

The Ethics of American Youth

Press Release and Data Summary

NOTE: To view the *pdf* files listed here, you must have Acrobat Reader, downloadable free [here](#).)

Data Tables (pdf)

[Click here](#) for information about the survey sample, plus more complete data.

Results From Religious Students and Students at Religious Schools (pdf)

- [Attitudes and opinions](#)
 - [Values and priorities](#)
 - [Behavior](#)
-

Results From Varsity Sports Athletes

View pdf file with data tables [here](#).

Previous Survey Reports

- [Press release on 2000 Report Card](#)
 - [Press release on 2000 Report Card – violence and substance abuse](#)
 - [Data and commentary on 2000 Report Card – violence and substance abuse](#)
 - [1998 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth](#)
 - [1998 Report Card: Results Related to Youth Violence and Substance Abuse](#)
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Talk About It

What are your thoughts on this survey? [Click here](#) to share your

SURVEY DOCUMENTS DECADE OF MORAL DETERIORATION:

Kids Today Are More Likely To Cheat, Steal and Lie Than Kids 10 Years Ago

According to a new report by the Josephson Institute of Ethics, cheating, stealing and lying by high school students have continued their alarming, decade-long upward spiral. A survey of 12,000 high school students showed that students admitting they cheated on an exam at least once in the past year jumped from 61% in 1992 to 74% in 2002; the number who stole something from a store within the past 12 months rose from 31% to 38%, while the percentage who say they lied to their teachers and parents also increased substantially. (See below for a summary of findings.)

The report, released as part of [National CHARACTER COUNTS! Week](#) (October 20-26), also reveals significant deterioration over the past two years: Cheating rose from 71% in 2000 to 74% in 2002, theft increased from 35% to 38%, and those who said they would be willing to lie to get a good job jumped from 28% to 39%.

The 2002 report also found that students who attend private religious schools were less likely to shoplift (35% vs. 39%) but more likely to cheat on exams (78% vs. 72%) and lie to teachers (86% vs. 81%). In addition, students participating in varsity sports cheated on exams at a higher rate than students who did not (78% vs. 73%).

Michael Josephson, president of the Josephson Institute of Ethics, said: "The evidence is that a willingness to cheat has become the norm and that parents, teachers, coaches and even religious educators have not been able to stem the tide. The scary thing is that so many kids are entering the workforce to become corporate executives, politicians, airplane mechanics and nuclear inspectors with the dispositions and skills of cheaters and thieves."

thoughts and pose questions in the discussion FORUM.

To provide greater insight into the factors that may impact the ethics of young people, the Institute's 2002 survey sought information about attitudes and affiliations that add new dimensions to the data: participation in varsity sports, student leadership, attendance at private religious schools and possession of strong religious beliefs. A summary of the data follows — and complete data tables are available online in [a PDF file](#) — but here are some highlights:

- **GENDER.** The most significant differentiating factor among high school students is gender. Though girls cheat and lie as much as boys in general, they are significantly less likely to engage in theft or other dishonest practices and they have more positive attitudes toward ethics.
- **SPORTS.** Participation in varsity sports does not appear to build or undermine character. In most cases it was not a differentiating factor with one significant exception: varsity athletes were more likely to cheat on exams.
- **RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS.** Those who attend private religious schools do not behave or think much differently from others. In most cases, it was not a differentiating factor. They did steal less but they cheated and lied more to teachers and parents.
- **RELIGIOUS CONVICTIONS.** Students who said that their religion was essential or very important to them (regardless of the kind of school they attended) also generally performed at the national average, though they shoplifted at a slightly lower rate, were less likely to lie to get a job and tended to have more positive attitudes about the importance of ethics.
- **COLLEGE AND HONORS CLASSES.** Generally, those who intended to go to college and attended honors or advanced placement classes said they cheated, stole and lied less than others.

The surveys underlying *Report Card 2002: The Ethics of American Youth* were administered by schools throughout the country in 2002.

This report addresses honesty and integrity and is the

first based on the data. An additional report focusing on violence, drug use and other issues will be released in the future.

Following a benchmark survey in 1992, the Josephson Institute has conducted a national survey of the ethics of American youth every two years. The Institute is a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan, non-profit organization based in Marina del Rey, CA. One of the major projects of the Institute is the CHARACTER COUNTS! Coalition, a partnership of more than 500 educational and youth-serving organizations committed to improving the ethical quality of America's young people through character education. Congress and 36 states have declared the third week in October National CHARACTER COUNTS! Week.

SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

1. CHEATING

In decade from 1992 to 2002 the number of high school students who admit that they cheated on an exam in the past year increased significantly from 61% to 74%. In 2000, 71% admitted to cheating.

- Students participating in varsity sports were more likely to cheat than non-participants (78% vs. 73%).
- Students attending religious schools were more likely to cheat than students at other schools (78% vs. 72%).
- Gender, student leadership, and personal religious convictions had no material impact.
- The number of students who admit they cheated two or more times in the past year has increased only slightly from 1992 to 2002 (1992 – 46%; 2000 – 44%; 2002 – 48%).

2. THEFT

A) Shoplifting. In the ten years from 1992 to 2002 the number of high school students who admit that they stole something from a store in the past 12 months increased significantly from 33% to 38%. In 2000, 35% admitted to theft from a store.

- Males were more likely to steal than females (41% vs. 35%).

- More than one-third of students in leadership positions stole from a store but they stole at a substantially lower rate than non-leaders (34% vs. 39%). Also 30% of the honor students said they stole—the lowest percentage of any group—compared to 40% of non-honor students.
- Participation in varsity sports had no material impact.
- Students attending religious schools were less likely to steal from a store (35% vs. 39%), as were students with personal religious convictions (34% vs. 38%).
- The number of students who admit they stole from a store two or more times in the past year has not changed from 1992 to 2002 (1992 – 20%; 2000 – 19%; 2002 – 19%).

B) Stealing from parents. The number of students who admit stealing from a parent or relative increased from 24% in 1992 to 28% in 2002; 25% of students with personal religious convictions said they stole from parents, the same percentage as for honor students.

3. LYING

A) Lying to parents. Though one would expect a high percentage of young people to admit lying to their parents in the past year, the increase from 1992 to 2002 is substantial (83% vs. 93%).

- In 2002, females were slightly more likely to lie to a parent than males (94% vs. 92%).
- Students attending religious schools were more likely to lie to a parent (95% vs. 91%) but students with personal religious convictions lied at the same rate as the national average.
- The percentage of students who admit lying to their parents two or more times increased from 70% in 1992 to 81% in 2002.

B) Lying to teachers. This kind of falsehood is also common among adolescents but again the percentage who admit doing so in the previous 12 months increased significantly from 1992 to 2002 (69% to 83%).

- Gender, participation in varsity sports, student leadership, and personal religious convictions

had no material impact.

- Students attending religious schools were more likely to lie to a teacher (86% vs. 81%).
- The percentage of students who admit lying to their teachers two or more times increased from 53% in 1992 to 63% in 2002.

C) Lying to save money. The percentage of students who say they “**sometimes lie to save money**” increased substantially from 36% in 2000 to 46% in 2002.

- Males were considerably more willing to lie than females (51% vs. 43%)
- Participation in varsity sports or student leadership, attendance in private religious schools and personal religious convictions had no material impact.
- This question was not asked in the 1992 survey.

D) Lying to get a job. In 2002 the percentage who said they would be willing to “**lie to get a good job**” went up 9% (37%, compared to 28% in 2000).

- Males were considerably more willing to lie than females (42% vs. 34%).
- Participation in varsity sports (37%) or student leadership (36%) and attendance at private religious schools (38%) had no material impact. Those who had personal religious convictions were significantly lower at 32%.
- This question was not asked in the 1992 survey.

4. IDEAS AND SELF-IMAGE CONCERNING ETHICS

A) In just the past two years, the cynicism of young people has increased substantially. In 2000, 34% of high school students said, “**A person has to lie or cheat sometimes in order to succeed.**” In 2002, the number agreeing jumped 9% to 43%.

- Males were considerably more cynical than females (50% vs. 38%)
- Students who attended private religious schools did not differ from the overall national average (43%) though students who said religion was very important to them were slightly less cynical (38%)

- Students involved in varsity sports did not differ from the overall national average.
- This question was not asked in the 1992 survey.

B) Despite the high proportion of students who admitted cheating, stealing and lying in the past year, the generation appears to possess high self esteem when it comes to ethics: 76% said, **“When it comes to doing what is right, I am better than most people I know.”**

- Varsity athletes and student leaders and honors students had an even higher self-image as 80-81% said they were better than their peers.

C) In addition, though many engaged in untrustworthy behavior, the students indicated that trust was very important: 95% agreed, **“It’s important to me that people trust me.”**

D) And the vast majority of high school students (79%) agreed, **“It’s not worth it to lie or cheat because it hurts your character.”**

- Males were considerably less likely to agree with this statement than females (74% vs. 82%).
- Student leaders were slightly more likely to believe that lying and cheating “is not worth it” (82% vs. 79%).
- Attendance at religious school did not have a significant impact (80% agreed that lying and cheating is not worth it) but students with personal religious convictions were significantly more likely to agree that lying and cheating is not worth it (84%).
- This question was not asked in the 1992 survey.

5. EFFORTS AT CHARACTER EDUCATION

About three-quarters (74%) of all students said that school tries hard to help students develop good character.

- That number was significantly larger among students attending private religious schools (83%)
- 69% of all students and 71% of religious school students said their teachers consistently set a good ethical example.

6. TEACHING AND MODELING BY PARENTS

A) The misconduct of young people is not the result of mixed messages from parents, at least according to their children as 84% of all students agreed with the statement, **“My parents want me to do the ethically right thing, no matter what the cost.”**

B) Similarly, 93% disagreed with the statement, **“My parents would rather I cheat than get bad grades.”**

CHARACTER COUNTS! is a service mark of the CHARACTER COUNTS! Coalition, a project of the Josephson Institute of Ethics, a nonpartisan, nonsectarian organization.



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