

## RESEARCH REPORTS

*Reviews of new research at public agencies and private institutions*

### *The Ambitious Generation*

Yale Univ Press. P.O. Box 209040, New Haven, Conn. 06520. \$26.

Authors: *Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson*

Today's teenagers are often portrayed by the media as apathetic slackers in baggy pants who lack the skills and motivation to succeed in the adult working world. On the contrary, say Schneider, a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, and Stevenson, an adviser to the U.S. Department of Education. Far from being unmotivated, "90 percent of high school seniors expect to attend college, and more than 70 percent expect to work in professional jobs." In the 1950s, by contrast, only 55 percent of seniors expected to attend college and just 42 percent aimed for a professional career. Many teenagers set their sights *too high*, say the authors. They have "limited knowledge about their chosen occupations, about educational requirements, or about future demand for these occupations." They get poor guidance from school authorities and their parents. Perhaps 56 percent become "drifting dreamers" with grandiose visions of career achievements.

Schneider and Stevenson base their findings on the Alfred P. Sloan Study of Youth and Social Development, which tracked and surveyed more than 7,000 students from 1990 to 1995. Similar studies from previous decades suggest that teenagers of, say, the 1950s, made the transition to adult responsibility much more quickly. For better or worse, many people in the earlier generation were already several years into their working life by age 21. Many had started families and assumed adult responsibilities.

According to the authors, kids today may also be handicapped, paradoxically, by the cornucopia of choices they have. There are a "greater number of jobs, more new types of jobs, and many jobs without well-established career lines," particularly in technology and mass entertainment. At the same time, students at many high schools must navigate through a bewildering array of course electives. Often without their realizing it, the choices they make may hurt their chances of achieving their chosen career goal, either by keeping them from taking relevant courses or, simply, by not positioning them properly to gain admission to their chosen college.

Most high schoolers today rightly equate

higher earning potential with increased education, but the Sloan study reveals considerable confusion about the correlation between education and career. Students who aspire to be doctors, lawyers, judges, and college professors, for instance, are "most likely to underestimate the amount of education required for their job choice." They also typically choose the wrong type of advanced degree needed—a Ph.D. for a physician, for example. Their choice of colleges is also hit-and-miss: 70 percent of students beginning two-year colleges expect eventually to transfer and get a bachelor of arts degree. The odds are strongly against them. Schneider and Stevenson also cite considerable anecdotal evidence suggesting that students often wind up at colleges ill suited to their career goals.

What's to be done? The most obvious remedies would provide adolescents with better tools for developing their career goals, and better advice about how best to achieve those goals. Schneider and Stevenson find that many parents, teachers, and counselors have narrowly focused attention on getting a letter of admission without thinking adequately about either choosing the *appropriate* school or the preparation needed to gain admission to it. Parents should know what classes their high school-aged children are taking—making sure that they are fulfilling requirements and preparing adequately for continuing education—and should also steer children toward jobs and internships that will help them learn to navigate through the adult working world. The authors also encourage schools to support extracurricular activities, which can help students identify and nurture interests, and to step up assistance with curriculum choices. They applaud developing programs that explain to students the connections between high school and college, allowing them to form coherent plans for higher education.

Schneider and Stevenson found that many people changed their career plan. But those who had developed a coherent plan—even if it was modified over time—were most successful at making the often difficult transition between teenager and adult.

## *“Solutions for a Water-Short World”*

*Population Reports*, Series M, No. 14, Population Information Program, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, 111 Market Place, Ste. 310, Baltimore, Md. 21202-4012. 31 pp. No charge.

Authors: *Don Hinrichsen, Bryant Robey, and Ushma D. Upadhyay*

## *“Water for Big Cities: Big Problems, Easy Solutions?”*

Paper written for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars' Comparative Urban Studies

Project on Urbanization, Population, Security, and the Environment.

Authors: *Peter Rogers, Hynd Bouhia, and John M. Kalbermatten*

Water, water everywhere—but not enough to drink, especially in the developing world. Today, more than 160 million people in 18 countries, mostly in Africa and the Near East, face chronic, widespread shortages. Some 294 million people in 13 other countries may experience temporary or limited shortages. Population specialists at Johns Hopkins University and elsewhere expect the situation to get worse.

“Population growth alone,” write the authors of the *Population Reports* study, “will push an estimated 17 more countries” (including India), with a projected total population of 2.1 billion, into those two water-short categories within the next 30 years. China, which has 22 percent of the world's population but only seven percent of all freshwater runoff, only narrowly misses inclusion in that group. “Despite periodic flooding in the south, along the Yangtze River,” the authors point out, “China faces chronic fresh water shortages in the northern part of the country.”

While the study stresses the impact of population growth (and advocates family planning efforts), it notes that demand for freshwater is also increasing as a result of industrial development, increased reliance on irrigated agriculture, massive urbanization, and rising living standards. On a worldwide basis, agriculture accounts for about 69 percent of all annual water use; industry, 23 percent; and domestic purposes, eight percent.

The Near East is the region in the world most lacking in water, every year withdrawing more water from its rivers and aquifers than is being replenished. Jordan and Yemen annually withdraw 30 percent more water from groundwater aquifers than is replenished. Saudi Arabia has been forced to mine fossil groundwater for three-fourths of its water needs. Virtually all the rivers in the region are shared by several nations, and water is a major political issue.

Four Persian Gulf states—Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—observe the study's authors, have resorted to desalinization, the conversion of seawater to

fresh water. But that is far too expensive for most practical purposes.

“As the world becomes predominantly urban, while agriculture depends more and more on irrigation,” observe the *Population Reports* authors, “it will be difficult for cities to meet the rising demand for freshwater.” Rogers, a professor of environmental engineering at Harvard University, and his fellow authors note that in big cities of developing countries, about 30 percent of the population (500 million people) lacks access to safe water, and 50 percent lacks adequate sanitation.

In most cases, say Rogers and his colleagues, some simple, effective remedies are available: (1) reduce the loss—through leaks, theft, broken meters, or failure to bill—of the often large amount of water (50 percent in Cairo, for instance, during the 1980s) that enters the system but generates no revenue; (2) discourage waste, by imposing fees for excessive water use, encouraging use of water-efficient fixtures and industrial processes, “and, above all, adopting sanitation systems that place minimal demands on [the] water supply” (instead of, as in most urban water systems, using most of the water “that is collected, treated to drinking water standards, and delivered to the customers at great cost” merely to flush toilets, immediately turning it into sanitary wastewater, dangerous and expensive); and (3) divert water to more efficient municipal use by imposing fees on agricultural irrigation.

Of course, these “easy” solutions are not so easily implemented, the authors note. “The major problem facing big cities is not technical or financial, but institutional.” Different authorities oversee water use and waste disposal, and each city, region, or country may have its own governing body for each function. It is not a formula for rational planning. “The essential ingredient for instituting the necessary improvements,” Rogers and his colleagues conclude, “is political will, both at [the] national and [the] local level.”