

Urban Trends

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Raising Adolescent Females: The Joys and the Challenges



What are today's girls made of? "Sugar and spice and everything nice" doesn't quite reflect the complexity of this contemporary generation, which has increased freedoms and greater opportunities. Young women today still face difficult emotional issues and tough choices in their daily lives, as they are bombarded with all types of messages—in the media, from their peers, and from society. Messages about what it means to "be a girl" in our consumer and media-driven culture are mixed, at best, and are too often devaluing, and destructive to self-esteem.

These days, no matter the race or socioeconomic status of the parents or caregivers, raising adolescent females is both challenging and rewarding. MEE recently talked with middle class parents raising girls ages 11 to 17, to discover their hopes and fears, along with some of the obstacles to successfully navigating their adolescents through puberty and beyond. We found many common themes that can be useful in understanding and supporting low-income,

inner city girls, who confront even more handicaps and obstacles to safe passage through the vulnerable teen years.

What do parents of teenage girls need to help them cope? They overwhelmingly agreed that good communication between parent and child is the most important issue that they confront. Even though the current generation of parents sees themselves as being more visible, aware, and involved in their children's lives than *their* parents before them, a focused, attentive presence does not guarantee an easy ride. These parents made it clear that they need help effectively establishing a dialogue with their children. As one mother offered, "When [she was] younger, my daughter used to hang on to every word I said. Now, she thinks she knows everything." Another mother agreed, "Because she's so opinionated, I have to explain my decisions for *everything*."

When it comes to tackling serious and often sensitive subjects such as teenage sex, navigating friendships and/or dating relationships, drug use and feelings of alienation, parents are often unsure about how to bring up or discuss them. They admitted that, even as adults, they don't have all of the answers to the questions of life. What they need, almost unanimously, is easily accessible information that offers them *solutions* to their questions, problems, and fears.

Participants recognized that developing good parent-child communication skills is critical, "so it works when you're not around," and more ominously, because, "you don't want to be the last one to know." While some parents described themselves as comfortable talking with their daughters about almost anything, others had less ongoing communication,

and concentrated on "being there." One father said, "My daughter feels that she can come to me. If she can't come to me, she's going to find another man to talk to." Another parent told us, "They want to communicate, but it may not be the way you want to communicate, [so] just be available." And another father shared, "If you can't help them, sometimes it's enough to just be there to listen."

Many parents are unsure about how to build a bridge to effective communication. As one mother honestly stated, "I don't know exactly what the issues are in my daughter's life." Another mother worried whether she'd be able to tell if "someone is trying to run her [daughter] in the wrong direction." Increasing that uncertainty for parents is the changing behaviors and mood swings that adolescent girls often experience. One father summed it up by saying, "They come at you with something new every day."

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As summer draws to a close, and back-to-school thoughts become unavoidable, this issue of *UrbanTrends* has a “children-as-our-future” theme. You’ll feel it in our lead story about the joys and the challenges of raising teen girls into strong, confident women, especially in a society that often devalues them. At that age, they’re no longer children, but not yet adults, and are making choices that can affect the rest of their lives. Effective parent-child communication, not surprisingly, emerges as a key to surviving the teen years with mutual respect, love and sanity intact.

Media influences play a formidable role in how not just girls, but all youth see themselves. In a special letter, MEE President Ivan Juzang challenges all adults to “step up to the plate” and do more than just criticize messages we don’t like. He offers a better solution—to counter them. And, we continue to update some of the social factors that impact inner city life, with a hard-hitting examination of the government and judicial systems.

Looking ahead, our next issue kicks off the MEE Collections Series, with a special edition featuring all aspects of urban-focused entertainment. We’ve done the research that allows us to bring wide-ranging expertise together in one easy-to-use, information-packed publication. This new way of bringing you “clues you can use” will put *UrbanTrends* readers another step ahead of the curve in urban and ethnic marketing. Check in and let us know what you think!



Pamela Weddington, Editor
MEEComm@aol.com

Parents expressed many fears for their daughters. They worry that what might at first seem to be just normal teenage moodiness may be hiding something more serious, like drug or alcohol abuse. They also expressed concern that if or when their daughters become sexually active, they may leave themselves exposed to HIV and other STDs, pregnancy, and the emotional difficulties of “young love.”

Ultimately, their goal, parents say, is to help teenage daughters develop practical life skills and solid self-esteem that can withstand an avalanche of external and internal conflicts and messages. One mother said, “So much of an adolescent girl is wrapped up in looking at herself through other’s eyes. She needs help to look through her *own* eyes.” Parents want to raise their daughters to become self-reliant, motivated by long-term goals, and emotionally resilient. Because they want them to make good decisions, both now, and for their future, parents

believe that it is important to help their daughters create educational and career goals. They are seeking a combination of spiritual, psychological, educational and work-related programs to help positively influence their teenagers.

Many elements of society must work together to support these growing and impressionable individuals whose life decisions will be shaped by their experiences, and through guidance from the adults in their lives. Not just parents alone, but educators, politicians, youth-service providers, and even the media, all have important roles to play. Access to positive communications strategies for consistently reaching adolescent females will be a key first step in meeting their often-silent cries for help, love and guidance. It will also support their development into the confident and motivated young women who will be needed to help raise tomorrow’s generation of young girls.



The Changing Face of America

Analysis of the 2000 U.S. Census shows that America has become a more diverse country overall, yet different races still tend to live apart from one another. Segregation persists in our biggest cities, where most of the country’s Blacks, Hispanics and Asians are located. This takes place at the same time that their growth outpaced that of Whites over the last decade. That new reality requires races to “get along” and adjust to a changing cultural landscape. The “White flight” trend of recent decades shows no signs of abating. In the ten largest cities, Whites were down to 32%, from 42% in the 1990 Census. The typical White family in America lives in a neighborhood with an 80%-20% ratio of Whites to people of color; the typical Black family lives in a neighborhood that is 51% Black, 33% White, 12% Hispanic, and 3% Asian. While Whites continued to leave cities, the Hispanic population soared over that same period, growing 36%. This reality impacts the challenges that city leaders face in meeting the needs of their newest residents, and could dramatically change the dynamics of local politics. Add to that the fact that many urban centers also lose middle and upper class Black residents, and you’ve got a recipe for big changes.

An interesting note is that among the country’s biggest 50 cities, many of the least segregated ones for Blacks were in the South, an area that many Blacks were anxious to escape from during the Great Migration North at the turn of the 20th Century. Cities like Charlotte, NC, and Austin, TX are leading the way in becoming more integrated. Cities that took the biggest overall population hits were in the older, industrial Northeast and Midwest. Meanwhile, Detroit “won” the tag as America’s most segregated city.

-Associated Press

The 8 Variables: “The System”



In spite of their good intentions, many programs and campaigns targeting urban populations ignore or misunderstand the unique political, cultural and communication dynamics operating in America's inner cities. MEE attempts to close the knowledge gap by sharing what we've identified as eight key variables that influence the choices, attitudes and behaviors of various audiences. Our special series began in UT 10 with an examination of the impact of media and of America's economic realities. We devote this column to sharing our perspective on how “the system” affects inner city life.

Suspicious and widespread distrust of the government and its judicial systems, run deep among African Americans, particularly in the inner city. Historical inequities provide the evidence that feeds and supports those feelings, including disclosures that the FBI attempted to “divide and conquer” Blacks by spying on civil rights leaders and infiltrating the Black Panther Party. The scars from the infamous Tuskegee experiments that left 400 mostly uneducated, syphilis-infected Black men untreated, so that government researchers could track the “natural” course of the disease, still run deep in the Black community. This incident, coupled with the inarguable fact that this same government sanctioned slavery as legal for hundreds of years, leads many to believe that in this society, Black lives are devalued.

Perhaps unfairness and discrimination is nowhere more tangible than within America's criminal justice system, where Black men, in particular, are overrepresented. One in four young African American men are estimated to be in prison, on probation, or on parole. Death Row is overwhelmingly populated by people of color. At the same time, prison-building has become

a growth industry for many rural areas. Most states now spend more per year on prisons than they do on higher education. What does it say about our society when we are willing to spend \$35,000 a year to incarcerate a young Black man, but will not commit \$2,000 to \$5,000 a year to enroll him in a trade school, GED or summer job program?

The never-ending “war on drugs” is driving much of the jail explosion, and has filled thousands of prisons with inner city Blacks. Whether or not, as some assert, the government is “putting” drugs into inner city communities in order to control Black men, it is clear that they are incarcerated for drug use at a much higher rate than other groups. Sentencing procedures for drug convictions also contribute to the skewed numbers. Federal sentencing guidelines for selling and possession of crack cocaine, whose users tend to be Black and poor, are much more punitive than those for powdered cocaine, which tends to be used more by Whites and the affluent.

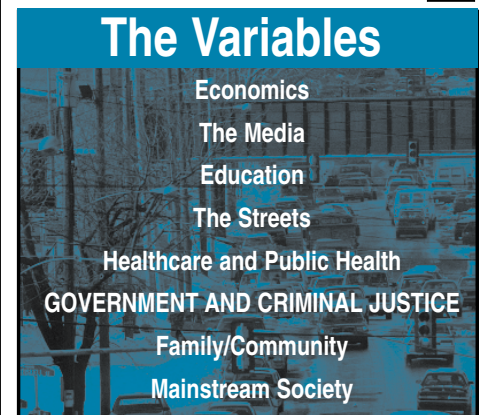
Even though African Americans are far more likely than members of other ethnic groups to be the *victims* of crime, there is a rift between urban communities and police, often seen as “the enemy,” that runs wide and deep. Blacks in general feel a lack of respect from police, and youth feel especially targeted as potential criminals, gangbangers or drug dealers, especially if they're dressed in the latest hip-hop street gear. Parents are teaching their children, especially young Black boys, “survival skills” for dealing with the police. Many urban residents can point to incidents, including those linked to racial profiling or DWB (driving while Black), that have left them feeling attacked and harassed by government and the justice system.

The long-term, pervasive effects of these criminal statistics are staggering. Since there are so many Black men with arrest and conviction records, a large segment of the urban Black population is in danger of permanent “second-class” citizenship. Employers tend to pass over job applicants with criminal records, making inner city unemployment and poverty even more of a reality. These young men have lost their opportunity for continuing education and their ability to support themselves and their families.

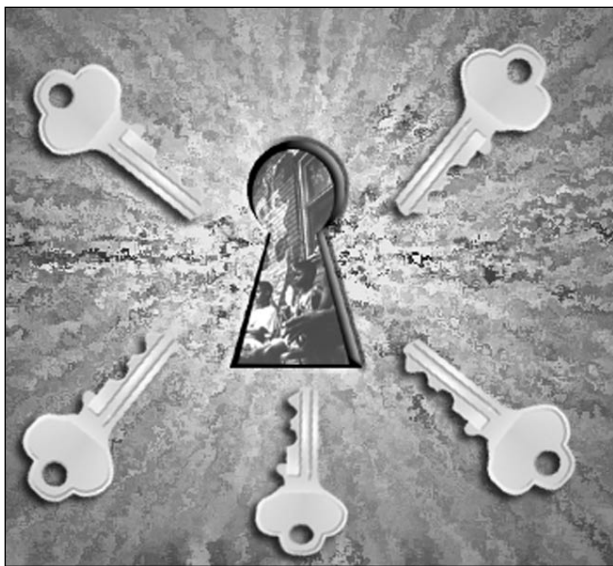
Other elements of governmental activity are also under skeptical scrutiny. Last year's presidential election further undercut Blacks' trust in the government. In spite of the years of civil rights struggle, here at the turn of the new millennium, many Black Americans feel that they did not have an equal opportunity to vote, or to have their votes counted. For many, the alleged voter intimidation; omissions from voter registration lists; vague standards about which ballots would be counted; and questionable ballot designs, felt all too much like a Jim Crow flashback.

With the prevalence of crime in urban communities, it is clear that inner city residents need a well-functioning government and criminal justice system that they can feel is working for them. Instead, many feel the government's presence in their lives as one of oppression, not assistance. Until new policies and social reforms are put in place to change those attitudes, African Americans will continue to view our system of police, courts, and jails with mistrust and suspicion.

UT



CBOs: Major Players in Urban Campaigns



As we shared in UT 10, No. 1, *community-based organizations (CBOs) can be major powers for social change in the inner city. Gaining buy-in from and building positive word-of-mouth among CBOs are critical success factors in creating a consumer or social marketing campaign that "has legs." In this issue, we share five keys to gaining authentic access.*

Keys to the Community

In order for grassroots marketing campaigns to make a real impact on urban communities, access to community gatekeepers is critical. The "keys to the community" include having *credibility*, building *trust*, gaining *access*, incorporating community *involvement*, and providing *value* to the community. Putting these mobilization keys in place requires time, and a targeted and often labor-intensive effort, but pays off in the long run.

Having credibility means that you understand the environment, respect the culture, do not impose your personal or institutional morality, and make no assumptions about what is or is not happening. Limiting yourself to using only traditional campaign implementation strategies will make gaining that credibility difficult, if not impossible. Instead, if you take the time "on the front end" to lay the appropriate groundwork, often by using non-traditional approaches, the target audience will not just receive your message, but share and promote it among their peers.

The second key to the community, trust, says that the campaign designers are willing to listen before doing anything else. It also means that you always follow up and follow through with any tasks that arise during the planning and implementation process. Once the community is assured that you can be depended on to do whatever you promise, you will be much more likely to be invited to return for projects and activities down the road.

Authentic access to a community is based on first having credibility and gaining trust. Community members, at the deepest levels, should be afforded the opportunity to be involved and at the table; their voices and ideas must be heard and respected. Even though some may not normally be considered part of an "inner circle," individuals and organizations that are already working within your targeted communities have a broad base of knowledge about their community's strengths, needs, and key players. They have often laid the groundwork of developing access points to the very people you are attempting to reach and influence. Tapping into those networks should be a key ingredient in your planning.

Finally, the campaign should "close the loop," or ensure that the community's needs are being met. The community should perceive your campaign, whether it is promoting a product or a behavior change, as an effort that brings added value to the environment. CBOs are already centers of community life, where members of the target audiences are accustomed to accessing a wide variety of services. By expanding upon already-developed trust, and developing strong working relationships with CBOs, you can create a "win-win" scenario both for your campaign and for the community.

Did You Know?

❖ Mississippi is the latest Southern state to lose Black business as a result of its love affair with Confederate symbols. Earlier this year, the state's voters overwhelmingly chose to keep the current state flag, instead of a proposed design that replaced the Confederate emblem with a cluster of stars. In protest, Alphi Phi Alpha fraternity has nixed plans to hold its 800-delegate Southern Regional conference in Jackson in 2002, and the International Association of Black Professional Firefighters pulled the plug on that site for its yearly conference.

❖ The National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS has deemed the alarming spread of AIDS among minorities a "national emergency," and has called on the Bush administration to step up efforts to fight the disease. "The face of AIDS has changed, and it is now ours," said Donna Christian-Christiansen, member of the Congressional Black Caucus, which has generated additional funding for education, testing and outreach in Black communities. The commission also called for Hollywood, the clergy and big business to get involved in the fight to save lives. Recent CDC reports indicate that young, gay or bisexual Black men, many of whom are too young to remember the disease's early, ravaging years, are particularly at risk. They were found to be five times more likely to become HIV-infected than their White counterparts.

❖ Did you know that youth whose parents never attended college have a harder time getting into higher education and finishing with a degree? "The Condition of Education 2001," an annual federal report, says "first generation" students struggle from start to finish, from getting accepted into school, through surviving the coursework and earning enough credits to graduate on time. Those who persist, however, get a significant financial payoff. The study found that four years after earning a bachelor's degree, those students earned the same amount of money as students whose parents were also college graduates.

– Associated Press



Don't Like the Messages? Counter, Don't Just Criticize



Ivan Juzang
President

With the explosion of media, today's urban youth are inundated with messages about sex and violence—from their peers, 24-hour access to music videos, television shows, movies, and more and more, over the Internet. Since these youth are bigger consumers of entertainment

than any other demographic group, they are exposed to negative, conflicting and often destructive messages at alarming levels. The question is, "What are we going to do about it?" Attempt to silence the messenger—or counter the message?

Adults need to be prepared to deal with these issues. Rather than see it as a nuisance or a threat, current entertainment programming presents opportunities to open a dialogue and initiate conversations with young people. Without positive messages to counter what we perceive as the negative ones, the negative becomes what's accepted among many youth as "keeping it real." Whether or not we agree with some of the current manifestations of hip-hop culture, media portrayals of urban youth as potential criminals, or the promotion of violence as a resolution to conflict is beside the point. Those depictions are out there in the "marketplace of ideas," and we need to be ready to compete with them.

We must not be fooled into thinking that inner city, rap and hip-hop messages will only resonate in "hardcore communities." There are implications for every part of society, because trends that start with low-income hip, trendsetting urban youth often eventually find their way into the suburbs, and even mainstream America.

We adults have not focused enough of our attention on how to create and share positive, alternative counter-messages for young people. We can continue to turn off and tune out messages that offend, scare or annoy us. But the truth of the matter is that we are in a battle for the hearts, minds and souls of our young people, and we better be about the business of fighting just as hard for their attention as those with whom they now identify, whether in person, or

through the media. We must be just as aggressive in promoting our positive, pro-social messages as those who want to sell them sneakers, soda or dangerous ideas about what life is all about.

Despite what some believe, parents and other adults can have as much influence over young people's decisions as their peers, movies and videos do. But before we raise our voices condemning messages coming from the media "out there," the first thing we adults need to do is to take a look at ourselves. We must make sure that we are clear about the messages we are sending to young people, directly or indirectly. What examples are we setting for the next generation we are often so eager to criticize?

Next, we have to really understand where young people are coming from. As with any group whose behavior you'd like to change, it is crucial to "get inside the heads" of urban youth before you can successfully influence them. Part of being able to do that is supported by speaking to them using their own language and acknowledging their reality, in a way that makes them comfortable.

Young people need the adults in their communities to step up to the plate and do better than we've been doing. They have expressed their struggles in both their actions and their words. They need more information, they need real-world, authentic strategies for dealing with their concerns, and they need direction. If we don't provide it, who will? Whether we are youth service providers or parents and other caregivers, we have a chance to make a real difference with the youth to whom we provide services, and those whom we counsel, teach and raise into adults.

Energy that we spend railing against the latest offensive rap lyrics, or what's happening on the screens at the multiplex, could better be used talking to young people where they are, in front of us every day—across the kitchen table, in our classrooms, at our community centers. Just like we did in our earlier days, young people are going to listen to and watch what appeals to them. But discussions around hip-hop entertainment provide an exciting and unique opportunity to raise awareness and influence future behavior. It's time to get the dialogue started.

A Way to "Better" Black Films?

An upcoming national research project on urban youth entertainment trends could revolutionize movies and other programming with messages for young people. **Inner City Truth: Going Beyond Media Hype** is a nine-city, MEE qualitative research study that has many applications, including its use in the development of socially-responsible entertainment programming (edu-tainment) for urban youth. It is also expected to generate public awareness and foster a community dialogue about the Black urban youth perspective on sexual health and other pressing issues.

This fall, focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and surveys will be conducted with hundreds of urban youth, ages 16 to 20, from nine urban markets, coast to coast. Cities under consideration include New York, NY; Los Angeles, CA; Chicago, IL; Baltimore, MD; New Orleans, LA; Philadelphia, PA; Detroit, MI; Miami, FL; Atlanta, GA; St. Louis, MO; Oakland, CA; and Houston, TX.

A thorough analysis of the responses will provide extensive insight to producers, directors and scriptwriters about the attitudes and behaviors of urban African American youth regarding the most relevant issues in their daily lives. The project brings to the surface the best ways to transfer pro-social information, in a "real" and "relevant" manner, to urban-oriented film, cable and television programming.

Some of the areas to be probed include: which genres of entertainment are most popular with urban youth, and what kinds of stories they want to see portrayed; who their favorite entertainers are, along with credible peers and (adult) role models from other fields; and youth's assessment of current entertainment programming. Because urban youth are often the trendsetters for American and international popular culture, **Inner City Truth** also has implications for general market programming.

To find out more about the research project, contact MEEPROD@aol.com or call Ivan Juzang at (215) 829-4920.



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Coming to you in the next issue of **UrbanTrends**...

THE MEE COLLECTION SERIES I: TRENDS IN ENTERTAINMENT



UrbanTrends

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340 N. 12th Street, Suite 503
Philadelphia, PA 19107
E-mail: MEEPROD@aol.com
www.meeproductions.com