

# **How America's Youth Are Faring Since September 11<sup>th</sup>**

## **A Report from the Girl Scout Research Institute**

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GSRI original research conducted in partnership with  
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### **Introduction**

The 2002 school year did not start off like any other for America's youth. On the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, two hijacked airplanes crashed into the towers of the World Trade Center; another hijacked airplane crashed into the Pentagon; and a fourth hijacked airplane is believed to have been on a similar course of destruction when passengers overtook the hijackers and the plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. Immediately after these tragic events many research institutes embarked on surveys to gauge the psychological and behavioral effects on American youth. The purpose of this report is to summarize the research to date, including an original study by the Girl Scout Research Institute and Partners in Brainstorms, Inc., and to provide tips on supporting youth during these challenging times.

### **Research Within The First Three Months After The Terrorist Attacks**

#### **Positive Impact of Caring Family Members and Adults**

One common theme found in research related to September 11<sup>th</sup> was the overwhelming desire of young people to discuss the terrorist attacks and future threats with caring adults. Furthermore, the majority of American youth reported spending more time with their families after the attacks and valuing them more. This increase in quality time with their families led to an increased feeling of safety and a decrease in worry about future attacks.

A *Harris Interactive* online survey conducted from September 19–24, 2001, with 1,241 respondents aged 8–18 found that most children had been watching (67 percent) and talking (71 percent) about the tragedy with their parents, with 66 percent of children’s teachers talking about the tragedy in class since it happened. America’s teens (ages 13–18) also gave an “excellent or good” rating to President Bush (70 percent), their parents (72 percent), the media (69 percent), and their teachers (63 percent) for helping them understand and cope with the tragedy. Only 49 percent of these same respondents gave an “excellent or good” rating to their friends. This adult support appears that much more valuable to youth considering that another *Harris Interactive* online survey of 640 teenagers aged 13–18 found that only 36 percent felt that the government would be able to prevent things like this from happening again, and 50 percent of the nation’s teens were fearful that terrorism would strike near them.

Further evidence for the positive impact of caring family members and adults was found in *The National Crime Prevention Council* telephone survey conducted from October 25–28 with 513 teenagers (256 males and 257 females) ages 12-17 for their report “Are We Safe? 2001 – Focus on Teens.” One of their main findings is that teens still point to their parents as having the greatest impact on their feelings of safety. Teens said they felt safest at home with their family and that their parents were the greatest source of influence on deciding between right and wrong.

## Emotional Toll Lingers

As time moved on, many research institutes discontinued their research on the effects of September 11<sup>th</sup> on American youth, as it appeared to many people that today's youth were "getting back to normal." The small number of studies that set out to gauge the enduring effects of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the events that followed found that the daily lives of American youth only *appeared* to be back to normal. Behaviorally, American youth were generally settled into their old routines, but the emotional effects of September 11<sup>th</sup> were ongoing.

Almost two months after the terrorist attacks, youth were still reporting emotional effects and the need for adult support. From November 1–12, 2001, *Horatio Alger Association* and *Peter D. Hart Research Associates* conducted an update to the annual "State of Our Nation's Youth" survey to gauge opinions and reactions of America's teens (aged 14–18) to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and the War on Terrorism. The study found that seventy-five percent considered 9/11 events the "most significant in their lives," and fifty-four percent reported that the attacks affected their lives "a great deal" to "a fair amount." Fortunately, ninety percent of teens said they could talk with and confide in at least one family member, and sixty-eight percent of teens said they felt closer to their families.

Two and one-half months after the attacks another study, by *Euro RSCG Worldwide*, revealed that teenagers (aged 13–17) were still experiencing fears related to terrorism. Over half of the respondents believed "at least one government leader will be assassinated" before this crisis is resolved. Also, half of the respondents thought there

was a “good chance” hundreds or even thousands of people in the U.S. would die due to bioterrorism. Again, it appeared as though teens still turned to their families in times of crisis, as half the teens said they intended to spend more time with relatives during the winter holiday season.

### **GSUSA Research on The Impact of September 11<sup>th</sup> And Related Future Events**

The *Girl Scout Research Institute* (GSRI) conducted, in partnership with *Partners in Brainstorms* (PIB), a youth market research firm, a 15-question online survey to gauge the impact of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> on teenage girls just over three months later. The online survey was posted on [www.girlscouts.org](http://www.girlscouts.org) and on a host web site affiliated with PIB from 12/19/01 – 1/2/02. Respondents consisted of 1,480 girls ages 11–17 reflecting a mix of geographic (all 50 states represented), ethnic, socioeconomic backgrounds, and Girl Scout and non-Girl Scout affiliations.

The *GSRI* study found that the emotional effects of September 11<sup>th</sup>, future threats, and the current war on terrorism were still resonating through the daily lives of U.S. teenage girls. Many girls still did not feel safe and worried about their own safety and the safety of their families. As a result, **girls were reporting common symptoms of anxiety and depression.**

- Almost half (46 percent) of the total sample of girls reported that their current feelings ranged from “a little less safe” to “much less safe” to “I am terrified” compared to before September 11<sup>th</sup>.

- When asked, “What do you worry about the most?,” 36 percent of the total sample of girls reported that they worried most about their safety and the safety of their families since September 11th.
- Across all Girl Scout and non-Girl Scout affiliations, the 11–12 year olds reported significantly more worry about safety than their older counterparts. Surprisingly, geographical differences did not factor into reported levels of safety concerns.
- Girls have reported negative feelings such as nightmares (15 percent), consistent worry (14 percent), crying more than usual (14 percent), depression (13 percent), and decreased enjoyment in daily activities (9 percent).

Nationwide, **girls had changed many aspects of their daily lives** in order to help themselves feel safer.

- Specific ways that their daily routines had changed included “I won’t travel on an airplane anymore” (19 percent), “My parents won’t allow me to travel alone anymore” (16 percent), “I have more parental restrictions” (16 percent), “I avoid public places that might be terrorist targets” (12 percent), “I have to always carry a beeper/cell phone to contact my family” (10 percent).

Girls reported that **talking about the recent terrorist events had been the single most helpful coping mechanism.**

- Just over one quarter (26 percent) of girls reported that talking about the events connected with September 11th was the one activity that had been most helpful to them in coping.

- Overwhelmingly, girls picked their moms (51 percent) as those who had listened to them and helped them most often about the events of September 11th, the later threats, and the war on terrorism.
- Friends came in 2<sup>nd</sup> place with only 11 percent. In research conducted before September 11, when girls were asked who they turn to when they have a problem, friends again came in 2<sup>nd</sup> place after moms, but the percentage was higher—close to one third (32 percent) of the respondents.
- Shockingly, the 3<sup>rd</sup> place answer choice was a tie between “no one” and “dads”(10 percent). Teachers ranked 4<sup>th</sup> place at 9 percent.

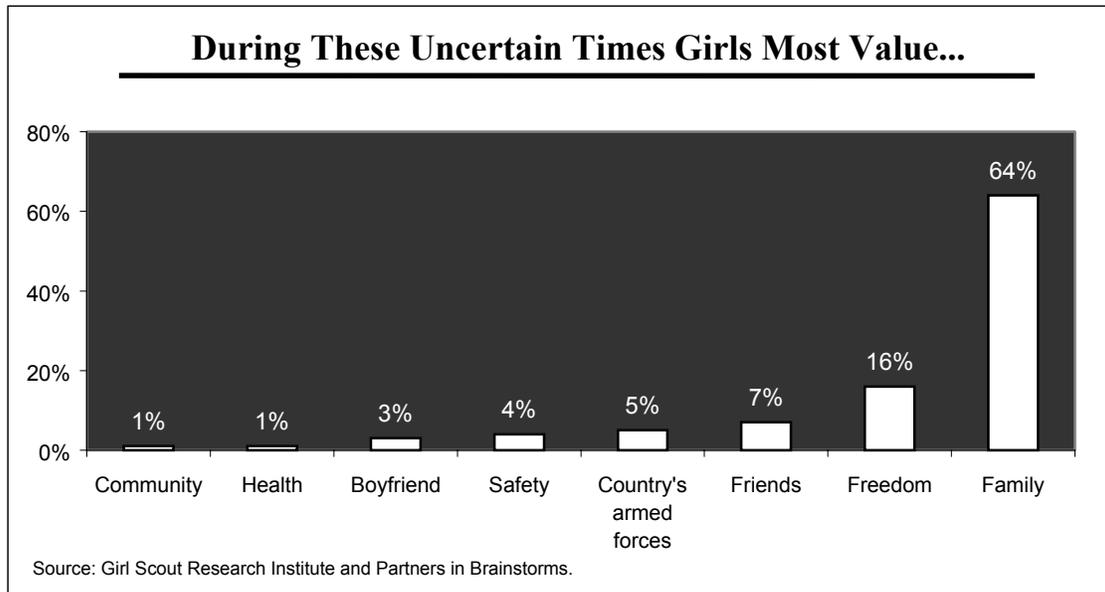
Although many of the effects of the terrorist events have had a negative impact on teen girls’ lives, there had been some positive impacts as well. **Girls were spending significantly more time with their families.**

- Nearly one quarter (24 percent) of the total sample of girls reported that they spent more time with their families since September 11th.

Girls also reported **increased patriotism, a greater love and appreciation for those close to them, a re-evaluation of what’s important to them, and increased community volunteerism.**

- A majority of girls in the total sample had reported feeling/experiencing both patriotism (62 percent) and a greater love and appreciation for those close to them (61 percent) since September 11th. Many girls (41 percent) also reported having re-evaluated what’s important in their lives.

- Overwhelmingly, the total sample of girls reported that they most valued their families (64 percent) during these uncertain times, followed by their freedom (16 percent), friends (7 percent), country’s armed forces (5 percent), their safety (4 percent), their boyfriends (3 percent), their health (1 percent), and their community (1 percent).



percent).

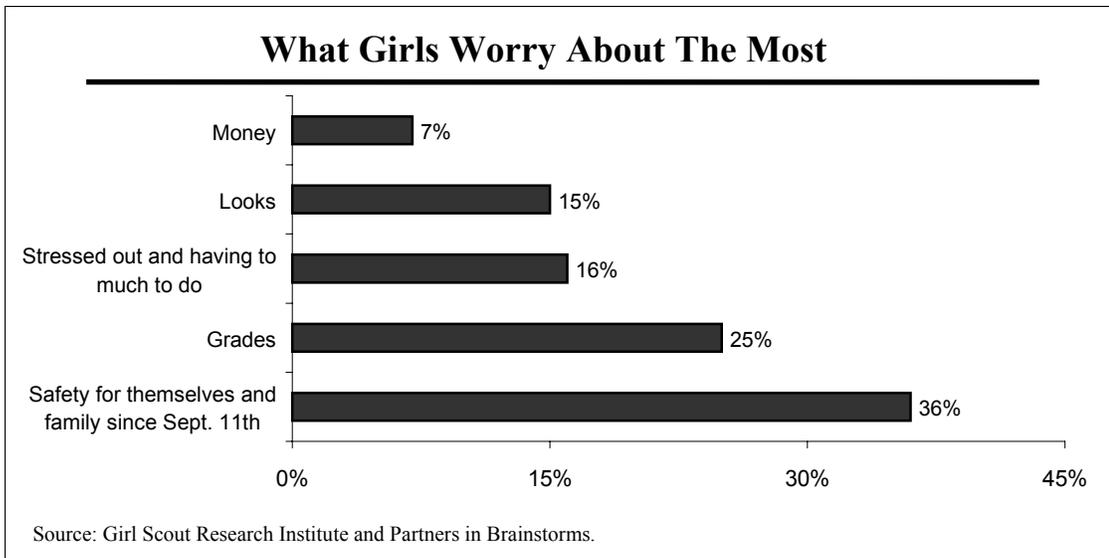
- 40 percent of the total sample reported that they had volunteered more since September 11th or were interested in volunteering within the next year.
  - Current Girl Scouts (25 percent) had volunteered significantly more than both former (10 percent) and non-Girl Scouts (6 percent).
  - It is interesting to note that only 2 percent of all girls reported that volunteering in their community was most helpful to them in dealing with the terrorist events.
- Community volunteering consisted of “donated money to September 11th charities”(35 percent), “donated clothes/food”(35 percent), “raised money for the

September 11<sup>th</sup> charities” (22 percent), “sent cards to affected parties”(18 percent), and “raised money for children in Afghanistan”(14 percent).

- For all these activities, current Girl Scouts participated significantly more than former and non-Girl Scouts.

Although the recent terrorist events have affected most people in some way, it is reassuring to note that **some aspects of teenage girls’ lives were not interrupted.**

- A little more than half (54 percent) of the total sample of girls reported that they felt at least as safe today as they did before September 11<sup>th</sup>.
- After safety (36 percent), girls ranked the following as their top worries: grades (25 percent), stressed out and having too much to do (16 percent), looks (15 percent), and money (7 percent). It is interesting to note that more non-Girl Scouts (19 percent) and former Girl Scouts (17 percent) reportedly worried most about their looks than current Girl Scouts (7 percent).



- After “talking about the events” (26 percent) girls reported that “being with friends” (21 percent), and “praying” (20 percent) were the second and third activity that were most helpful to them in dealing with the terrorist events.



- When asked, “when you are currently with a group of girl friends, what you are most likely to talk about?” only 3 percent of respondents chose “the events of September 11, the later threats, and the war on terrorism.” The most popular answer choice was “relationships with boys” (36 percent). It is interesting to note that non-Girl Scouts and former Girl Scouts reported talking significantly more about boys than current Girl Scouts, whereas current Girl Scouts reported talking significantly more about the events of September 11 than either non-Girl Scouts and former Girl Scouts.
- The second most popular answer choice was “interests and hobbies” (30 percent) followed by “other problems and things bothering them” (24 percent).

## **Conclusion**

It is clear from the synthesis of research on the effects of September 11<sup>th</sup> that American youth were profoundly affected by the terrorist attacks and emotional effects were enduring several months later. The research also points to youth feeling comforted and supported when relying on their families and other caring adults for emotional support during these difficult, scary, and confusing times. Although September 11<sup>th</sup> and the events that followed greatly changed daily life for all Americans, children and teens around the country did report positive daily behavior changes, such as spending more time with their families, paying more attention to current events, volunteering more in their communities, and thinking more positively about our country.

As time moves on, all Americans are trying to get “back to normal.” However, as this report makes clear, adults who live and work with youth should keep in mind that our children and teens want and need to rely on adults to feel safe. Fears of future terrorism are still resonating and youth will be best served by caring adults who are willing to offer their time, advice, and support.

## **Tips For Parents And Other Caring Adults**

1. Do not expect children and adolescents to react the same way you do to traumatic events.
2. Recognize how you have been personally affected by an event, so you'll be able to get help for yourself if you need it.
3. Don't overwhelm children and adolescents with facts and figures they don't want or haven't asked for. Take your cues from them.
4. Recognize that youth of different ages will understand events and react to them in ways appropriate to their developmental level.
5. Reassure youth that you will do all you can to keep them safe, but do not give absolute guarantees.
6. Provide opportunities for discussion of topics related to the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> and its continuing aftermath, as many have done in Girl Scout troops and groups.
7. Try to understand that many children and adolescents will be more concerned about their own development and personal issues than they are about current events. You can't force them to care, but you can ask questions and help them understand the significance of world events.
8. Suggest community action activities that will help kids and teens feel that they are making a difference in the world. Girl Scouting provides many opportunities for this kind of involvement.
9. Encourage youth to express their fears and their resentments, while teaching them to understand that people who commit terrorist acts are not representative of an entire group of people.
10. Seek out the help of a mental health care professional if a child or teen displays symptoms of distress that linger long after a traumatic event or if symptoms seem to be unusually severe.

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