was treated in (suburbia) as a personal failure, a lien placed on future life chances. (In the Lower East Side of Manhattan) on the other hand, becoming pregnant was considered another form of the pervasive problem of 'trouble' which many youngsters get into, and its present rather than future implications were what we heard being considered.

Ianni is right in pointing to cultural differences as an explanation of the greater prevalence of pregnancy for urban youth. Among urban girls, getting pregnant and having a baby can even be a positive thing. Hillary Carlip (*Girl Power*, 1995:66-68) lets us hear many reasons for pregnancy from girls themselves. Seventeen-year-old Neyleda had seen her virginity as a source of low self-esteem:

I started junior high at the age of 11...Girls...were always talking about sex (and) making fun of me. I used to think to myself is it really, am I old fashioned? Of course I didn't want to be called these names. A year passed and my frustration grew up more. I was 12. Suddenly, here I am kissing in a car with this guy, his name Javier. I was with him for a year...Finally I ran away with him. It took me two weeks before I was ready for it. That night I remember we were alone, turning around the bed. I had wide open eyes. And I thought this is it. This is what the girls in junior high were talking about. I lost my most precious thing in the blink of an eye. I felt good because it was with someone I love very much. By the way, he is the father of my 2-year-old little girl. I wish I could have held on to my most precious thing for a longer time.

For seventeen-year-old Connie there was an added factor of sexual abuse:

From the time I was nine years old, my life started to become a living hell. The reason for this is because that's about the time my step father started to molest me. It finally stopped at the age of 14 (when she reported him)...When I heard how long he got, I felt like I was going to die. I learned to live with it. I learned to live with knowing he would only do a year and a half for the five years of hell he put me through.

It was hard, but I finally started a relationship with this guy. This is when I decided I wanted a baby. I wanted a baby because I wanted someone who would always love me and be there no matter who I was or what happened in the past. I felt as if there was still an empty space in my life that needed to be filled and a baby was the answer.

Sabrina (17) is pregnant and sorry about it (Mary Motley Kalergis, *Seen and Heard*, 1998: 29):

I always got good grades until high school, then I guess I got around the wrong crowd and I started skipping all my classes. Kids at my high school like to hang out instead of going to class. I got a boyfriend that was older than me and I wanted to be all grown-up. When we first started having sex, I was worried about getting pregnant, but it seems like after a while I just stopped worrying about it. I think I just blocked it out, thinking it couldn't happen to me.

I want to tell young girls out there who want to get a baby that it's not pretty and it doesn't make you grown. When I was chillin' with my boyfriend, I felt like a grown woman, but when I found out I was pregnant, I really needed my mom...Now my childhood is gone and I regret it. I learned a lot but it cost a lot.

Urban kids who want to excel academically can face incredible negative pressure to not study and get poor grades. A's are often a negative fact; hide them as you do going to the library. Keith Anderson, an

18-year-old African American, remembers how it was for him before he got into prep school:

In the District's public schools, it's just terrible. My old...H.D. Woodson High School is in the middle of about five different ghettos, and all of these neighborhoods don't like each other, so it's a bit like a war zone. Fights break out over nothing. It's crazy. Everyone's worried about getting disrespected instead of thinking about respecting others. Fortunately for me, my parents didn't raise me that way. It seems like a lot of kids I went to junior high with were hardly raised at all.

The biggest problem in public school right now is that the kids want to appear cool by acting like they know it all and that makes them afraid of making an effort in class, because they don't want to make a mistake. That was the biggest difference to me when I went to private school. The kids there wouldn't be ashamed to ask questions when they didn't understand something.

One of the teachers at Woodson has been there for seventeen years and seen over two hundred kids murdered. Three of my friends from there were killed in just a few weeks last year. I've been away at school for three years now and I sometimes forget to watch my back. Last spring break a guy put a gun to my head for twenty dollars. That probably wouldn't have happened to me if I hadn't dropped my guard, but after life in the dorm, I get used to feeling safe, and of course that makes me in more danger when I'm back on the streets at home.

I really don't have any fantasies of being rich or famous, I just want to be comfortable—to be able to take care of my family without worrying about money all the time. By getting the education that's preparing me for college, I think I've got a good chance of achieving my goal. (Kalergis, 1998: 47)

Francis Ianni (Search for Structure, 1989: 228 ff) tells the story of Victor from a Dominican community in New York City. Nobody who knew him ever expected Victor to make it in life. His father stayed with Victor's mother for "a stormy eight year period in which he never married her and frequently beat her." Finally, he left her alone with Victor. Victor remembers:

In a neighborhood of poor people, we were the poorest. My mother was 27 years old and two months pregnant when my father left, and she was sick all the time and couldn't work. (They were on and off of welfare but not making ends meet.) There wasn't any such thing as a budget; we lived from day to day. My mother would send me to my Aunt Dominga's at six or seven in the morning to ask her for a dollar so that we could buy rice. (After giving his mother the money he would leave and wander the streets...seldom going to school after the fourth grade. What was he looking for?) Trouble, I guess, and I usually managed to find it. (One day the truant officer was waiting for him in his apartment.) I just turned around and walked out, with her yelling at me to come back and my mother crying and saying I was going to be just like my father.

Victor drifted into more and more trouble until he was caught stealing by a Chinese merchant "who grabbed him, kicking and screaming, until a cop who happened to be there on the street took him and he was booked and let go." Later, when he was fourteen (he had begun drinking beer and smoking marijuana at 13), he got caught snatching a purse from a woman who turned out to be a decoy cop. His court-appointed public defender happened to be a young, female Hispanic.

She took a liking to me because she thought I was smart. At first she really let me have it, telling me I was a real scum-bag who made her ashamed of being Hispanic, and I told her I didn't ask for or need any help from her or any other social worker. She really got mad then and said she could understand how a lot of Spanish kids got into trouble, but someone smart like me should be using what he had to

make other people look up to us rather than feeling for their wallets when one of us walked by.

Rather than lecturing to him, the public defender got Victor into probation and a program designed for "high risk, high potential" Hispanic teenagers. Victor says it was something about the public defender and this program that "reorganized his internal as well as external world and got him to 'see things as they could be instead of what they had always been.' "

It is difficult to understand such dramatic changes in behavior in an urban kid's "sense of identity and future orientation." Fear of jail hardly explains it. The intervention of a caring and determined public defender seems more plausible. At any rate, those who knew Victor best attest that he was a "completely different person" from that time on. From being a trouble maker on a dead-end course, he worked through "in Erikson's terms, earlier developmental crises of industry versus inferiority and trust versus mistrust." Victor considers the public defender to have been his first role model for trust and industry. With a new identity, he became a role model for others. There are many success stories like Victor in urban communities; some settle down with a job in the neighborhood; others go on to college.

The main point of Ianni's study is that young people are at high risk when the messages they receive from the main social systems around them (family, community, school, and friends) are incongruent or contradictory (Ianni, 1989: 233-235).

Victor's chaotic as well as socially and economically deprived childhood did not provide (a) stable stage on which to develop a sense of continuity and support. Neither did it provide easy access to a variety of socially sanctioned and consistently evaluated roles...

The deficits in and conflicts among the social settings in Victor's life were not of his making; they were there for most (urban) youngsters as well. Family and school seldom worked together in presenting a clear picture of how education could be related to future lives much different from those of older siblings, parents, and neighbors.

In all societies urban, suburban, and rural futures are linked. Urban problems are part of pathology in the whole society and urban problems will come to suburbia and rural areas. The more we know about each other and the more we address our issues together, the greater the hope of success corporately and individually.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. To what degree can you identify with the people behind the voices in this article? With whom did you identify mostly, and with whom least? Why?
2. With what did you most agree or disagree in this article? Why your agreement, or how do you see it?
3. Can you see anything that the suburbs or rich sections of the city take away from its poorest neighborhoods? Why is this important and how can it be addressed?
4. What is your experience in the inner city?
5. What positive and beautiful aspects of urban life were described here? How can you enjoy them? How do/could you relate to the problems described here?

IMPLICATIONS

1. The health of any society depends on the health of its cities.

2. There are significant problems, if not crises, in most cities of the world.

3. Many individuals can be reached by caring and persistent mentors. Systemic problems need solutions coordinated at national, municipal, business and charitable organizational levels. Community problems demand cooperation among city administration, the police, neighborhood organizations, and churches, synagogues and temples. School reform must be on-going, and educational success will only take place as educational experts, educational administrators, business consultants, parents and students all bring their assets to the table.

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