

# Youth on the edge: A profile of American teens

by [D. Michael Lindsay](#) in the [October 4, 2003](#) issue

The current cohort of American teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 is lonely, spiritually hungry and intensely aware of the threat of violence. That's the profile that emerges from a recent Gallup Youth Survey.

Young people fear for their safety at school more than ever, despite dramatic increases in security measures. Nearly one in two (48 percent) teens say they have had bomb threats in their own school since the 1999 Columbine school shootings in Colorado. Close to one in four (23 percent) say they are fearful of going to school because of school violence. Black students are twice as likely as white students to report that they fear for their physical safety (26 percent versus 13 percent).

Also, teenagers today express feeling pressured and lonely. Among high school leaders, these feelings can be intense. A Gallup study of student leaders in the nationally recognized Hugh O'Brian Youth Leadership seminar found them three times more likely than other teens to express feelings of loneliness. In addition, while 30 percent of the general teenage population feels "pressured," over half (55 percent) of student leaders claim the same.

The spiritual hunger among teens is remarkable. Millions of teens attend church and youth groups regularly. Teenagers express a burgeoning interest in learning about other faith traditions, yet most remain faithful to their own orthodox beliefs. They are persuaded that faith is an important component in their lives, and many of them want to deepen their religious understanding. The challenge for churches is to help channel teenagers' free-floating, often vague interest in spirituality into sincere religious conviction that grounds a life of faith.

The Gallup survey showed that 92 percent of teens consider their religious beliefs important to them. A third say faith is the most important influence in their lives. That number goes up to 52 percent for African-American teens. Close to four in ten say they pray alone frequently (42 percent) and read the Bible at least weekly (36

percent).

Teens report a higher or comparable degree of Christian orthodoxy and confidence in the church when compared to their parents or other adults. Ninety-five percent express belief in God, and 67 percent have confidence in organized religion. Over half (55 percent) call themselves “religious,” with an additional 39 percent referring to themselves as “spiritual but not religious.”

American teenagers today more closely resemble their grandparents in church attendance. On average, the Gallup Youth Survey documents teen church attendance that is 10 percentage points higher than the national figures for all adults. In a recent study, 50 percent of American teens 13-17 report attending a local faith community within the past seven days. The statistic tumbles after high school with 35 percent of adults between the ages of 18 and 29 reporting attendance within the past week. It then climbs steadily with age: 40 percent for ages 30-49; 45 percent, ages 50-64; and 56 percent among adults over 65.

The strongest showing of youth church attendance occurs among American Protestants; three in five of them report attending within the past week. Also, young people endorse the idea that parents and their children should attend church together. Only 27 percent of the teen population expressed reluctance to have parents and teens in worship services together.

Even more teens report being part of a church youth group. Sixty-five percent of teenagers today say they have been involved in a youth group at some point, and of those, close to half (46 percent) are still involved. When Gallup asks teens why they became involved, the answers reveal a surprising degree of depth. The top response (82 percent) is that they want to learn more about faith. Seventy-three percent got involved because of parental encouragement. Over seven in ten (71 percent) say they wanted a place to talk about what’s important to them, and nearly two in three (65 percent) say they became involved because of a friend’s invitation.

Although the American religious scene is slowly becoming more pluralistic and diverse, the number of non-Christian teens in this country remains relatively small. In fact, American young people are more likely to have no church preference than they are to prefer Mormonism, Judaism or Islam. While 9 percent of teens state that they have no religious preference, only a slim number assert that they are either atheist or agnostic.

Perhaps most pronounced about the religious lives of American teens is their spiritual curiosity. Over half of them want to learn more about Roman Catholicism (54 percent) and Protestantism (52 percent). A higher proportion of Protestant teens want to learn about Roman Catholicism than Roman Catholic teens want to learn about Protestantism. Even more intriguing is the finding that the third most popular faith tradition American teens express a desire to learn about is Native American spirituality (44 percent).

Recognizing the culture of violence in which they live, over half (53 percent) of teens say “violence on TV and in movies sends the wrong message to young people.” One in three teens says he or she watched a “particularly violent TV program in the past month.” A similar proportion saw a strongly violent movie as well. Male teens report being exposed to more violence, but they are less concerned about it than female teens.

While many schools have gone to great lengths to prevent another Columbine from happening in their own communities, most Americans don't place the blame for school violence on school officials or on a lack of security. Adults' main concern is the availability of guns. “Parents” were cited next as the source of the problem (along with media, social pressures on youth and the Internet).

Parents of teens claim that, as a result of the episodes of school violence, they have taken action. Eighty percent say they have spoken to their children about not making fun of unpopular students or groups. Nearly half report supervising their own children's activities more closely. Also, 38 percent say they have become more involved in their children's school in the past year in an effort to protect their children.

Still, nearly two-thirds say that a Columbine-type shooting “is likely” to occur in their own community. And one-half of teens (48 percent) say there are groups at their school capable of violence, based on what they do, say or claim they will do. Students believe these groups continue to bring weapons to schools, and 64 percent believe parents know about these groups. Fifty-eight percent of American teenagers say episodes of school violence reflect the overall mood of teens today.

Like many Americans, teenagers in recent years have sought to identify potential threats to their school communities. Four out of five teenagers (81 percent) believe dangerous individuals can be identified by their dress, appearance or manner, as

reflected in the “Trench Coat Mafia” at Columbine.

The situation, however, is far more complex. Toward the end of President Clinton’s administration, the Secret Service conducted a threat assessment based on a review of more than 30 school shooters. The purpose behind the study, titled the Safe School Initiative, was to harness the knowledge and expertise of the Secret Service on behalf of police and others trying to safeguard American schools. Several interesting findings emerged from the study:

- All of the incidents were committed by boys or young men.
- Contrary to the impression given by the Columbine event, fellow students were not the only targets chosen by attackers. In over half of the incidents, the attacker had selected at least one school administrator, faculty member or staff member as a target.
- More than half of the attacks occurred in the middle of the school day.
- Incidents of targeted violence at school are rarely impulsive. As the report states, they are “typically the end result of an understandable and often discernible process of thinking and behavior.”
- Prior to most incidents, the attacker told someone about his idea or plan.
- There is no accurate or useful profile of “the school shooter.” They range in age from 11 to 21, come from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, exhibit a range of academic performance (from excellent to failing), and vary substantially in personality and social characteristics.

The Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center found that most attackers had previously used guns and had access to them, and most shooting incidents were not resolved by law enforcement. In more than two out of three cases, having been bullied played a key role in the attack.