



## Online Journal of Urban Youth Culture

---

Institute for Children, Youth and Families  
Michigan State University  
East Lansing, MI 48824

Dr. Carl S. Taylor  
Editor  
[taylor36@msu.edu](mailto:taylor36@msu.edu)

February 2003

### INTRODUCTORY EDITORIAL Understanding Youth Culture

**Carl S. Taylor**



This journal has been created in an effort to better understand urban youth and the culture that has developed for young people living in our communities since the industrial age. It is of utmost importance that we first realize the need to include "urban youth" in positive youth development efforts and initiatives. Far too often, "urban youth" are defined by terms associated with criminality and juvenile delinquency, thereby establishing far more often than not a self-fulfilling prophecy where these young people are concerned.

As society passed into the new millennium and technology reached new heights, many in society remain fixated on a simpler time, a time when many children and young people were typically protected based on their community and/or neighborhood. Once upon a time not so many years ago, a parent raising children in suburban communities was relatively assured that their children would be safe from what they considered "bad influences." Today this is not true. Today urban youth culture is the dominating force in the life of most young people and this is not only true throughout the United States; it is true throughout the world.

#### **The power of youth culture**

For those who would dispute this statement, I suggest that you take a close look at fashion trends, automotive design, movie and television programming, video games and sports, magazine publications and advertising and, last but not least, music. Urban youth culture represents billions of dollars in numerous industries and it shows no slowing in its growth and influence. Some of the fastest-growing magazines in the world today are *The Source*, *Vibe*, *XXL*, *Gear* and *Murder Dog*. One of the top performers in the world is Marshall Mathers, better known as Eminem, a young Caucasian man from the metropolitan Detroit area, notorious for his misogynistic and often violent lyrical content, as well as his unabashed denouncement of his mother

(and frequently his wife). Today one of the most successful programs on television is *106 & Park*, a program on BET (Black Entertainment Television) with a "hip-hop" format.

Many of you will likely argue the merits of the statements made here, but they are not just my opinion, they are researched and documented facts. Whenever I am challenged about the power of youth culture, I point to an incident not too many years ago when then Democratic Presidential nominee, William "Bill" Clinton, made an appearance on MTV with his funky saxophone... the former President of the United States understood the power of youth culture.

In Detroit, another politician made history by appealing to youth culture, to urban youth culture. Mayor of Detroit Kwame Kilpatrick was recently elected to the office of Mayor for this large city by appealing to young people. As was noted time and again by citizens interviewed by the media after his election, children and young people not yet of voting age influenced their parent's decision at the polls.

Many scoffed at the Source Foundation not long ago when they warned America that despite what the establishment (traditional American's) thought, they (the hip-hop based community) had more influence over young people than traditional institutions such as churches, schools, and even families. After years of research and working closely with youth throughout the world, I agree. In all honesty, the challenge from the Source Foundation and what I deem as "new school" youth inspired this journal. I believe that exploring urban youth and youth culture and attempting to understand the minds and thoughts of our young people offer a window of opportunity for a new paradigm.

### **Our inaugural issue**

This first edition includes an article written by the distinguished world citizen, Dr. Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., former Deputy Secretary of State under the Clinton Administration. We are proud to have such a distinguished scholar and leader provide us his views and insights. In his article, Dr. Wharton addresses the subject of tribes and tribalism within our nation and throughout the globe. Throughout hours of conversation he and I have discussed the question of where we as a society are headed. Dr. Wharton observes that as a nation we are not heeding indicators that suggest a less than promising outcome for our citizens both young and old alike.

I agree wholeheartedly with his contention that, despite how young people define themselves, it is imperative that "old" America must remain involved and active in the lives of young people. As in prior years, a generation gap remains and young people today have their own ideas, ideas not always shared by adult society.

### **A global youth culture**

The difference today is that young people are connected to each other in ways never seen before. Today's youth are not solely dependent on their parents or traditional means for their knowledge and opinions. More and more frequently they are independent and as adults many of us do a very poor job of understanding them or even trying to. It is my sincere hope that researchers, policy-makers, parents, law enforcement agencies, teachers and others will begin to better understand the new challenges regarding our children and young people.

Young people today are defining themselves through hip-hop culture, new breeds of alternative music and a host of other methods. Dr. Wharton eloquently deemed it "tribalism" and the young followers of today's musical genres, whether they are devotees of Marilyn Manson or Marshall Mathers, The Insane Clown Posse or Justin Timberlake, are the voices of a new school. These new voices today echo what Bill Haley and The Comets, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard and others meant in their parents' (or grandparents') day.

If America is to meet the challenges that now face our young people and our society, we must recognize the voices of our young people; we must understand their challenges and needs. If we are sincere in our endeavors to understand what is taking place with our young people, we must in earnest research youth culture and we must understand their language and their symbols. Just as Elvis was the face of rock 'n' roll and the personification of a generation, young people today have their own faces and those with whom they identify. To denigrate or demonize the symbols and voices of this generation only widens the gap between the old school and the new school, further exacerbating the problems.

I do not suggest that old school America necessarily embrace hip-hop or other expressions of youth culture, but I believe it is imperative that it be understood and respected. The failure of generations of parents and other adults to attempt to understand and communicate with young people has led to countless incidents of suffering throughout communities. We must ask ourselves how many unfortunate circumstances and situations might have not occurred had the proper interventions been used with a child or young person throughout the years. Today we have the opportunity to begin a new method of thinking and engaging our young, for the betterment of our society and ourselves.

As I expressed earlier, it is critical that those who naively believe that their family or community is "safe" from outside influences begin to understand that a global community offers no such safe haven where your children are concerned. I am reminded of a recent conversation with a graduate student from Nairobi, Kenya. During the conversation she told me of the impact of hip-hop on the young people of her country, she was impressed with the fact that the youth of Nairobi identified with American youth. I shared with her my experiences traveling throughout Europe and how surprised I was to see very young children with their headphones on listening to hip-hop music. Neither of us could hide our surprise at the fact that very young children throughout two very far away continents were so connected by urban American music.

Overhearing our discussion, another graduate student entered the conversation and talked about how surprised she was during her internship in Mexico to find that the young people in an extremely remote rural section of that country knew in detail about the horrific events of September 11th in the United States. How is it possible for young people from a remote location with no access to television or computers to know about such events happening thousands of miles from them?

Whether we like it or not, it is a fact that young people all over the globe are connected by an ever-expanding technology. It no longer matters whether you live in upstate New York, the upper peninsula of Michigan or in the middle of a small fishing village in Alaska, the world is connected now in ways we are just beginning to understand... your children are no longer isolated because of locale.

## **The philosophy of Positive Youth Development**

Positive Youth Development, in concept and execution, embraces the principle that youth are still developing during adolescence. Advocates of this approach recognize the potential for shaping the citizens of the future. In the case of urban youth, there is a great challenge to treat them fairly. Because of factors that are not of their own making, many urban youth are often not viewed as children or young people but rather as criminals. It is critical to the future of not only all children and young people but society that this tendency to categorize our youth based on preconceived notions be eliminated. In the words of the philanthropist Floyd Starr, "There are no bad children, just children that have suffered from bad examples or conditions".

Americans can no longer naively assume that suburban or rural communities are "different" and that the children that inhabit those communities are not at-risk. Children and young people are the products of their environment. In the year 2003 the entire world is one environment and, as with global warming and the ill effects of neglect and abuse to our ecosystems, our youth the world over are at risk.

In closing I will quote an elderly gentleman I spoke with in Detroit during a recent research project, Mr. Charlie Williams, a citizen of Detroit for more than 60 years. As we discussed how things once were and how they are now in the city, Mr. Williams smiled and said, "Doc, the good kids ain't all that good, and the bad kids ain't really that bad."

How true, I thought to myself as I laughed and shook this elder citizen's hand. I recalled my own youth in Detroit and how I was neither as good as some adults liked to believe nor as bad as some people in the community would have believed me to be, though they didn't even know me.

In teaching classes now I always ask my students at the beginning of the term whether or not any of them have ever been delinquents. The response is always the same... of course not, after all, they are college students, the future of our society, the crème de la crème... how could any of them be anything other than the best of the best?

A few weeks into the term (after they've gotten to know me better) I ask the question again... I'd say it's about fifty/fifty by then.

---

**Carl Taylor**, editor of the online Journal of Urban Youth Culture, is director of Community and Youth Development Programs at the Institute for Children, Youth and Families at Michigan State University. Taylor is author of numerous books and articles, including **Dangerous Society** and *Girls, Gangs, Women and Drugs*.