

Text: Britain's unruly teenagers are the price of progress

5 Readers of British newspapers have, in the past week, been scandalised by the claims of several teenage boys to have had sex with their teacher at drunken parties. In other news, prolific juvenile mobile-phone bandits manage to manipulate the nation's violent crime figures. If generalisations were not so dangerous, it would be tempting to say that there is something peculiarly delinquent about British youth.

1 In fact, there is. On just about any measure of naughtiness, British teenagers are worse behaved than others in Europe. Among their other distinctions, they take drugs more than their counterparts, and only Danish youngsters booze as much. Teenage girls in Britain 0 are more likely to give birth than any others in Western Europe. A higher proportion of robbery convictions are made against under 18s in England and Wales than anywhere else in Europe. And so on.

1 Of course, conservatives have always worried about young tearaways, especially in Britain: where other nations regard youth as a resource, Britain has tended to see it as a problem.

5 But it wasn't ever quite like that. In the past decade, school exclusions and the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases among teenagers have rocketed. The proportion of 14-17-year-old boys admitting to breaking the law rose by 14% between 1993 and 1999; girls are increasingly sharing the fun of violent crime. And they do more harm to themselves, as well as to others: the suicide rate among British males aged 15 to 2 24 has more than doubled over 30 years.

0 Some of these problems can be solved by simply thinking about them in a more grown-up way. Under-age drinking and cannabis smoking, for instance, although they can cause some health problems, are generally fairly harmless, even if they are illegal. The much-cited teen pregnancy statistics do not really mean a plague of promiscuity: more British teenagers got pregnant 30 years ago, though then they tended to be (or get) 2 married, so were less likely to become a burden to the taxpayer. Nevertheless, teenage 5 delinquency is definitely costly, not least because it tends to anticipate similar problems in later life, and to be inherited by the delinquents' own children.

Two dissenting social developments are routinely cited to explain the malaise. One is economic. The decline of British industry has meant that poorly educated men, in particular, have fewer job opportunities. More children grow up in workless households 3 in Britain than in any other rich country. The flaw in this explanation is that British 0 teenagers are, in general, richer, better educated and wealthier than ever. Drinking and drug-taking require disposable incomes; many of these problems affect the entire social scale (look at Prince Harry, the third in line to the throne, whose drinking and dope-smoking has spread joy among newspaper editors).

3 The other explanation emphasises the growth of divorce, single parenthood (the number of children who live with only one parent has trebled in 30 years).

5 Because familial instability and poverty often accompany each other, it is difficult to say which has a greater influence on teenagers' behaviour. But one way in which the government can definitely make a difference is to keep more children in school: fewer British children stay in education beyond the age of 16 than in most comparable 4 countries, and more leave school with few or no qualifications than in any other EU country except Portugal.

0 A less sad interpretation is that the angst some teenagers experience and cause is the side effect of two otherwise desirable trends. A minority may be getting too little education, but most are getting more than their parents did, and in consequence entering the labour market and assuming adult responsibilities later. During this prolonged adolescence, British youngsters tend to get less support from their families than others.

4 Juvenility may continue longer than it previously did.

5 The other happy trend is the slow braking up of the class system. Young people no longer follow predestined paths. Social superiors and authority figures who once commanded automatic respect now have to earn it – another good thing, unless you are an old woman on an inner-city estate or a teacher in a slum school.

[From *The Economist*, Feb 16, 2002; abridged]

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Worksheet

A Questions on the text

[40 cr.]

Answer the following questions in complete sentences. Use your own words as far as appropriate and do not copy from the text.

1. Show in what way British youth measure more negatively on the scale of naughtiness than their European counterparts. Give evidence from the text. [15 cr.]
2. Name and explain the solutions the text offers. [15 cr.]
3. What positive side-effects does the author see in the recent development? [10 cr.]

B Text Production

[(4/6) x 2 = 20 cr.]

Choose ONE of the following topics.

1. You are a member of the school newspaper. A few days ago you read the article above and you told your editor-in-chief about it. He wants you to write an article of about 150 – 200 words on the role of parents and adults in teenagers' lives. Do not limit yourself to the article above, remember the texts we read in class.

OR

2. You are an exchange student at an American school. Last week the principal made a rule that forbids students to wear hoodies. As you know both school systems, you tell him how the question of allowing hoodies would be treated in Germany in a letter of

about 150 – 200 words. In your letter you also include information from the texts we read in class.

Best of Luck! StoJ

Total: 60 cr.