

Executive Summary

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The youth of Massachusetts are of primary concern to legislators and citizens. This briefing report features three essays by experts – Lisa Jones, Ramon Borges-Mendez, and Janis Wolak – who focus on three aspects of youth well-being: youth victimization and other indicators of psychological health, youth unemployment, and online sexual predators of youth.

Although youth well-being is of primary concern, the worrisome stories about crimes against children that regularly fill the media have unfortunately obscured some more positive news from statistical reports on these same issues. Child victimizations of various types – i.e., child sexual abuse, witnessing domestic violence, child physical abuse, sexual assaults of teenagers, physical assaults and robberies of teenagers, and homicides of teenagers – have been declining nationwide and in Massachusetts since the early 1990s, in some cases declining dramatically.

Similar trends have also been noticed in areas of maladjustment, such as fighting in school, suicide, teenage birth rates, early sexual initiation, running away, and drug use. These downward trends continue even in the midst of continuing difficult economic times.

However, not much focus has gone into showcasing these achievements, which not only continues to give a lopsided picture of the reality, but also limits our understanding of the reasons behind these trends that would, in turn, help us further such efforts in an informed manner.

Although the nature of these findings is largely encouraging, they may lead one to believe that this topic has received much attention and that we can finally rest. However, that is a dangerous position to assume because it is likely to cause the rates to increase again to their initial high points. Currently, something positive is going on in the social environment. Three hypotheses seem to have the most support for explaining these downward trends:

- (1) The increased involvement of police and other social change agents in youth victimization** (e.g., social workers, child protection workers, specialized domestic violence units, specialized sexual assault officers, specialized school resource officers, and mental health professionals who focus on social control issues);
- (2) Advances in mental health treatment and psychopharmacology**, which at the same time have become easier for the public to access and advanced around the same time that indicators of child victimization began to improve. Such advances may have had the effect of alleviating predictors of aggressive behaviors, such as depression, discouragement, despair, and stress; and
- (3) Changing norms, practices, and laws**, in that a broad range of opinion leaders drew attention to these issues at the same time that the population was becoming more educated in general and more exposed to the points of view of these leaders; moreover, laws were being instituted to reinforce society's stance that these behaviors were wrong.

What is required is for researchers, policymakers, and active social agents to continue to invest in the practices that are working while being alert to other burgeoning issues.

One such burgeoning issue is youth unemployment. Although declining rates of indicators of youth maladjustment have persisted despite economic declines, the continuing economic troubles have had a strong impact on youth employment and their future economic well-being.

National studies show that early employment experiences shape youth's earning potential for the rest of their lifetime. Youth unemployment rates, however, have recently reached highs that have not been seen since 1948. Youth unemployment rates for workers ages 16-24 peaked at 19.2% in September of 2009. Youth are now two times more likely to be unemployed than adult workers, and although youth only comprise 13.5% of the workforce, they represent 26.4% of the unemployed.

An additional concern is that rising unemployment rates do not affect all youth equally. The recession has exacerbated racial disparities, putting minority youth out of work more often than their white peers.

Half of Massachusetts' Latino residents are under the age of 24, and although their labor force participation rates have been increasing since 1970, Latino youth are still less likely to be in the labor force at any given time than White or African-American youth. This means that they are at a disadvantage when it comes to building skills that will help them increase their lifetime earning potential.

The economic situation has steadily deteriorated for young African American men. Incarceration rates are still on the rise for young African American men. Many of these young men face employment challenges that can contribute to their criminal behavior. When they get out of prison, their criminal history often complicates their employment prospects even more.

Being unemployed as a young person, especially for a long time, can have long-lasting effects. While a young person may eventually find a job, having been unemployed raises the probability that they will become unemployed again. Instability like this damages their lifetime earning potential more than it would for an adult who experiences a period of unemployment.

In 2009, the Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board released a report that made three recommendations:

- (1) Increase the number and quality of work experiences and career exploration activities for both in-school and out-of-school youth.
- (2) Organize and strengthen collaboration among education, workforce, and human service agencies at both the state and regional levels.
- (3) Pilot a "multiple pathways" approach in selected regions that combines the education, workforce development, and human service support necessary to address the state's dropout crisis by creating new avenues to educational attainment, economic security, and upward mobility for all youth.

There are many programs in the state that have been engaging in these kinds of efforts and would be worth supporting. Moreover, several bills – including H.540, H.2712, H.2871, and S.971 – propose ideas that would bolster youth employment prospects. Finally, other countries have adopted ideas that may prove useful in reducing youth unemployment, such as bonuses, benefits, and/or preferential treatment for firms that employ apprentices.

Another area of growing concern focuses on youth Internet use. Legislators, teachers, parents, and other concerned citizens are increasingly worried about youth being victimized online. However, national research data suggest that the problems with youth Internet safety may be less widespread and dire than news reports and anecdotes suggest.

Nonetheless, arrests for Internet-initiated sex crimes against children increased 21% between 2000 and 2006. Although arrests of online predators are increasing, the facts do not suggest that the Internet is facilitating an epidemic of sex crimes against youth. Rather, increasing arrests for online predation reflect increasing rates of youth Internet use, a migration of crime from offline to online venues, and the growth of law enforcement activity against online crimes.

Moreover, the research on online predators shows that our stereotypes of who they are and what they do are largely inaccurate. Most Internet-initiated sex crimes involve adult men who use the Internet to meet and seduce young adolescents into sexual encounters. Most such offenders are charged with crimes that involve nonforcible sexual activity with victims who are too young to consent to sexual intercourse with adults. The statistics suggest that Internet-initiated sex crimes account for a salient, but small proportion of all statutory rape offenses (7%) and a relatively low number of the sexual offenses committed against minors overall (1%).

Most offenders take time to develop relationships with victims. Investigators describe victims in half of the cases as being in love with or having feelings of close friendship toward offenders. Sixty-four percent communicated online with victims for more than one month prior to meeting the victim; 79% had telephone conversations; 48% sent pictures online to victims; and 47% sent or offered gifts or money.

Nonetheless, romantic and sexual involvements with adults during early and mid-adolescence are associated with a range of negative outcomes that bode ill for youth in terms of mental health and academic achievement. And online sexual predators do target certain vulnerable youth, including boys who are gay or questioning, youth with histories of sexual or physical abuse, youth with other troubles such as depression or delinquency, youth with poor relationships with their parents, and youth who visit chatrooms, talk online to unknown people about sex, or engage in patterns of risky off- or online behavior.

Suggestions for how to address this problem include maintaining the use of undercover decoys posing online as young adolescents and targeting youth for prevention discussions around healthy relationships and online behavior. Moreover, providing safe centers and outlets for at-risk youth – such as proposed by S.981 – could provide at-risk youth a safety net and social support network that steers them away from risky online behavior.

Only 4% of online predators arrested for crimes against youth victims are registered sex offenders. Thus, policies to address this problem that are targeted at registered sex offenders – such as H.2405 – are aimed at a very small part of the problem. Internet safety needs to be designed with the assumption that most online predators are not registered offenders and have no prior record. Thus, other mechanisms for deterring this behavior need to be designed.