

## Opinion/Letters

# Study looked at teenage attitudes in NW Ontario



**NORTHERN  
INSIGHTS**

by Larry Sanders



I have a teenage daughter, Joanna, who will turn 16 in 1992. Two years ago, Joanna and 1,415 other girls in Grades 7 to 10 filled out a 24 page questionnaire prepared by the nursing faculty at Lakehead University. That's a huge sample — 25 per cent of the total population of girls in those grades in this region.

The results have been released in a lengthy report, titled Northwestern Ontario Survey of the Health and Social Behaviour of Girls. Because the sample was so large, the authors (Liz Diem and Linda McKay) conclude that the results reflect the behaviour and attitudes of girls across the entire region. However, the Catholic school boards would not allow the surveyors into their schools, nor did some public boards, such as the ones in Red Lake and Ear Falls. Thus it's more accurate to say this survey reflects the opinions and behaviour of teenage girls in *some* public schools.

### Catholic schools didn't participate

The Catholic school boards decided not to participate because the detailed survey was very probing — including questions about sexuality. Guy O'Brien, director of the Lakehead District Catholic School Board, says they were also concerned about confidentiality, and the "obligation of schools under the Privacy Act" to not reveal personal information about students. Diem says special efforts were taken to protect privacy — including not allowing teachers or boys in the room when girls were filling out the questionnaire.

So much for methodology. The survey found some surprising things about our teenage girls — our future mothers:

1. Teenage girls in northwestern Ontario have lower self-esteem. The survey asked the girls to comment on the statement "I have confidence in myself." In a national survey like this one, 80 per cent of Grade 9 girls agreed with the statement. In this northwestern Ontario survey, only 59 per cent agreed with the statement. Northwestern Ontario girls also indicated lower rates of agreement than the national survey on whether they liked their appearance, their weight, or themselves.

2. Northwestern Ontario girls are concerned about their future. A national study conducted by the Canadian Teachers Federation found girls most concerned about their future as well, but the concern about personal futures among northwestern Ontario girls is even higher than the national rate.

3. There's a greater percentage of heavy drinking teenage girls in northwestern Ontario than the national average. Diem says the survey found 35 per cent of the girls aged 12 to 16 had regular monthly use of alcohol. In a national study looking at males and females 11 to 17 years of age, they had 14 per cent with regular monthly use. The other concern is the amount of alcohol consumed. Thirty-seven per cent of the girls in Grade 10 are having five or more drinks at one time, six times or more (per month). In the national study, they only had 21 per cent. So our girls had a higher rate (of heavy drinking).

4. The study found significant differences between girls in the City of Thunder Bay and those in the district. Diem says the main differences that struck her were "higher alcohol consumption, more problem relations with their parents, and the district girls did mention feeling more lonely."

5. On the positive side, the survey found that teenage girls want to get more information from public health professionals about things like personal hygiene, sexually transmitted diseases, and alcohol and drugs. Linda Hiscox, a public health nurse, says based on the study's findings, she expects to spend more time in classrooms. "It was gratifying to hear that the students listen, and enjoy hearing from a different person. Sometimes going in, you only see them once or twice and you wonder if you're in fact having any impact on the students, and it was good to hear that there is an impact that we are having."

### Stopped short of examining why

The study stopped short of examining *why* teenage girls in northwestern Ontario feel or act like this. Personally, Diem speculates that "what girls see around them and what they see on TV are quite different. Those differences are even greater in the district than in the city." As for why heavy alcohol consumption is higher, Diem says "we know that alcohol consumption is higher in the district, and that can certainly contribute to the higher alcohol consumption in these girls when they see the people around them drinking."

Educators, parents, health care professionals or anyone else concerned about this region's future will want to get a copy of this study, and read it closely. There's tons of other information in the report, including things like not wearing seat belts or not practising "safe sex." The main message I get from this is that our future mothers really want more help dealing with this complex world.

continued above

## Letter to the editor

### Ideas for Terrace Bay theme

Dear editor,

Re: Theme for Terrace Bay

My family is new to this beautiful town. You folks are sweet, kind and loving. We like the warm reception we have received and know there is a lot of love in this town.

My idea of your theme is this. Years ago, people welcomed travellers to a warm meal, a hot fireplace and a joyful sleep. Motel guests should be welcomed with a gold card to enjoy our sports complex for their night's stay, and maybe they would stay a few more days.

We should allow ourselves to watch for strangers and out of town license plates. Good hospitality travels fast by word of mouth.

I for one would like to keep my romance of my sweet Jamaica wife alive. A nice ride in a horse drawn carriage for \$10 a half hour would be so sweet. In the winter, a sleigh ride with a nice warm cup of coco with marshmallows.

If people enjoy skidoos, then plan rides with rented suits and a warm fire and food.

I know many seniors who would love to sit on a machine and travel over the snow and see a deer, a mouse, a rabbit, etc.

There is no need to spend much money to enjoy life. God has given us a heart, let's show that it glows with a love for life and for his children.

I have found no other city or town except Terrace Bay that projects a warm hello and happiness with feeling toward this creation of man and woman, that we are all God's children.

The McLaren Family  
Terrace Bay

## Northern insights, continued from below

If they get accurate information from health professionals, their personal hygiene habits and behaviour patterns *do* change.

In other words, girls do want to have fun — but they'd like to learn more about how to have fun safely and protect their health at the same time.

On a personal level, the survey also told me that fathers should have another look at their relationships with their daughters. The survey asked the girls to list their most important sources of information on subjects such as sexuality, nutrition, exercise, and general behavior. Mothers topped the list, followed by teachers, doctors, friends, and television. Fathers didn't even make the list. Fathers instead are role models for such habits as alcohol consumption, not wearing a seat belt, or driving while under the influence of alcohol. That's not a good report card on fatherhood.



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