

CHEATING' SMARTS

finds dishonesty OK among top teens

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Four out of five of the country's best students cheated to get to the top of their class, yet nearly half see declining social and moral values as their generation's greatest problem, according to a survey released today.

In a poll of 3,123 of the nation's top students — listed in Who's Who Among American High School Students — also found startling rises in prejudice against homosexuals, African-Americans and Hispanics.

More than half the students surveyed said they don't think cheating is a big deal — and most did not get caught.

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—Adam Brawer, 17, a senior at Midwood High

There also were encouraging signs: More than 80% of the 16 to 18-year-olds polled said they had never had sex.

Of the 18% who did, most used condoms or some form of birth control. Fewer teens are drinking and driving, and less are climbing into a car with a driver who consumed alcohol.

"The most incredible thing we found this year is the large number of students who said the decline in values was the largest problem of their generation," said Joe Krouse, associate publisher of Who's Who, now in its 29th year. "There is alarming information here. But we hope people use this as a tool to address those issues."

Among other results:

■ 48% say they are prejudiced against homosexuals, up 19 percentage points over last year.

■ 15% are prejudiced against Hispanics or blacks, double the number from 1997.

■ 47% have used alcohol.

■ 4% have mixed drinking and driving, down from 10% last year.

■ 93% have access to the Internet, and 77% use it for school work.

■ 84% of those who had sex were 16 or younger their first time.

But the incidence of cheating was the most "glaring example" of declining values, Krouse said.

All the respondents had an A or B average, with 97% of them planning to attend college.

"Everyone does it. I'd say it is more than 80%," said Adam Brawer, a senior at Brooklyn's

Midwood High School who was surveyed. "It is very competitive. Most kids say you have to do it to get by. They want to get into good colleges."

Brawer, 17, said teens also steal, because "the pressures to wear nice clothes is so high. It is crazy."

But Daniella Ashwood, a senior at Sheepshead Bay High School, said cheating is uncommon among honor students.

"Everyone tries to do their work honestly," she said. "I know it would eat at me. It wouldn't be fair because everyone else is working hard."

Ashwood, whose family comes from Jamaica, also refuted findings that prejudice was on the rise. Sheepshead Bay students are used to differences because they come from all over the world, she said.

"You name a country and someone is from it," she said.

Experts linked the cheating to rising competition for limited spots at the nation's best colleges and an increasing sense of alienation and social pressure among teens.

"It seems like it is getting worse," said Niobe Way, a New York University psychology professor who specializes in teen development. "With welfare reform and the loss of affirmative action, now it has become if you are screwing up, it is your fault. They realize they have no backup."

Krouse said youth also are being influenced by the behavior of public figures.

"The bottom line is, involvement of parents makes the most difference," he said.

Sample answers from surveys of 3,123 of the nation's top high school students.

CHEATING

40% cheated on a quiz or test

67% copied someone else's homework

95% of cheaters say they were not caught.