

**[The Hamilton Spectator]
Teens believe in rosy future**

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National survey following kids through adolescent years sees trends toward risky behaviour

Dreaded exams start today, but Julia, Robbie, Gillian and Melanie are happy, healthy and optimistic.

Yesterday afternoon, the sun was golden -- finally hot -- and the four Westdale High School students abandoned books to kick a hacky sack about in the middle of quiet Dromore Crescent. Like the overwhelming 95 per cent of Canadian 16- and 17-year-olds surveyed by Statistics Canada, the four believe their futures are rosy.

Robbie Holmes, Gillian Shepherd, and Melanie Lawson, all 16, and Julia Bellissimo, 15, are representative of the 1,800 teenagers asked about their adolescent attitudes and feelings.

All four say they will finish university, as did more than half of the teens surveyed, although the national average of those who actually do is only about 30 per cent

There is, however, also a darker side to the study, which began in 1995 as a part of the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, jointly developed by Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada.

As they move through their teenage years, the incidence of risky behaviours such as stealing money from their parents and staying out all night without permission, went up the survey says.

And those who engaged in other risky behaviours were more likely to smoke marijuana.

The four Westdale teens weren't surprised that 44 per cent of teens 16 and 17, who StatsCan has been checking in with every couple of years, had used marijuana.

"It's so readily available," said Robbie.

But they were surprised at some of those darker aspects in the lives of their fellow Canadian teens.

Statistics Canada has been looking at the 23,000 young people surveyed in much the same way as documentary film-makers follow people as they age. StatsCan talked to some of them at the age of 12 and 13 in 1997, and then the same ones again at 16 and 17 in 2001.

Julia, Robbie, Gillian and Melanie were somewhat surprised that 27 per cent of teens reported staying out all night without permission and one-third of that 27 per cent had gotten away with it three times or more in the previous year.

"Broken curfew, yes, but all night?" said Julia. And Melanie explained that 11 p.m. is late in their lives

"There's nowhere to go, we can't go to bars," said Robbie.

The Westdale teens weren't as surprised by the jump in teens reporting symptoms of depression. It was 9 per cent when the young people were 12 and 13, but 24 per cent when they reached 16 and 17.

"There's all kinds of pressures and stresses," says Gillian. "When you're 12 and 13, school's just a colouring book, but not later."

And there are boy-girl entanglements, the teens say.

The four voiced mixed surprise to reports that some young people report stealing from their parents. It's 15 per cent when they are 12 and 13, but has jumped to 29 per cent four years later.

"You can get away with loonies and toonies," says Julia, but Gillian added she had heard of teens stealing hundreds of dollars from their parents.

Increased risky behaviour by young people -- especially as it relates to marijuana use -- is a main feature of the survey.

Marijuana use was 1.8 to 2.6 times higher among those teens who reported staying out all night, taking money from parents and damaging property.

Teresa Abada, of StatsCan, says the findings are a preliminary look at the survey and StatsCan isn't drawing any causal effect relationship about marijuana use. A full report is due this fall.

At times the survey has generated controversy, like the time it was interpreted to mean day care was better for kids than stay-at-home mothering.

Catherine McPherson-Doe, executive director of the Hamilton agency Alternatives for Youth, says she is heartened by the youthful optimism. But depression and stresses are real for teens and we can be too quick to write them off as teenage angst, she said.

Alternatives for Youth works to help troubled teens with substance abuse problems. Drug abuse and depression are symptoms of other problems.

"We need to look beyond the behaviour of these kids to what is going on in their lives," she says. Marijuana is a quick, easy way for teens to deal with stress but they develop a dependency on drugs without building healthy and positive coping mechanisms.

Parents, teachers and others must spend time talking to teens about their stresses, hopes and anxieties and develop youth-friendly counselling and services to help, said McPherson-Doe.

National longitudinal survey

www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/030616/d030616a.htm

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