



**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.

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**What is Youth Culture?  
A Brief Introduction**

This introduction to the Center's work on youth subculture and youth subgroups highlights

- how youth culture is defined
- provides some background about the concept.
- why adults need to understand youth subgroups – including both positive and negative facets
- what schools should do

It concludes by highlighting the process the Center is using to enhance understanding of youth culture and youth subgroups.

***We invite additions and improvements.***

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## What is Youth Culture? A Brief Introduction

As with so many concepts, defining *youth culture* is fraught with complexity. The term is generally used to designate “a youth-based subculture with distinct styles, behaviors, and interests.” The term *counterculture* is used to designate subgroups that manifest hostility to the dominant culture. Youth subcultures allow and encourage members to have a special identity that separates them from those they are assigned by institutions such as the family and school.

Over the years, terms such as Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Z, and now Millennial Generation have found popular acceptance. However, these global labels tend not to shed much light on the many different subgroups with whom youth identify themselves or are grouped with by observers. More specific subgroup labels come and go. A few examples of such designations that are in vogue include Hip-hoppers, Nerds, Geeks, Homies, Goths, Emos, Punks, Redneck Girls, specific youth gangs such as the Bloods and the Crips, and on and on.

And, the problem is compounded by differences between and within observer and actor perspectives. Both who is considered part of a subgroup and the positive and negative features ascribed vary markedly. All this complicates and often exacerbates the cultural clashes that arise across generations, social and economic classes, race, ethnicity, sex and gender identification, disabilities, and other ways differences and diversity are classified.

**Some Background.** Historians disagree about when youth culture first appeared. Some cite Plato crediting Socrates as stating: “The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers.” This, however, is more a statement about the eternal generation gap than it is about youth culture.

Drawing from various sources, there seems to be some consensus that youth culture as we know it today blossomed after the Second World War. Prior to that time, most children pursued and were expected to pursue adulthood as early as feasible. Around the 1950s, the spending power of teenagers was markedly enhanced. They became an increasingly profitable market to which goods and services were directed. The result was the expansion and increasing diversification of teen-oriented products and types of cultural content with which subgroups associate.

Marshall (1998) suggests that by the 1970s the study of youth culture took a turn.

“Feminist writers pointed to the invisibility of girls in the mainstream literature on youth and have researched gender variations in youth culture. The experiences of youth among ethnic minorities have also received more attention. But, above all, the period since the mid-1970s has seen the demise of the notion of the independent teenage consumer and rebel. The focus of research has switched instead to the youth labour-market, and the dependence of young people on the household, as a result of growing unemployment and the vulnerability of youth to flexible employment.”

Whatever the current direction, some observers argue that the media, advertisers, writers, and other shapers of contemporary thought have made youth the dominant culture of Western societies, and this contributes to many individuals maintaining “immature attitudes far into adulthood” (Danesi, 2003).

**Signaling Subgroup Membership.** Michael Brakel (1985) sees youth subcultures as defined by modes of expression or lifestyles – *meaning* systems – that are developed as a response to dominant systems by groups in subordinate structural positions. He stresses the forms adopted reflect their attempt to solve structural contradictions arising from the wider societal context.

Many subgroups try to indicate their identity by adopting distinctive and symbolic clothing, hairstyles, tattoos, makeup, vehicles (e.g., cars, motorcycles, scooters, skateboards, surf boards), and so forth. Others reflect their group identity through carefully delineated special interests, language patterns, and meeting places. Some groups pursue obscure or experimental musical genres or political views and adopt a strong in-group or tribal mentality; this exclusive subculture or faction may be referred to by the term *scene* (e.g., Goths), and the scene may be identified with a geographic setting (e.g., London Goths). And changes in subgroup scenes or contexts influence positive and negative development, learning, and behavior (Bradley, 2010; Straw, 1991; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010).

### Theories about Youth Subculture

From Wikipedia entry on *Youth subculture*  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Youth\\_subculture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Youth_subculture)

Early studies in youth culture were mainly produced by functionalist sociologists, and focus on youth as a single form of culture. In explaining the development of the culture, they utilized the concept of *anomie*. Talcott Parsons argued that as we move from the family and corresponding values to another sphere with differing values, (e.g. the workplace) we would experience an "anomie situation." The generalizations involved in this theory ignore the existence of subcultures.

Marxist theories account for some diversity, because they focus on classes and class-fractions rather than youth as a whole. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson described youth subcultures as symbolic or ritualistic attempts to resist the power of bourgeois hegemony by consciously adopting behavior that appears threatening to the establishment (Hall & Jefferson, 1993). Conversely, Marxists of the Frankfurt School of social studies argue that youth culture is inherently consumerist and integral to the divide-and-rule strategy of capitalism. They argue that it creates generation gaps and pits groups of youths against each other (e.g. mods and rockers), especially as youth culture is the dominant culture in the west.

Interactionist theorist Stan Cohen argues youth subcultures are not coherent social groupings that arise spontaneously as a reaction to social forces, but that mass media labeling results in the creation of youth subcultures by imposing an ideological framework in which people can locate their behavior (Cohen, 1964). Post-structuralist theories of subculture utilize many of the ideas from these other theories, including hegemony and the role of the media. Dick Hebdige describes subcultures as a reaction of subordinated groups that challenge the hegemony of the dominant culture (Hebdige, 1979). This theory accounts for factors such as gender, ethnicity and age. Youth can be seen as a subordinate group in relation to the dominant, adult society.

### Why Should Adults Try to Understand Youth Subgroups?

*Young people are all too easily viewed as a social problem. Always in trouble with sex & drugs & rock 'n roll. And that's unjustified I find. Youth culture has always seemed to me to be associated with idealism, with seeking new ways.*

Rupa Huq

Many adults seem to have a love-hate relationship with youth culture. (*I want my kids to enjoy growing up. What's the matter with kids today?*) Reconciling this split involves enhancing

understanding by developing an appreciation of the good that comes from youth culture and how to work toward minimizing problems.

As the above discussion underscores, youth subculture is complicated and not easy to comprehend. Nevertheless, there are multifaceted reasons for adults to enhance their understanding of youth subgroups. These reasons go well beyond just being better informed. As with any subculture there are positive aspects which can enrich individual lives and the dominant culture, and there are negative facets to be countered.

From a public health and public education perspective, it is imperative to understand both aspects. Such understanding is the basis for promoting healthy development, preventing problems, intervening as soon as problems are identified, and providing effective ways to respond to pervasive, chronic, and serious problems.

For interveners, the more they understand about those facets of youth subgroups that put individuals and society at risk (i.e., that call for protecting youth from hurting themselves and others), the more effective the interventions can be. Of particular importance is acquiring an understanding that avoids stereotyping because within each subgroup considerable diversity exists. The ongoing dilemma is one of maintaining an appreciation of individual differences at the same time one is enhancing understanding of youth subgroups and one's competence for intervening when necessary.

All this is complicated by the relative rapid change in what's in and what's out. The symbols signaling membership can change dramatically. Words literally flip flop in meaning (e.g., adopting the word "bad" to mean "good"); new forms of adornment replace those that are adopted too widely; scenes shift.

**What's Positive?** Go to any major book or music store or simply enter the phrase *youth culture creativity* into an internet search engine and you rapidly see the many positive cultural contributions stemming from a variety of youth subgroups. The influence is seen in art, music, dance, video, literature, motion pictures, computer software and hardware, popular fashion, education, and more. And, the influence is growing at an accelerating rate because of the social web that enables youth around the globe to interact.

Not only are youth expanding the world of learning for each other, adults are tuning in and benefitting as well. Many classroom teachers learned long ago to tap into the technological savvy of their students. And popular culture businesses and marketers rely heavily on youth input.

On another level are the benefits any group of people derive from identifying with subgroups. Such identification may provide status, support, safety, resources, nurturance, learning opportunities, a sense of community, and many other positive contributions to development and well-being.

Clearly, the stereotype of youth subculture as "less than" or strictly as a negative force in society is unwarranted.

**What Should Concern Society?** In appreciating the positives of any culture, it would be naive not to address problems that often emerge from subgroup participation and actions. Of concern is when a person's participation and actions as part of a youth subgroup result in harm to self or others. Obvious examples are when gangs engage in criminal behavior and when one group denigrates, harasses, victimizes, and stigmatizes another (Peguero, 2009; Suarez-Orozco, Rhodes, & Milburn, 2009). And there is the ubiquitous concern over the types of group-associated risk taking behaviors that jeopardize health/mental health and work against positive educational outcomes (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2007). As Steinberg (2003) suggests, it is a mistake to approach youth risk taking "as if it were an individual phenomenon when in reality it occurs in groups."

While it is essential not to ignore the negatives that stem from youth subgroupings, the aim in addressing the problems should be to deal with them without demonizing youth in general and specific subgroups in particular (Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 2003). As a McKnight Foundation brief on youth in the media stresses ([http://www.mcknight.org/hotissues/framing\\_youth.aspx](http://www.mcknight.org/hotissues/framing_youth.aspx)):

“Demonization of young people can reinforce racial discrimination and prevent the public from focusing on the reality of the lives of youth in America today. Moreover, it can create the very alienation and hopelessness that can produce criminal behavior. A longer-term, broader danger also lurks in the punitive policies adopted to protect the public from youth. That is, people fail to see youth as a society's primary asset.”

### **What Should Schools Do?**

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>

### **What Process is the Center Using to Enhance Understanding of Youth Culture and Youth Subgroups?**

Because the complexity of youth culture has yet to be well captured in the professional literature, our Center has decided to approach the topic first by developing a series of descriptive *Information Resources*. These include this brief introduction to the topic, a glossary, an annotated bibliography, a topical Quick Find for our Online Clearinghouse, and basic information on specific subgroups.

All these resource aids are being designed as working drafts that will be upgraded as we learn more from feedback, ongoing searches, and continued study.

After the descriptive phase of the work, we will do analyses to clarify trends and issues of relevance to policy and practice. The products of this work will be a series of reports and issue briefs and practice guides designed to incorporate understanding of youth subgroups and youth trends in order to refine efforts to promote healthy development, prevent problems, intervene as soon as problems are identified, and provide effective treatment of chronic and serious problems.

Finally, we will tackle the problems of effective dissemination and diffusion by addressing the question of how best to inform health/mental health and education policy makers and practitioners about youth trends and subgroups in ways that have an impact on policy and practice.

### **Invitation**

As noted above, the Center first products on youth culture and subgroups are presented as drafts documents. We want to improve them. If you know of references and resources we can access, please contact us. Send to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)

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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.