

# That Great Big Hill of Hope

## An Era of Change for Youth, Too

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.



Paradoxically, in this time of almost crushing concern over the state of our nation, the inauguration of a new President ushers in, at least briefly, a period of palpable hope. Hope for a better economy, for demonstrable progress in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Middle East, and for improvements in everything from climate change to education to Social Security to health care. Indeed, optimism abounds even as things seem to be falling down all around us. It's the American way.

But those aren't the only things we have to feel hopeful about. Or, for that matter, to worry about.

In some very important ways, the state of our nation's youth mirrors that of our country. For example, according to statistics from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), suicide is rising rapidly, incidences of death and injury due to violence are staggering, and sexually transmitted diseases and infections are epidemic.

The CDC reports that:

- The suicide rate for young people under the age of 20 increased by 20 percent between 2003 and 2004 and, in 2007, 14.5 percent of U.S. high school students reported that they had seriously considered attempting suicide during the 12 months preceding the survey;
- In 2005, 5,686 young people ages 10-24 were murdered, and in 2006 more than 720,000 were treated in emergency departments for injuries sustained due to violence; and

- In 2008, one in four (26 percent) young women between the ages of 14 and 19 in the United States was infected with at least one sexually transmitted disease.

No less alarming is the drug and alcohol use that often accompanies decision-making about self-injury, violence, and sexual behavior among teens.

The federal Office of Legislative Policy and Analysis says that by the time they reach 8<sup>th</sup> grade, nearly 50 percent of adolescents have had at least one alcoholic drink and more than 20 percent report having been "drunk."

In addition, SADD's *Teens Today* research reveals that more than one third of young people (35 percent) report using other drugs, such as marijuana, ecstasy, and methamphetamines.

So, where does the hope part come in? With a continued federal commitment to address those issues that most threaten the health, safety, and development of youth. It is a priority that carries with it, in President Obama's oft-repeated words of Dr. Martin Luther King, "the fierce urgency of now."

Good thing that we have a running start.

Over the past decade, our government, with the support of key partners, has mobilized to reduce "demand" for drugs and alcohol among adolescents and children. Here is a sampling of those efforts.

**1988:** The U.S. Congress proclaims the first National Red Ribbon Week, drawing attention to the dangers of drug use in our society, especially among young people.

**1998:** The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy launches the Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign to prevent and reduce youth drug use, delivering anti-drug messages to America's youth, their parents, and other influential adults.

**2003:** The National Academies publish *Reducing Underage Drinking: A Collective Responsibility*, exploring ways individuals and groups contribute to the problem and how they can be enlisted to boost prevention.

**2005:** Congress passes the STOP (Sober Truth on Preventing Underage Drinking) legislation, recognizing that a coordinated approach to prevention, intervention, treatment, and research of underage drinking is key to making progress.

**2006:** The federal government's Interagency Coordinating Committee on the Prevention of Underage Drinking supports Town Hall Meetings across the country, addressing the problem of youth alcohol use.

**2007:** The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issues *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking*, pointing to new research indicating that the developing adolescent brain may be particularly susceptible to long-term consequences of alcohol use.

What are the results of these collaborative efforts?

A 2007 Monitoring the Future report noted that, since 2001, the overall use of drugs by young people had dropped by 24 percent (alcohol by 15 percent, marijuana by 25 percent, ecstasy by 54 percent, and methamphetamine by 64 percent). Come 2008, the decline was 25 percent ... 900,000 fewer young people using illegal drugs than there were in 2001.

Now that's change we can believe in.

Given the enormity of the risk that remains, can our country continue to make progress in its climb up that great big hill of hope? With a fierce urgency of now and the enduring commitment of critical federal resources for youth drug and alcohol education and prevention, the answer is a resounding "Yes We Can!"

And we must.

---

*Stephen Wallace, national chairman of SADD and author of the new book Reality Gap: Alcohol, Drugs, and Sex—What Parents Don't Know and Teens Aren't Telling, has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. For more information about SADD, visit [sadd.org](http://sadd.org). For more information about Stephen's book, visit [RealityGapTheBook.com](http://RealityGapTheBook.com).*