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GENERATION EXCLUDED

A REPORT CHIDES AMERICA FOR NEGLECTING ADOLESCENTS

BY STEVE WULF

THE CLOSED DOOR, THE WRONG CROWD, the bad grades, the defiant clothes, the sullen demeanor, the telltale scents. Those are some of the warning signs of adolescence, signs that parents should heed--but too often ignore.

Last week the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development delivered a similar alert to America. In a report titled Great Transitions, the 27-member panel of scholars, scientists, members of Congress and former Cabinet officers concluded after a nine-year study that the nation is neglecting its 19 million young adolescents to such an extent that half of them may be irrevocably damaging their chances for productive and healthy futures. Ten-to-14-year-olds are being abandoned by their governments, communities, schools and parents just when they most need guidance and support. They are in danger of becoming "lifelong casualties" of drug and alcohol abuse, violence, suicide, AIDS, teen pregnancy and failed educations.

The report, while offering concrete suggestions and models of successful programs, paints a disturbing portrait of America as a dismissive and preoccupied parent, a country trying to wish away the troubles of its teenagers. "Adolescence is as perplexing for our society as a whole as it is for the individual parent," says Dr. David Hamburg, chairman of the council. "I hope that we can

point people in the right direction and stimulate programs to deal with the problems. I hope that we have touched a nerve."

The report's statistics are alarming. The rate of suicide among young adolescents increased 120% from 1980 to '92; the firearm-homicide rate for 10-to-14-year-olds more than doubled between 1985 and '92; the smoking rate among eighth-graders rose 30% from 1991 to '94; two-thirds of eighth-graders report that they have tried alcohol, and 28% say they have been drunk at least once; pregnancy rates for girls younger than 15 rose 4.1% between 1980 and 1988.

As children enter the physical and emotional turmoil of adolescence, they naturally seek more independence and experiment more boldly. But it is precisely at this phase, the report shows, that parental involvement in school activities--and by extension, parents' influence on their kids' lives--drops off. Seventy-five percent of the parents of nine-year-olds claim high or medium involvement, while only 55% of the parents of 14-year-olds do.

Among the report's prescriptions: 1) educational institutions should create schools better suited to adolescents' developmental needs; 2) parents should re-engage themselves with their children, with the help of more family-friendly policies by employers; 3) health professionals should increase their efforts to educate and treat adolescents; 4) youth organizations should expand and multiply to reach out to the one-third of adolescents who are now largely ignored; and 5) the media should show more responsibility by discouraging, not glamourizing, violence, sex and drugs.

Hamburg acknowledges that the council's--and society's--work doesn't conclude with the publication of a report. "What is it Winston Churchill said after the Battle of El Alamein?" he says. "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."