A Series of Information Resources on

Youth Subcultures: Understanding Subgroups to Better Address Barriers to Learning & Improve Schools

As calls for addressing barriers to student learning and improving schools increase, better understanding of youth subculture is essential. This series is intended to stimulate thinking about the implications for policy and practice of the complex, multifaceted subgroups with which youth come to be identified and/or assigned by peers.

Public health and education policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and educators need to know as much as they can about the factors that lead youth to manifest behaviors stemming from group defined values, beliefs, attitudes, and interests. Such understanding is basic to promoting healthy development, preventing problems, intervening as soon as problems arise, and enhancing intervention impact on severe and chronic problems.

To these ends, the Center is producing a series of resources, such as this one, as aids for policy and practice analyses, research, education, and school and community improvement planning.

About "Loners" and "Losers"

Our focus here is on briefly highlighting:

(1) how youth are identified as "losers" or "loners"
(2) the impact of these "subgroups"
(3) prevalent policy and practice efforts to address negative impact
(4) data on intervention efforts
(5) proposed new directions
(6) resources for more information.

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About "Loners" and "Losers"

Youth groupings and subcultures emerge as peers identify those who do and do not share a given image or reputation or hang with a specific "crowd." While some small youth subgroups are based primarily on social interaction patterns, Brown, Von Bank, and Steinberg (2007) stress that "crowds are reputation-based entities that reflect important distinctions within the peer system in individual abilities, interests, social background (socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion), or activity patterns. Ethnographic and interview or self-report studies consistently demonstrate that adolescent crowds are arranged in a social status hierarchy ... [and that] status distinctions tend to be central to the dynamics of interaction among groups in the middle school and early high school years." Thus, the label assigned to a subgroup connotes status (e.g., popularity, mainstream acceptance, rejection). And, the characteristics associated with the label provide benchmarks young people use to gauge their status in youth subculture. Research suggests these benchmarks are significantly but not inevitably related to feelings about self and to various forms of positive and negative functioning and that status distinctions tend to dissipate toward the end of high school.

Our focus here is not on a youth subgroup per se. Rather it is on those who do not join groups and do not engage with peers and whose commonality stems from being designated as *loners and losers*. These students sometimes are referred to as outsiders, social outcasts, and even called nobodies. They standout as solitary figures on every playground, in school cafeterias, and on school buses. Some apparently want to be alone. In some cases, however, youngsters have been and continue to be rejected by others. This is especially the case for students who standout at school because of unusual characteristics or behavior (e.g. those with disabilities or who are an isolated minority on a campus in terms of race, ethnicity, or the type of crowd with which they hang out). Such students may experience loneliness, low self-esteem, and sometimes are harassed. Researchers note that those who experience social rejection may manifest significant social anxiety and low rates of prosocial behavior, may manifest psychological reactance and reactive aggression, and may be inattentive, immature, or impulsive (Bierman, 2003; Deci & Ryan, 2006; Prinstein & La Greca, 2002).

Defining "Loners" and "Losers" and Identifying Subgroup Members

In defining a loner, care must be taken to avoid a psychopathological presumption. Simply stated, the core of most definitions is that a loner is simply a person who *prefers* to be alone. Note, for example, the following comment from a blog devoted to the topic:

> "I'm basically a loner myself. However, it's not because I hate people or I'm some sort of an outcast. It's just I prefer being alone to being with a group of people who are probably not doing or talking about anything that really holds my interest. I can keep myself entertained. One advantage to being like this is that I'm never lonely."

Clearly, some loners may be selective in choosing not to interact socially. The behavior itself is not a symptom of a mental health problem and being a loner doesn't mean the individual lacks social skills.

However, because the natural state in society is deemed to be one where humans socially interact, being called a loner usually carries with it a negative connotation and as noted above is strongly associated with a range of negative emotions and cognitions. The Wikipedia definition, for example, adds the suggestion that such a person is avoiding or not actively seeking human interaction. While the intentional reasons for such behavior are described as including religion or personal philosophies, the unintentional reasons are described as "being highly sensitive, having more extreme forms of shyness and introversion, or various mental illnesses." At the same time, it is noted that in popular culture, "there is a certain romanticism in the idea of the loner since he or she is seen as special and unique. ... As a result, the concept of a lonely hero is a recurring theme in stories" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loner).

In youth subculture, it is common for loners to be viewed as *losers*. However, one doesn't have to be a loner to be called a loser. Stated simply, the term losers usually is applied to those who are not in popular or mainstream subcultures. Thus, youth who standout because of unusual characteristics or behavior (e.g., those designated as nerds, freaks, goths, and so forth) also may be labeled as losers by some peers. And some youth even apply the term to themselves.

The Impact of "Loners" and "Losers" for Society and on Those So-Labeled

Society's reaction and concern about loners is evident from the degree to which this is a topic of research and for interchange on the internet (search for "society and loners"). And, with respect to losers, every society identifies some individuals as winners and losers and responds differently to each. Exclusion of some of those designated as loners and losers is a predictable feature of social organization. It seems to serve multiple purposes such as clarifying the prevailing power and status hierarchy and also reinforcing what the majority deem as socially desirable.

Currently, society's policy makers mostly worry that loners and losers may be potentially violent and thus a threat to others. More generally, they are seen as a hindrance with respect to the society's well-being.

Identification of some students as loners and losers is commonplace in schools (especially in middle and high schools). No matter how exclusive or selective the school, some students will be on the fringes. And the message usually is "befriend them at your risk." For schools, loners and losers become a concern mainly when the individuals also manifest learning and overt behavior problems, seem threatening, or become the focus of harassment. Problems stemming from this form of stigmatization and social rejection are exacerbated when the experience is prolonged or consistent, directed at the individual by significant others, when an individual is highly sensitive to rejection, and when the result is social isolation.

From a public health and a psychosocial perspective, there is ongoing concern about preventing and correcting any negative impact on or from individuals who are identified as loners and/or losers. As Berguno and colleagues (2004) report:

> There have been correlational studies that have shown that loneliness is associated with shyness, poor social skills, low self-esteem and social dissatisfaction. ...Passive solitary behavior may be associated with peer rejection as early as preschool ... the combined influence of anxious solitude and peer exclusion in the early schools years are predictive of depressive symptoms later. ... A majority of children claimed to have been bullied, with lonely children being more likely to be victimized by peers. ...Victimized children are more likely to have negative views about school and to perceive the overall school environment as unsafe or even threatening.... Victimization experiences increase children's risk of suffering anxiety, depression, interpersonal difficulties and low self-esteem. Moreover, victimized children are more likely to suffer a decline in their academic performance."

Prevalent Policy and Practice Approaches to Address Negative Impact

Concern about loners and losers has led to school and some community-wide approaches to counter social rejection, harassment, loneliness, and depression. A school-based example comes from the work of Mikami and colleagues (2005). They evaluated an intervention for preventing peer rejection in middle school. The emphasis was on promoting social acceptance in the classroom environment. The findings suggest that the intervention did reduce the amount of self-reported peer rejection in classrooms. The investigators stress that:

> "The systems-level and preventive focus of this intervention differed markedly from traditional interventions that target putative deficits within individually rejected children. In collaboration with 24 teachers and their classrooms, the intervention team led mixed groups of accepted and rejected children in cooperative games that required teamwork and mutual respect among all members in order to succeed. To reinforce these alliances between children, as well as to prevent future peer rejection, teachers were encouraged to use cooperative, teamwork-based group activities for academic instruction."

Essentially, the policy and practice emphasis increasingly is on enhancing social-emotional learning, school climate, and general wellness. A special focus in all this is on ensuring there are transition and social supports for new students and for special times during the school day such as before and after school and during lunch and recess (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008).

Data on Intervention Impact

Considerable data indicate the long-term negative impact of social rejection, bullying, and so forth (e.g., Berguno, et al., 2004; Pellegrini & Long, 2002). And, as the above example indicates, promising findings emerge from special projects designed to address concerns about those designated as loners and losers.

However, as many reviewers have stressed, for those students with problems, the body of intervention research has not indicated a significant impact with respect to intermediate and longer-term psychosocial and educational outcomes. Some promising findings are emerging related to enhanced school performance from programs promoting social emotional learning (Zins, Payton, Weissberg, & O'Brien, 2007).

Given the available data, interventions to address problems related to loners and losers have been too limited in nature and scope. They have focused mostly on changing students who are seen as troubled or troublesome and not enough on changing how schools address problems arising from youth subculture.

Proposed New Directions

Federal policy related to school-safety is on the verge of shifting, and this will have a significant impact on how schools and communities address individuals designated as loners and losers. Kevin Jennings, the U.S. Department of Education's top school-safety official, wants his division (currently called the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools) to broaden its focus to encompass school climate as essential for ensuring school is a place in which students feel safe and included.

> "Students can't learn properly unless they're both physically and emotionally safe and they feel valued," he says. "Just as we have standards around academic goals, we need standards around school climate because what gets measured is what gets done," Jennings says. "We're only going to put school climate at the priority level it deserves – which to me is at the top – if we have standards around it and start measuring it" (http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2010/02/obama_appointee_advocates_scho.html).

From the perspective of our Center's work, we agree about the need for a positive school climate. However, we stress that school climate and school culture are qualities that emerge from a proactive, multifaceted, and comprehensive approach to addressing concerns such as those raised by loners and losers. At the same time, the approach must avoid traditional tendencies to look at such students as requiring totally unique intervention strategies. As is evident from the information provided above, some of the concerns overlap those raised by other youth subgroups. On the next page and in the box that follows, we offer a perspective about policy and practice related to all students with a few

examples to illustrate how specific considerations related to those designated as loners and losers might be addressed.

The emphasis is on developing and implementing a comprehensive intervention continuum that:

- *Promotes healthy development and prevents problems*

For instance:

> providing information to educate school and key community stakeholders about loners and losers

> establishing working alliances to dialogue with students designated as loners or losers and those who stigmatize and harass them with the intent of minimizing negative encounters and promoting social emotional learning

- *Intervening when problems are noted*

For instance:

> implementing agreed upon promising practices to respond as quickly as feasible

> protecting all students (e.g., from bullying or harassment)

> ensuring a student's status as a loner or loser isn't interfering with success at school (e.g., enhancing regular attendance and motivated participation)

> providing medical, mental health, and learning supports (e.g., related to social, emotional, and learning problems)

- *Attending to chronic and severe problems*

For instance:

> identifying and referring for appropriate individual interventions as necessary (e.g., related to negative emotional and cognitive impact)

> establish a safety net of support (e.g., through school, family, community mental and physical health providers, social service and juvenile justice agencies)

In contrast to a waiting for problems, new directions thinking stresses a proactive approach to preventing social rejection, enhancing personal well-being, and improving academics, and using a continuum of interventions that contributes to enhancing a positive school climate.

A Perspective on What Schools Should Do Based on the Work of our Center at UCLA

Schools experience many overlapping concerns related to youth subgroups and youth subculture. Of special concern is addressing any negative impact (e.g., criminal acts, bullying, sexual harassment, interracial conflict, vandalism, mental health problems). But, also essential is a focus on promoting healthy development and fostering a positive school climate.

As always, the more we understand about subgroups and individual differences, the more effective our interventions can be. But to keep from the tendency to focus on each concern as if it is discrete, schools need to work in a new way.

Given the complexity of the negative behaviors that arise in relation to youth subgroups, those in the school, district, and community who have responsibility for gangs, safe schools, violence prevention, bullying, interracial conflict, substance abuse, vandalism, truancy, and school climate need to work collaboratively. The *immediate objectives* are to (1) educate others about motivational and behavioral factors associated with a particular subgroup, (2) counter the trend in policy and practice to establish initiatives in terms of separate categories that lead to a host of fragmented and too often ineffective programs and services, and (3) facilitate opportunities on campus for youth subgroups to engage positively in subcultural activity and connect with effective peer supports.

By working collaboratively and differentiating the causes of observed problems, school staff and community stakeholders can integrate fragmented and marginalized initiatives for promoting positive youth development, preventing problems, intervening as soon as problems are identified, and providing effective ways to respond to pervasive, chronic, and serious problems. *Longer-term*, the aim is to help develop a comprehensive system of student and learning supports that (a) addresses a wide range of barriers to learning, teaching, parenting, and development and (b) re-engages disconnected youth. Such a system encompasses a continuum of integrated school-community intervention systems that are fully integrated into the improvement agenda for schools and communities (Adelman & Taylor, 2006a, b).

Toward these ends, schools must reach out to the community and establish a collaborative mechanism where those with specialized knowledge not only bring that knowledge to the table, but also work to build the needed comprehensive system of student and learning supports that addresses a wide range of barriers to learning, teaching, parenting, and development (Adelman & Taylor, 2007). And it is essential to remember that those with specialized knowledge include youth themselves (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2009).

Moving forward requires building a comprehensive and systemic continuum of interventions and fully integrating the system into the improvement agenda for schools and communities. To guide development of a systemic approach, we have suggested using a continuum of integrated school-community intervention systems as a unifying framework. This includes school-community systems for promoting healthy development, preventing problems, intervening early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible, and addressing chronic and severe problems.

Policy that helps schools and communities develop the full continuum of interventions is essential to moving forward in enhancing equity of opportunity. Such policy must effectively establish a *comprehensive intervention framework* that can be used to map, analyze, and set priorities. It must guide fundamental *reworking of operational infrastructure* so that there is leadership and mechanisms for building integrated systems of interventions at schools and for connecting school and community resources. And, it must provide guidance for the difficulties inherent in facilitating major *systemic changes*. By working in this way, we can counter the trend in policy and practice to establish initiatives in terms of separate categories that lead to a host of fragmented and too often ineffective programs and services.

For resource aids related to policy examples, intervention frameworks and related mapping tools, examples of ways to rework the operational infrastructure and develop key mechanisms such as a *Learning Support Resource Team*, guides for facilitating systemic change, and much more, see the Center's Toolkit at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm

References and Resources

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A Few Additional References

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Source for Additional Information

>University of Michigan. Cool Kids and Losers: The Psychology of High School Students in
Peer Groups and Cliques – http://sitemaker.umich.edu/356.tran/hom

>Gallup Poll series – http://www.gallup.com
>>Teens and Bullying: Who's Taking Abuse? (2003)
>>...And Everything Nice: Girls Bully, Too (2002)
>>No Contest: Most Teens Say They're Popular (2003)
>>High School: Worst of Times or Best of Times? (2005)
>>The "in" Crowd: Winner in High School, Losers in Life? (2005)

The Center's Series of Information Resources on *Youth Subcultures: Understanding Subgroups to Better Address Barriers to Learning & Improve Schools**

Online:

What is Youth Culture? A Brief Introduction

Glossary of Terms Related to Youth Culture Subgroups

Youth Subcultures: Annotated Bibliography and Related References

About Youth Gangs

About the Goth Youth Subculture

About Hip Hop Youth Subculture

About "Loners" and "Losers"

About "Jocks" as Youth Subculture

About Emo Youth Subculture

About Surfing and Skateboarding Youth Subcultures

About the Cheerleading Youth Subculture

About "Mean Girls" as a Youth Culture Subgroup

About "Nerds" and "Geeks" as an Identified Subculture

About "Preppies" as a Youth Culture Subgroup

About Sexual Minority (LGBT) Youth Subculture

Youth and Socially Interactive Technologies

About Raves as a Youth Culture Phenomenon

Others are in development

*Many of the terms used by youth in referring to subgroups often are pejorative and offensive. We do not condone such language. We do, however, recognize the need to go beyond adultcentric definitions and descriptions of youth subgroups if we are to understand youth perceptions and perspectives. So the *Information Resource* documents reflect the terms used by youth.