



**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 the Goth Youth Subculture

Our focus here is on briefly highlighting:

- (1) how the Goth youth subculture is defined and how members are identified
 - (2) the impact of this subculture on society and on subgroup members
 - (3) prevalent policy and practice efforts to address negative impact
 - (4) data on intervention efforts
 - (5) possible new directions
 - (6) resources for more information.
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About the Goth Youth Subculture

Goth youth subculture has lasted, spread, and diversified as a contemporary subgroup in many countries. It emerged in the United Kingdom in the early 1980s as an offshoot of the punk rock scene. The symbols and actions have been identified as reflecting nineteenth century Gothic literature influences, as well as more contemporary imagery from horror films.

As described in Wikipedia, the Goth subculture

“is marked by its emphasis on individualism, tolerance for diversity, a strong emphasis on creativity, tendency toward intellectualism, and a mild tendency towards cynicism.... Goth ideology is based far more on aesthetics and simplified ethics than politics. ... Spiritual, supernatural and religious imagery has played a part in gothic fashion, song lyrics and visual art.” The subculture “has associated tastes in music, aesthetics, and fashion Gothic music encompasses a number of different styles. Styles of dress within the subculture range from deathrock, punk, androgynous, Victorian, some Renaissance and Medieval style attire, or combinations of the above, most often with black attire, makeup and hair” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goth_subculture).

From a sociological perspective, Hodkinson (2002) states:

“Gothic ... Elements of punk, glam rock and new romantic, were gradually fused into a distinctive style of music and fashion ... described as ‘dark’, ‘macabre’ and ‘sinister ... black hair and clothes and distinctive styles of make-up.... Once the general goth theme had been established for a time, many elaborated on its logical association with horror by drawing upon various images originating in macabre fiction such as crucifixes, bats and vampires.... The appearance of vampire protagonists in films reinforced the existing enthusiasm among goth males for whitened faces, long dark hair and shades....”

“The emphasis, for both males and females, on a feminine appearance was also linked with a general acceptance and, sometimes, even veneration of sexual ambiguity. While the majority of goths behaved in accordance with heterosexual norms throughout wider society, there was little if any disapproval or surprise, in goth clubs, at the occasional sight of people of the same sex holding hands, cuddling, or kissing....

It was clear that goths’ dislike of the mainstream also tended to reflect a positive and necessary enjoyment on their part of feeling collectively different and, more specifically, superior to ‘outsiders’ Among goths, the strength of the distinction from perceived outsiders was particularly intensive as a result of the prejudice and occasional violence goths were prone to receive in light of their unconventional appearance. “

Defining Goths and Identifying Subgroup Members

Taubert and Kandasamy (2006) stress that the Goth subculture is not easily defined or categorized because it now spans several continents, has evolved to include a wide range of musical and clothing styles, and includes Mallgoths in the United States, Gogans in Australia, Dark in Latin America, Cuervos in Spain, and Spooky Kids and Neogoths in the United Kingdom.

Rutledge, Rimer, and Scott (2008) agree:

“There is such diversity within the Goth subculture that defining an average adolescent Goth is difficult. The majority of adolescents who gravitate to Goth are looking for social acceptance among their peers. Other teens turn to the Goth Subculture as a result of difficulties in school, feeling alienated, and as they look for a way to express their feelings. Some are even victims of abuse, discrimination, and systemic ridicule. Many

feel like social misfits with a dislike for authority. ... Some just simply enjoy the music, the fantasy found in role-playing games, and the shock value they receive when walking around in the mainstream culture. Many tend to be nonviolent, passive, pacifistic, and tolerant, whereas others can exhibit signs of anger, depression, and violence. They often possess above average intelligence and are highly literate and creative. There are many Goth subgroups. Each subgroup wears similar clothing and makeup, participates in specific activities, and is drawn to certain types of music and art.”

As with other youth culture subgroups, it is important to differentiate between the “devoted” and the “dabblers or wannabes.”

Alicia Porter Smith, a self-defined Goth, has developed a website devoted to the study of Goth subculture (<http://www.gothicsubculture.com/index.php>). She indicates that the problem of definition and categorization is compounded by the reality that:

“There are things that many Goths *like* that are *not* gothic (Industrial or Classical music). There are things that *are* gothic that many Goths *dislike* (vampires, interest in death). There are things that some people *think* are gothic that are *not* gothic (bands like Marilyn Manson and Nine Inch Nails), and there are things that *do not call themselves* gothic even if they *are considered* gothic by most people (bands like Sisters of Mercy and Dead Can Dance). However, there's no Grand Gothic Judge to decree what is truly Goth and what is not, although there are plenty of people who claim to be it. It's an ambiguous label with many people using it that don't understand what it means. The people who do understand it often have many different definitions.”

To give a sense of subgroups, Smith's website offers the following:

“**Weekenders:** the kids who are just going through a phase, following a trend, or doing it to be cool. They are the ones who like to dress up gothic on weekends and go out to the clubs, but are only familiar with the most superficial aspects of the culture. They are essentially the wannabes, and they eventually move on to something else.”

“**Ultra Goths:** the more stable portion of the community. They have been in the scene for a long time. Usually, they are more extreme in appearance than others. There are other definitions for Ultra Goths. In its use here, it is meant to designate those people for whom gothic is who they are, not what they dress up as. In a glossary she further notes that they are usually over 20 years old. Often used to designate the gothic snobs, ones who have a ‘more gothic than thou’ attitude.”

“**Satanists** includes some Theatrical and Experimental Satanists and some Proclaimed Satanists. This is a very small percentage of Goths. Satanists can be found in almost any random group of people. They are not exclusively Goths.”

“**Vampires** also comprise a very small percentage of Goths. These are the people who are excessively fixated on vampires and want to look like a vampire and/or drink blood. There are many people who have an interest in vampires, but in this category we specifically mean those who are a little too enthusiastic.”

In a glossary, she further notes the following subgroups:

“**mopey Goths:** Goths who have an overdeveloped sense of **angst**. These Goths are the ones you may find brooding in dark corners, pondering the pain of existence, wondering why their girlfriend/boyfriend has torn their heart out (again). In general, they tend to take life very seriously.”

“**more gothic than thou**’: A sarcastic phrase used to designate a snobbish attitude, or describe people who take themselves too seriously. A play on “’holier than thou.’ Someone with a ‘more gothic than thou’ attitude will likely tell you about the gothic bands they are into by saying, ‘You probably haven’t heard of them.’”

“**net.goth**: A term for those Goths who frequently post to the alt.gothic newsgroup and have a fairly well known presence among the internet Goth community.”

“**perky Goth**: Some may say this is an oxymoron, but perky Goths are people who like the gothic style and music, but don’t like the **doom and gloom** attitude some Goths have. Perky Goths try not to take themselves too seriously and don’t brood. They like to have fun. You’ll often find them wearing, for example, body glitter, a mixture of black and non-black clothing, and telling the **mopey Goths** to lighten up. The mopey Goths say that they are missing the point of Gothic entirely.”

What is the impact of this subgroup on society and on subgroup members?

As is the case for many alternative subculture groups, Goths have made their contribution to fashion and the arts and they have also been stigmatized, demonized, and harassed physically and emotionally. Because Goths are a highly visible counterculture subgroup, media, parents, schools, therapists, religious organizations, and law enforcement authorities have paid considerable attention to them mainly as a potential threat to established norms and institutions. At the same time, concern has been expressed that publicizing and overreacting to the subgroup will increase its attractiveness for youth who are leaning toward rebellious, antisocial, or attention-seeking behavior.

With respect to hurting themselves, Young, Sweeting and West (2006a) describe a propensity among Goths towards self-harm. In their research, they found current Goth identification

“strongly associated with lifetime prevalence of self harm and attempted suicide, with a prevalence of 53% for self harm (any method): 47% for self harm involving cutting, scratching or scoring; and 45% for lifetime suicide attempt among the most highly identified.... Although some other subcultures were also associated with self harm (Punk Mosher) the association was strongest for Goth....”

Young and his colleagues suggest that “Self harm could be a normative component of Goth subculture including emulation of subcultural icons or peers who self harm (modeling mechanisms). Alternatively, it could be explained by selection, with young people with a particular propensity to self harm being attracted to the subculture. ... Our data suggest that both processes are involved with selection mechanisms possibly being more likely.”

Others have responded to the research with different explanations for some of the behavior described as pathological. Phillipov (2006) stressed: “While the authors seek to link cutting, scratching, and scoring to depression, attempted suicide, and psychiatric illness, these techniques can be practised for a range of reasons. For example, in some subcultural contexts, they are used to induce fine scarring in decorative patterns on the body, much like tattooing or body piercing.” And, Taubert and Kandasamy (2006) assert that the diversity among Goth subgroups precludes overgeneralization about self-harm.

It is reasonable to speculate that some in the Goth youth subculture may have been abused at home or elsewhere. And, they often may be overwhelmed with feelings of anxiety, anger, persecution, alienation, and other negative emotions and will almost inevitably be seen by observers as depressed and distrustful.

From a motivational perspective, it is likely that many who overidentify with and immerse themselves in a youth subculture do so as a reaction to threats to their feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness with others (Deci & Ryan, 2006). Some may see opportunities for enhancing such feelings. And researcher Robert Young at the University of Glasgow is quoted as suggesting that “rather than posing a risk, it’s also possible that by belonging to the goth subculture, [some] young people are gaining valuable social and emotional support from their peers” (Vince, 2006).

What are the prevalent policy and practice efforts to address negative impact?

Those concerned most about the negative impact of youth cultural subgroups tend to be parents, schools, peers, health professionals, law enforcement, and religious groups. Most are unsure of what might be effective. The intervention focus usually is reactive. Police respond to criminal activity; schools react to behavior they see as barriers to learning and teaching; parents try to counter those life style practices of which they disapprove; so do many peers; health professionals treat and try to prevent physical and emotional harm to self and others; religious groups range from those that demonize Goths to those who want to find ways to be helpful in clarifying the positives and negatives stemming from the subculture. Permeating many of the reactive interventions is a tendency to isolate those who identify with the subgroup and to use scare tactics in hopes they will drop out of the group.

At schools, the first emphasis generally is on social control strategies, including zero tolerance policies (e.g., dress codes, punishment for rule infringement, behavioral interventions, expulsion, suspension). Then, some attention is paid to providing school personnel and parents with knowledge, skills, materials, and referrals. Finally, support staff may play a role in (a) advocating for the health and safety of students, (b) identifying those at risk, (c) disseminating information and new knowledge, and (d) providing interventions for those in need (Rutledge, Rimer, & Scott, 2008; Shapiro, 2008).

Whether or not the behaviors are labeled as indications of pathology, those who cut, scratch, score, pierce, and so forth may need medication to treat infections and prevent tetanus and ensure immunity to hepatitis. And those who engage in sexual activity and other risky behaviors need regular access to a range of physical and mental health supports. As the national health care reform discussion has underscored, access to such supports by young people remains problematic.

Any Data on Intervention Impact?

Data on interventions designed to deal with the negative impact of most youth subculture groups must be extrapolated from interventions designed to prevent or end specific behaviors or encourage youth to disassociate from groups such as gangs and cults. In general, available findings indicate a variety of practices show promise for preventing specific behavior problems, but this is no recipe for those who want to stop youth from aligning with a subculture such as the Goths. There are no evidence based practices for addressing the complexities involved in preventing such involvement. Some interveners may be tempted to use practices designed to scare a youngster out of the subgroup or to employ techniques used by cult deprogrammers. Available evidence suggests that such efforts not only may do more harm than good, their use also raises significant legal and ethical issues.

Possible New Directions

From the perspective of our Center’s work, addressing concerns related to the Goth subculture should be proactive, multifaceted, and comprehensive. Moreover, the approach must avoid traditional tendencies to look at subgroups such as Goths as discrete from other groups. It is true that

some facets of intervening with Goths differ from dealing with other youth subculture groups; however, it also is the case that concerns raised by many subgroups overlap. Below and in the box on the next page, we offer a perspective about policy and practice related to all students with a few examples to illustrate how specific considerations related to Goths 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 the subgroup
- > establishing working alliances to dialogue with members of the subgroup (e.g., about what behaviors can and cannot be accommodated, including codes for dress; about "safe" places for the subgroup to congregate at school and in the community)

- *Intervening when problems are noted*

For instance:

- > implementing agreed upon accommodations
- > ensuring subgroup membership isn't interfering with success at school (e.g., enhancing regular attendance and motivated participation)
- > protecting the subgroup (e.g., from bullying or harassment)
- > providing medical, mental health, and learning supports for the subgroup (e.g., related to self-injurious behavior such as cutting and social, emotional, and learning problems)

- *Attending to chronic and severe problems*

For instance:

- > identifying and referring subgroup members for appropriate individual interventions (e.g., related to clinical depression, suicidal thinking)
- > establish a safety net of support (e.g., through school, family, community mental and physical health providers, social service and juvenile justice agencies)

By weaving school and community resources together, a more positive and effective approach can be taken in addressing concerns related to students who identify with the Goth subculture. In contrast to overemphasizing social control strategies, such an approach can contribute to development of a positive school climate and to enhancing the academic and personal well-being of those who at this time in their lives are devoted to the Goth lifestyle.

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>

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A Few Additional References

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Source for Additional Information

See our Center's online clearinghouse Quick Find on
Youth Culture and Subgroups
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/youthculture.htm>

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.