
Youth on Race



A South Dakota Issues Forums Report

2001

Collaborators

South Dakota Issues Forums (SDIF) is a project of the Chiesman Foundation For Democracy, a neutral, non-profit organization which encourages participation in civic life based on the premise that citizens need to be involved for democracy to work. SDIF serves as a community support and resource for citizen involvement in local, state, and national issues.

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.

Report prepared by

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Introduction

South Dakota's population is 88.7% white, 7.6% American Indian, 0.6% black, 1.4% Hispanic or Latino, and 1.7% other or unspecified, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's Census 2000. Race relations in South Dakota, especially between whites and American Indians, can be strained and the issue is sensitive.

Realizing that talking together, in an atmosphere of courtesy, can help people understand the viewpoints of others and help bring about a respect for the opinions of others, even when in disagreement, Custer Youth Corrections Center (CYCC) staff had students take part in discussions on race. More than 100 young people at the Excel, Quest, and Patrick Brady Boot Camp programs in Custer, South Dakota, talked in small groups about race and ethnicity over the past year.

Between October 2000 and September 2001, the South Dakota Issues Forums (SDIF) engaged the students in a forum process using the National Issues Forums (NIF) issue book *Racial and Ethnic Tensions: What Should We Do?* Participating in these forums develops skills that will help them become successful and contributing citizens.

Teachers at the CYCC had specific reasons for wanting their students to participate in this program. Some wanted to help their students improve their listening and speaking. Some wanted more practice for their students in critical thinking. Others wanted to give students opportunities for input on an issue they thought was relevant to their daily living.

The CYCC serves youth of racially diverse backgrounds. For a few youths, the CYCC has been their first

experience with people of a different race. The openness and forthrightness of the students was appreciated, as this is necessary for the forum to be of benefit. In the forum process, the youth could express any opinion as long as ground rules were followed. The students expressed themselves in a very sincere and honest manner. Many students said they heard perspectives they had not considered before, and thank-you letters to SDIF revealed that some students were still pondering ideas and perspectives deliberated many days before.

These youth, like the rest of us, base their opinions on their own observations and experiences and are free to develop their own perspectives on any subject. The forums on race were one way for them to gather information they will use to continually develop their thinking.

Note

Acknowledging that some attach a biological definition to race while others ascribe a social construction definition, it is the feelings and beliefs of the students that are important, rather than semantics. It is hoped that readers of this report will take to heart what youth have to say about their feelings and behaviors concerning race. Statements in this report are not meant to hurt any individual or group, but have been related as an expression of how the youths who took part in the forums feel about race and ethnicity. We can use their contribution to further our own understanding of this issue and to help all young people feel they are valued members of society.



See note on student artwork on page 5

Racial and Ethnic Tensions

Is it a problem?

Some youths said no, there was no problem, at least not for them or their hometown. These youths said their towns were all white or, if not, had only one or two people who were black or American Indian—not enough diversity to “trigger anything.” One girl said she had not even thought about race until she moved to Sioux Falls and was exposed to “people I thought lived only in other cities.”

Most youths, however, believed that there *is* racial and ethnic tension and had many stories to illustrate their beliefs. After listening to their fellow students talk about their experiences and opinions about race, those who said that they had not experienced much racial tension said they understood that some people live it. During the forums, the students claimed there is racism toward all groups, not just one, and that racism and prejudice create anger. Youths from each racial group represented at CYCC told of experiencing prejudice, favoritism, discrimination, and hurt—sometimes from people of another group and sometimes from their own.

Many of the youths said they have, or try to have, friends of different racial backgrounds and feel they have no prejudicial feelings against any group. One girl said her policeman father, who is American Indian, gets along with everybody and said she does also, an attitude expressed by many other students. “It doesn’t bother me to see how other cultures live, such as scarves being worn by women of Arab background,” said one girl. The words “created equal” and “treated equally” kept recurring regarding their hopes about race and ethnicity.

Aside from the white/American Indian history, the students observed that South Dakotans may not be used to much diversity and that may cause tension. A few mentioned specifically that there seemed to be a serious problem in Rapid City with racism toward



American Indians, while in Sioux Falls there seems to be racism toward blacks. These opinions were drawn from

their interactions with others and they shared them with their classmates in the forums.

Experiences

The experiences of the youths were diverse. One young man said he felt he gained attention for doing well in school because, “I am in a minority group.” A young woman related a different experience, when she told her classmates that a staff member at her hometown school had hung up the phone on a girl speaking Spanish, telling her to “go back where she came from if she wanted to speak Spanish.” The student said it made her feel angry to see the girl treated in this manner.

Biracial youths appeared to experience an especially difficult time, saying they can feel hurt by both sides. A biracial student told the group that she was called “that white girl” by her American Indian neighbors. Another biracial girl felt hurt when asked by a white person if she was adopted, because her skin was lighter than the rest of her family. One participant said she was bothered greatly by the cruelty and resentment that people can demonstrate toward biracial children, “cause it’s not their fault.”

Peer pressure was a factor in making friends, said the students. The prejudice of others makes it difficult for a person to become friends and “hang with” members of other groups since the friends might not approve, said several youths. They can be looked upon and treated differently when they choose to be friends with those of another racial group, said the young people.

The students had observed that people and groups self-segregate; that people cannot be forced to feel a certain way. “I went from the reservation to an all white community and felt that people were afraid of me. In Pierre, people segregate themselves,” related a young woman. One student told the group that he had attended a high school near Atlanta and that everything was based on race, with little intermingling. He had observed fights between groups.

One American Indian student told his classmates that he felt accepted in Sioux Falls, but felt prejudice on the reservation because: “They thought I was better than them. They called me an apple. On the res, their mentality is that everyone is out to get them, and in the city you try to have a better life.”

When talking about sports teams using Indian names and mascots, youths of the same groups expressed diverse thinking. While one youth expressed disdain over their use, feeling that it made fun of American Indians by depicting them “all funky looking,” another thought the name “Warrior” for a Sioux Falls high school team was acceptable. He had personally experienced team spirit around its use, telling forum participants that “a lot of Native Americans attend those schools and a lot of Native Americans play on teams.” (The Sioux Falls school board recently decided to keep the nickname “Warrior,” but will discontinue use of the mascot.)

Why the tension?

There was a lot of talk about prejudice, and many of the youths felt that older people seem to be more prejudiced than young people. There were many stories similar to a young woman’s who told the group, “My grandpa didn’t like me bringing people of other races home. It was the time in which he grew up.” A white girl said some people in her community are very racist against American Indians on welfare and the natives know it, so take it out on everyone.

Several students brought out that there may be confusion between jealousy and racism. Some had felt looked down upon because they did not “have things like Nike shoes.” Several youths thought divisive factors can be economic status or religion, not just race.

Some students were bothered by what they called special help being directed toward a particular group. “It bothers me tremendously that there are certain colleges for American Indians and that they get special fundings for the color of their skins and other groups don’t,” expressed a youth and was concurred with by several others. Several students felt one ethnic group should not be given more than any other, while others noted that everyone needs help in some way—physically, socially, financially, etc.

Changing Communities

Some students noticed their communities changing, with comments such as, “People from other races and ethnic backgrounds are coming and moving into the community I live in,” and, “There’s more cultures coming to my school.” What can help bridge the chasm between “I hate going to cities and seeing all these natives who are always drinking, fighting, or just thinking they are better than everyone just because they don’t have to work,

because we, the taxpayers and government, are supporting their lives,” and, “white people thinking that they are all high and mighty and better than anyone else, when they’re not”? The youths said talking honestly with each other is one way. One student said that not talking facilitates prejudice “because schools only talk about drugs and safe sex, and not about racism, especially in small towns.” People should take the time to get along and get to know others from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, suggested students, as a way of making their communities function well. Participants asked that we start talking more *as a community* about the issue.



Having a common factor or bond can bring people together, deduced one boy from his experience of drug use among friends of many racial groups. It was observed that the factors of economic status and religion may also bind people together rather than dividing them. A young man thought a lot of problems come from teenagers, and that once they get older, start working, having more experiences, and bonding with others, their behavior improves.

The students said we need to stop talking about people as a group, that words and prejudice can create anger. People want to be proud of their heritage, the youths said, and one explained, “It makes me mad when people say drunken Irish. I am Irish and many in my family are alcoholics, but it still makes me mad.” They felt that we divide ourselves when we use hyphenated terms such as Asian-American and African-American.

Almost everyone said that how we view others starts in the home, and that parents need to teach their children to respect others if things are ever to improve or change. “I like to mix, interact with both, but my family calls me on it,” a young American Indian woman told her classmates. Another student said he grew up around the American Nazi Party and admitted he may be racist, but said it was how he “was brought up.” The youths said that if they were going to have children they need to think about these things, and one young woman said she would teach her nephew to treat everyone equally and to learn about other cultures.

The students wanted to be seen and to see others as individuals, not by their race, with one young man reminding others that “people act as individuals, not as members of a race.” There was a feeling in the forums that there is too much generalization from an experience with an individual that is extrapolated to an entire group. A young man was frustrated with a classmate’s comments, saying that, “He is trying to make all white people sound that way, and it’s not true.” A young woman expressed how that can happen when she told her classmates about a white family in her community which calls children



names and that it teaches “the little kids that all white people are like that.”

It is also the responsibility of individuals, and the students felt that how people present themselves—by manner of dress, manner of speaking, etc.—makes a difference in how others perceive them. What kept coming out throughout the forums was that people’s perceptions and reactions to others are best based on an individual’s character, not color, and that if they aren’t, they should be, felt the youths.

Why SDIF?

Because it’s beneficial and another way of learning. Participants in a South Dakota Issues Forum deliberate public policy choices by thinking of and listening to the pros and cons of various ways to address an issue. This helps participants learn about an issue and stimulates their thinking. Since they are examining directions for policy, they must think as a community member, not just as an

individual. Because ground rules are followed, the atmosphere remains safe for expressing varying perspectives and a model for civil societal interaction is learned and practiced. Many participants in forums are struck by how an issue can be discussed without anger or resulting in a “screamfest.” CYCC youths said they enjoy participating and learning in a way that is different from classroom learning. Students had the following comments on the *Racial and Ethnic Tensions* forums:

I hope my participation will help to loosen tension between people in the future.

I enjoyed the stimulating talk.

I feel that we got a lot accomplished in a little amount of time.

The topics that we talked about are very serious and need to be discussed in groups like this.

I think it is a good opportunity for kids to discuss issues like racism.

I learned many unique viewpoints and was surprised to learn the other cadets’ viewpoints.

I appreciated you being neutral throughout the meeting and keeping order with the small group.

I would like to have another discussion again some other time; it was an enjoyable experience.

The Racial and Ethnic Tensions forum got me thinking a little. I never really thought about it much.

I had already had pretty strong opinions on racism, but had never thought that in-depth on the subject.

I liked your video and the way it was set up.

It helped me to open up my mind to new ideas.

I learned quite a bit of things I didn’t know.

Now I have a better understanding of racial and ethnic tensions.

The forum brought out some never thought before ideas.

It was a wonderful forum over a very important topic that needs to be addressed.

It really made me think. I really appreciate it.

I never knew that there were forums and such things like these.

CYCC Student Artwork

Students at the Custer Youth Corrections Center participate in the ARTSCORR (Arts in Corrections) sponsored by the South Dakotans for the Arts, South Dakota Arts Council, and the Department of Corrections. Ten South Dakota artists come to CYCC on a monthly basis to work with students on art projects, i.e., batik, beading, watercolor, pottery, marbling, drawing, drama, and music. Each artist will visit CYCC about three to four times per year. Students' work may be framed and matted to be on display at CYCC, entered in an art contest and/or taken home by the student. A professional artist from Custer, Jonna Morehead, also works with students on a regular basis in the CYCC Living Center with art projects ranging from framing and matting to pottery and visual arts.

—Cynthia Tjaden, Education Coordinator CYCC

Special Thanks

Custer Youth Corrections Center staff for welcoming their students' participation in the forum process

Jeanmarie Heriba and **Michelle Russell** forum moderators and recorders

Michelle Russell for the layout and design of the report

Students at the Custer Youth Corrections Center for the beautiful artwork adorning the report

Jonna Morehead and **Jeanmarie Heriba** for the photographs of the students' artwork

Dr. John Usera for technical assistance and leadership support

The Zonta Club of the Black Hills and the **Chiesman Foundation** for providing the support necessary to engage the students in the forums and to produce the report



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I suddenly saw all of the worth in this. The idea of a dignified discussion, respecting each other's opinions, is something we all need. Understanding that someone else's opinion has worth is an invaluable tool for the rest of your life."

—Lois Wells, Teacher CYCC