

By David Finkelhor November 26

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The news media likes to characterize today's young people as [risk averse](#), [narcissistic](#), [app-dependent](#), over-scheduled, entitled and "[pornified](#)." Among the culprits are too much praise, not enough challenge, helicopter parents, cellphones and of course, the Internet.

But by many measures, young people are actually showing virtues their elders lacked. They have brought delinquency, truancy, promiscuity, alcohol abuse and suicide down to levels unseen in many cases since the 1950s. Rather than coming up with ever more old-fogey complaints, we should be celebrating young people's good judgment and self-control — and extolling their parents and teachers.

Here are some of the most impressive developments.

You've probably heard that crime is down. But most of the remarkable facts about crime and delinquency among young people have not been trumpeted enough in a country just 20 years removed from fears that it was facing a generation of young "[super-predators](#)." In fact, arrests for serious violent offenses by juveniles [have dropped about 60 percent](#) from 1994 to 2011. Juvenile arrests have receded faster in the past 10 years than adult arrests. Property crime by youth also has sunk to its lowest point in 30 years.

Of course, we read, quite correctly, that rates of rape on college campuses and in the military are high, and that [victims are treated poorly](#). But rape and other sex crimes among youth have been decreasing. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, the number of sexual assaults against 12- to 17-year-olds has declined [by more than half](#) since the mid-1990s. The number of youth [arrests for sex offenses](#) also has dropped. It may be hard to believe, but three nationwide and statewide [victim surveys](#) have [corroborated these decreases](#).

School shootings, too, have scarred the nation's psyche and left a sense that schools are dangerous. But school safety has been improving dramatically. Violent victimization of teenagers at school [has dropped 60 percent](#) from 1992 to 2012, according to Justice Department data. School homicides, which rarely number more than a couple of dozen per year, [have been lower in the 2000s](#) than they were in the 1990s.

We hear about the bullying epidemic in painful accounts of youth taking their own lives after dealing with peer harassment. But peer victimization, harassment and bullying — despite their ubiquity — have [been abating](#) in almost all of the surveys. Suicide, too, is less common. Among 10- to 24-year-olds, [the rate declined](#) from 9.24 to 7.21 suicides per 100,000 people from 1991 to 2009.

Every generation of parents is alarmed by the sexual behavior of the young. But the accusations are more misplaced now than ever. Not only is the rate of teenage pregnancy down to [record lows](#) in the United States, but the percentage of ninth-graders who say they have had sexual intercourse [has declined](#) from 54 percent in 1991 to 47 percent in 2013. The percentage of high schoolers who say they have had four or more sexual partners also has declined.

Young people are showing a lot more self-control when it comes to substances as well. Binge drinking by 12th-graders is lower than at any time since surveys were started in 1976. The number of teenagers who have been drunk in the past year is at a record low and the drop for eighth-graders is particularly remarkable. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, half as many high school students said they had driven a car after drinking alcohol in 2011 compared with 1991.

Kids also are much less likely to run away and they're much more conscientious about finishing school. Compared with 1995, 56 percent fewer youth were running away in 2012. And dropout rates among those ages 16 to 24 are at their lowest, down from 17 percent in 1968 to 6.6 percent in 2013.

Why these improvements? Social scientists are mostly guessing. For example, over the past generation we have unleashed many new prevention and intervention programs for parents, families and children that use more effective strategies. We also have given psychiatric medication to many children and their parents. Although controversial, such drugs reduce aggression, depression and hyperactivity — which all contribute to conflict and risk-taking. Then there is the Internet, electronic games and related technology that have combined to relieve boredom, one of the chief drivers of adolescent mischief. Cellphones keep kids in touch with their parents and their friends, making it easier to summon help or get advice when they're in trouble. Moreover, maybe risk-taking has migrated, like everything else, to the electronic world, but in that world the connection between risk and harm is more remote than it was in the face-to-face past.

These improvements do not mean that everything is rosy. The levels of many problems among young people are still too high by most standards. And one can easily find other indicators that have worsened for this generation, such as obesity.

But every parenting manual says it is important to highlight progress to encourage improvement. What's so wrong with a little praise and gratitude for a remarkable generation? We may look back on today's youth as relatively virtuous, as the ones who turned the tide on impulsivity and indulgence.

MLA Citation:

Finklehor, David. "Are Kids Getting More Virtuous?" *Washington Post*. 26 Nov. 2014. Web.

1 Dec. 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-kids-are-all-right-after-all/2014/11/26/63b9e494-70fe-11e4-8808-afaa1e3a33ef_story.html>.