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# Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Research

A Study of Youth in Detention in Denver, October 1997–September 1998

192982

Prepared by

**The Piton Foundation**

Terri Bailey, Research Officer  
Diane DiGiacomo Peck, Communications Officer  
Stephanie Nelson, Research Associate

**Colorado Division of Criminal Justice**

Kim English, Research Director  
Diane Pasini-Hill, Data Collection Manager

**Denver, Colorado**

September 1999

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Steele

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All across America, communities are searching for answers to the serious problem behaviors adolescents today are engaging in — drug abuse, school failure, teen pregnancy, violence and, ultimately, in some cases, behavior that is criminal.

In Denver, in 1997, The Piton Foundation and the Colorado Division of Criminal Justice embarked on a research effort to try to better understand juvenile delinquents. What factors in young people's lives might contribute to juveniles committing crimes or might help protect them from such behavior? Are there indicators to tell us when or where intervention might be effective?

We began by analyzing data from a sample of youth interviewed at the Gilliam Youth Services Center between 1992 and 1996 as part of the National Institute of Justice's Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) program. Within 48 hours of admission to Gilliam, which serves Denver County, the youth were interviewed and tested for recent drug use. These youth represent juveniles who had been arrested and detained but not convicted of a crime.

In the one-on-one interviews, the juveniles were asked questions regarding their drug and alcohol use, family composition, school status, and other demographic information. *It is important to remember that all the survey data are self-reported, except for the information about what the youth were charged with and their urinalysis results.*

While this information was useful in helping develop a general profile of these youth, we thought that important questions were left unanswered. Can the behaviors of these young people be linked to family history? What role do peers play in the lifestyle of these youth? How do particular neighborhood and community factors affect these youngsters? What factors in young people's lives might contribute to juvenile delinquency or might help protect them from such behavior?

To try to answer these questions, we added an addendum to the drug use questionnaire in 1997.<sup>1</sup> It asked a series of questions designed to more fully understand the problem behaviors young people engage in, the risks faced by young people, and the protective factors that help counter those risks. The addendum was administered over the course of one year. It was loosely developed based on the landmark research conducted by Dr. J. David Hawkins and Dr. Richard Catalano, whose work opened up new understanding about the risk and protective factors that both expose and protect young people in our society.<sup>2</sup>

In their research, Dr. Hawkins, Dr. Catalano and their colleagues reviewed more than 30 years of existing work on the risk factors that increase the chances of adolescents developing behavior problems. Their research identified risk factors in important areas of young people's lives: family, school, peers and community, as well as risk factors that exist within the young people themselves. They also identified "protective factors" that include the individual characteristics of the youth, the bonds that they have with positive adults, and the presence of healthy beliefs and clear standards.

In the following sections, the information we learned about these youth from the addendum is presented. The extent of their problem behaviors is described. Their risk and protective factors are examined. We also report on the observations made by an advisory group of experts who helped develop the addendum and reviewed the findings. This group included a juvenile court judge, the director of the Gilliam Youth Services Center, heads of several projects serving high-risk youth and officials from within the youth-service delivery system.

But first, we present the basic information describing the youth detained at Gilliam Youth Services Center and Dahlia Street Youth Center who we interviewed between October 1997 and September 1998.

### Background of the Detained Youth

Only a small number of Denver County youth arrested or issued a summons to appear in court are admitted to Gilliam or another youth detention center. Many juveniles who are stopped by police are simply lectured and released on the spot. Some might be issued a summons to appear in court, while others are arrested and released. And, just a fraction of those juveniles who are arrested and detained are convicted of a crime and committed to the Division of Youth Corrections. For instance, in a sample year, 16 percent of all arrests of juveniles in Denver resulted in detention and one percent of arrests resulted in conviction and commitment.<sup>3</sup>

The original sample for our analysis was 2,214 youth at Gilliam Youth Services Center who were interviewed and tested for recent drug use between 1992 and 1996. Between October 1997 and September 1998, we interviewed an additional 398 youth with the addendum questions. All were tested for recent drug use and the charged offense was recorded from arrest records. All other data presented are as reported by the youth themselves.

<sup>1</sup> In September 1995, Gilliam Youth Services Center was the subject of a lawsuit resulting in a significant decrease in its daily population. In order to maintain the desired male sample size, the youth we surveyed using the addendum also included males from Dahlia Street Youth Center.

<sup>2</sup> Risk-Focused Prevention: Using the Social Development Strategy (Seattle: Developmental Research and Programs, Inc., 1993). Unless footnoted otherwise, future references in this report to risk and resiliency research refer to this report.

<sup>3</sup> Elements of Change (Colorado Department of Public Safety, Division of Criminal Justice, Vol. 2, No. 3, July 1997).

## INTRODUCTION

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### The Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Research Project Advisory Committee

The Honorable Doris Burd, Judge, Denver County Court

Vel Garner, Director, Gilliam Youth Services Center

Pastor Tastonga Gay-Moore, Grace and Truth Full Gospel  
Pentecostal Church

Allegra (Happy) Haynes, Councilwoman, Denver City Council

David Huizinga, Senior Research Associate, Institute of Behavioral  
Science, University of Colorado at Boulder

Jennifer Mankey, Project Director, Denver Juvenile Justice  
Integrated Treatment Network

Kathy Sandoval, Community Development Director,  
Neighborhood Resource Center of Metropolitan Denver

David DeForest-Stalls, Director, The Spot

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## FINAL REPORT

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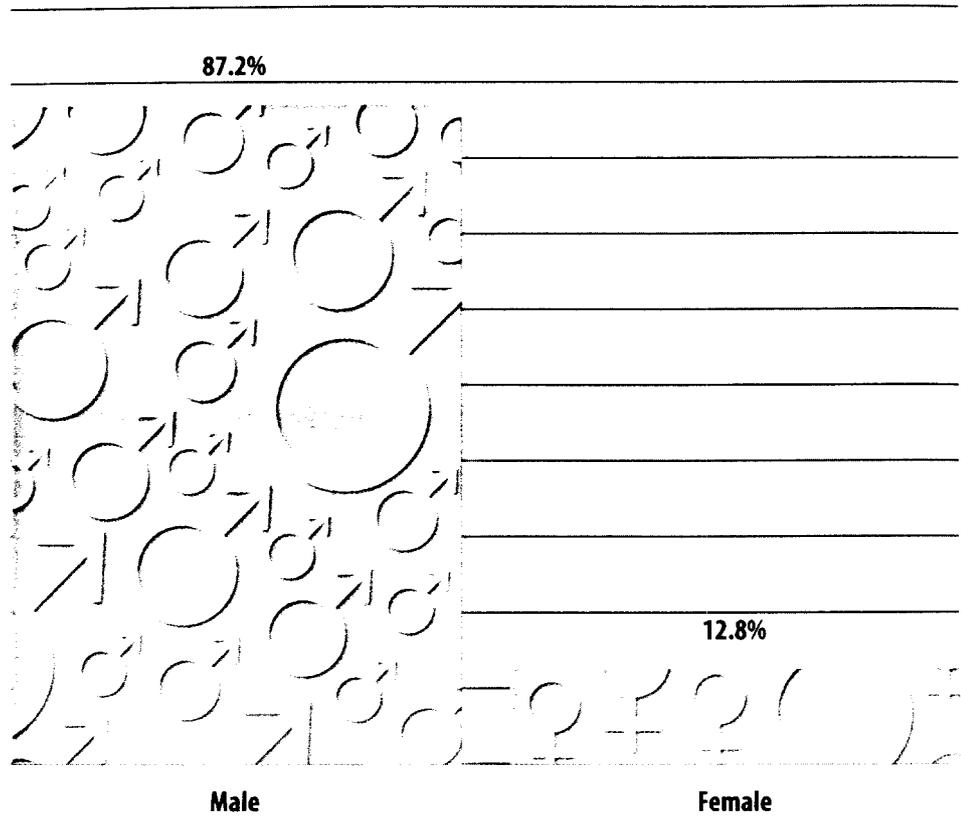
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### Characteristics of the Surveyed Youth

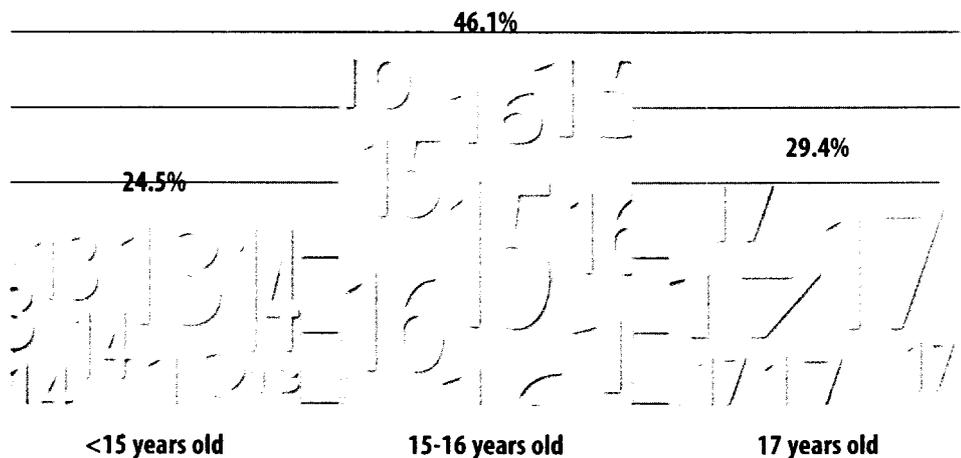
Of the detained youth we interviewed between October 1997 and September 1998, 87 percent of the juveniles were male and 13 percent were female.

#### Characteristics of the Surveyed Youth — Sex



One in four, or 25 percent, of the youth surveyed were below the age of 15, 46 percent were age 15 or 16 and 29 percent were 17 years of age.

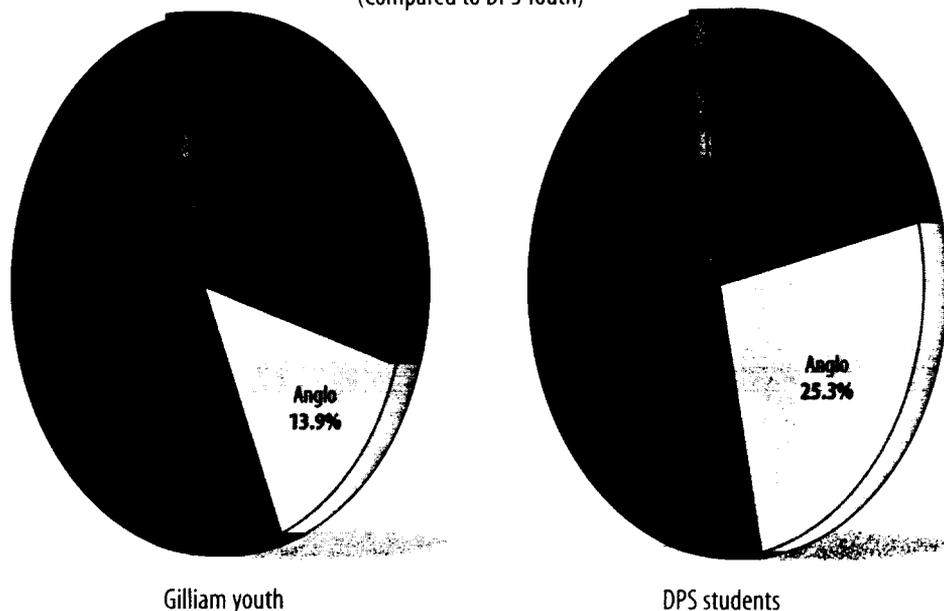
#### Characteristics of the Surveyed Youth — Age



Regarding ethnicity, 52 percent of the youth were Latino, 30 percent were black and 14 percent were white. In comparison, 48 percent of all Denver Public School Students were Latino, 21 percent were African American and 25 percent were white, according to statistics from the 1998-99 school year.

### Characteristics of the Surveyed Youth — Ethnicity

(Compared to DPS Youth)



Our survey of the nearly 400 youth in juvenile detention revealed the existence of most of the risk factors in the young people's lives that the national research has identified. The common characteristics were:

- They were boys.
- They had problems in school academically and behaviorally, beginning at an early age.
- Drugs and alcohol played a big role in their lives.
- It was typical for them to have family members who had been in jail.
- Their family lives were disorganized. They were typically living in single-parent families, or with other relatives or friends rather than with a parent.
- They had been in trouble with the law before.

### Girls at Risk

Research indicates that given equal exposure to risks, girls are less likely to develop health and behavior problems in adolescence than are boys. Because there were only 54 girls interviewed as part of our study, we could not draw any conclusions as to whether their gender was a protective factor. We did make, however, some interesting observations about the girls we surveyed.

In respect to their charged crimes, almost 20 percent of girls were being detained for violent offenses (assault, robbery, homicide, rape) in comparison with nine percent of the boys. On the other end of the spectrum, 60 percent of girls were being held for technical violations (such as juvenile specific offenses, like truancy and running away, and probation or parole violations) compared with 30 percent of boys.

*"Many times girls are in Gilliam that shouldn't be there. A fairly decent percentage of them would be a social service placement, but there's no place else to put them."*

Vel Garner, Director, Gilliam Youth Services Center

Related to problem behaviors, girls seemed to have more of a problem with drug use than the boys did. According to their responses:

- Girls were more likely than boys were to report having tried drugs. For example, 20 percent of girls reported ever using cocaine versus 16 percent of boys; and 35 percent of girls reported using LSD versus 25 percent of boys. However, urinalysis results indicate that girls were less likely than boys were to have recently used drugs. Fifty-six percent of girls tested negative for all drugs compared to just 34 percent of boys; 40 percent of girls tested positive for marijuana compared to 54 percent of boys; and only 4 percent of girls tested positive for drugs other than marijuana compared to 12 percent of boys.

*"That girls are involved in delinquency, including some aggression /violence is in agreement with other bodies of research, including later domestic violence. That fights with family members is higher for girls is interesting, and the general public may have some disbelief...but not researchers in the field."*

David Huizinga, Senior Research Associate,  
Institute of Behavioral Science,  
University of Colorado at Boulder

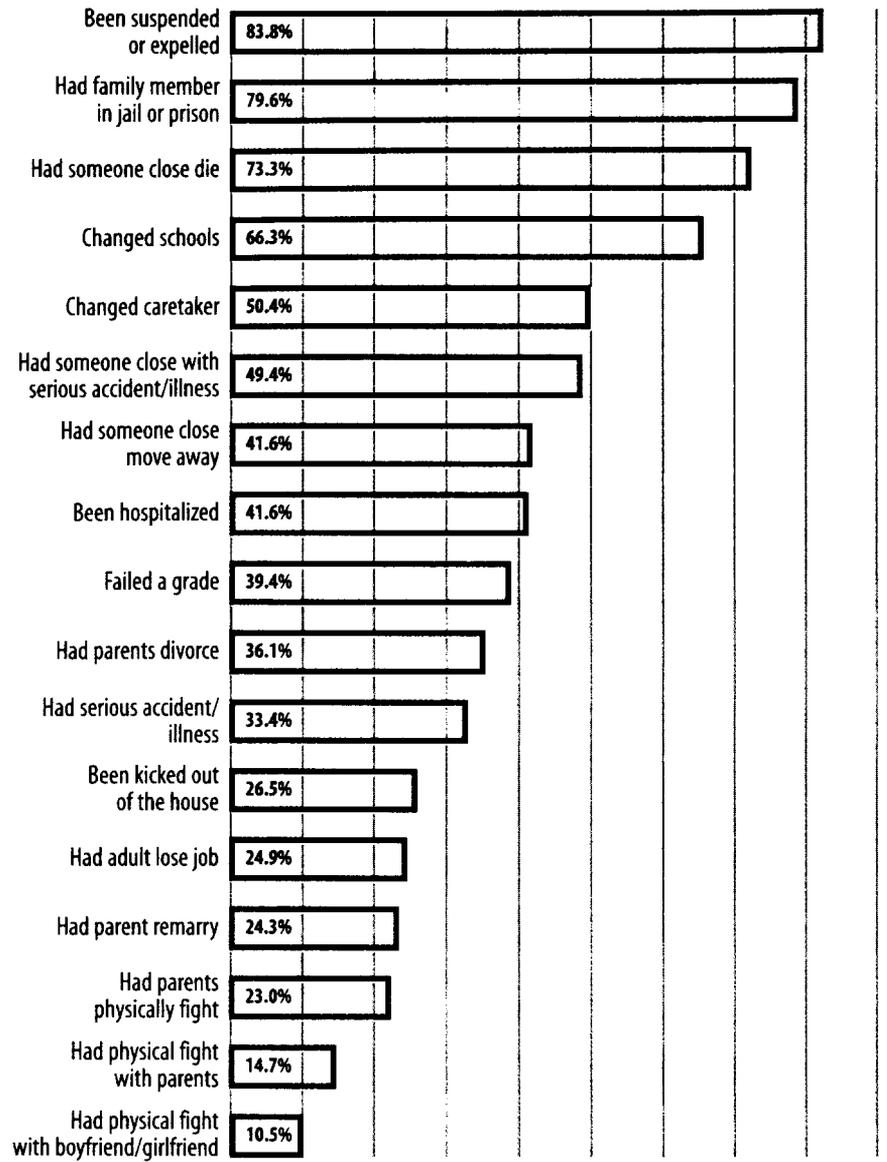
According to their responses, a larger proportion of the girls, compared to the boys, experienced negative family situations that could put them at risk for delinquent behavior. For instance,

- A larger proportion of the girls were victims of abuse. For example, more girls reported having been physically abused compared with the boys (26% vs. 17%). And many more reported having been sexually abused (30% vs. 3% of boys), although we believe that boys may underreport sexual abuse.
- More girls (24%) than boys (13%) had been in physical fights with parents or caretakers. And more girls had been kicked out of the house (57% vs. 49%).
- While slightly fewer girls than boys reported that they had a family member who had been in jail (71% vs. 81%), girls were much more likely than boys to have had a mother who had been in jail (59% vs. 24%).

The chart below presents a striking illustration of the circumstances that have influenced these boys and girls in their young lives.

### Youth Experience of Life Events

Of the youth we interviewed, the percentage who had experienced specific events:



# PROBLEM BEHAVIORS

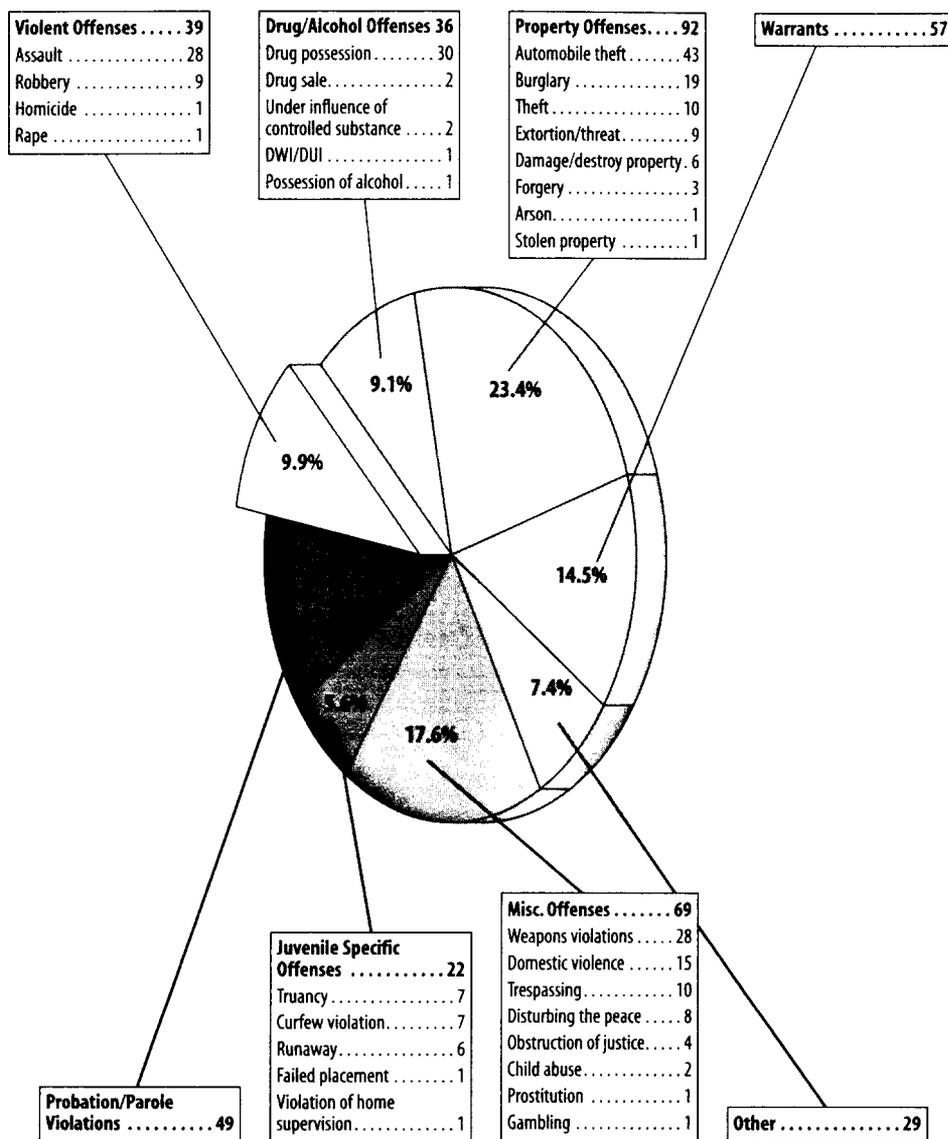
By the very fact that the youth in our study had been arrested and were being detained at the Gilliam Youth Services Center and Dahlia Street Youth Center, it is evident that their problem behaviors had become serious. But, to put adolescent problem behavior in perspective, it is interesting to note though that studies have found that nearly every juvenile commits at least one delinquent act before turning 18, although most are never arrested.<sup>4</sup>

Studies document three developmental pathways juveniles take to problem behavior and serious offending: the authority conflict pathway, such as truancy and running away from home; the covert pathway, such as property damage followed by more serious delinquency, like car theft; and, the overt pathway, starting with minor aggression, followed by more serious violence. The most serious juvenile offenders travel through all three of these pathways. Most juveniles, however, do not proceed beyond authority conflict or early covert behavior such as minor property damage.<sup>5</sup>

And while the public's attention and concern in recent years have been focused on violent juvenile behavior, less than 10 percent of the youth we surveyed were involved in a violent offense such as homicide, rape, robbery or aggravated assault. Nine percent were charged with drug/alcohol law violations. A significant portion of the youth (24 percent) were brought in for property offenses, primarily stealing a vehicle, but also burglary and theft.

Bench warrants and probation or parole violations accounted for the arrests of another 27 percent of the youth. Bench warrants are primarily issued for flight, escape or failure to appear, but some are undefined and may indicate a new crime, either violent or nonviolent. Six percent were detained for juvenile specific offenses that include curfew violations, truancy and being runaways. The final one-quarter of the youth were charged with a miscellaneous variety of other offenses, such as weapons violations, disorderly conduct, domestic violence and trespassing.

*"In a lot of cases, the difference between the ones that are on the outside and the ones on the inside is that the ones on the inside got caught."*  
 Dave DeForest-Stalls, Director, The Spot



<sup>4</sup> Howard N. Snyder, "The Juvenile Court and Delinquency Cases," in *The Future of Children*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Winter 1996 (Los Altos, California: The Center for the Future of Children, The David and Lucille Packard Foundation).  
<sup>5</sup> *Guide for Implementing the Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent and Chronic Juvenile Offenders*, (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention).

*"Most of the kids I know that get picked up and detained have some form of warrant violation where they got a ticket, in many cases for spitting on the sidewalk or throwing a cigarette butt down on the ground or loitering. And then they don't go to the hearing."*

Dave DeForest-Stalls, Director, The Spot

*"Research is telling us that essentially the kids who are in the juvenile justice system today were in the juvenile justice system 20 years ago. The incidence of violent behavior has not, in and of itself, increased. Because of the weapons, the lethality of the violent behavior has increased."*

Jennifer Mankey, Project Director,  
Denver Juvenile Justice Integrated Treatment Network

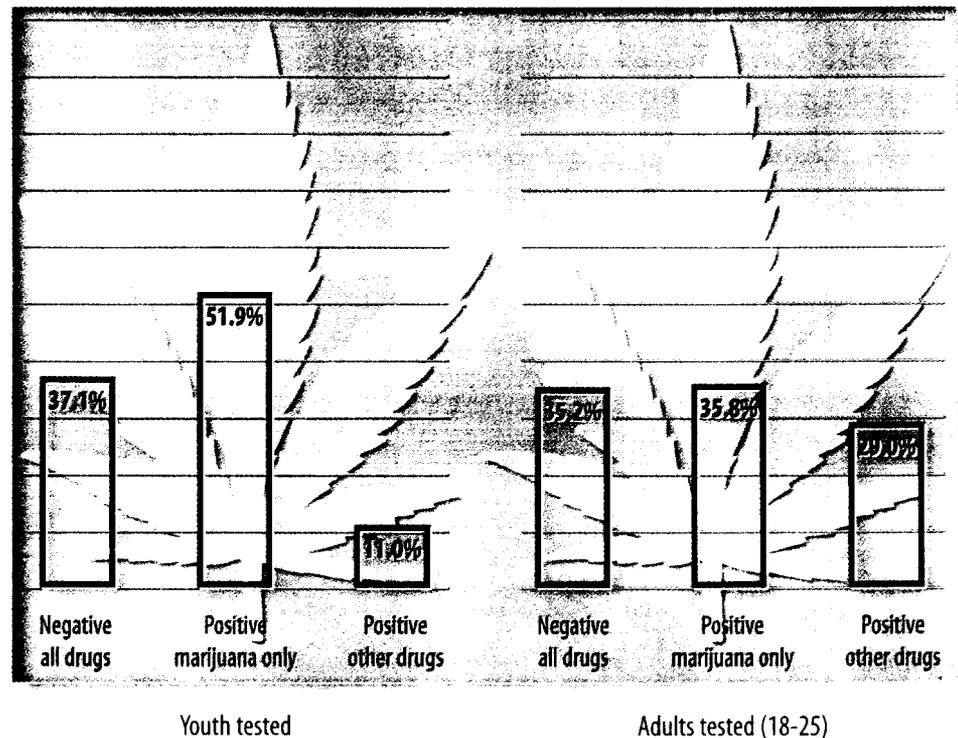
Who is detained at Gilliam has been notably affected by a lawsuit related to overcrowding filed in 1994. The lawsuit resulted in limiting the number of juveniles who could be held in Gilliam. This capitation of the population size brought about policy changes that resulted primarily in a significant decrease in the number of juveniles detained for presumably less serious warrant offenses (from an average of 191 in the three years prior to the lawsuit to 32 in 1996). The number of juveniles detained for violent offenses increased only slightly (from an average of 48 in the years prior to the lawsuit to 53 in 1996); but actually decreased to 39 in the 12 months the addendum questionnaire was administered.

It is significant to note that for the majority of these youth, this arrest was not an isolated brush with the law. Six in 10 of the youth reported that they had been arrested at least one other time during the past 12 months. The average number of prior arrests in the past year was 2.2. And more than one-third of the youth (36%) said they had served time during the past 12 months.

### Use of Marijuana Widespread Among Detained Youth

Drug use was prevalent among the youth detained. More than one out of every two youth surveyed over the 12-month period from October 1997 through September 1998 tested positive for marijuana, when tested within 48 hours of admission into detention. Another 11 percent of the youth tested positive for other drugs, most often cocaine, or sometimes heroin. Alcohol and LSD are not tested for by the urinalysis.

The tests revealed that more juvenile male detainees tested positive for drugs (66%) than females (44%). By ethnicity, however, there was no statistical difference in the drug use of the youth.



In the adolescent population in general, marijuana is the most widely abused illicit drug. Studies have associated it with poorer grades, dropping out of school, depression, delinquency and use of other illegal drugs.<sup>6</sup>

By comparison, about the same percentage of detained adults age 18 to 25 in Denver tested positive for drugs. But half of those adults tested positive for drugs other than marijuana, most often cocaine.

### Survey Results Regarding Drug Use

The youths' own responses to questions related to alcohol and other drug use confirm the seriousness of their drug problems.

- The vast majority (95%) of the juveniles reported using alcohol, marijuana or tobacco at some time in their lives. Most, 69 percent, reported using all three.
- Of those who reported using these common drugs, 81 percent had used tobacco in the past three days, 51 percent had used marijuana, 37 percent had used alcohol, 19 percent had used cocaine and 11 percent reported using LSD.
- Almost half (49%) said they had bought illegal drugs in the last year; almost a quarter (23%) reported selling illegal drugs.

<sup>6</sup> The Waste Management, Inc. Survey of Parent-Child Dialogue on Drug Abuse, Gallup Organization, Inc. (Oak Brook, IL: Waste Management, Inc., 1989).

## Violence

The violent behavior of adolescents today is a topic of enormous general interest and concern. The answers to our survey questions related to violent behavior corroborate the magnitude of this problem for these youth — not only as perpetrators of violence, but as victims as well.

Nine out of 10 of the youth reported that they had been in a physical fight with someone outside of their family. Forty-one percent said they had been in a physical fight with a family member. Almost half of the youth surveyed had been involved in a fight during the past year in which a group of friends fought another group; 14 percent had fought once, 20 percent 2-4 times and 13 percent 5 or more times.

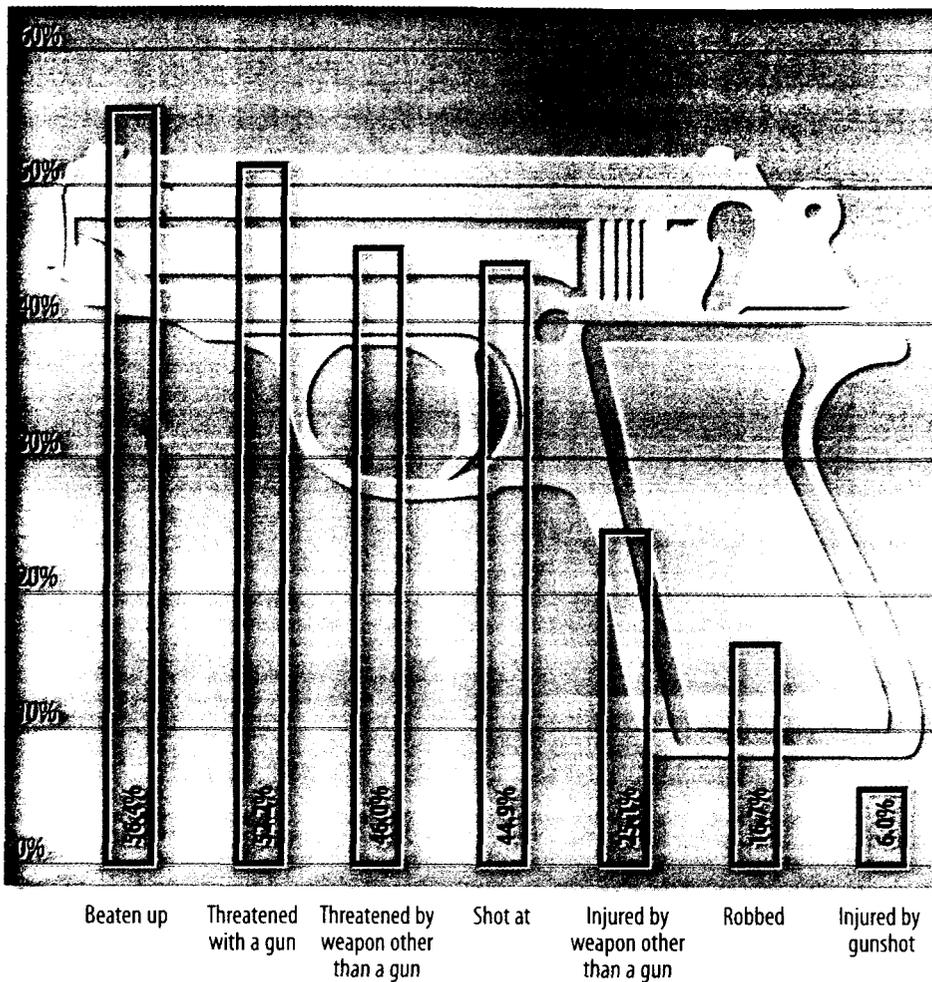
Other key findings on violent behaviors:

- 52 percent of the youth reported that they had at some time carried a weapon (a gun, knife or club)
- 29 percent said they had at some time hurt someone seriously (so they required bandages or seeing a doctor) once or twice; 15 percent said they had hurt someone seriously three or more times.

More than half of the juveniles had been victims of violence themselves. Fifty-six percent had been beaten up; 52 percent had been threatened with a gun; 46 percent had been threatened by a weapon other than a gun; 45 percent had been threatened by a gun; 25 percent had been injured by a weapon other than a gun; 19 percent had been robbed; 6 percent had been shot at.

### Victims of Violence

Percentages of youth claiming to be victimized by various acts of violence.



*"It's just not that big of a deal for our kids to have weapons and violence and somebody shot. Two-thirds of our kids at The Spot said that they know somebody who's been hurt or killed by a gun. Violence is just part of their life. And they live with it."*

Dave DeForest-Stalls, Director, The Spot

## Out-of-School Youth

Almost one in three of the young people we interviewed had either dropped out of school (23%) or had been suspended or expelled (8%) at the time of the interview. Even more compelling, however, is the fact that more than three-quarters (84%) of the youth we interviewed had been suspended or expelled at some time in their lives. On average, these suspensions occurred before the age of 12.

## Teen Pregnancy

Seventeen percent of the juveniles surveyed reported that they had children, 18 percent of the boys and 16 percent of the girls.

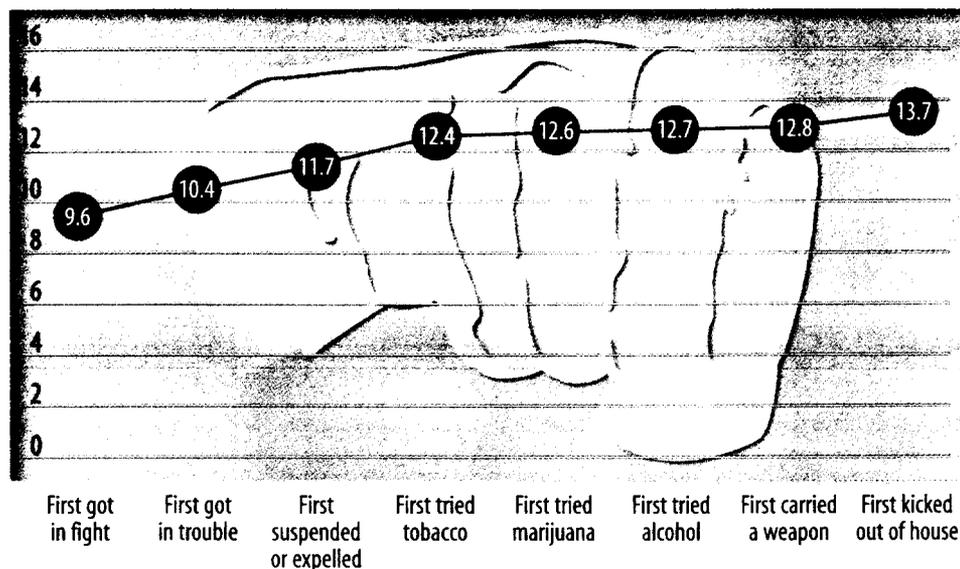
*"If there's going to be some serious issue with a kid, the first place it becomes obvious is at school, before they're in sixth grade. That's the first time it comes to the attention of anybody outside of the family."*

Vel Garner, Director, Gilliam Youth Services Center

## Problem Behaviors Started Early

National research on adolescents indicates that the earlier young people begin committing crimes, using drugs, engaging in violent activities, dropping out of school and becoming sexually active, the greater the likelihood that they will have problems with these behaviors later. As the following chart shows, the surveyed youth did in fact initiate problem behaviors at a very young age.

**Average Age at Which Youth Began Problem Behaviors**



## Youth Accepting of Problem Behaviors

The young people we interviewed indicated an acceptance of behaviors like drug use, violence and criminal activity. The national research on risk-focused prevention indicates that a young person's acceptance of behaviors like drug use, violence and criminal activity places him or her at higher risk of engaging in the behavior themselves. In our study, for example:

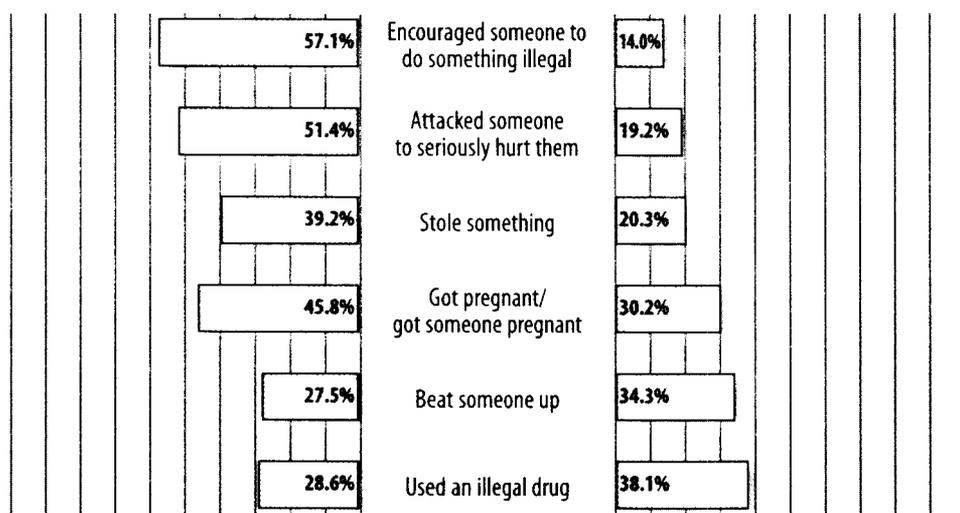
- 38 percent of the young people said they would not feel "very guilty or ashamed" if they used illegal drugs;
- 35 percent would not feel very guilty if they beat someone up; and
- 20 percent would not feel very guilty if they stole something.

Following are their responses to our question regarding their acceptance of problem behaviors.

## Favorable Attitudes Toward Problem Behaviors

% who would feel very guilty or ashamed if:

% who would not feel very guilty or ashamed if:

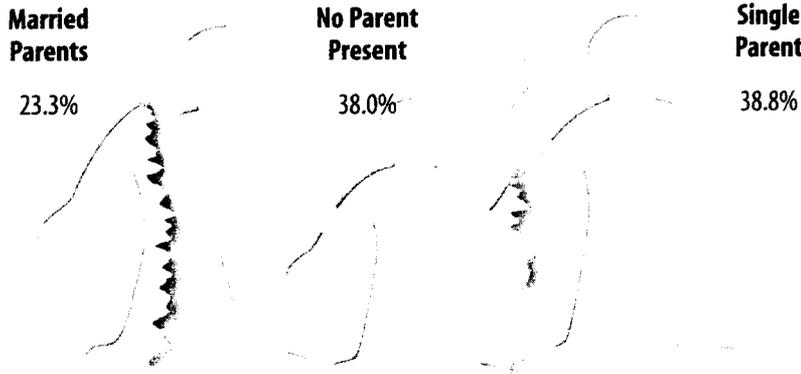


Our survey indicates that the youth we interviewed lived in unstable family situations. While it was not surprising that more than one-third of the young people reported they were living with a single parent, it was more surprising that more than a one-third (38%) of the young people, who were between the ages of 11 and 18, were not living with a parent at all. Despite changes in the structure and stability of their family situations, it is interesting to note that the majority of the youth (81%) said they get along well with their parents and/or caretaker, whoever they defined the caretaker as. It could be another family member, often, for instance, a grandmother, or it could be a friend's family.

## FAMILY LIFE

### Family Life

Detained youth who live with:



*"I think it depends on how you describe family. There's always somebody in their family they relate to, whether it's a grandmother or an uncle or an aunt, some person. It's not necessarily the immediate legal guardian or guardians. Sometimes it's an older brother, older sister."*

Vel Garner, Director, Gilliam Youth Services Center

*"Most of the youth I know do not have a real close relationship with a male. Most of them will say they feel close to their mother or grandmother."*

Dave DeForest-Stalls, Director, The Spot

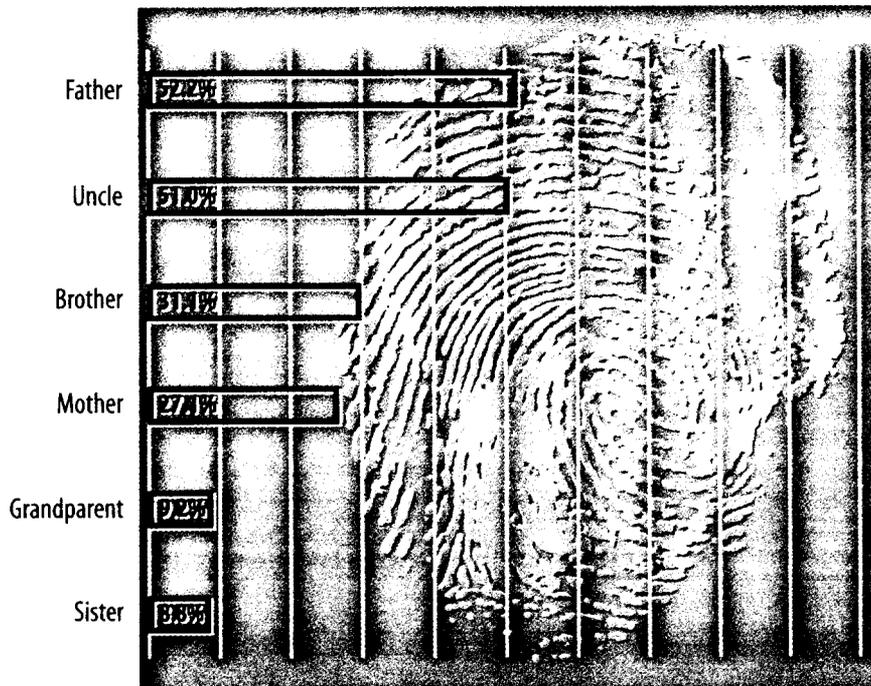
### Family History of Problem Behaviors

Research has substantiated that children who are raised in families with problem behaviors, such as substance abuse, criminal activity, teen parenting and educational failure, have an increased risk of exhibiting the problems themselves. That proved to be true for the young people we interviewed:

- 80 percent of the youth we surveyed reported having family members who had been in jail.
- Four in 10 (41 percent) of the children reported that their mothers had less than a 12th grade education and more than one-quarter had fathers who had less than a 12th grade education.
- More than one in three (38 percent) of the youth were born to a teenage mother.

### Family Members in Jail

Percentage of detained youth who have family members in jail:



*"Many of them have one or the other or both parents in jail, either at one time or all the time. They all know somebody who's in jail. It certainly has some impact on them. If nothing else, they're desensitized to the whole thing; it isn't a problem."*

Vel Garner, Director, Gilliam Youth Services Center

*"You talk to the kids about going to Gilliam, going to Lookout Mountain or even going to Cañon City, and it's not what they would prefer, but it's not that big a deal. I mean, they've been there; their brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles have been there or are there."*

Dave DeForest-Stalls, Director, The Spot

*"Abuse is an area where you don't get the truest picture from boys. I think there's a lot more abuse than is reported, at least from my discussions with kids."*

Vel Garner, Director, Gilliam Youth Services Center

## Family Conflict

According to Drs. Hawkins and Catalano, regardless of family structure, children raised in families high in conflict appear to be at risk for many problem behaviors — substance abuse, violence, teen pregnancy and educational failure, as well as delinquency. But persistent, serious conflict between primary caregivers, or between caregivers and children, was not the norm for most of the young people we interviewed.

- Twenty-three percent reported that their parents/caretakers have physical fights with each other.
- Eighteen percent reported that their parents/caretakers had at some point become so upset with them that they left bruises, welts or other kinds of injuries like broken bones or made them bleed. Of these, 70 percent reported being abused more than once.
- Seven percent reported that they had been sexually abused, most often by a friend of the family (44%), a stranger (28%), another relative (19%), or their guardian (12%). None reported sexual abuse by a parent.

## Relationship with Family

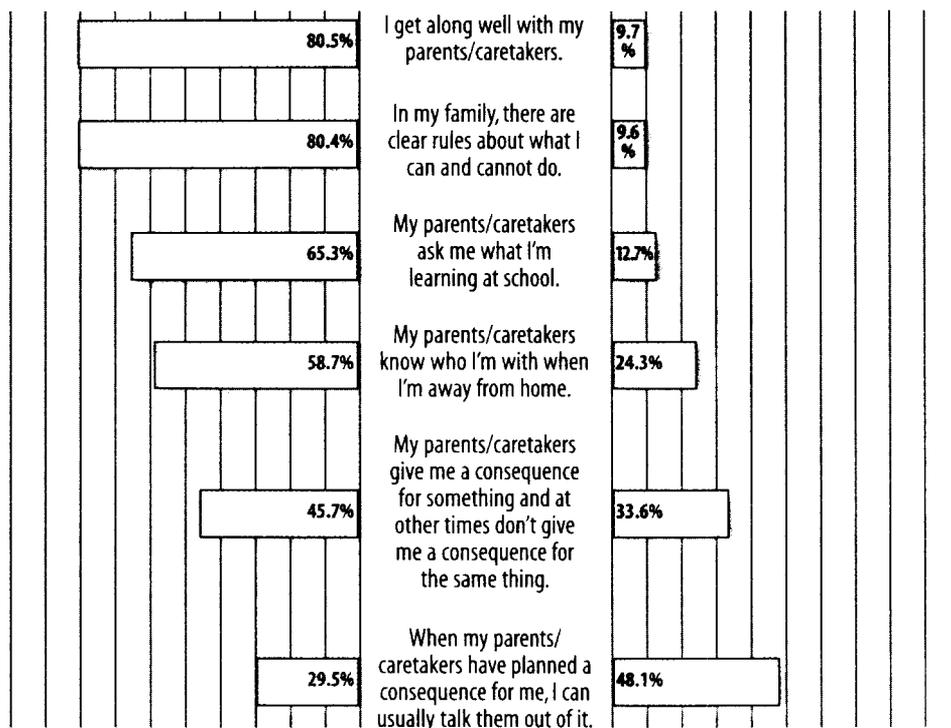
Research also shows that the attitudes of parents/caretakers toward a young person's behavior have a strong influence. In fact, the research indicates that one of the most effective ways to reduce children's risk of developing problem behaviors is to strengthen their bonds with positive, pro-social adults and peers. The majority of the youth (80.5%) in our survey told us they have close relationships with their parents and/or other adults, but there was no way to determine if these adults were "a good influence." In addition, as the following table indicates, the youth indicated they feel that their parents/caretakers had clear expectations of them.

## Family Management

Percentage of youth who responded to statements of family issues:

% who agree or strongly agree

% who disagree or strongly disagree



*"I was intrigued by their perception of how they felt close to their families. It is contrary to what my understanding is from having worked with a lot of these kids, that they cannot communicate with their family, and they often feel alienated."*

The Honorable Doris Burd, Judge, Denver County Court

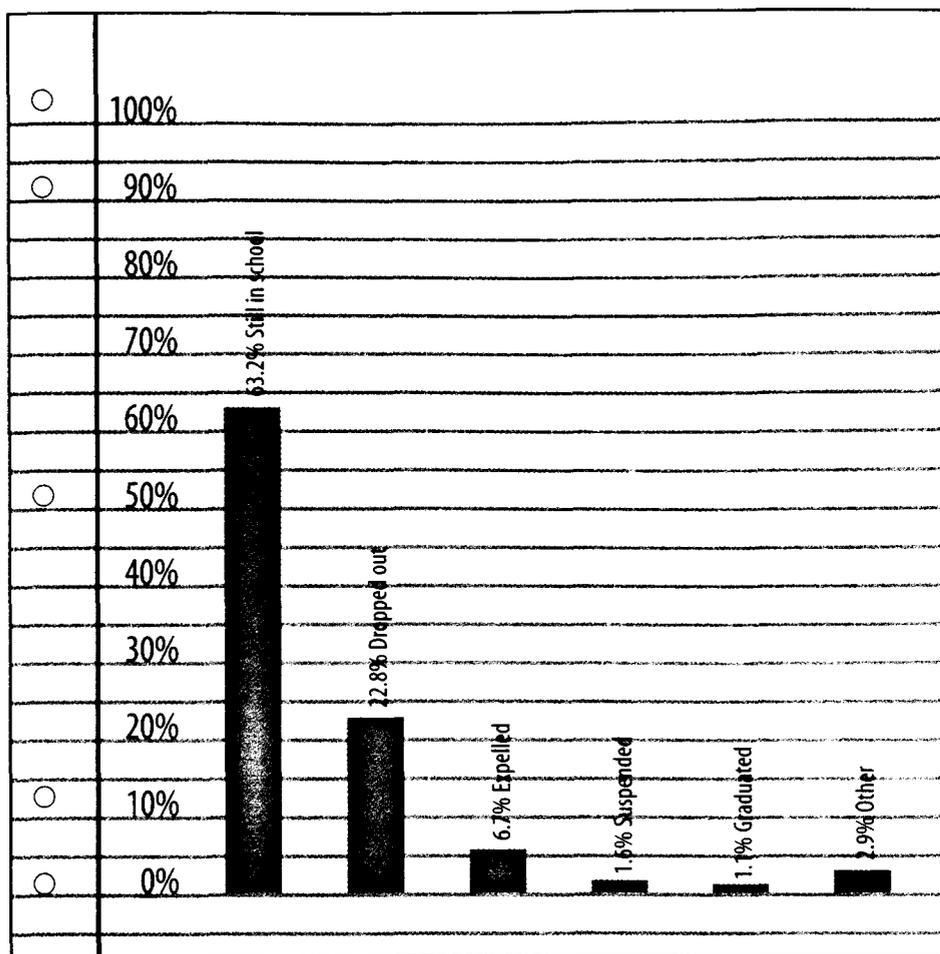
What's more, according to the youth we surveyed, their parents/caretakers had high expectations for their school success. Seventy-five percent said their parents expect them to not only graduate from high school but to go on to college; 65 percent of them said their parents expect them to graduate from college.

Fourteen percent of the youth reported that their parents/caretakers get drunk and seven percent said they use drugs. Seventy-two percent also said that their parents/caretakers would be "upset" or extremely "upset" to learn they had been drinking, while 28 percent of the youth said their parent or caretaker would be "only a little upset" or "not upset at all."

Thirty-seven percent of the youth we interviewed were not in school at the time of their interview. The majority of those had either dropped out (23%) or been suspended or expelled (8%).

## SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

### School Experience



*"School is the one institution that we have in place where kids are suppose to succeed. And when they feel that they're not succeeding there, they are so disenfranchised."*

Jennifer Mankey, Project Director,  
Denver Juvenile Justice Integrated Treatment Network

According to research on delinquency, the risk factors related to a young person's school experiences fall into three categories, early and persistent antisocial behavior, academic failure in elementary school, and a lack of commitment to school.

### Early and Persistent Antisocial Behavior

Drs. Hawkins and Catalano's research indicates that boys who are aggressive in grades K-3 are at higher risk for substance abuse and juvenile delinquency. And, when this early, aggressive behavior is combined with isolation or withdrawal, the research shows there is an even greater risk. Hyperactivity or attention deficit disorder also combines with aggressive behavior to increase risk.

This risk factor also includes early behaviors such as misbehaving in school, skipping school and getting into fights with other children. These behaviors were very much present in the lives of the youth we interviewed. For example:

- More than eight in 10 (84%) had at some point been suspended or expelled from school; on average, these youth had been suspended or expelled 2.2 times.
- The average age at which they were first suspended or expelled was under 12; more than one in four had been suspended or expelled before the age of 10; 37 percent before the age of 12.
- More than three-quarters of the youth surveyed reported that they had been in a physical fight within the last year; the vast majority (73%) had been in more than one fight. In fact, 28 percent said they had fought more than five times in the last year.
- The average age at which they first got into a physical fight was 9.6 years of age; almost half (46%) got into their first fight before the age of 10.

*"Almost every single kid I've encountered at The Spot has had trouble with school. They just do not do well in a big environment, big classes or sitting in desks for hours."*

Dave DeForest-Stalls, Director, The Spot

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*"If there's going to be some serious issue with a kid, you notice it in elementary school, because their antisocial behavior becomes very obvious, because they're not controllable in school."*

Vel Garner, Director, Gilliam Youth Services Center

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*"These kids still have dreams and aspirations to do something."*

Vel Garner, Director, Gilliam Youth Services Center

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*"These data concentrate on the student's behavior in school. What is missing is the failure of the school system that the students are exposed to. Is there enough counseling available? Does the school have the ability to adapt to a violent kid? Are the classes too big?"*

Dave DeForest-Stalls, Director, The Spot

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## **Academic Failure in Elementary School**

If children begin failing in school by the late elementary grades, the research shows their risk of problem behaviors increases. About four in 10 (39%) of the children we interviewed reported that they had failed a grade in school: 28 percent before the age of 10 and 34 percent before the age of 12.

Related to their recent academic performance, however, almost two-thirds reported that they had received mostly Cs or above during their last year in school. And when we asked them how they thought their academic performance was compared to other students, 56 percent said they thought they were average, 20 percent reported being above average or one of the best, and 24 percent reported being below average or one of the worst.

## **Lack of Commitment to School**

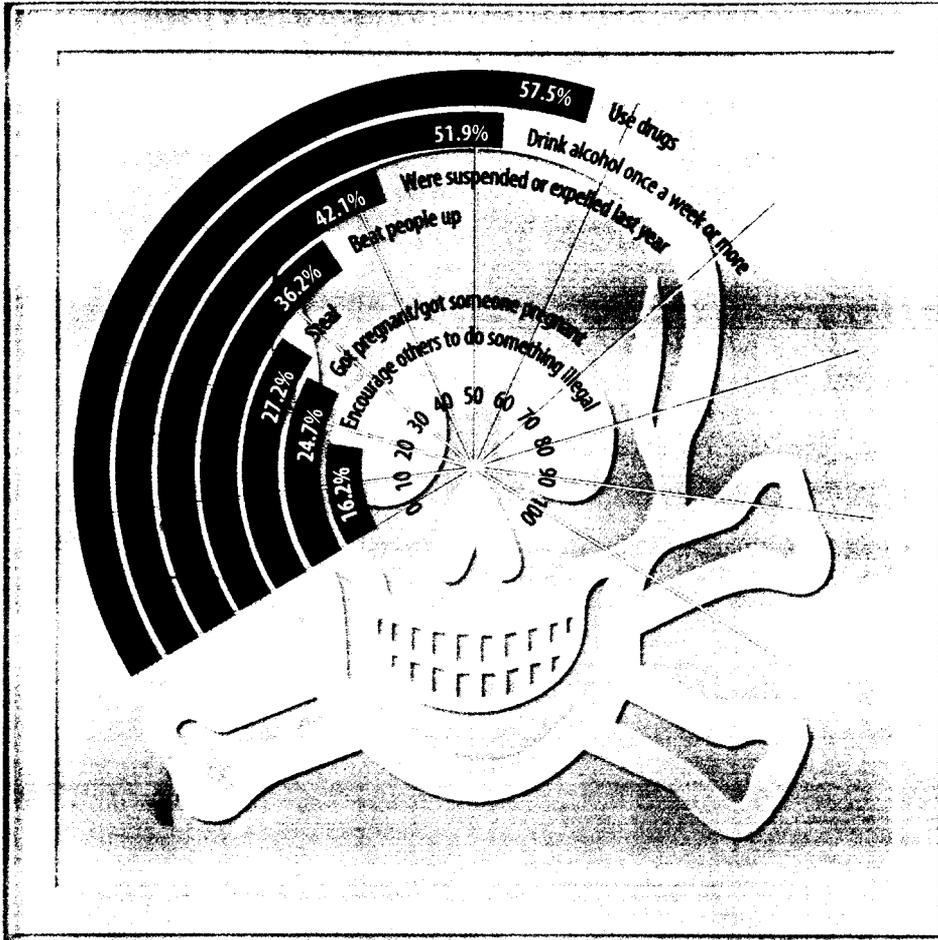
Young people with a weak commitment to school are at higher risk for problem behaviors, the research has found. While 31 percent of the youth we interviewed had either dropped out or been suspended or expelled, the remaining youth we interviewed voiced a strong commitment to school. For instance, 60 percent of the youth that were still in school agreed with the statement "I care about my school."

They also expressed a strong desire to succeed in school. Most of the young people (59%) said they wanted to graduate from college, compared to 27 percent who wanted to complete high school or just three percent who said they wanted to go as far as trade or vocational school. Of those who said they wanted to finish college though, only half (54%) thought they would make it.

Studies have found that associating with delinquent peers is strongly and consistently related to delinquency. The youth we interviewed did seem to have strong associations with friends engaging in problem behaviors. For example, 58 percent of the youth said that half or more of their friends use drugs and 52 percent said that half or more of their friends drink alcohol once a week or more.

**Dangerous Behaviors**

Half or more of friends engage in:



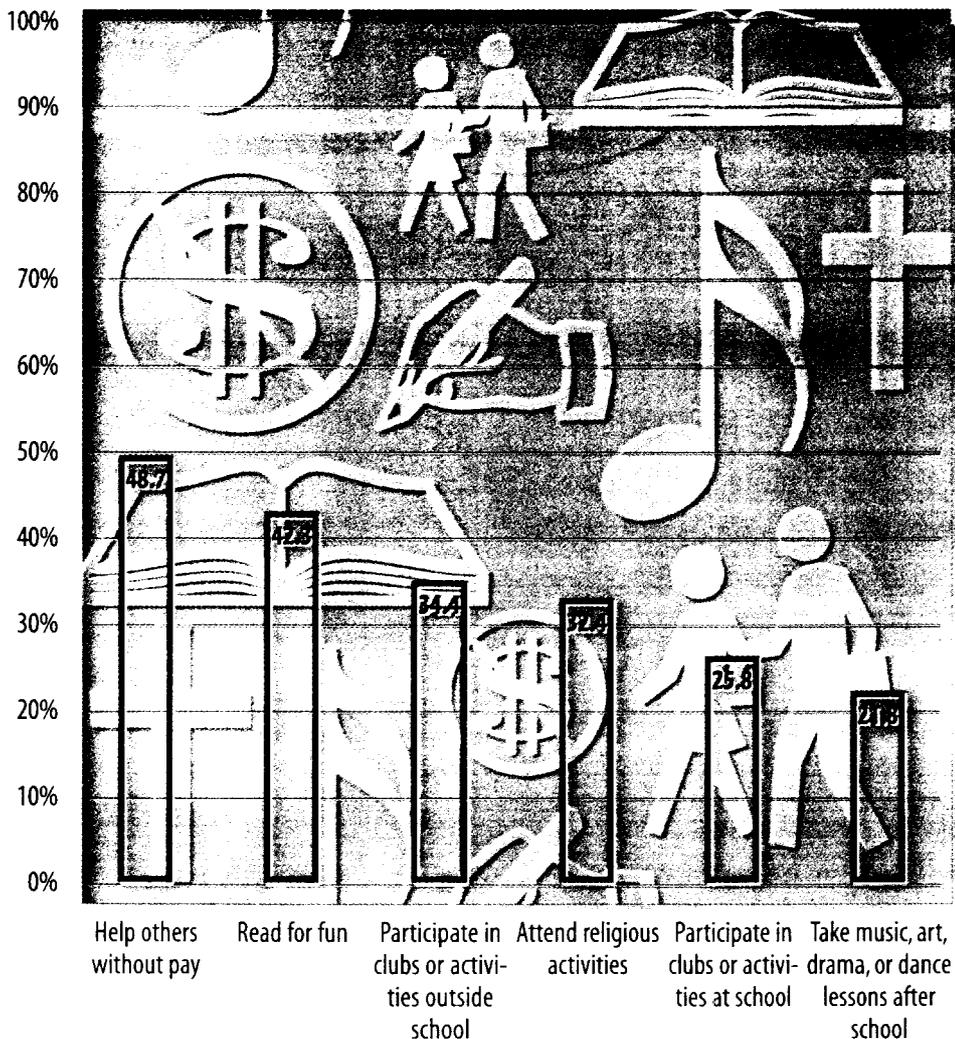
Further, 42 percent of the youth said that more than half of their friends were suspended or expelled in the last year. 36 percent of their friends beat people up, and 27 percent said their friends steal.

## Prosocial Orientation — A Protective Factor

The following chart illustrates the types of pro-social activities the youth said they engage in. However, compared with other research on juveniles' involvement in conventional activities, the involvement did seem low.<sup>7</sup>

### Pro-social Behavior

Percentage of youth who, several times a week or more, engage in positive activities



*"A lot of people would probably be surprised that these young people are doing positive, conventional-type things at all, like reading for fun and participating in school and non-school activities."*

David Huizinga, Senior Research Associate, Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado at Boulder

*"Perhaps what they're saying is that they want to be part of the community and for tragic reasons they are not. And we don't treat them as part of the community either."*

The Honorable Doris Burd, Judge, Denver County Court

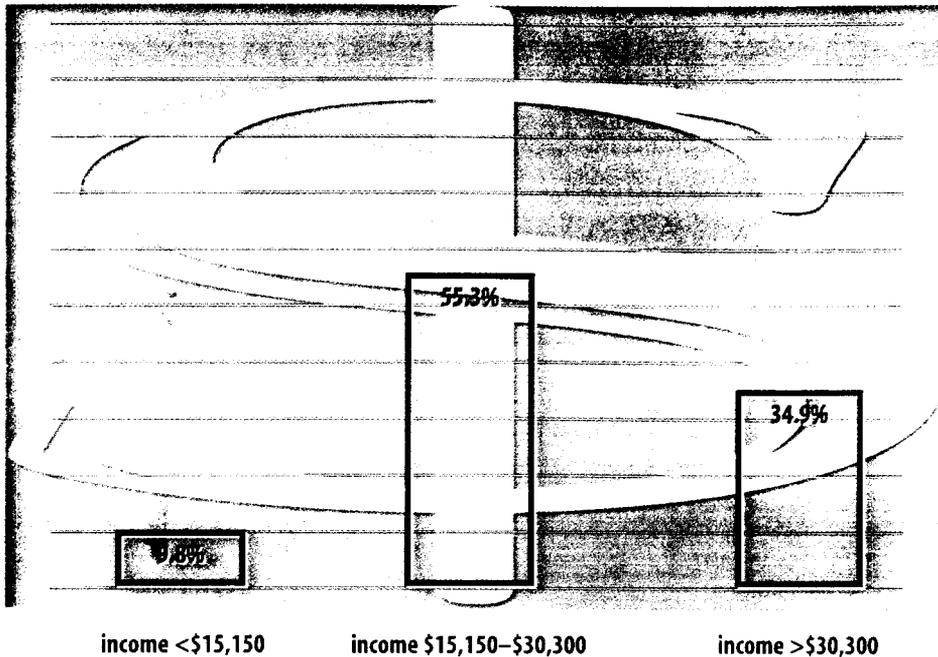
The national research conducted on risk factors found that the community young people live in had important effects on whether or not they engaged in problem behaviors. Dr. Hawkins' and Dr. Catalano's research specifically identified some major community-related risk factors, including economic status, the availability of drugs and firearms, and mobility, which we asked about in our interviews with the detained youth.

**Majority of Youth Came from "Working Poor" Neighborhoods**

While the national research shows that children who live in extremely poor neighborhoods are more likely to develop delinquency problems, our survey did not bear out the assumption that the youth we interviewed at Gilliam Youth Services Center would come from Denver's most impoverished neighborhoods. In fact, only 10 percent of the youth we interviewed came from poor neighborhoods (household income less than \$15,150, the poverty rate for a family of four in 1995); 55 percent came from neighborhoods considered "working poor" (household income between 100% and 200% of poverty, or between \$15,150 and \$30,300). Thirty-five percent of the youth lived in neighborhoods with household income above \$30,300.<sup>8</sup>

**Household Income**

Percentage of youth who live in poor, working poor (low income), or middle income communities



Not only are these youth not concentrated in poor Denver neighborhoods, they are not geographically concentrated at all. Out of the 181 census tracts in Denver, only two were home to more than 10 juvenile detainees; 19 were home to between five and 10 juvenile detainees. One in six juveniles, though arrested in Denver, actually lived outside the city limits.

*"Most youth who come into our Treatment Network through our Juvenile TASC Program are not eligible for Medicaid but are the working poor. And those kids and their families are the kind that fall between the cracks of services."*

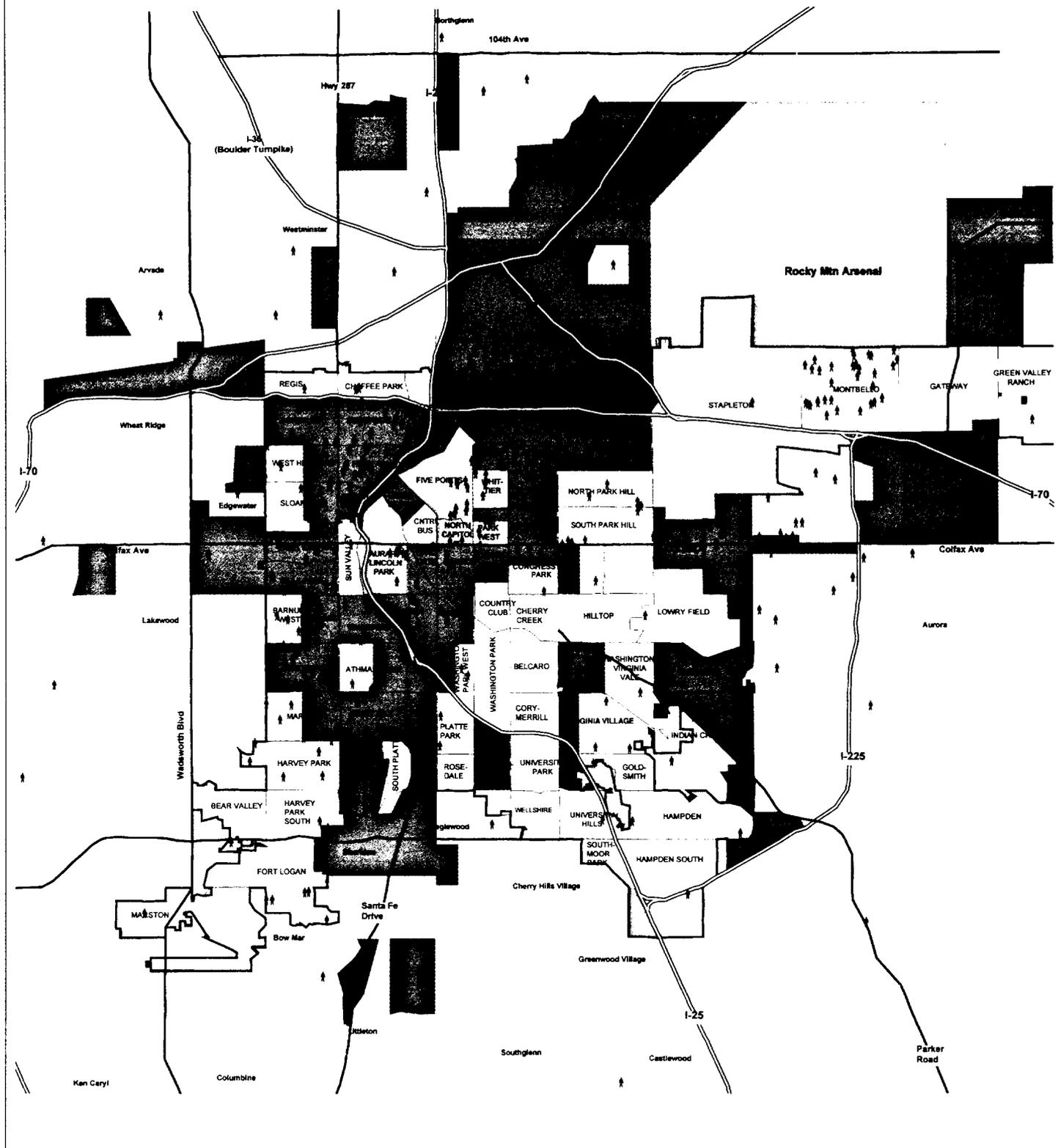
Jennifer Mankey, Project Director, Denver Juvenile Justice Integrated Treatment Network

*"In Denver, you get arrested quicker. There are some things that you're not arrested for in other counties that Denver focuses on, because of having the police available on the street."*

Vel Garner, Director, Gilliam Youth Services Center

<sup>8</sup> Average household income data are available by census tract only every five years. Data from 1995 represent the most recent data available. Source: Denver Regional Council of Governments.

### Average household income of neighborhoods where detained youth live



*"It's a citywide issue. I think what we need to understand is that those families that are of the greatest need are the ones that are on the fringes of all the other resources. I think people have this notion that this is all kids from Five Points getting into trouble. But they're from all over. This ought to raise some flags."*

Vel Garner, Director, Gilliam Youth Services Center

**Key for map:**

- Income less than \$15,150
- Income \$15,150-\$30,300
- Income greater than \$30,300
- ♀ Each youth surveyed

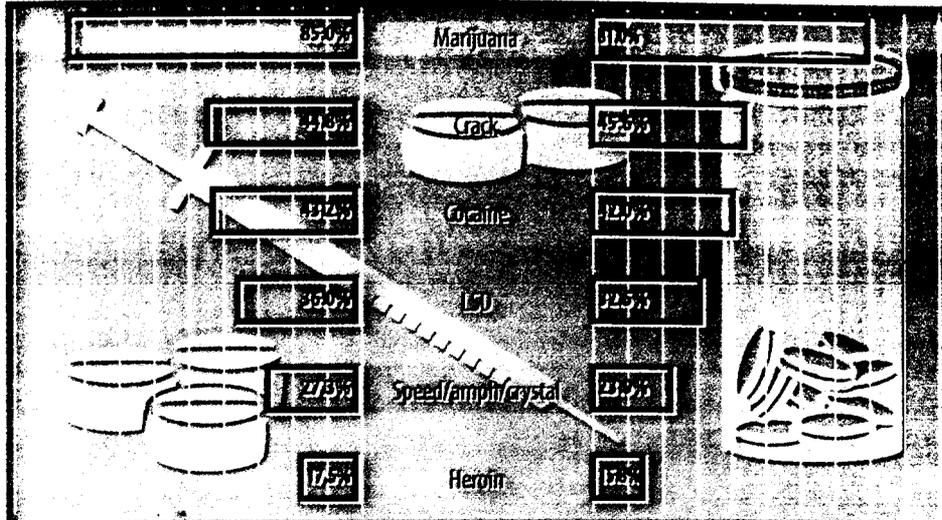
## Youth Report Drugs and Firearms Prevalent in their Neighborhoods

If drugs are available in a community, or even if the perception is that they are readily available, it increases the risk that young people will abuse drugs, according to the research. Likewise, if firearms are available, most studies indicate a greater risk of violence. The youth we surveyed reported both drugs and firearms are prevalent in their neighborhoods. Eighty-eight percent of the youth reported drug use in their neighborhoods, 83 percent reported drug sales and 49 percent reported that drugs are used out in the open.

### Availability of drugs

% reporting drugs used in their neighborhood

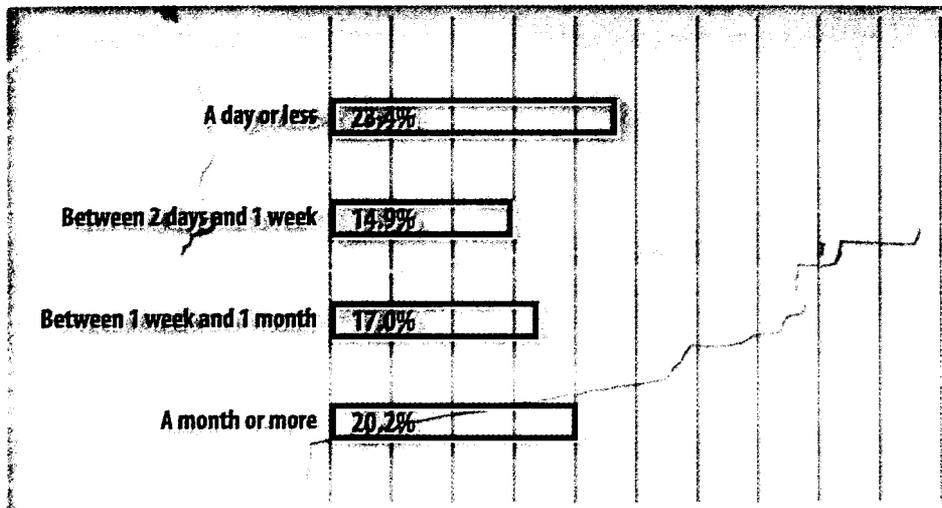
% reporting drugs sold in their neighborhood



Regarding the availability of firearms, almost half the youth (49%) said there were lots of guns on the street and 30 percent thought it was important to have a gun in their neighborhood for protection. What's more, three-quarters of the young people said they could get a gun if they wanted one, and they could get it quickly.

### Availability of guns

How long youth reported it would take them to get a gun if they wanted one:



We also read the youth some statements that were designed to learn about their communities' norms around guns. We asked them if they agreed or disagreed with each statement. The following responses indicated some general acceptance of guns. About one-third of the youth surveyed said that it was o.k. to shoot someone who hurt them. Twenty-two percent said that "most" of their friends had guns and 12 percent said they thought it was o.k. to shoot someone who disrespected them.

We also asked the youth about gang activity in their neighborhoods: 66 percent said there was gang activity where they lived and 27 percent said there was pressure on young people to join a gang.

Finally, in another attempt to get at the expectations of parents and other adults in their neighborhoods, we asked the youth if they did something wrong if their neighbors would tell their parents. Sixty percent said yes and 40 percent said no.

*"We can't ignore the amount of drug use, the facility to acquire weapons is very much part of their community. Those are risk factors that are the reality of their communities."*

The Honorable Doris Burd, Judge, Denver County Court

*"This is scary. There's definitely need for public education about firearms."*

David Huizinga, Senior Research Associate, Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado at Boulder

*"They are very sad figures. And that's where the community is falling down."*

Pastor Tastonga Gay-Moore,  
Grace and Truth Full Gospel Pentecostal Church

## Mobility

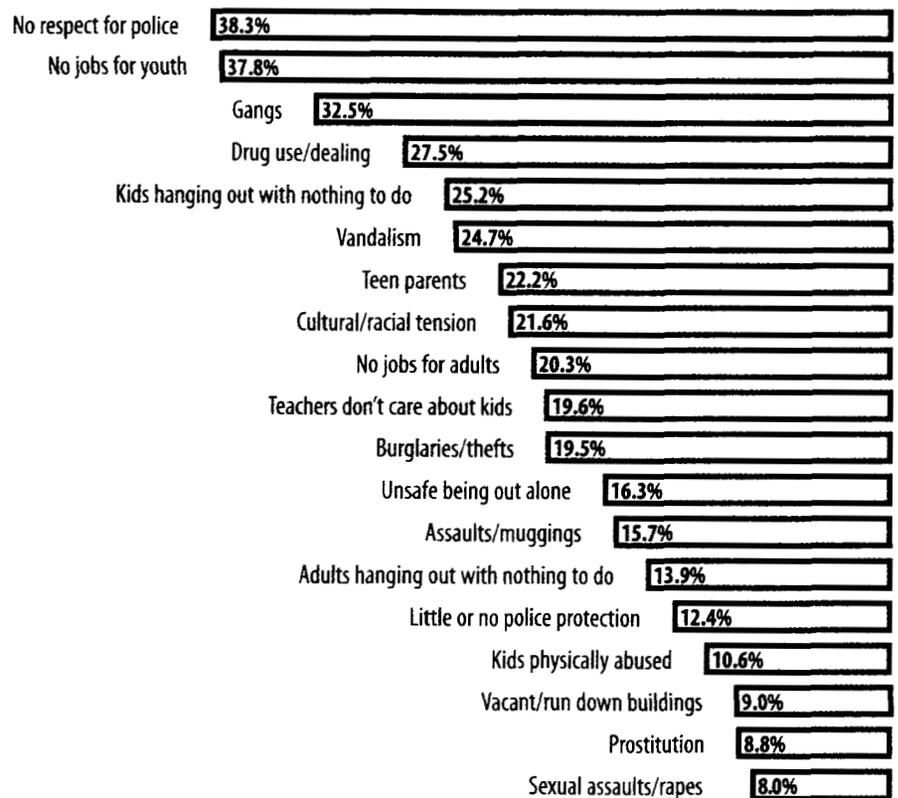
Studies of adolescents show that even normal school transitions — like from elementary school to middle school and middle school to high school — increase problem behaviors. More frequent moves further increase young people's chances for dropping out of school, delinquency and substance abuse. According to our interview, these children had moved a lot. Almost half (46%) of the youth said they had lived at their current address for less than a year.

And most of them they had changed schools, too. Just within the past 12 months, two-thirds of them (66%) had changed schools once, 17 percent twice and 15 percent two or more times.

When people move from neighborhood to neighborhood, their attachment to a community may not be very strong. In our survey we asked the youth to tell us whether they thought certain conditions in their neighborhoods were a "BIG PROBLEM." As their responses indicate, their neighborhoods seem to have a number of conditions that suggest low neighborhood attachment and community disorganization, including gangs, unemployment, drug use and vandalism.

### Most serious problems in neighborhood

Percentage of youth who thought the following were among the most serious conditions in their neighborhood:



Among the almost 400 youth we interviewed at the Gilliam Youth Services Center and Dahlia Street Center, there were a number of common risk factors for delinquent behavior. These included family influences like broken homes and physical conflicts; early academic failure and behavior problems in school; negative peer group influences; and community factors such as high rates of drug abuse and the easy availability of guns. But there also were a number of positive factors, like a strong bond with some family member or other caretaker and engagement in prosocial activities.

Collecting and analyzing this information presented a good opportunity to augment and improve public dialogue around juvenile crime prevention and intervention. Our advisory group of experts, who guided the development of the questions regarding the quality of the juveniles' relationships with family, school, peers and community and reviewed the findings, also had some thoughts about what steps can be taken to address the risk factors and take advantage of protective factors. Their suggestions are presented below.

### **"Warning Signs" Showed Up Early, Intervention Should Too**

According to this group of professionals who work with troubled young people, these children gave off plenty of warning signs. "Their problems started way before they reached Gilliam, and there were points of intervention where something could have occurred and should have been done," said Jennifer Mankey, project director of the Denver Juvenile Justice Integrated Treatment Network.

Noting that 38 percent of the young people we surveyed were born to teen parents, they suggested that services should start as early as birth for the children of teen parents. "Maybe that's the way we start to assist these kids, so that we start focusing training at the beginning," said Judge Doris Burd. Certainly much of the research indicates that nurse home visitation programs reduce the risk of early antisocial behavior and prevent problems associated with youth crime and delinquency.<sup>9</sup>

"I think the more you work with these kids, you start realizing you've got to start earlier," remarked Pastor Tastonga Gay-Moore of Grace and Truth Full Gospel Pentecostal Church, who operates a program for at-risk girls in northeast Denver. "Because once you get an eighth grader in your program she's already molded and it's really hard to retrain her."

### **Schools are "Missing Players"**

Schools were emphasized as a critical partner in efforts to help troubled youth. "There's one major institutional way, early on, to identify when children are beginning to get out of control, and that's the school," said Vel Garner, director of the Gilliam Youth Services Center.

"The schools are the missing players," she said. "Look at the statistics on the kids and how many kids have been suspended or have dropped out of school."

According to our survey, 84 percent of the youth interviewed at Gilliam had at some time been suspended or expelled from school. Overall, in Denver Public Schools in the 1997-98 school year, there were more than 8,200 suspensions in the middle and high schools and about 100 expulsions. This represents 25 percent of all middle school students and 10.5 percent of all senior high school students.<sup>10</sup>

What's more, 23 percent of the youth we surveyed had dropped out of school. This statistic is symptomatic of a national concern: the dropout rate in our country is among the highest of all industrialized nations. In Denver Public Schools, barely half of Latino students (52%) graduate from high school; 68 percent of African-American students and 78 percent of white students graduate.

The important roles that counselors and social workers play in schools was stressed. "The problem that I see in the schools is that they don't have the people there who have time to deal with kids' problems," said Garner. "We've taken out of the schools those people that could provide the assistance and I think as a society we've got to advocate to put them back."

"It doesn't work if you've got one school social worker for three to five schools and it's their job to deal with the truancy issues, and everything else, for thousands of kids," said Mankey.

"To put it simply, the schools are just too big," said Dave DeForest-Stalls, director of The Spot, a center for youth in downtown Denver. "The older the kids get, the bigger and more impersonal the environment is that they're thrust in."

"For many, many kids, that just doesn't work," Stalls added. "They have individual issues, problems at home, issues of their own self confidence, they don't read quite right, or their math is not quite right. But when you've got 2,000 in a school, just how do you actually invest time with an individual, to get to know them and their problems?"

<sup>9</sup> D. Olds, C. R. Henderson, R. Cole, J. Eckenrode, H. Kitzman, D. Luckey, L. Pettit, K. Sidora, P. Morris and J. Powers. "Long-term effects of nurse home visitation on children's criminal and antisocial behavior: 15-year follow-up of a randomized trial." *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 280 (14) (1998): 1238-1244.

<sup>10</sup> Colorado Annual Dropout Rates for Grades 7-12; Suspension and Expulsion Rates, 1997-1998. Colorado Department of Education.

## **CONCLUSION**

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*"Successfully helping youth traverse this sometimes turbulent time in their lives can be frustrating, but it ain't rocket science."*

Dave DeForest-Stalls, Director, The Spot

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*"We've taken out of the schools those people that could provide the assistance and I think as a society we've got to advocate to put them back."*

Vel Garner, Director, Gilliam Youth Services Center

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*"Adolescents need adults with whom they have consistent access and can develop respectful and trusting relationships."*

Dave DeForest-Stalls, Director, The Spot

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### **Parents and Caring Adults Are Essential**

Parents have to take more responsibility for the behavior of their children too. "Adolescents need adults with whom they have consistent access and can develop respectful and trusting relationships," said Stalls. "Without access to these adults, they will find others with whom to invest their time... gang leaders, cultists, haters, etc."

"Most parents of children in the system love their children," said Mankey, "but they might themselves be somewhat disenfranchised from community resources and supports for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it's because they have to work several jobs in addition to responding to family needs, and many of these youth are involved in multiple systems, which the parents have to navigate and respond to as well."

If giving guidance and support is not a role filled by parents, the professionals agreed that other adult role models are essential. "Whether that's in school, in church, in a boys and girls club, in a Little League Baseball program or an art class doesn't matter," said Stalls. "But there are just so few adults in any capacity that have the time to invest in young people's lives."

The young people must have fun and challenging activities to keep them busy too, especially after school, in the evening and on weekends. "The statistics show that most juvenile crime happens between 3:00 p.m. and midnight," said Stalls. "If they don't have anything positive to do, they'll find something else to do."

### **Services Must Target Those Most at Risk**

"It's scary when you think about how many programs we do have, but we're still missing kids," said Pastor Gay-Moore. The professionals expressed concern that programs might be missing the "working poor." (55 percent of the youth came from "working poor" neighborhoods where the average household income is between \$15,150 and \$30,300.)

"That's the population that has the least access to everything," said Garner. "When they finally end up in Gilliam, they are probably at the point where they've had many different needs and none of them have been met."

Better coordination was considered a key missing ingredient in the service delivery system. "Something has to be done to coordinate all these services, some forced collaboration among the school district, social services and all the programs serving children," Garner said. "There needs to be a chief authority of children's services."

### **Accessibility of Weapons Making Problem Worse**

Guns are making the problems of adolescents today worse than in the past. "Because of weapons, the lethality of violent behavior has increased," said Mankey.

"Before, you had to get shot with a rifle, but now there are hand guns and assault weapons," said Garner. "And that's the real big difference. Whether we want to accept it or not, guns do kill people and no matter what people say, it's a big political issue."

"Our statistics show it," said Judge Burd. (Almost half the surveyed youth [49%] said there were lots of guns on the street and 30 percent thought it was important to have a gun in their neighborhood for protection. What's more, three-quarters of the young people said they could get a gun if they wanted one, and they could get it quickly.) "The accessibility to weapons is absolutely out of control in this country."

### **Future Not Necessarily Hopeless for These Young People**

The fact that they find themselves being held in a detention facility is no reason for these young people to give up on themselves or for society to give up on them. "Eventually, the majority of them stop doing what they were doing," said Stalls. "They just grow up, get tired of it, and the hormones slow down."

"Their job is to eventually, through making their mistakes, start figuring out what the best choices are that give them the best results," Stalls added.

"It's important that people understand that these kids are struggling to still be a part of the nation and they still have dreams and aspirations of doing something," said Garner. "The question is, do we as adults have the courage and commitment to invest time and money back into their future?" asked Stalls.

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*"The accessibility to weapons is absolutely out of control in this country."*

The Honorable Doris Burd, Judge, Denver County Court

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*"The question is, do we as adults have the courage and commitment to invest time and money back into their future?"*

Dave DeForest-Stalls, Director, The Spot

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