
America's Youth Problem

The Forgotten Half Revisited. Samuel Halperin, editor.
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by Daniel Yankelovich

A decade ago, the Grant Commission's report on the "Forgotten Half" painted a grim picture of the future prospects for a huge proportion of our nation's youth. It showed that half of the nation's young people, the half with the least education and technical skills, faced an economy with fewer good jobs for the unskilled, a society largely unaware of their plight and unaware of the guidance and services they needed to cope with the challenges of the future.

How has this situation changed over the past decade? Has it gotten better or worse, and in what ways? Has the size of the at risk group grown larger or smaller? Is it still appropriate to speak of a "forgotten half?" If not, how should this group of young people be characterized? What new approaches and strategies for assisting young Americans make sense in today's world?

PART I

OVERVIEW

Over the past decade both positive and negative forces have affected the prospects for the forgotten half. Unfortunately, the balance is weighed toward the negative.

The positive forces grow out of the recent dynamism of the American economy, and also out of the public's growing awareness that to cope in the new global economy young people must acquire greater skills and higher levels of education than in the past. The public is increasingly aware that these skills are indispensable to making a decent living and to avoiding downward social mobility.

In the early Nineties, most Americans were gloomy and depressed about the economy and convinced that the nation was on the wrong track. (More than any other factor, this outlook cost George Bush his reelection.) By the middle of the decade, however, the economy began to improve.

The pick-up in the economy cheered most Americans because all but the bottom quintile benefited from it. To be sure, the haves gained proportionately more than the have-nots, reinforcing recent trends moving us in the direction of a two-tier society. But after years of stagnation and decline, incomes rose sharply for the top quintile and moderately for the three middle quintiles. Thus, in the past few years the upper segments of the forgotten half have experienced some improvement in their economic condition. The devastating trend of loss of income for the bottom quintile has, however, continued unabated, leaving this large group of Americans stranded despite the rising tide of the economy.

In the job market the combination of spreading automation along with industry's ability to outsource a wide variety of jobs has driven salaries down for unskilled and semiskilled labor. Today, the prospect for young Americans without skills is as grim as the prospects for those with the right skills is glowing.

As a consequence of this new reality, over the past decade the nation has grown more education and skill conscious. In earlier years, most Americans were complacent about their schools and the education their children received. The typical response was, "many schools are awful, but my kid's school is just fine. My kids are getting as good an education as I did, even better in some ways."

Until the late 1980s, most parents did not realize that the kind of education they themselves had received was no longer adequate for the world in which their children would have to compete. Therefore, they judged the schools by the standards of their own education. As the realization grew that their children require higher levels of skills and education to keep from falling behind, they began to pay more attention to the need to improve the schools, to raise their standards, and to connect the skills they taught more directly to the requirements of the workplace.

Today, the majority of Americans support school reform and higher standards, but it has proven difficult to translate public concern into effective action of the sort that would equip today's forgotten half with the skills, knowledge and outlook they need to cope successfully with the economy of the future. Schools and workplaces, especially schools, have shown themselves to be massively resistant to change. Though they may eventually adapt to the new requirements of the economy, for the majority of the forgotten half they are not doing so in a timely fashion.

No one deliberately raised the bar on the skills and education Americans require to adapt to the emerging new high-tech economy. And unfortunately, no policies were put in place to accommodate this new life circumstance. Also, we are living through a phase of our national existence where the majority of Americans have grown disillusioned with, and mistrustful of, big government and its costly bureaucratic policies. Whereas a generation ago the plight of the forgotten half would have inspired a host of government policies designed to assist young Americans to make the transition to a different kind of economy, in today's political climate there is little temptation to insist that the Federal government come to their aid. The majority of Americans assume that the involvement of big government might well make the situation worse, not better: they assume that government will fail to do the job efficiently, fairly, economically and effectively. Thirty years ago, more than three quarters of all Americans (76%) trusted the government to "do the right thing most of the time." Now, the situation is totally reversed: three quarters of all Americans (76%) *mistrust* the government to do the right thing most of the time.

In addition to the swift and massive growth of mistrust in government to solve social problems, there has been a profound attitude change in attributing blame and responsibility for individual success in life. A trend toward Social Darwinism shows up clearly in my firm's annual tracking studies of social change. Our SCAN data reveal a shift away from the kind of egalitarianism dominant in the '60s and '70s which assumed that everyone was entitled to share in the bounty of available resources, even if this required large-scale redistribution. The assumption then was that unequal results were society's fault, and that it was society's obligation to address and correct them. We are now moving back toward the traditional American value that people are responsible for their own lives, and that the reality of life is such that there inevitably will be both winners and losers. This conception limits the society's moral and legal obligations. Unequal results are no longer deemed to be society's fault, but are attributed to the failure of individuals to survive and prosper.

Thus, a number of circumstances have combined to produce a "sink or swim" social environment for the forgotten half. The skill/education bar has been raised beyond the ability of our school and work institutions to meet the new requirements of the global economy, the federal government lacks the legitimacy it needs to take remedial action on the scale required, and the larger society has adopted a moral attitude that leaves it to the resources of the individual to find his or her own way in an often brutal world.

Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that some young Americans who are having a rough time coping with this environment are turning to various forms of antisocial, self-defeating behavior — crime, drugs, violence, teen-age pregnancy. Arrest rates for young adults, unwed teen-age pregnancy and victimization rates have grown steadily over the past few decades.

The turn to antisocial forms of acting out their frustration has proven to be self-defeating for the forgotten half. Older Americans regard this behavior with fear, disgust, bewilderment and a bad conscience. Public Agenda research, summarized in the next section, shows that the majority of Americans take a disapproving and somewhat punitive attitude toward this outburst of antisocial behavior. To some extent, they blame themselves. They fear that the current crop of American parents are failing in their most serious moral responsibility: to bring up the next generation of young Americans as caring, responsible, loving, effective, morally mature adults. This fear, however, has not led either to a realistic assessment of the problem or to imaginative and effective proposals for actions to deal with it.

The net result is a largely negative appraisal of the next generation on the part of average Americans, especially of those in the forgotten half.

PART II

SURVEY DATA

This section summarizes relevant survey data to document and amplify the assertions made above. After the summary of survey data, I have added a third and final section in response to the invitation of the American Youth Policy Forum to "give us your strongest, most passionate and well reasoned advocacy of what *you* would like see happen in public thinking and public policy in the next decade or so, 1998-2008." I therefore end with some ideas suggested by the research for ways to improve the life chances of those young Americans who are willing to help themselves if the resources they need to do so are available to them.

Education

The condition of education is one of the public's major concerns. Education is seen as a powerful tool for the future and an absolute requirement for long-term success. But there is a widespread concern among the general public, parents, teachers, students and employers that schools may not be providing young people with an adequate education.

- Education is considered one of the most important problems facing local communities (CBS News/*New York Times*, 1996).

- A Gallup survey found that when the American public is asked to grade the public schools of the nation, only 22% give them an "A" or "B". (Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Survey of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, 1997).
- Fewer than half of the public (46%) felt that their local public schools deserved an "A" or "B" grade. (Ibid.)
- Almost one-half (47%) of Americans surveyed in 1995 said they do not believe a high school degree is a guarantee that a student has learned the basics. ("Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reforms" -- 1995, a Public Agenda Report)
- One third of teachers and school administrators share this assessment. (Ibid.)

Skepticism about Preparation for Work Force

Employers and college professors who encounter recent high school graduates are even more dubious than teachers and students about how well high schools are preparing students for work force entry or college education.

- Nearly two-thirds (63%) of employers and 76% of professors of college freshmen express the view that a high school diploma is no guarantee of a knowledge of basic skills. (Public Agenda Report for *Education Week*, 1998)
- Employers complain particularly that the graduates they see lack basic math, writing, grammar and spelling skills. (Ibid.)
- 52% of the college professors say the students they observe lack the skills necessary to succeed in college. (Ibid.)

Need for Higher Standards

By overwhelming margins, parents and teachers, as well as employers and college professors believe that setting clear guidelines for what students are expected to learn and know would improve academic performance.

- Two-thirds (67%) of the American public believe that using standardized national tests to measure the academic achievement of students would improve student achievement. (Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Survey of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, 1997)
- An even larger majority (88%) agree that it would improve academic achievement if high school graduation were made contingent on the ability to write and speak English well. (Public Agenda Report "First Things First: What Americans Expect From the Public Schools," 1994)
- Six out of ten Americans (61%) say academic standards are too low in their own local schools, rising to seven in ten African-American parents with children currently in public schools (70%). (Ibid.)

- When people are asked to compare private to public schools, over half (53%) attribute higher academic standards to private schools (Public Agenda Report "Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform," 1995)
- High school students as well as adults feel the need for higher standards. Three out of four students endorse the requirement that they show they can write and speak English well before being allowed to graduate (Public Agenda Report "Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools," 1997)

Effect of Higher Standards

Will students faced with higher standards be more likely to drop out of school? The majority of adults believe that higher standards will have the opposite effect.

- Six out of ten Americans believe that higher standards will "encourage students from low-income backgrounds to do better in school," compared to only 29% who think higher standards will lead more disadvantaged students to become discouraged or drop out. (Phi Delta Kappa /Gallup 1994)
- About a third of the general public (32%) and only one in four parents (26%) want to ease standards by "making some allowances because inner-city kids come from disadvantaged backgrounds." (Ibid.)

The Importance of Teaching Values

While parents are seen as having the ultimate responsibility for imparting values to their children, schools are seen as having an important supportive role. All segments of the community agree that it is a part of public education to impart the values that the next generation needs.

- Large majorities, over 70%, of parents, teachers and economic leaders agree that values such as responsibility, honesty, tolerance of others and good work habits are "absolutely essential" for schools to teach. (Public Agenda Report "Assignment Incomplete: The Unfinished Business of Education Reform," 1995)
- Students rate values like hard work, good work habits and honesty and tolerance of others among the most important things for high schools to teach. (Public Agenda Report "Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools," 1997)
- Approximately half of America's teachers say that values are more important to teach than academics, with another 9% finding values equally important. (Public Agenda Report "Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk About Public Education Today," 1996)

Safety and Order

Americans are concerned that too many public schools are so disorderly and undisciplined that learning cannot take place. This is joined with a rising concern about school safety.

- Lack of discipline, the use of drugs, fighting and violence are seen as major problems facing local public schools. (Phi Delta Kappa /Gallup 1994)
- More than half of the public (54%) say teachers are doing only a "fair" or "poor" job dealing with discipline (Public Agenda Report "First Things First: What Americans Expect From the Public Schools," 1994)
- Almost three-quarters of Americans (72%) say "drugs and violence" are serious problems in their local schools. (Ibid.)
- The large majority of high school students (71%) also feel that "too many disruptive students" are a serious problem, though fewer (48%) regard drugs and violence in schools as a serious problem. (Public Agenda Report "Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools," 1997)

Educational Aspirations

The educational aspirations of high school students is high and on the rise. Over the decade from 1982, a college education came to be seen as a necessity.

- In 1992, nearly seven out of ten high school seniors said they hoped to graduate from college, as compared to only 39% in 1982. (Youth Indicators, 1996)
- The desire for post-secondary education cut across gender, ethnic and socioeconomic lines. In every subgroup, the vast majority aspire to more than a high school education. Even among high school seniors in the lowest performance quintile, 87% felt a high school diploma was not enough and wanted to obtain at least some further education. (Ibid.)

There is a realistic basis for this level of aspiration. The earnings gap between high school graduates and college graduates has increased substantially. In 1980, males with four or more years of college earned 19% more than high school graduates. By 1993, this gap had widened to 57%, and the trend continues to climb. (Youth Indicators, 1996)

Are these aspirations for higher education being achieved?

Despite these high aspirations, the traditional college path does not often work out: many 18 year olds end up with just a year or two of attendance, no certification and no salable skill. An analysis by the Educational Testing Service indicates that attrition rates are high and are getting worse, not better.

- Of those students who graduated from high school in 1992, only 56% were enrolled in post-secondary education two years later. (Youth Indicators, 1996)
- Of students who started at community colleges in 1989, just 37% had attained any degree five years later and only 6% had attained a bachelor's degree. (Educational Testing Service, "Toward Inequality," 1997)

- Of students who entered college in 1989 seeking a bachelor's degree (whether or not they attended a two or four year college) 46% had a four-year degree five years later, 5% had an associate's degree and 3% a certificate. (Ibid.)
- The chances of completing college are considerably worse for those from the bottom fourth in socioeconomic status ranking. Whether they enter a community college or seek a four-year degree, only about 3 out of 7 will make it. The gap is continuing to widen between youth from high and low-income families. (Ibid.)

An intensive analysis of students leaving college concludes that attrition rates are not just the reflection of financial constraints. The research shows that many factors associated with leaving school relate to institutional practices and culture.

The Educational Testing Service concludes that "Financial aid that ignores the established college completion pattern will fall far short of increasing the intended achievements of degrees. More students starting college will mean high proportions who are not finishing. They will often end up with neither an academic or an occupational credential and owe money on college loans as well ...The spotlight should be focused on institutions with non-completion rates higher than expected, based on the makeup of their student bodies." (Ibid., p.20)

The Dropout Problem

Young adults have completed more years of education over the past decade but increases since 1975 have been small. After rising steadily until 1976, the percent of 25-29 year olds who have completed four years of high school has risen only slightly since then, hovering at about 86-87% (Youth Indicators, 1996).

One encouraging change is the steady climb in the number of blacks completing high school, now almost equal to whites. However Hispanics, projected to become the nation's largest ethnic minority by the early 21st century, are dropping out of high school at a rate almost triple the U.S. average, with no sign of improvement. While the dropout rate for other populations has declined over the last 20 years, the overall Hispanic dropout rate started higher and has shown little improvement. Only 57% of young adult Hispanics (25-29) have a high school diploma. (Youth Indicators, 1996)

Dropout rates also relate to family income. Young people with family incomes in the lowest quintile are five times as likely to drop out as are their peers in the top quintile. (National Center for Education Statistics, Dropout Rates in the United States, 1996)

Follow-up studies of 1992 high school dropouts reveal that they are at an extreme disadvantage in employment and earnings. In the first full year following their expected graduation, 33% of the dropouts had no earnings; over a two-year period 19% did not obtain any job. In 1970, a high school dropout could earn about 84% of what a high school graduate earned; by 1993, the ratio had dropped to two-thirds. (Youth Indicators, 1996)

Job skills and job training

Americans recognize that a significant problem for American youth is a lack of job training and job skills and see a need to increase services to youth that would better prepare them for employment.

- Two out of three Americans see a lack of job skills as a serious problem for young adults aged 17-21 in their communities (Yankelovich Partners, "Young Adults At Risk Survey," 1995)
- Fewer than one out of four (23%) consider the quality of education and job training of young people to be excellent or good. (Peter Hart, Council on Competitiveness, 1991)
- Many more see a need for more job training (67%) and job placement (62%) services. (Yankelovich Partners, "Young Adults At Risk Survey," 1995)
- An analysis of the United States as compared to six other industrial democracies found it at or near the bottom in the effectiveness of its employment services and school-to-work programs ("Why People Don't Trust Government," Nye, Zelikow & King, Harvard, 1997 p.72)
- When asked who should take the lead in providing job training for youth, 43% named individuals and businesses, 35% put the emphasis on government programs and funding and 20% volunteered that both should be involved. (CNN, *USA Today*/ Gallup survey, 1995)

The Role of the Government

Confidence in government has declined steadily over the past few decades. Even while the federal government is perceived as successful in some areas such as providing for the national defense or maintaining a growing economy, it is seen as a failure in dealing with key social problems such as poverty, crime and drug abuse.

- A plurality of Americans (47%) think that government programs and policies do more to hinder than to help families (Hart-Teeter, 1997)
- A shade less than a majority (49%) rates the federal government as successful in supporting quality education. On other non-economic issues, the large majority rate the federal government as unsuccessful in solving the problems of reducing drug abuse (76%), reducing crime (69%), improving moral values (65%) and reducing poverty (63%). (Ibid.)

Why government programs are faulted

While the public does see the government as having a responsibility in such areas as reducing poverty, the effect of its efforts to date is regarded as more harmful than helpful. Most importantly, Americans reject any program that does not respect the fundamental value of self reliance. Welfare is a prime example of a program that aroused public disfavor since it was seen as undermining the work ethic and the family.

- Almost three-fourths of Americans feel that government would inspire substantially greater confidence if it focused on "respecting the moral values of the public." 80% say that "giving people the skills and resources to be self-sufficient instead of ...encouraging dependence" would enhance public confidence in government. (Ibid.)
- Before the changes in the welfare system, 69% of the American public supported the view that the welfare system did more harm than good because it encouraged the breakup of the family and discouraged the work ethic. (NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, 1995)
- In contrast, aiding working poor families is seen as a way to strengthen families and family values. 79% believe that guaranteeing that families in which the parents work will not fall below the poverty line would be an effective government policy. (Wirthlin Quorum Poll, 1995)

Increasingly, people are moving away from the point of view that government needs to provide for everybody and toward the conviction that more emphasis be put on individual self-determination. There is more of a focus on individual responsibility for outcomes, good or bad.

- Only 16% of Americans feel that government is responsible for the well-being of all its citizens, while four times as many say that individuals are responsible for their own well-being.(Hart-Teeter, 1997)
- Poverty is more likely to be attributed to people not doing enough to help themselves (60%) than to circumstances beyond their control (30%) . (NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, 1995)
- There is still a strong belief in the American Dream. The overwhelming majority (85%) still see America as a place where "people who work hard to better themselves can get ahead." (CNN, *USA Today* / Gallup survey, 1995)

Moral Values

One of the most serious concerns in society today is a decline in moral values. The public see declining values as a key component in major social and political issues. Attitudes toward young people are framed within the perception of a decline in the family's ability to transmit successfully the values of respect, responsibility and civility to their children.

- When asked the source of the most serious problems in our society, 51% attribute them mainly to a decline in moral values; only 37% said they stem from economic and financial pressures on the family. (NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* ,1996)
- A 1996 DYG study found that 87% of Americans (up from 76% in 1994) shared the conviction that our nation's social morality has eroded. This belief is seen across gender, age and race differences.
- The proportion who see a decline in family values increased from 62% in 1989 to 76% in 1995. ("American Family Values," Michaels Opinion Research, 1995)

Parents' Responsibility

As the principal teacher of values, parents are blamed for not doing an adequate job in transmitting the right values to the next generation. There is a pervasive feeling that parents are neglecting this prime responsibility.

- 79% of Americans believe that children growing up today are not taught good moral values as much as when they were growing up. (Yankelovich Partners Inc. "The State of the American Family," 1993)
- 74% agree that parents today are not taking enough responsibility for teaching their children moral values. (*Los Angeles Times* Poll, 1996)
- More than 6 in 10 (63%) say it's very common for parents to have children before they are ready to take responsibility for them. (Public Agenda, " Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation," 1996)

Parents' Concern About Values

Parents themselves generally feel their own family is doing a good job in teaching their children about morals and values. When pressed, however, they admit to some concern about how adequately they are doing in teaching values to their children.

- The large majority of parents rate themselves as doing an excellent (37%) or good (59%) job of teaching their children about morals and values (*Los Angeles Times* Poll, 1996). This finding is consistent with other polls in which parents are asked about their own performance.
- However, over half (52%) of parents with teenagers and 46% of those with children under the age of 13 admit that they are sometimes worried about doing a good job teaching values to their children. ("American Family Values," Michaels Opinion Research, 1995)

Difficult Time to Raise Children

In general, the public recognizes that these times are harder for both parents and children than when they were growing up.

- Eight out of ten Americans think it's much harder for parents to do their job these days. (Public Agenda, " Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation", 1996)
- Equal numbers (79%) think children have a harder time growing up today than their parents did (ABC News/ *Washington Post* 1990).
- There is widespread recognition that teenagers live in a more difficult world, in which they must face social problems like drugs, gangs or crime (62%). (Public Agenda, "Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation," 1996)

Attitudes Toward Youth

While there may be sympathy for the difficulties of parents and children in the current social climate, the overall attitude toward young people is surprisingly negative. A recent survey of attitudes toward young people, (Public Agenda, "Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation," 1996) concluded that " Most Americans look at today's teenagers with misgiving and trepidation, viewing them as undisciplined, disrespectful and unfriendly." There is a widespread feeling that kids are in trouble because they are not developing the ethical and moral values needed to become responsible adults in society. This conclusion was based on such findings as:

- 67% of Americans choose negative adjectives such as "rude," "irresponsible" and "wild," when they are asked what comes to their minds when they think about American teenagers.
- 41% say it is common to find teenagers who have poor work habits and lack self-discipline.
- Only 12% say it is common for teens to be helpful and friendly and treat other people with respect.
- Only one in five (19 %) say it's very common for parents to be good role models and teach their kids right from wrong.

This judgment is not simply based on casual impressions from the media. Those who have a lot of direct contact with teenagers are as critical of them as everyone else.

But Willingness to Assist Them Exists

Notwithstanding their extensive criticisms of young people, Americans have not given up on kids and feel that helping young people is of paramount importance to our society . And they believe that reclaiming the lives of even the most troubled teens is possible.

- More than half (52%) say that helping kids get a good start is more important than creating more jobs, protecting citizens from crime, or helping the poor or homeless.
- Almost three-quarters (74%) say that given enough help and attention, just about all youngsters can learn and succeed in school.
- 85% believe that given enough attention and the right kind of guidance even teenagers who are always getting into trouble at school and in their neighborhoods can be helped.

What are seen as appropriate solutions?

Since Americans define the problem with youth as predominantly moral in nature and the crux of the problem as parents' lack of responsibility, they are not attuned to governmental solutions. Rather they look to schools, community center programs and volunteer organizations like the Boy Scouts as a more effective way of helping kids.

- From a list of possible ways to help young people, two out of three (67%) identified improving the quality of public schools as a "very effective" way. Large numbers also believe that increasing after-school activities in community centers (60%) or involvement with volunteer organizations dedicated to kids like the Boy Scouts (53%) would also be effective resources.
- Only 10% felt that increasing government funding for such welfare programs as AFDC and food stamps would be a very effective way to help young people .

Why is the public so upset about young people?

The public's perception of youth is strongly affected by such social problems as teen-age pregnancy, youth crime and drug abuse. Although three out of four adolescents engage in little or no risky behavior, there is much more awareness of the one in four who are in significant trouble, ranging from teen-age pregnancy and drug abuse to juvenile delinquency and more serious crimes. (Estimates from J. G. Dryfoos , "Adolescents at Risk," 1990)

Teen Pregnancy.

When President Clinton identified teen pregnancy as the nation's most serious social problem in his 1995 State of the Union Address, his words resonated with the public. Teen pregnancy is seen as a symptom of the erosion of family cohesiveness and is closely associated with out-of-wedlock births. One of the strongest arguments of opponents of the welfare system was that it encouraged teenagers to have kids out of wedlock, a belief shared by six out of ten Americans. (Public Agenda, "The Values We Live By: What Americans Want from Welfare Reform," 1996)

- 72% of adults believe that the growth in teen pregnancies is a very important problem (Gordon S. Black Corporation for *USA Today*, 1987)
- In the current climate of tolerance of diverse lifestyles, fewer than half of the public (46%) condemn out-of-wedlock births on moral grounds (Roper Center Family Values Survey, 1997). But there is a realistic perception on the part of the public that teen pregnancy is detrimental. By wide margins, the public believes that all teen mothers face economic hardships: that they are more likely to receive welfare, less likely to complete high school and more likely to experience poverty and a lifetime of low earnings. (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, " Why Have Births to Unmarried Teens Increased?", 1997)

While teen child bearing is not a new phenomena, what has changed is the proportion of births that are to unmarried teens: in 1960, only 15% of teen mothers were unmarried,

compared to 48% in 1980 and 75% in 1994. (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, "Why Have Births to Unmarried Teens Increased?", 1997) Since the seventies there has been both a dramatic rise in the proportion who have had sexual intercourse as teens and also the severing of the link between sex and marriage.

Having an unplanned baby as a teen can hurt a young woman's economic and educational prospects:

- Many young mothers end up on welfare. Almost half of all teenage mothers and over three-fourths of unmarried teen mothers go on welfare within five years of the birth of their first child. 52% of all mothers on welfare had their first child as a teenager. (National Campaign To Prevent Teen Pregnancy , " Whatever Happened to Childhood? The Problem of Teen Pregnancy in the United States," 1997)
- Fewer than one-third of teens who begin their families before age 18 ever complete high school. (Ibid.)
- The children of teen mothers are faced with a host of disadvantages—more health problems, poorer academic performance, higher rates of behavior problems, a higher frequency of parental abuse and neglect.
- Teen parenting leads to a repetitive cycle of negative consequences. The teen daughters of teen mothers are 22% more likely to become teen mothers themselves. The sons are 13% more likely to end up in prison.

The teen birth rate has declined from 1991, its highest point in the past two decades. The recent decrease reflects a leveling off of teen sexual activity as well as the increased number of teens using contraception effectively. But the U. S. rate of teen births remains higher than in other industrialized democracies.

Youth Crime

What adults think about young people is influenced by their concern about crime and their perception that young people have a heavy share in the increase in crime over the past few decades.

- Despite the fact that crime rates have shown a recent decrease, a 1996 survey found that crime still topped the list of important problems facing the country today, more of a concern than jobs and unemployment. (CBS News/ *New York Times*,1996)
- The public is concerned that youth crime is on the rise. 86% believe that crimes committed by teenagers in this country had increased from last year ; only 2% saw a decrease. (Ibid.)
- 81% see teen-age violence as a big problem in most of the country, though not as bad in their own community . (Ibid.)

The "get tough" attitude to crime in general carries over to youth, with widespread support for more stringent policies for juvenile criminals.

- The large majority of Americans (83%) would mete out the same punishment to juveniles convicted of their second or third crimes as to adults with comparable conviction records. (Gallup for CNN/USA Today, 1994)
- In a 1994 Gallup survey, 61% favored the death penalty for a teenager who is convicted of murder, up from 24% in 1957.

At the same time, the public also supports early intervention programs for high-risk youth and spending federal funds to provide positive social programs for poor youth.

- 65% of respondents to a 1994 Gallup crime survey favored the use of federal funds for social programs such as midnight basketball and other activities for poor children.
- Given a choice of methods for reducing crime in this country, 64 % favored putting money and effort into preventive methods such as better education and job training over improving law enforcement (27%). (Wirthlin Group, 1994)

PART III

Proposals for a New Youth Strategy

Our society does not have an impressive track record on creating effective social policies. We are not nearly as proficient in this arena of our public life as we are in fields like business entrepreneurship, science, technology, pop culture, sports and finance. Therefore, the best starting point for a new youth strategy is to avoid the most common mistakes made in the past so as not to repeat them. At the present stage in the history of social policy, we know a great deal more about what doesn't work than what does.

Perhaps the most familiar of all social policy mistakes is the "magic bullet" approach: the advocacy of a single simple solution to a complex problem (e.g., "jobs", "education", "housing", "affirmative action", "just say 'no'", "lock them up and throw away the key").

An equally familiar mistake is one I have come to think of as the "everything-at-once" policy. It goes to the opposite extreme of the magic bullet fantasy. Recognizing the complexity of problems like those of the inner city, it warns us that to make a dent in them, we must do everything at the same time: offer better education *and* job training *and* economic development *and* mentoring *and* child care *and* drug rehabilitation *and* improved transportation *and* stronger civil rights enforcement *and* outreach services, etc. The result is virtually the same as doing nothing.

The public has grown weary of these and other ineffectual social engineering strategies, especially those that require large tax expenditures and government bureaucracies.

It is certainly futile to search for a single answer, a magic bullet, to solve the forgotten half problem. The plight of the forgotten half is too serious and deep-rooted to lend itself to any one simple solution. Consider job training. More effective job training is surely an indispensable part of any overall strategy for the forgotten half, but by itself it will not improve the odds for the majority of the forgotten half for a variety of reasons: most young people at risk don't know what they should be trained for; the jobs for which they are trained may not exist or may become obsolete; they may

lack the incentive or knowledge to translate the training into the kind of job that would give them the benefits they seek, etc.

The unavailability of a single solution does not mean, however, that we must swing toward the everything-at-once strategy. These sorts of strategies are particularly appealing to those most deeply committed to solve the problems of the inner city. So complex and interdependent are these that it is easy to fall into the every-thing-at-once trap. And it is a trap, because experience has shown that such strategies never win either the public support or the practical implementation they need to be successful.

The dilemma of what to do about the inner city should not be identified totally with the problems of the forgotten half. Inner city youth constitute only one part of the forgotten half population. It is an important part but still a minority. The strategy I am proposing should prove effective for the majority of the forgotten half population, including the majority of inner city young people who are capable of self-help. Unfortunately, there exists a minority of inner city youth who cannot be reached through self-help programs, including this one. That grim reality should be confronted from the outset.

For the majority of the forgotten half population, there is no need to do everything that ought to be done all at the same time, however desirable that might be in principle. Priorities can be set, and public support won gradually in response to hard evidence of success for programs with limited objectives.

Over the long run, a number of disparate elements must fit together as in a jigsaw puzzle. In addition to job training, some of these elements are:

- More effective school-to-work transition policies and practices.
- Primary action at the local and regional, as distinct from the national level.
- The development of large numbers of badly needed second-chance institutions.
- Vast improvements in tools for assessing peoples job capabilities and for matching people to jobs.
- Programs to teach and to reinforce the moral virtues of responsibility, perseverance, cooperation, self-discipline and hope.
- Financial mechanisms other than government programs for supporting young people who are willing and able to make the effort to help themselves.
- Large-scale efforts to win public support for programs that will inevitably require patience and suffer setbacks, even though they can promise to deliver extraordinary long term results.

Lest this inventory of requirements seem too daunting for practical solutions, I would emphasize that our society is fortunate in having in place an institution ideally equipped to manage the majority of these tasks: the nation's sprawling network of two-year community colleges. Typically, these are overworked, under-funded, low status institutions that are taken for granted and are almost never given the resources and opportunities they need to fulfill their potential promise.

With the right kind of support they can create massive improvements in the life chance prospects of the forgotten half.

My proposed strategy has three major elements:

1. **A core institution.** A vastly expanded community college capability.
2. **A financing mechanism.** A new mechanism for financing young people's self-help efforts based on the principles of micro-lending.
3. **A base in public support.** A massive effort by both the political structure and the civil society to win and maintain public support through a strategy that faithfully reflects the moral convictions of the American public.

In a short paper reporting on public opinion survey data I can do no more than hint at how this three part youth strategy might develop if it were to receive the attention it needs to convert it from one observer's personal statement to a practical public policy.

The Community College Component.

The advantages of building on the strengths of the nation's community colleges are obvious and compelling:

- They have a track record of success in helping people develop the skills they need to make the school-to-work transition.
- They are local institutions (in contrast, for example, to our nation's network of research universities which are national and international in their orientation). They have close ties with state legislatures and other regional institutions.
- They do not seek to "cream" the youth population, recruiting the young people with high SAT scores. They are popular institutions with virtually open admissions.
- They have close ties with local employers who can assist in training and job placement.
- They are well positioned to learn from each other's mistakes and successes.

However promising their potential may be, the nation's community colleges need a great deal of support and added resources if they are to compensate for a deeply flawed K-12 system of public education and also to assume the task of easing the school-to-work transition for the most needy part of our youth population in the context of the new global economy.

In the previous section the data showed that at present fewer than two out of five young people (37%) who enter community colleges had attained a degree of any sort five years later. Also, the incompleteness rate varies enormously from one community college to another. The reason, I believe, is traceable to the difficulty of the task these institutions have assumed. On the one hand, the population being served is burdened with all manner of economic, practical and cultural handicaps. And on the other, the community colleges must navigate their way through a rapidly changing and highly technical job market whose skill requirements are often difficult to define and to impart. Also, many community colleges are still mired in the single-path approach to education, where education

at one level is assumed to be nothing but a preparatory step for more education at higher levels. The wide variability in success rates suggests that some community colleges know how to educate and train this population appropriately, and others do not.

The discovery of wide variability in best practice is potentially a very promising development. As a society, we know a lot about how to spread best practice to a wider base of institutions. What we need to add is the political will to do so.

The first step in developing a new youth strategy is to consult with leading community colleges in every state in the nation, individually and collectively, to develop models of best practice so as to improve the completion rate significantly. Policies should be adapted to the idiosyncrasies of individual states and regions. This consultation should go beyond the staffing and resource needs of community colleges as they now exist. They should explore what resources the community colleges need in order to add several new capabilities to their existing ones.

One would be a new and powerful individual assessment and guidance capability. Most young people do not know what opportunities are open to them, what requirements these demand, and what their own potential undeveloped gifts are. One of the most striking characteristics of less well-educated populations is their lack of information. The nation has access to many resources to fill this need: computer-driven data bases, new methods of individual assessment and new concepts of "multiple intelligences" that do not try to fit everyone into the same mold. The trick is to match these new resources to the individual. Community colleges are well positioned to offer this added service, if given the resources to do the job.

Community colleges are also well positioned to become second-chance institutions. Indeed, they already serve that function. I suspect that the majority of young people in the forgotten half of the population lack the maturity and the incentive when they are growing up to take full advantage of their educational opportunities, even when these are adequate. Later on, in their twenties or thirties or even later in life, they develop the requisite maturity and incentive, but have no practical means of taking a shot at a second chance. Community colleges already serve one part of this population. It would not take a great stretch for them to expand and publicize these capabilities so that millions more could take advantage of them.

From Entitlement to Reciprocity: The Micro-lending Concept.

Acquiring the skills one needs to win in the new global economy requires a capital expenditure as much as, say, a start-up biotech venture does. Individuals need to invest now to develop assets and skills that will pay off in later years. This is not the traditional way to think about skill development because capital expenditures are usually associated with building plant and equipment rather than human capital, and linked to business enterprise rather than individual skills. But the structure of the financing requirements are strikingly similar. Also, one of the defining characteristics of the new economy is the premium paid to human capital. Those who are fortunate enough to develop the education and skill credentials the market needs can virtually write their own ticket.

Up to recently, access to capital has been the exclusive privilege of the haves. The lack of access to capital is the plight of the poor all over the world. Some years ago, a Bangladesh banker, Mohammad Yunis, innovated a system called micro-lending which made small amounts of capital available to women in the villages of Bangladesh through the Grameen Bank. Contrary to expectations, the default rate on the repayment of the loans was lower than for the business elites of Bangladesh.

This creative and successful example of social entrepreneurship caught the imagination of people all over the world. At present, micro-lending to make capital available to people who would not qualify for conventional financing has proven itself in a number of countries such as Poland and in a variety of applications in the United States. Virtually the only application that has suffered relative failure is in the inner city where default rates on loans have proven unsatisfactory from a self-sustaining enterprise point of view (though not necessarily from a public policy perspective).

As experience with micro-lending increases, it has become clear that careful implementation is the key to success. As bankers know all too well, you can't simply loan money to people who want and need it, and expect to be repaid. You need to observe specific guidelines and policies. But — and this is the encouraging note — if you follow these guidelines, micro-lending is showing itself to be a practical, self-sustaining way to finance the projects of people with no other access to capital. Why, then, shouldn't individuals have access to the capital they need to invest in themselves and their own future?

Doing so creates a dual benefit. For the individual, it creates and reinforces independence, self-confidence, hope and optimism. For our society, it offers a strategy that is consonant with public values rather than in conflict with them. My trend studies show a steady increase in support for the moral principle of reciprocity and against the principle of entitlements. Public sentiment here is unambiguous. "No one should feel entitled to get something for nothing," is what people say emphatically. "Unless you are a child, an old person or too sick to help yourself, you should give something back for what you get." An important part of a viable strategy, therefore, is that programs for the forgotten half be financed by methods such as micro-lending and President Clinton's work study programs that are based on the moral principle of reciprocity, and not on the idea that people have a moral and legal right to expect the taxpayers to finance their skill development beyond the level of public education available to all.

Wooing Public Support.

This consideration brings us to the third prong of my proposed youth strategy: the effort to win public support by making the moral principles underpinning the strategy match those of the American public. To launch and maintain a strategy of this sort, strong public support is a must.

To people unfamiliar with the subculture of the world of social policy, this aspect of the strategy might appear to be its least controversial element. At first glance, aligning the strategy with the moral values of the American public seems innocuous and desirable on principle. Unfortunately, however, the values of the public at large are at many points in direct conflict with the values of the social policy subculture. What seems like ordinary common sense to the majority of the public may seem insensitive, even cruel, to the social policy professional. For example, the public is far more

discipline minded and less tolerant of those who refuse to help themselves than most policy professionals are. The doctrine of need-based entitlements on which most of our public policies are based reflects the values of the social policy subculture. A great deal of public resistance to government social policy, especially welfare policy before its reform, reflected the public's views that the government was acting in an immoral fashion in helping to perpetuate a dependency life style that deeply offended the moral sensibilities of the majority.

The Principles That Best Reflect the Public's Own Social Morality Are These:

- Reciprocity rather than entitlement.
- Compassion rather than legal obligation.
- Self-reliance and responsibility on the part of the individual.
- Evidence of strong motivation and effort. A willingness to make sacrifices in order to take advantage of opportunities.
- Evidence of strong family values.
- Refusal of further assistance to those who flout the rules (e.g., drug abuse, alcoholism, chronic failure to show up).
- Showing courtesy to and respect for others.
- Not rewarding people for antisocial, dependent behavior.

The issue can be stated in simple, fundamental terms. There is a traditional American ethos embodied in the idea of the "American Dream": if you work hard, live by the rules and make the effort to better yourself through education, you can succeed in our society better than in any other nation on earth. I have been tracking this ethos for more than forty years. Despite all of the transformations in social values in recent years, this faith persists. For some in the forgotten half it may be a bit battered and bruised, but beneath the surface it continues to have an astonishing vitality and potential. In my view, it is indispensable that a strategy for the forgotten half be grounded in this traditional faith.

The problems of the forgotten half are not simple or tractable. They will not vanish overnight, even if the economy continues to thrive. A steady, patient, efficient long-term strategy that will endure over decades is needed. The public will support such a strategy, but only if it reflects their values.