

Just How At Risk are Our Youth? Estimating Risk Based on Behavior Patterns

Youth who engage in one kind of risky behavior are more likely to engage in other risky behaviors. Researcher Joy Dryfoos distinguishes the characteristics of high-risk from low-risk teens.

Researcher Joy Dryfoos says that while almost all youth engage in some kind of risky behavior at some point in their lives, there are a number of adolescents who engage in multiple risky activities. The more problem behaviors a youth engages in the less likely he or she is of making it successfully to adulthood.

Risky Behaviors Tend to Occur Together

Dryfoos says that problem behaviors tend to overlap. That is, teens who engage in some kinds of risky behavior are also more likely to engage in other risky activities. She summarizes the following patterns from the research on risk behaviors:

- Beginning any negative behavior when young generally means that other problems will follow later.
- Substance abuse is closely related to delinquency.
- Almost all youth who are arrested report some involvement with drugs.
- Youth who engage in heavy alcohol, smoking, and marijuana use also tend to have early unprotected sex.
- Young people who initiate sex at early ages tend to:
 1. have multiple partners
 2. not use protection
 3. are often under the influence of alcohol or drugs when they have sex.

Dryfoos reports two studies of 14 year olds (about 9th grade) that look at the number of risky behaviors youth say that they engage in. The two studies found similar patterns of risk participation among 14 year olds. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Number of Risky Behaviors Among U.S. 14 Year Olds

Risk Groups

Based on the overlap among risky behaviors, Dryfoos classifies 14 year olds into different risk groups.

Very High-Risk: These youth "do it all." They have already entered the juvenile justice system, carry guns, and use illegal drugs such as cocaine. Dryfoos says that the only way to change the lives of these troubled youth requires case management and intense treatment.

High-Risk: These youth "do most of it." They haven't entered the juvenile justice system yet, but engage in heavy drinking, smoking and marijuana use, are behind in school, often truant, and have frequent unprotected sex. Dryfoos says that these high-risk youth are in jeopardy unless they receive immediate, intensive intervention.

Moderate-Risk: These youth "do some of it." They are engaged in one or two high risk behaviors such as experimenting with marijuana and alcohol, occasionally truant, have sex (usually without contraception), and occasionally feel depressed. Dryfoos says that these youth need considerable support in order not to deepen their involvement with the risky behaviors.

Low-Risk: These youth experiment with risky behaviors. They may have an occasional drink or cut class once in a while. A few of these youth are sexually active, but they always use contraception. They are, for the most part, protected from the dangers of risky behaviors.

No-Risk: These youth do not engage in any risky behaviors. Except for being surrounded by many negative or risky activities, these youth are protected from the dangers of risky behaviors.

Drawing on a number of sources Dryfoos estimates the number of youth that fall into these different risk categories. See Figure 2.

Figure 2: Percent of U.S. Youth in Risk Categories

What are Common Characteristics of High-Risk Youth?

Dryfoos summarizes the characteristics that are most common to high-risk youth:

- They tend to begin negative or risky behavior early (for example, purse snatching before the age of 10 or sex at 12)
- High risk youth tend to lack nurturing, caring, supportive parents
- They report high rates of physical or sexual abuse
- They tend to be failing or drop out of school
- They tend to conform to peer norms rather than society norms
- They tend to be depressed
- They tend to live in disadvantaged neighborhoods
- Many high-risk youth do not know anyone in the work force, so they do not have role models of gainful employment.

What are Common Characteristics of Successful Youth?

Dryfoos points out that not all youth who live in dangerous neighborhoods, come from dysfunctional homes, or go to inferior schools fail to make it successfully to a healthy adulthood. These children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds but still, somehow, make it are called *resilient youth*. Dryfoos says that resilient youth tend to share the following characteristics:

- Resilient youth tend to have a close bond with a caring, responsible adult.
- Resilient youth appear to be strongly independent. They have a build-in competence to overcome barriers and distance themselves from troubled families.

- Resilient youth tend to have high aspirations.
- Resilient youth tend to have a more supportive and challenging school environment.

Dryfoos says that low-risk and no-risk youth tend to:

- come from strong, supportive families,
- live in safe neighborhoods
- go to effective schools
- are more likely to be White non-Hispanics
- live in suburban areas with many social resources.

How is the U.S. Different?

Dryfoos says that, according to Professor Michael Rutter at the University of London, risky behaviors among youth have become pervasive world wide. However, Dryfoos reports that Rutter finds differences in murder rates, teenage pregnancies, and the abortion rate in the U.S. compared to the rest of the world.

Why is the U.S. different on these behaviors? Dryfoos quotes Rutter as saying, "The conclusion of virtually all scientific commentators [regarding the U.S. murder rate]...lies in the greater availability of murder weapons, namely guns." Dryfoos says that the pregnancy and abortion rates reflect lower use of contraceptives in the U.S. than in Europe.

Research Design:

Research Problem

Joy Dryfoos' express goal in *Safe Passages* is to not only inform people about successful efforts "that help at risk youth emerge from their childhoods as responsible adults", but Dryfoos seeks to get her readers involved in these efforts. Dryfoos calls for a "Safe Passage Movement" that involves all levels of society in a concerted effort to help youth at risk become successful adults.

Research Questions:

What are the issues facing at risk youth today?

What are the characteristics of successful youth intervention programs?

Method

Dryfoos combines a review of the academic research on the issues surrounding at risk youth with a concrete description of several intervention programs (both programs that work, and programs that do not work).

Participants

NA

Instruments and Procedures

NA

Funding Institution

Joy Dryfoos received the support necessary to write *Safe Passages* from the Carnegie Corporation.

Citation: This Keytext reports some of the ideas and findings from the following source:

Dryfoos, J. G. (1998). *Safe passages: Making it through adolescence in a risky society*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. 32-41