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# Youth Truth



Official 'Zine of Americans for a Society Free from Age Restrictions [www.asfar.org](http://www.asfar.org)

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## Aftermath of 1984

*Sandra Buckley*

As reported in the last issue of *Youth Truth*, the National Minimum Drinking Age Act, which forced states to raise their drinking ages to 21 or lose federal highway funding, was signed into law in June 1984. Since then its proponents have trumpeted the success of the measure in preventing death and harm among young people. According to Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), the organization primarily responsible for pushing the act through the legislature, the nationwide “proportion of drivers 16-20 years of age who were involved in fatal crashes, and were intoxicated, dropped 33 percent” from 1988 to 1998. But, they are quick to remind us, more needs to be done. In spite of such dramatic decreases in youthful fatalities, “young drivers” who “make up 6.7 percent of the total driving population ... constitute 13 percent of the alcohol-involved drivers in fatal crashes” <[http://www.madd.org/stats/stat\\_youth.shtml](http://www.madd.org/stats/stat_youth.shtml)>.

Statistics may be used selectively to conceal information. In MADD’s statement above regarding the 33% drop in the “proportion of drivers 16-20 years of age who were involved in fatal crashes, and were intoxicated”, they fail to mention that the proportion of these intoxicated drivers aged 21 and older dropped drastically as well, according to the Centers for Disease Control <<http://aepo-xdv-www.epo.cdc.gov/wonder/prevguid/m0039652/m0039652.htm>>. MADD’s mention of the “young drivers” who are overrepresented in alcohol-related fatal crashes does not specify an age range; according to several sources, drivers aged 16-20 are involved

in about 13% of all alcohol-related fatal crashes, so that is probably the group they mean. But they fail to mention that this is about the same percentage of *non*-alcohol-related fatal accidents they are involved in—which would indicate that driving experience, rather than alcohol, might be the problem for this group. They also ignore the 21-24 year olds, whose share of alcohol-related accidents is even higher.

Statistics are mighty confusing. Various sources may present comparisons of different periods of time, different age ranges, or numbers and percentages with slightly different definitions. Methods of gathering statistics may change, making accurate “before and after” comparisons impossible. MADD’s own statistics on actual numbers of traffic fatalities <<http://www.madd.org/stats/fatalities82.shtml>> do not agree with the numbers in the Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) of the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration <<http://silk.nih.gov/niaaa1/database/crash01.txt>>. While MADD’s figures show, for all age groups, a 34.5% decrease from 1982 to 1997 in alcohol-related crash fatalities, they also indicate that there was a 35.6% increase in *non*-alcohol-related crash fatalities during the same years, causing the highway death toll to remain about the same. This is badly at odds with FARS statistics for the same time period, which shows an increase in non-alcohol-related crash deaths of only about 16%, and a moderate reduction in the total number of accident fatalities.

Another problem with statistics concerns terminology. Does “intoxicated” mean having a certain blood-alcohol level that is measured, or must one be noticeably drunk? or perhaps an officer may record, during the investigation, his or her own suspicion, or someone else’s testimony, that someone in the crash was drunk? does the term mean the same thing to all police officers, in all states, and in all statistical sources where it appears? And the term “alcohol-related” was the subject of a recent joint report of the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention and the International Center for Alcohol Policies <<http://www.icap.org/annfin.html>>, which criticized as misleading and overly inclusive the definition provided by the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration, in which a crash is “alcohol-related ... if either a driver or nonmotorist (usually a pedestrian) had a measurable or estimated blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.01 g/dl or above”. A BAC of 0.01 is well below the lowest legal limit in any state (0.08). With this definition, the presence of this level of alcohol may be “estimated”, and any person involved in an accident—even an innocent victim—could, if judged to have consumed alcohol, qualify the accident as “alcohol-related”.

Having taken all of these problems into consideration, it is still pretty clear that since the signing of the National Minimum Drinking Age Act, fatal traffic accidents, already on the decline, decreased even more substantially—for all age groups!

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## Voting Protest in Massachusetts

One of several protests to lower the voting age, planned to be held by ASFAR and other groups on Election Day, took place in Brookline, Massachusetts. ASFAR member David Schneider-Joseph was interviewed by the local media; the story is online at <[http://www.townonline.com/brookline/news/topstories/general/0-8890\\_0\\_students\\_110900\\_98bbf77dc.html](http://www.townonline.com/brookline/news/topstories/general/0-8890_0_students_110900_98bbf77dc.html)>.

## ASFAR Supports Chicago Protest

On November 2, ASFAR Secretary Susan Wishnetsky joined about 10 members of a local Chicago group to fight psychiatric oppression in their protest at the 12th Annual Conference of Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD). Originally formed as a parents' support group, CHADD now receives substantial funding from pharmaceutical companies. CHADD is among several subjects of a class action lawsuit (see <[www.ritalinfraud.com](http://www.ritalinfraud.com)>) by people who feel they were improperly diagnosed or treated. The protest focused on the fact that the welcoming speaker for CHADD's opening ceremony was Paul Vallas, the Superintendent of Chicago Public Schools.

## The Less, the Better

Something to think about as government schools try to increase their grip on American kids, by extending the school year and creating mandatory preschool. If someone can spend 12 years in public schools and graduate without ever learning to read, as many do, what happens to those 1 or 2 or 3 year olds who start going to school even earlier—they might never learn how to talk or eat solid food.

Jason Gerber

## Disruptive, or Just Unpopular?

I'm what people would call a goth. I wear black outfits, in fact, they are my favorite thing to wear, and I paint my nails black, and on occasion even wear black lipstick. And the school administrators occasionally get on my case about it. They say it is "a disruption to class". My question is "and cheerleading outfits aren't?"

Kat

## Chuckee Cheese—Where a Kid Has to Leave

I and two friends were not allowed to enter Chuckee Cheeses today because we were under the age of 18, and no one in our group was 18 or older.

Peace, love, and information,  
David Schneider-Joseph

# News Links

## Homeschooler Helps to Find Mathematical Proof

The discovery of the mathematical solution to the "Carpenter's Rule" problem by three researchers was announced to the Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics this year. One of the team was 19-year-old Erik Demaine, who was "well into homeschooling" by the age of seven. A report on the "Carpenter's Rule" problem appears at <<http://www.sciencenews.org/20000923/bob1.asp>>; Erik Demaine's home page is at <<http://daisy.uwaterloo.ca/~eddemain/>>.

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## Such a thing as too low?

I've been reflecting on an issue of great importance to our movement for some time now, and have come to the conclusion that it's time to share it with you all. The issue is whether, at a certain point, lowering an age restriction becomes more harmful than helpful.

This may seem a rather peculiar line of inquiry for the Vice-President of an organization called Americans for a Society Free from Age Restrictions, but bear with me.

Let me use the age of consent as an example (and why not—everyone else does). The official ASFAR position is that the age of consent should be replaced with a more objective standard, such as that of informed consent (determining whether the individual could really be aware and informed of the action and consequences they were undertaking, in other words, that they had the mental maturity to make such a decision). I agree with this.

Now, when it comes to the issue of lowering the age in the interim, I think it's safe to say that most ASFAR members would feel comfortable lowering it 14. Some might say 13, some even lower. But think for a moment: what do we get by lowering the age of consent to, say, 5?

Let's consider the fact that there is a higher burden of evidence necessary to convict someone of rape when the alleged victim is over the age of consent (due to the obvious fact that being "underaged" isn't a viable claim), and while it's true

that juries would use their common sense in judging such cases, is it really even worth the risk, or the effort?

On the other hand, if the standard is replaced altogether with an objective standard, then the point is moot—you don't have to worry about those "under age" being able to get their victimizers punished more harshly, since everyone would be given the same consideration.

Think about it for a moment: is it really fair that our current laws are, in a way, biased against those OVER the age of 18 who get raped? By having an age of consent, it creates an impression in certain cases where the victim is over the age of 18 that "she shoulda known what she was doing", whereas a 16 or 17-year old might get a more favorable verdict. Whether "she shoulda known" is irrelevant to our present discussion; what is important is that this decision isn't made entirely on the merits of the case or the mental capacity of the individual, but on the sole basis of whether or not the individual is above or below a certain age.

This seems to be as ludicrous as the politically-fashionable concept of "hate crimes", which punish more severely the "thought behind the crime" (when the crime is against politically correct groups, that is). As if killing someone because you don't like the way they're looking at you is morally superior to killing someone because they are black, and as if the former should be punished more leniently than the latter. But that is another discussion for another publication!

## Perspective

*Justin Mallone*  
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Ultimately, we are left with the somewhat ironic-seeming conclusion that at a certain point, abolishing an age restriction altogether may be safer than lowering it.

This leaves several questions unanswered though: at what point does that become true? Is it wrong to continue to pursue lowering the age restriction? What should ASFAR do if it ever comes to that point?

Like many questions, these depend on context. Let us remember that not all age restrictions pose this problem (the driving age, given the ability to objectively test for the skill to drive, poses no such quandary about lowering it at any opportunity, to any age).

The questions regarding at what point this situation becomes reality, and whether it is wrong to continue to pursue lowering as opposed to abolishing, are closely related. As a youth rights supporter, I cannot say I could support a policy that would lead to the rights of youth being further violated (as is a conceivable scenario if the age of consent were set VERY low). On the other hand, age restrictions are, in and of themselves, a violating of the rights of the young. A most perplexing situation.

The truth is that if and when we come to this crossroads, youth rights supporters will have to decide for themselves where the line is to be drawn. In the meantime, let us work towards the goal of being able to ponder such dilemmas as pressing and immediate issues instead of hypothetical situations.

**— ABOLISHING AN AGE RESTRICTION ALTOGETHER MAY BE SAFER THAN LOWERING IT ... IS IT WRONG TO CONTINUE TO PURSUE LOWERING THE AGE RESTRICTION? —**

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# Sue's Review

Susan Wishnetsky  
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Editor's note: Content of reviewed books is not necessarily the opinion of ASFAR.

Hine, Thomas. *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*. New York : Avon Books, 1999.

The popular media of our day—television, newspapers, magazines, online services—never tire of trumpeting the timeless message: Kids today are doing more dangerous, inadvisable, “adult” things, and they’re doing them at younger and younger ages. The message is timeless, since it has been uttered throughout the history of this country, but now, carried by freight and wire and satellite into every home, it has greater force and conviction than ever before.

And never before in America’s history has this message been less true. In *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, author Thomas Hine traces the history of youth, primarily focusing on their lives in the New World, from a time when there were no “teenagers”, and age as an actual number was irrelevant, to today. Throughout history, young people are seen adapting—often impressively—to whatever roles their families and communities permitted and expected them to play.

Actual documentation of ordinary lives is difficult to find. Hine includes quotations and anecdotes from a wide variety of sources, including newspaper articles, newsletters, memoirs and oral histories, in order to paint a picture of each period of time in our country. With the aid of his historical perspective and analysis, he tries to give readers an understanding of how and why people lived and thought as they did. The attempt is largely successful.

The book is indexed and includes a wonderful bibliography, but no specific citations throughout the book (although sources are sometimes mentioned within the text). This is occasionally regrettable, when specific facts or statistics are presented, such as the following:

In 1870, about 13 percent of young people ten to fifteen years old—more than 19 percent of males and nearly 7 percent of females—were working at jobs. This number of employed youths doesn’t seem all that high, until you consider that it doesn’t include those who were working without wages within their family. That means that just about all young people on farms, where the vast majority of Americans lived, were not counted .... By 1900, the number of young people employed off farms ... comprised more than 18 percent of the population of ten- to fifteen-year-olds ...

Hine goes on to state that, during the same period, the percentage of children attending school also increased dramatically. It certainly would be helpful to know the source of these statistics.

But Hine’s book consists more of stories, commentary, and “psychoanalysis” of the American mindset than of hard facts and statistics. The picture it presents is of an America created and built by young people. Alongside the adults, and often in greater numbers, they fought the Revolutionary War, cultivated the land, toiled in the mines, mills and factories. And in the 1900s, the America that youth were so instrumental in building began to be denied to them.

Hine identifies a major turning point as the 1904 publication of *Adolescence*, by psychologist and college president Granville Stanley Hall. While the book was not widely read at the time, Hine maintains that it helped to increase and justify the fear of “premature” entry into adult life that Hall shared with “many members of the professional and middle classes”:

Such major changes in the way Americans have lived their lives were spurred by forces in the economy, technology, and politics, both in the United States and elsewhere. They cannot be attributed to one book, even one as imposing and ambitious as Hall’s. Nevertheless, the book played a catalytic role, giving various groups an intellectual basis for their campaigns to get young people off the streets, out of the factories, and into the schools.

Hall’s view of unstable, emotionally volatile teenagers depicts human development as mirroring human evolution, with the adolescent stage paralleling that of primitive man. Although his views have been contradicted by later studies (and criticized for racist overtones), they continue to shape our current opinions. Hine comments on the current status of youth in our society:

The majority of young people grow up all right, but even they are affected by the stigma and atmosphere of mistrust .... the normal, law-abiding young, facing pervasive suspicion in their everyday lives and increasing restrictions on their freedom of movement and association, are paying a high price for problems that aren’t theirs.

Available in paperback for under \$13.00, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* is a highly enjoyable, hopeful, and enlightening book.

— THE PICTURE  
IT PRESENTS IS OF AN AMERICA  
CREATED AND BUILT BY YOUNG PEOPLE —

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## America Online One Year Later

In the very first issue of *Youth Truth*, I wrote about the “parental control” feature of the internet service provider America Online (AOL). AOL’s parental control system consists of four settings: “General Access” (unrestricted), “Mature Teens” (recommended for 16-17 year olds), “Young Teens” (13-15 year olds), and “Kids Only” (12 or younger). I reported that the settings for “Young Teens” and “Kids Only” blocked access to important educational and political web sites.

I’ve been told since then that the situation has changed—specifically, that the web site of my own organization, ASFAR (Americans for a Society Free from Age Restrictions), is now accessible. So last month, about one year later, I repeated my investigation of AOL’s parental controls.

I reported in my earlier article that the “Mature Teens” category seemed to block only those sites containing explicit sexual or violent images or descriptions, but otherwise seemed to have the same searching and access capabilities as the unrestricted “General Access” level. This time, however, I found three sites blocked at that level that do not fit the above description: the Creator’s Rights Party <<http://www.christiangallery.com/creator.html>>, the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan Party <<http://www.kukluxklan.org>>, and Peacefire <<http://www.peacefire.org>>. I might have overlooked these last year, or the decision to prevent “Mature Teens” from viewing these sites might have been made since then. There could be many more such sites—neither pornographic nor outrageously violent—that are blocked to “Mature Teens” that I *didn’t* come across. So I’m no longer so confident that the “Mature Teen” setting is similar to the “General Access” setting.

I repeated my test with two academic sites: Northwestern University and the University of Michigan. The latter site seems to be

as accessible as it was a year ago—some departmental pages, such as physics and departments in the School of Medicine, are still blocked to “Young Teens” and “Kids Only”, although most of the site can still be viewed at these levels. For Northwestern University, however, it seems that *only* the home page is accessible; every internal link I tried, at these two settings, was blocked (last year, at least *some* of the internal pages could be accessed).

I also repeated my test of four search terms. This test could not be done at the “Young Teens” level last year, because with that setting there was no screen provided to permit searching of the entire web. This year, however, the feature has been added for “Young Teens”. The results, below, are not surprising based on what I found a year ago:

Search Term:	Number of hits for:		
	GA/MT	YT	KO
“bully”	1367	395	12
“curfew”	306	73	2
“puberty”	630	137	3
“drugs”	21049	3964	126

While the number of hits was the same for the “General Access” and “Mature Teens” settings, it is possible that many of the links would be blocked to “Mature Teens”.

The relevance of the matches at the “Young Teens” and “Kids Only” levels was questionable. For example, of the first ten hits listed for “bully”, *none* were relevant at the “Young Teen” level; at the “Kids Only” level, only one was relevant, but it was blocked! The search for “drugs” did yield mostly relevant matches—anti-drug links seemed to be heavily overrepresented (but that is true of searches done without parental controls as well).

## Update

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The first of the three matches for “puberty” at the “Kids Only” level was a Harry Potter books fans’ site, which was blocked! (Out of curiosity, I also checked the official Harry Potter site, and found it was also blocked to “Kids Only”.) The second was a link to something called gURLmAIL—also blocked. The third, not blocked, was a letter from a 39-year-old taking Tegretol for epilepsy. The results for “Young Teens” searching the term “puberty” were significantly better; of the first ten matches, eight were relevant and only one was blocked.

The search term “curfew” yielded the most surprising change. Last year, at the “Kids Only” level, only one match was found, a handbook of the Parks and Recreation Department of College Station, Texas. This year, that match was still the first one listed, but a second link was added—to the home page of ASFAR. And it wasn’t blocked! This match for “curfew” was also found at the “Young Teen” level, although it wasn’t among the first ten. With the exception of ASFAR’s discussion archives (which do contain an occasional four-letter word), ASFAR’s entire site is accessible at all levels of AOL parental control.

Two other youth rights organizations—the National Youth Rights Association <<http://nyra.ecg.net>> and Youthspeak <<http://www.oblivion.net/youthspeak>>—are still completely blocked. Since ASFAR, as far as I know, has taken no action to protest the blockage of its web site by AOL, aside from publishing my article a year ago, I assume one of our readers must have gone to bat for us! (Thanks!)

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— THE OFFICIAL  
HARRY POTTER SITE ... WAS  
ALSO BLOCKED TO “KIDS ONLY” —

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*Opinions expressed may not reflect the views of ASFAR.*

## Education and Social Segregation

Whenever it is suggested that compulsory education cease, or even that there be discussion on its value, the suggestion is immediately drowned out by a thousand voices yelling, “Do you want child labor?” This ridiculous bromide has kept back meaningful discussion of this subject for a long time, and thus closed most people’s minds to rational thinking and discussion about compulsory education.

1928 was the first year in which every American state had a compulsory education law. At that time, most of them required people under the age of sixteen to attend school for significantly less time than today’s school system demands. Yet the

school system’s students learned far more even in that time than do most of their contemporary counterparts.

Many people today would argue that, despite the attendant decrease in the quality of schools, the increase in the time spent at them, and the immense increases in their cost, compulsory education is still worthwhile because it prevents “child labor.”

This argument presupposes that child labor is undesirable. Of course, it could hardly be argued that the appalling working conditions under which destitute children in 1928 suffered were good places for the children of that time to be. However, work-

place laws now ban that sort of employment altogether. Even if no such laws were in place, if children had the same legal rights as other people, they couldn’t be forced to work in those places.

The laws barring children from employment do not meet their stated purpose. Children are barred almost universally from holding any job. While few would benefit from working in a sweatshop, it is inane to claim that no one under the age of eighteen years is capable of holding a job in which they are productive, at which they are treated well and from which their pay supports them or helps to support them—which helps to teach them about responsibility and self-sufficiency, and increases their sense of personal dignity.

*continued on next page*

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### AOL—Again

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The major part of the test was checking the links to political sites, using (again) the wonderful list created by the Government Documents Librarian of the State University of West Georgia’s Ingram Library at <<http://www.westga.edu/~library/depts/govdoc/political.shtml>>. The list has grown a bit in the past year, but is similar enough, I think, to serve the purpose of retesting. My results were also similar to those of last year.

Of the page’s 48 working links to “Political Parties”:  
“Young Teens” can access 15  
“Kids Only” can access 13

Last year, the site of the Republican National Committee was accessible, while the Democratic Party’s site was not! I felt certain that this was a mistake, and sure enough, this year, both are accessible at all levels of parental control.

Two other parties that are accessible at all levels are the Communist Party and the Socialist Party; however, the “youth” pages on both of these sites are blocked to “Kids Only” and “Young Teens”.

Of the page’s 31 working links to “Non-Partisan Sites”:  
“Young Teens” can access 8  
“Kids Only” can access 4

At the site of *Project VoteSmart*, neither group can access their comparison of the candidates. Some youth-related pages are blocked in a site called *WhiteHouse 2000*, including a page entitled “Neglection 2000”. However, a site called *The Skeleton Closet*—covering scandals reported or rumored about political figures, which included a suggestion that Pat Buchanan may have had a venereal disease!—was entirely accessible at both levels.

Of the page’s 15 working links to “Media Sites and Publications”:  
“Young Teens” can access 6  
“Kids Only” can access 4

Among the sites blocked to both groups are the *American Politics Journal* and the *Harvard Political Review*. One notable site which is accessible to “Young Teens” is the *Drudge Report*; I found many of its internal links to be blocked, but not the one to a story about Paula Jones’ nude appearance in *Penthouse*, or an item on which famous actors are gay.

Of the page’s 193 working links to “Political Action Groups”:  
“Young Teens” can access 52  
“Kids Only” can access 34

As I commented last year, the possible reasons for permitting or denying access to these sites are unfathomable to me. While such groups as the Center for Auto Safety, the Children’s Rights Council, the Food and Law Drug Institute, and the National Coalition for the Homeless are blocked at both levels, the Christian Coalition, Doctors Opposing Circumcision, and the Taxpayers Assets Project are entirely accessible to both levels. The AFL-CIO and UAW sites are accessible, but not the Teamsters’ Union. To “Young Teens”, the Episcopal Peace Fellowship is accessible, but not the Lutheran Peace Fellowship!

I did not check each of these links at the “Mature Teen” level; from spot-checking it’s clear that the vast majority are accessible (but at least two “Political Parties” are not).

While I’m happy that my own organization can now be viewed by all kids using AOL, I found that using AOL with parental controls gives about the same access to the World Wide Web as it did a year ago—not very balanced and not very informative.

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# Editorial

Joshua Freeman

ASFAR Member

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The actual result of child labor laws is not to bar children from working in sweatshops, but to deny them meaningful, educational and enjoyable jobs, and to put most of them in the predicament of having little useful to do. Frustrated at their impotence, denied useful employment, many young people turn to crime and prison. Others develop bad habits after years of forced dependence on others for their most basic needs. They are taught not to work but to rely on others. Are prison terms, crime, and the habits of dependency and unproductiveness preferable to “child labor”?

Not only are the original laws against sweatshops in place, and the laws barring youth from employment, but it is argued that young people must also be forcibly sent to and detained at schools, the specifications of which are set by remote educational bureaucracies and specialists who have no incentive to run schools well, but every incentive to make them run poorly and thus increase the size of their departments.

It is obvious that compulsory education does nothing to prevent young people from working in sweatshops and other unsafe and unrewarding workplaces. The only other argument for it rests on the presupposition that it teaches students more than they would otherwise learn.

Humans are naturally curious. Our curiosity and will to learn is part of our nature, and what differentiates us from inhuman animals. Today, learning and knowledge are more accessible than ever before. Books are inexpensive and enormously variant, auditory and audiovisual educational methods abound, from audio tapes to television documentaries, and telephones, inexpensive letter-carrying, and the Internet put almost every American at easy reach of a friend or expert in a field.

Despite this new availability of information, ignorance is increasing in the United States and test scores are plummeting. Despite the fact that compulsory education is three times as expensive as it was thirty years ago, even adjusted for inflation, the

United States consistently achieves dismal results from its school system. Despite the enormous wealth that exists in this country, pedagogy is at a new low in our nation’s history. Teachers’ salaries are rising, and there are thousands of devoted teachers, but the proceeds are less each year. Even powerful politicians in charge of the school system, who extol its greatness (such as Bill Clinton and Al Gore), send their children only to private schools. Scientists have to be imported.

What is most people’s response to this? To suggest even *greater* expenditure on schools. The trebling of schools’ funding in the past thirty years hasn’t reversed the decline in standards, or the schools’ inability to meet even those newer, lower standards.

Compulsory education is based on fallacies and hollow slogans. While America’s schools are allegedly attempting to accentuate the “specialness” of each student, students are forcibly grouped together not by ability, interest, or will, but by age. People are forced to slog through twelve years of school at a pace aimed at the average, although even average students are capable of much more, as we can see by the success of other countries and this country’s past. Everyone below the “average” can’t keep up, and everyone above the “average” becomes bored and twiddles their thumbs while their teachers drone on about things that they already know.

What are the results of this? Most people below the schools’ standards are relegated to special categories, classes, and schools, designated as inferior and consigned to spend the rest of their lives marked as inferior to most. Most people above the schools’ standards, in addition to having some of their earliest years, some of the most fertile for learning, wasted, begin to believe that learning is boring and arduous. Most of the most fertile minds in the United States are taught that learning is uninteresting. Students all over the spectrum believe that learning is unrewarding, since they are denied usage of their knowledge.

Almost everyone begins to believe that learning is something done only in school. They are taught that they cannot learn on their own, and, consequently, do little reading and original thinking. Outside of the failing schools, they do little to increase their knowledge and satisfy their curiosity.

People below the average begin to despise those above them, because the latter are not placed in the same class as the “inferiors”. People near the average begin to despise those who learn more quickly than them, because what comes effortlessly to those significantly above the average is difficult for them. This is immensely exacerbated by the fact that they are all lumped together into classes. Rather than striving to do well, most people not significantly above average intellectually give up devotion to learning, figuring that their efforts will always be useless. Those above the average begin to despise those at it and below it, because they are forced to work with them, and have little chance to see others of similar capability.

All of this resentment is exaggerated, too, by the fact that ability within individuals is not usually distributed evenly. Those good in math and poor in spelling both resent and are resented.

People who go to schools in destitute neighborhoods are usually taught “their place.” Students in wealthier neighborhoods are taught “theirs”.

Compulsory education does not do what it is said to do. It causes most people to hate and abandon learning. It segregates society.

It’s time that it ended.

## New Whine in Old Bottles: the Crusade Against Video Games

*Wendy McElroy*

On September 7th, Wal-Mart and Kmart announced a new policy: they will not sell “violent video games” to anyone under seventeen unless the customer is accompanied by a parent. The decision has been widely applauded as a move toward eliminating violence from society, especially the so-called copy-cat violence that certain video games are said to inspire within children. These games incorporate “virtual violence” into their method of scoring. For example, in *Carmageddon* players score points by driving virtual cars over as many pedestrians as possible. Exposure to violent games is said to be an underlying cause of such tragedies as *Columbine*.

The “voluntary” policy change at Wal-Mart and Kmart is the business equivalent of jumping off a cliff before being legislatively pushed over the edge. It was a response to increasing pressure from politicians. In May, the executives at Wal-Mart and Kmart (along with other major retail chains) received a letter signed by seven senators who urged them either to cease selling or to restrict the sale of violent video games. In August, Toys R Us replied to Senator Jeff Sessions, R-Ala.—one of the signatories—and assured him that they had restricted the sale of violent video games to minors. Sessions pointedly observed that other retailers (e.g. Montgomery Ward and Sears) now prohibited such sales.

Politicians at the state level have been equally vigorous in the call for commerce to self-censor. Jim Ryan, the Attorney General of Illinois, declared, “When it comes to exposing our children to violence, we must be especially vigilant. It defies common sense that we would want these shockingly violent and interactive ‘murder simulators’ to flow freely into the hands and ultimately the minds of our young people.” The targets of his righteous wrath were M-rated (mature-rated) video games. Although no law prohibits the sale of M-rated games to minors, Ryan called for a voluntary ban. That was his “preference,” Ryan stated, then he explained that his office was investigating other solutions to the “problem.”

The timing of the announcement of compliance by Wal-Mart and Kmart is revealing. Their statements came shortly before the much anticipated upcoming release of a government report that Clinton demanded in the wake of *Columbine*. The report is expected to condemn the entertainment industry for marketing “adult” movies, music and video games to children.

In short, there is a full frontal assault on freedom of expression—from the federal and state governments, as well as the media—being conducted under the banner of “protecting children from violence.” The private sector is blamed for making a profit off the endangerment of children’s safety.

The censorship argument hinges on a connection being drawn between images and behavior: namely, that violent images cause violent behavior. What evidence supports this argument? Senator Sam Brownback, R-Kan. explains, “Common sense should tell us that positively reinforcing sadistic behavior, as these games do, cannot be good for our children.” Of the anticipated report on whether violent games are targeted to kids, Brownback states, “If this is true—and there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that it is—this is a scandal and an outrage.” In other words, the pro-censorship argument is supported by the “common sense” of politicians and “anecdotal evidence.”

If someone questions the “common sense” of how crime can be declining steadily although violent video games have swept the nation, the questioner is quickly silenced by emotional rhetoric about school shootings. If someone who was brought up playing with G.I. Joe doubts the “anecdotal” evidence of how violent games lead to violence in reality, the “protect our children” card is played. Arguably, this is the most politically powerful card in the deck.

The current furor over violent video games is only the most recent expression of a long censorship campaign that can be dated backward at least three decades to 1972, to the United States Surgeon General’s proclamation that children become violent due to images on television. The renewed call for the censorship of images has a familiar ring to it. About the same time that the Surgeon General attacked violence on television, the Federal Commission on Pornography and Obscenity—called by President Nixon—rendered its findings on the connection between sexual images and violence. The Commission found that there was none. The subsequent use of “studies” and “evidence” to suppress dangerous sexual images has a direct parallel to what is happening with violent video games.

In 1984, President Reagan tried to erase the findings of Nixon’s Commission by replacing them with the Meese Commission Report. The Report was the culmination of a circus of biased public hearings conducted by the U.S. Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography for the purpose of investigating “evidence linking pornography to anti-social behavior”—

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# Redirect

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<http://www.lewrockwell.com/mcelroy/mcelroy25.html>

that is, linking porn to violence against women. The Meese Commission was more obedient to political will than its predecessor: it found that graphic sexual images lead to violence. After all, it was headed by the same man—Ed Meese—who was largely responsible for raising the age limit that defined “a child” from 16 to 18.

Not surprisingly, much of the Meese Commission’s proof that pornography led to sexual assault came from politically biased sources who gathered data in order to reach a foregone conclusion. Even valid studies were interpreted in a politically expedient manner. In the *Virginia Law Review*, Nadine Strossen—President of the American Civil Liberties Union—commented on one study used to support the anti-porn position. “The Meese Commission...relied on Professor Murray Straus’ correlation studies...to ‘justify’ their conclusions that exposure to ‘pornography’ leads to sexual assaults. But, as Professor Straus wrote the Commission, ‘I do not believe that [my] research demonstrates that pornography causes rape.’”

The ideological bias embedded in studies stems not merely from political funding or a political agenda. It is also springs from the assumptions that researchers bring to their studies. For example, if researchers believe human beings are largely hard-wired by genetics toward certain behavior, they are likely to ask different questions than if they believe human behavior is determined by the environment.

Even when good research is honestly conducted and attempts are made to filter out assumptions, the media commonly distorts the significance of findings in order to produce sensationalism. A frequent act of distortion is to blur the distinction between a correlation and a cause-and-effect relationship. A correlation says nothing about cause-and-effect. It is a fallacy to assume that if A can be correlated with B, then A causes B. Such a correlation might indicate nothing more than that both are caused by another factor, C. For example, there might be a high correlation between the number of doctors in a city and the number of alcoholics there. One factor doesn’t cause the other; both are proportional to the size of the city’s population. The same is true of the correlation between playing M-rated

video games and violence by minors. It is as valid to state that attendance in public school causes students to shoot their classmates, as to ascribe that behavior to playing a game.

In the ‘80s and ‘90s, freedom of expression triumphed over attempts to eliminate pornography. It was a heated and prolonged battle during which radical feminists joined with the religious right to call for censorship. They lost largely because their data was widely discredited. I do not believe the censors will lose the fight against violent video games however flawed their evidence may be. People are in a panic over violence in the schools and the government needs a scapegoat. It cannot blame the public school system for which it is responsible. It cannot control or repair the break down of the nuclear family that has left millions of children without the traditional safety net of values and guidance. But government can blame the private sector for selling “unsavory” wares. And it can control retailers like Wal-Mart through letters of intimidation signed by Senators.

In the final analysis, it probably will not matter how weak the common sense or how anecdotal the evidence is that underlies their arguments. The censors will probably win.

Those watching the political juggernaut go by should raise one question repeatedly. Where are the parents? Why are they appealing to government to inculcate proper values into their children? Why are politicians being asked to exercise what is rightfully parental control? The games being targeted by law-makers have been clearly rated so that parents know them at a glance. Why aren’t parents opening their eyes and taking responsibility for their own children?

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## Teen Wins State House Seat

Derrick Seaver, an 18-year-old high school graduate, defeated his 34-year-old opponent by 235 votes to win a seat in Ohio’s House of Representatives. The story appears at [http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/nm/20001109/pl/ohio\\_teen\\_dc\\_2.html](http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/nm/20001109/pl/ohio_teen_dc_2.html).

## High School Student Witch Hunt Victim—Literally

An Oklahoma high school suspended a 15-year-old student for 15 days, charging that she cast a spell which caused a teacher to become ill. More details may be found at <http://www.aclu.org/news/2000/n102600.html>.

# News Links

According to FARS statistics, from 1975 to 1984, the number of fatal crashes per 100,000 people in each age group went down 7.8% for 15-20 year olds and 7.9% for people 21 and older; from 1985 to 1994, the decreases were 12% for 15-20 year olds and 12.6% for people 21 and older.

How could keeping people from drinking until the age of 21 reduce the drinking of people over 21? It probably didn't. After the nation's drinking age was raised to 21, the 21-24 age group apparently took over the greatest share of alcohol-related fatal accidents. In *The Scapegoat Generation* (p.210), author Mike Males presents his findings that the first year or two after a person can legally drink alcohol—regardless of what age is chosen—is the period in which that person is most likely to be involved in an alcohol-related accident.

For the rest of the population, all accidents decreased. A whole host of factors could have contributed to reducing impaired driving and promoting traffic safety in general. There were reductions of highway speed limits and improvements in auto safety equipment, such as shoulder harnesses and airbags, along with media campaigns extolling safety measures. There were, for all drivers, increased enforcement of drunk driving laws, roadside checkpoints, and harsher penalties, also widely discussed in the national media. (Prior to the 1980s, people did not use the expression “designated driver”—in common use today.) The potential for lawsuits against businesses serving alcohol to over-imbibing patrons (however unfair one feels such lawsuits are!) gave rise to “server training programs” to assist bartenders in recognizing and dealing with intoxicated customers; bar owners were also motivated to help these customers find alternatives to driving home. Community and school-based programs began to appear, to educate people about the risks and effects of alcohol; many were found ineffective, but even the poorest programs contributed to public awareness of this renewed caution about alcohol.

## Drinking Age

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While overall traffic safety clearly seems to have improved in the past 20-25 years, there appears to be little change in the consumption patterns of alcohol by people under 18. In his above-mentioned book (p.204), Mike Males compared survey responses of high school students who were asked comparable questions about drinking in 1952, 1978, and 1991:

the percent reporting they'd “ever had a drink” ranged from 87-90%  
the percent reporting drinking “weekly” ranged from 46-48%  
the percent reporting “problems with drinking” ranged from 15-16%  
the average “age of first drink” was the same in each survey—12

A survey from the National Institute on Drug Abuse called *Monitoring the Future*, which compares students' responses from 1975-1999, tends to confirm (for the years it covers) the consistency of this pattern. One type of drinking behavior, however, does seem to be increasing somewhat: binge drinking. After a reported low point in 1993, the percent of high school seniors reporting drinking five or more alcoholic beverages on a single drinking occasion within the previous two weeks rose gradually from 28% to 31%. This may not seem like much of an increase, but it is almost entirely attributable to the responses of *male* students, of whom 39% reported this level of consumption on one or more occasions in the past two weeks.

Surveys of college students show greater differences. In Wechsler, et al. “College Binge Drinking in the 1990s” (*Journal of American College Health*, v.48:1 2000, p. 199-210), the authors found an increasing “polarization” between abstainers and heavy drinkers on college campuses, with fewer students who reported drinking moderately. Between 1993 and 1999, the authors noted an increase of

24.7% in students who consider themselves “abstainers” and 14.5% in “frequent binge drinkers”. In 1999, 44.1% of the students surveyed identified themselves as frequent or occasional heavy drinkers; 36.6% were classified as “non-binge” or moderate drinkers, and 19.2% didn't drink at all.

A 1997 study, the *College Alcohol Study* of the Harvard School of Public Health, did find slight decreases in the number of students who binged, compared to 1993, but it also reported an increase in the frequency of binge drinking among these students, with more of them choosing “to get drunk” as their reason for drinking. Dr. William DeJong, an instructor at the Harvard School of Public Health, was recently quoted in *Advances: the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Quarterly Newsletter* (issue 1, 1999) as saying:

Just about everyone in the substance abuse field says the nature of drinking has changed over the past 15 years or so. Teens...are doing what we call industrial-strength binging. They use all kinds of apparatus—funnels, beer bongs, pumps. There's an intensity to it that you seldom saw years ago.

These comments should surprise no one who understands human nature! Fifteen years before the above statement was made, there was no National Minimum Drinking Age. Alcohol use by high school students—within limits—was looked upon as a normal form of experimentation and a mild exercise in rebellion. Drinking by 18-20 year olds was a legal, acceptable part of their adult lives, something they were expected to learn to do responsibly. But since the mid-1980s, people under 21 have been considered so incapable of handling alcohol that they are often forbidden to touch sealed containers of beer or wine on their jobs. Any drinking by anyone under the age of 21 has come to be considered *criminal* behavior. When one is labeled “irresponsible”, and when one is engaging in behavior that is considered “criminal”, the concept of moderation ceases to have much meaning.

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