

# Custer Camp Youth Voices

A **South Dakota Issues Forums** Report

November 2000



**South Dakota Issues Forums**

a project of the

**Chiesman Foundation For  
Democracy**



## **Collaborators**

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**Custer Youth Corrections Center (Custer, South Dakota)**, a juvenile correctional facility serving youths aged 14-18 for an average stay of four to eight months, is designed to improve the quality of life for juvenile offenders through counseling, treatment, and education.

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# Custer Camp Youth Voices

## Introduction

From November 1999 to June 2000, students at the Patrick Brady Boot Camp for boys and Quest Program for girls participated in six forums using the National Issues Forums issue books: *Alcohol: Controlling the Toxic Spill*; *The Troubled American Family: Which Way Out of the Storm?*; and *Violent Kids: Can We Change the Trend?* The forum series was a collaboration between the Custer Youth Corrections Center (CYCC) and the South Dakota Issues Forums (SDIF).

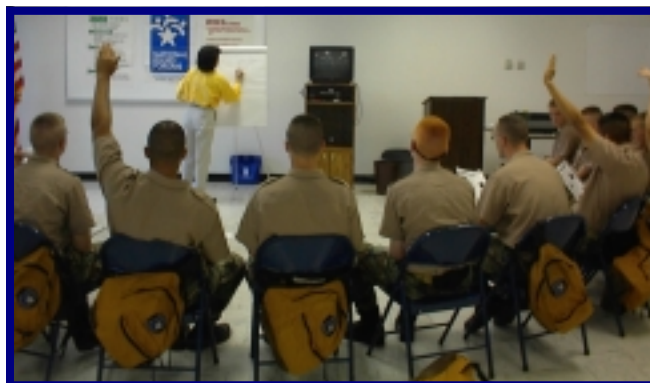
The purpose of the forums was many-sided. As with all South Dakota Issues Forums, participation can help participants:

- improve or enhance critical thinking skills;
- view themselves as a community member with civic responsibilities;
- learn about an issue;
- develop better listening and speaking skills;
- learn the art of deliberation through in-depth exploration of choices for an issue; and
- practice a way of talking about a sometimes controversial issue in a safe, respectful way.

South Dakota Issues Forums participation is only one of many ways students at the CYCC advance their progress in education, come to know themselves better, develop social skills and empathy for others, and develop the skills of give and take in the community. During the forum, a trained moderator encourages group members to look at the benefits and pitfalls of various choices for addressing an issue and what impact each choice would have on society and individual citizens. After listening and considering the viewpoints of all members, the group is then asked which choice they feel would be the best focus for the public's time and resources. Through forum participation, a better understanding of the motivations behind people's beliefs and actions can be gained.

*“Action, not just talk; today’s kids are tomorrow’s parents and leaders.”*

—Quest Program participant



In each forum the moderator, who remains neutral, listens for the public voice that reflects how the participants are thinking about an issue. This report reflects what was said by the young people who took part in this forum series and is their voice. It is a response to the desire and plea of young people to be heard.

*(Quotes used throughout the report were chosen for their value in reflecting what the group said.)*

Choices for the deliberation of each issue were:

### ***Alcohol: Controlling the Toxic Spill***

#### **1) Demand Citizen Responsibility**

Calls for swift, certain, severe punishment for the irresponsible use of alcohol

#### **2) Treat the Public Health Epidemic**

Addresses alcohol use through prevention, counseling, and treatment

#### **3) Educate for Societal Change**

Believes society-wide educational efforts can curb alcohol use and abuse

### ***The Troubled American Family: Which Way Out of the Storm?***

#### **1) Revive Traditional Values**

Premise is that America's problems are the result of a permissive society

#### **2) Promote Responsibility for Children**

Accentuates the responsibility of parents in the raising of children

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### 3) Expand Societal Responsibility

Advocates feel society should be of more help to parents

### *Violent Kids: Can We Change the Trend?*

#### 1) Kids Need a Nonviolent Popular Culture

Proponents feel that media models behavior and therefore encourages a violent culture

#### 2) Kids at Risk of Violence Need More Help

This choice says that troubled and abused children should be identified and helped.

### 3) Kids Need More Moral Discipline

Assumption is that America's moral meltdown is a root cause of juvenile violence

A few students participated in more than one forum but it was a first-time experience for most. Over 100 youth participated in the six forums and discussed the above issues with each other. At the beginning of every forum a lot of these young people had the fatalistic view that nothing can be done or will change about our society's problems. After participating in the forum process, many were encouraged but felt frustration that their opinions might not be heard. One young woman felt it is about what **will** people do, not what **can** people do.

## Common Themes

During the forums on alcohol use, troubled families, and violent youth, the following common themes recurred:

- Alcohol is a big problem for South Dakota families
- People in harm's way should receive help
- Education, especially parenting education, is a must
- Offenders must accept personal accountability
- Society can play a helpful role in the lives of youth

### **Alcohol use and its abuse by youth and adults plays a large role in the problems many people experience, most participants expressed.**

The youth were unanimous in their thinking that alcohol use causes trouble for many individuals and families. It was thought that underage youth have easy access to alcohol through friends or family members, even some parents. In discussing the role of alcohol in our society, one student made a distinction between alcohol use and abuse. She said that consumption should not be a crime in itself, even for minors, but that the criminal acts caused by alcohol are what should be punished.

Treatment can be effective for habitual drinkers and could help improve the quality of many people's lives, but a person has to want to change before treatment will be successful thought most. Consequently, treatment which is forced or required would be useless these students thought. Harsher laws may make some who deny they have a problem realize its seriousness, but it was felt that tougher penalties would not solve the larger problem. Education as a way to respond to the problem of alcohol use and abuse was preferred by these youth.

Students placed a high value on peer-to-peer education and suggested that the "ugly, graphic results" of alcohol use be shown. Elementary students may not understand alcohol/drug information and it is too late after students reach high school, participants thought. They felt that drug education should begin early, and relayed that middle school is a "large age usage" period for drugs and alcohol. The students said education also needs to tell young people why they should not use alcohol (mentioned were domestic violence, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and divorce among others).

More discussion was called for around parent involvement—those who use alcohol themselves or who supply it to their children. Higher taxes on alcohol to provide more youth and community education was a tradeoff society should make, believed these participants.

***"Help parents stay away from drugs and alcohol in families with children."***

***"My alcohol use hurt my parents and other family members."***

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**Help should be given to those in need for the sake of their safety and emotional well-being, emphasized these young people.**

The family was seen as a critical factor in the growth and development of children and in the stability of our society. "Family is the strongest thing we have. . .and without it we basically have nothing," stated one girl who captured the opinions of many. Students said they need their families' support in dealing with their problems.

Counseling services would be beneficial in helping families deal with addictions or other problems and might help families stay together, the students pointed out.

Though keeping families together was a priority, students agreed that one happy parent is better than two unhappy ones and that no one should stay in an abusive situation.

Discussion around those in need uncovered a tension concerning the benefits and pitfalls of family responsibility versus government intervention. Regardless of how it is done, however, students thought that a child in harm's way should be rescued but not necessarily by removing the child from the home. It was suggested rather that removing the abuser from the home would allow the child to continue to receive the support of other family members. One student said that placing a child in a foster home can lead a child to rebel. A girl summed up many comments by saying, "Things should be determined on a case-by-case basis. A runaway may get in trouble for running away, but may be running away for reasons of abuse."

Government intervention carries the possibility of misidentifying abused or at-risk children or of

placing blame on the wrong perpetrator students said. Though there was also the possibility of a child reporting abuse over minor discipline noted the participants, they emphasized the benefits of intervention.

**Education, especially for parents and future parents is necessary and can help prevent or address problems with alcohol, violent children, or child and spouse abuse, thought these young people.**

Since family is the major influence on a person's behavior and creates the environment in which children grow up, expressed these youths, parenting education was viewed as mandatory for both future parents and those already with children. Some people do not know right from wrong so cannot teach the difference to their children, these students felt. They said violence in the home has more impact on a person's behavior than violence viewed in the media or the larger society.

Parenting education delivered through structured classes was called for by these students. These young people believed that parenting classes could teach people the possible effects of divorce, domestic violence, child abuse and alcohol abuse on children and families. Education on alcohol use might reduce consumption by minors, accidents and injury, and might promote healthy lifestyles and families, according to most students.

Some students felt so strongly about parent education that they suggested some form of parenting test or permit be required before a person could be allowed to have a child. Parenting classes were viewed as a means to reduce the number of children in trouble and as a way of raising educational levels and society's morals.

*"I think that the government should not get involved with most family issues, but yes there are those unfortunate ones whose parents are not worth a damn, and those are the cases where the government should get involved."*

*"I think they should provide inexpensive, or free if needed, counseling to help families."*

*"I think a lot of people aren't responsible enough or just don't have enough common sense to take care of children."*

*"It could be a Utopia but the violence is in the home. If you are hanging out with someone who is violent, you will be violent."*

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**Being held accountable for one's actions is only just and fair, the students believed.**

Personal accountability was held in high regard by the students. There was a feeling throughout the forums that regardless of the consequences and an "I won't get caught," attitude, people will do what they want to do. The youth believed that people should pay for their own mistakes and choices. "Kids will find a way to get in trouble," reflected the belief of many students and therefore it was thought they must accept the consequences.

Children may be taught what behavior is acceptable but may choose to act otherwise, said many students. They also believed that parents cannot know or see everything their children do outside of the home. Considering these points, the students wondered why a parent would be held accountable for a child's actions unless the child were young enough to "not know better." Punishing a parent will not change the child, the young people said, and could make children feel an element of control over parents. Also, considered one student, punishing parents might make them angry, so they then take their anger out on the child.

*"Kids may have been taught right from wrong, but choose wrong."*

*"I feel that the choices we make at the age we know right from wrong, we should have consequences. Not our parents if they were teaching us but couldn't control us."*

**Society can help children grow up to be responsible and contributing citizens, the youth felt.**

Youth need places to go and places where they can engage in positive behavior, according to the young people. The students wanted more after-school programming and places to go while parents are working. Many comments focused on the lack of facilities designed for youth, and examples were given of taxpayer or privately funded projects which serve industries and populations other than youth.

*"I think a lot of people aren't responsible enough or just don't have enough common sense to take care of children."*

*"It could be a Utopia but the violence is in the home. If you are hanging out with someone who is violent, you will be violent."*

The young people were firm in their belief that media has little influence on older youth, that things such as violent video games can even serve a positive purpose. "Some people can take their anger out on some stupid video guy," one student remarked. Students were unsure of the impact of the media on younger children, so felt the modeling of good behavior on television and by individuals was important.

Government and society should be more helpful and supportive of the family, thought the youths. Some of the ways noted were:

- help with day care;
- tougher responses to domestic violence;
- providing free or low-cost counseling services; and
- parenting classes.

These students said people should be alert for children who need help and that individuals have a responsibility to report child abuse or suspected potential for violent behavior by youth. They thought that young people sometimes feel put down, but instead would like their input to be courteously accepted and welcomed.



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## Summary of Suggestions

The following recommendations came from the students at the Custer Youth Corrections Center and are offered to officeholders and others for their consideration.

1. Continue to support educational efforts for youth about alcohol use and use more peer-to-peer education methods.
2. Educate the general population, as was done with smoking, about the negative effects of alcohol use.
3. Provide more ways for families to receive/ access free or low-cost counseling services.
4. Rethink the concept of foster parenting and consider ways of removing a violent person from a home, instead of an abused victim.
5. Require parenting classes for graduation for all high school youths.
6. Investigate possibilities for delivering parenting education to parents, regardless of their ages or the ages of their children.
7. Hold offenders accountable (youth and adults).
8. Do not punish parents for a teenager's choices.
9. Spend tax dollars and encourage private funds to be used on facilities for youth.
10. Ask for youth input when formulating public policy.



*The South Dakota Issues Forums thanks the staff at the Custer Youth Corrections Center for welcoming them in engaging their students in the forum process.*

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## Reflections

*“Helped me understand that everyone has their own opinion  
and everyone has their own insight.”*

—Quest Program participant

*“I am more educated on this issue, there are options,  
I’m not single minded now.”*

—Patrick Brady Boot Camp participant

*“We can use this information in our everyday lives.”*

—Patrick Brady Boot Camp participant

*“Can we get involved in forums when we go back to our community?”*

—Quest Program participant

*“Isn’t it great the way these kids participate? And they are such good deliberators.”*

—Jeanmarie Heriba, a forum moderator/recorder

*“The youth don’t have a sophisticated base of judgment, but will tell you what  
they know and have experienced.”*

—Michelle Russell, a forum moderator/recorder

*“I like getting first-person input on issues the legislators need to address.  
This report helps do that.”*

—Alice McCoy, state representative

*“Elections are based on popular opinion. Democracy is based on the popular will.  
Public policy should be based on the kind of information provided in this report.”*

—Mel Olson, state senator



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