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# Too Much of A Good Thing

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Raising Children of Character in an  
Indulgent Age

Dan Kindlon, Ph.D.

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# Study Goals

- To describe common parenting practices and attitudes especially those more prevalent among the affluent
  - Investigate how parenting practices function as risk\protective factors affecting adolescent outcomes
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# Facets of the Study

- Parent surveys
  - Adolescent surveys
  - Secondary analysis of large national data sets
  - Interviews with teenagers, parents, experts (psychologists, pediatricians, teachers, school counselors).
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# Parent Survey

- 1078 parents of children ages 4-19 at 9 private or suburban public schools located in 7 states
  - 65% are affluent (more than 100k\year)
  - 14% are wealthy (more than 500k\year)
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# Types of Survey Questions

- Characteristics of their child
  - Child's possessions
  - Allowance
  - Chores and household rules
  - Attitudes about sex and drug use
  - Income
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# Adolescent Survey

- 679 teenagers surveyed at 7 private or suburban public schools in 6 states
  - Parallel questions to parent survey about rules, chores, attitudes and behavior
  - Additional questions about substance use and relations with parents
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# Conditions \ Disorders That Increase in Adolescence

- Depression
  - Delinquency
  - Running away
  - Substance abuse
  - STDs \ Out-of-wedlock pregnancy
  - Eating disorders
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# Parenting Practices at the Millennium – Survey Results

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# What kinds of kids are they?

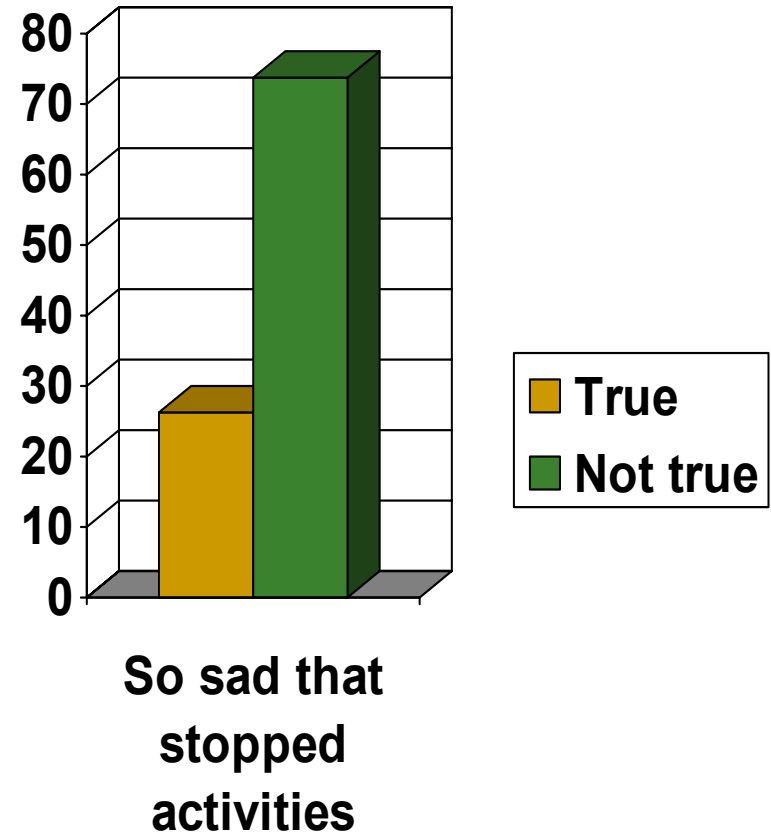
- **70% got 2 or more A's on their last report card**
  - **64% say they are very concerned about other people**
  - **42% are trying to lose weight**
  - **Last Month:**
    - 42% got drunk**
    - 11% drove drunk**
    - 21 % smoked pot**
    - 23% smoked cigarettes**
  - **1 out of 4 don't think its wrong for a 13 year old to have oral sex.**
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## Past Month Substance Use (N=653)

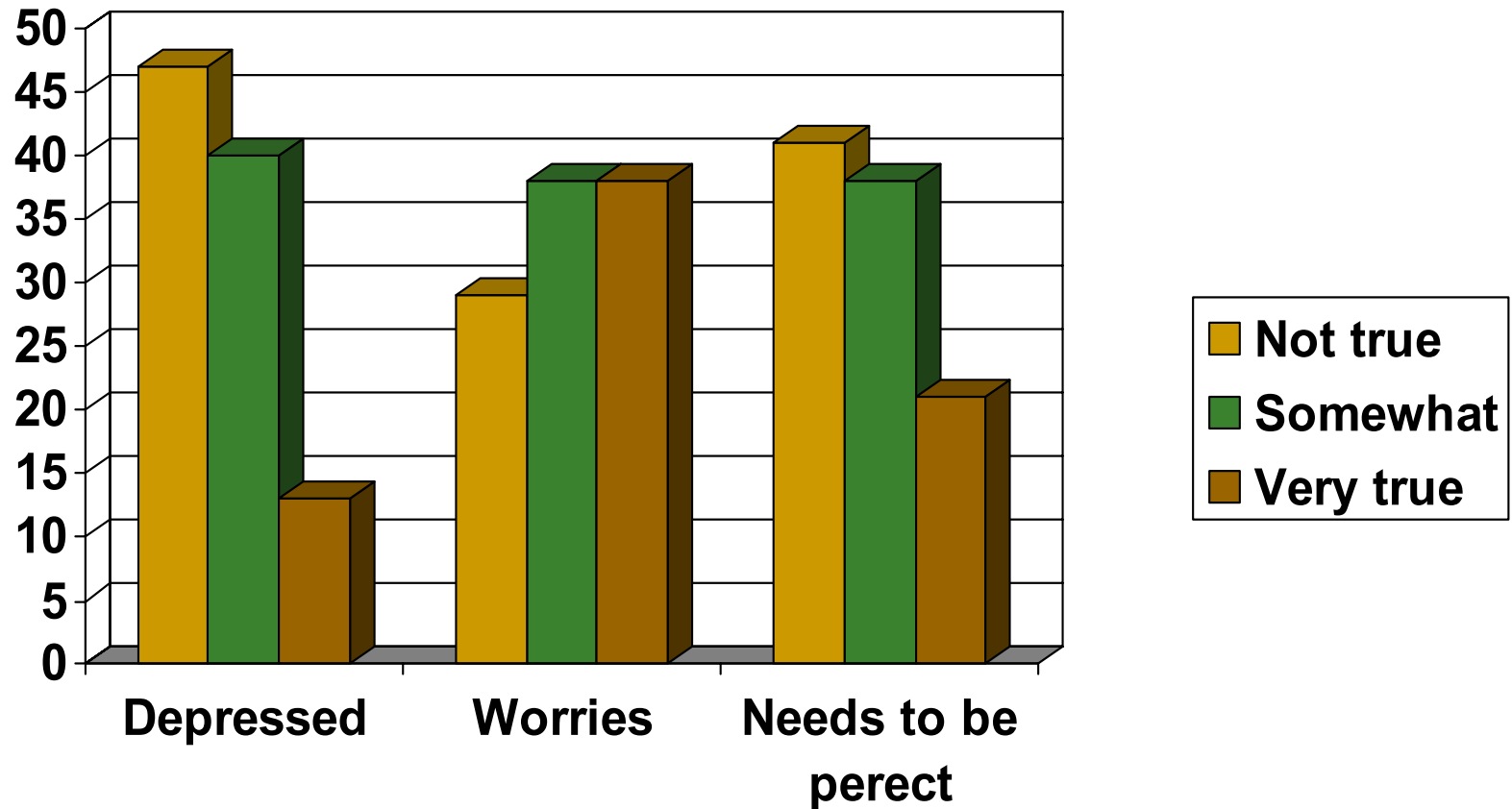
No Substance use	275 (42.1)
Alcohol only	172 (26.3)
Alcohol and marijuana only	47 (7.2)
Cigarettes only	19 (2.9)
Cigarettes and alcohol only	46 (7.0)
Marijuana only	5 (.8)
Marijuana and cigarettes only	6 (.9)
Cigarettes, marijuana, and alcohol	54 (8.3)
Cigarettes, marijuana, alcohol +other	17 (2.6)
Other drug combinations	12 (1.8)

# PPM Depression

- 26.4% of adolescents aged 13-19 said that there had been a period of 2 weeks or more during the last 6 months in which they felt so sad or hopeless that they stopped doing regular activities



# Depression and Anxiety in the PPM Survey



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# Social Changes

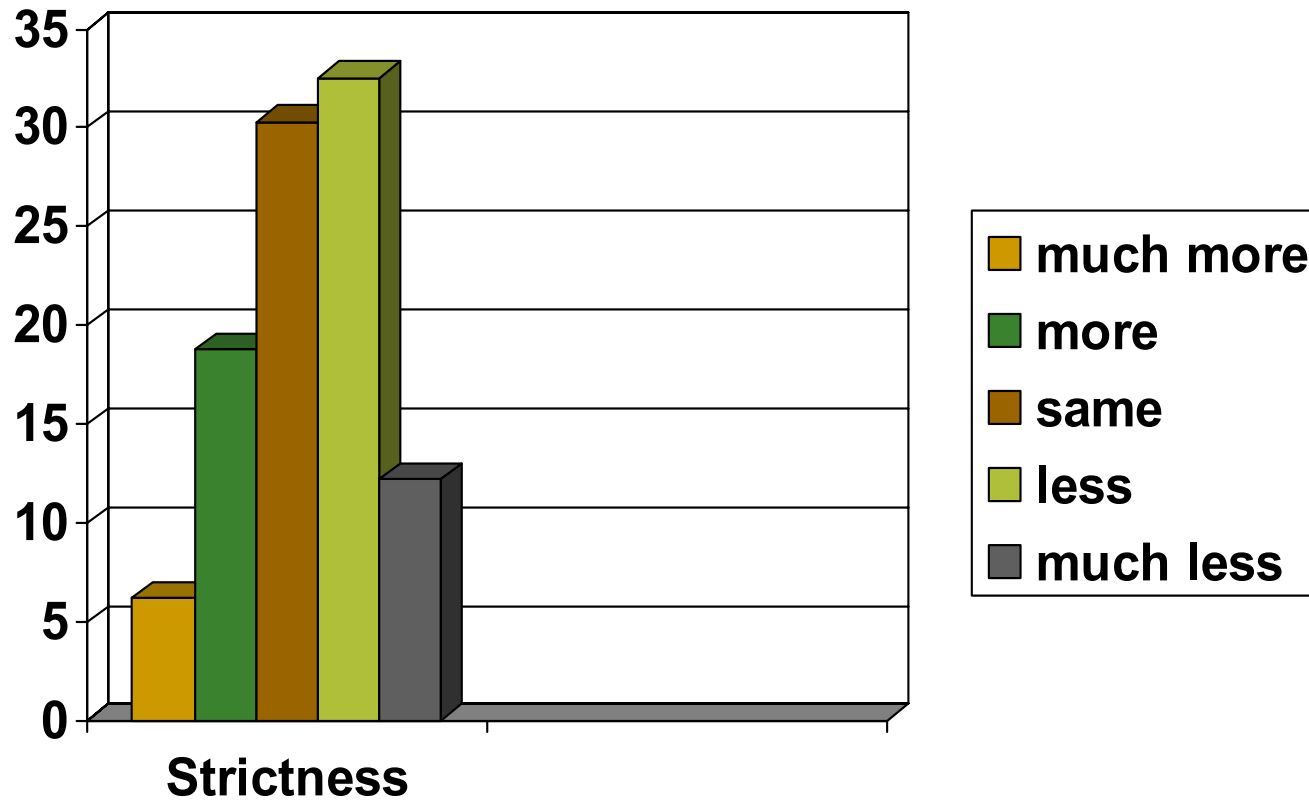
- More permissive parenting
  - Less family time
  - Increased pressure for academic and career success
  - Greater societal affluence accompanied by an increased celebration of wealth and luxury
  - More overprotection of children
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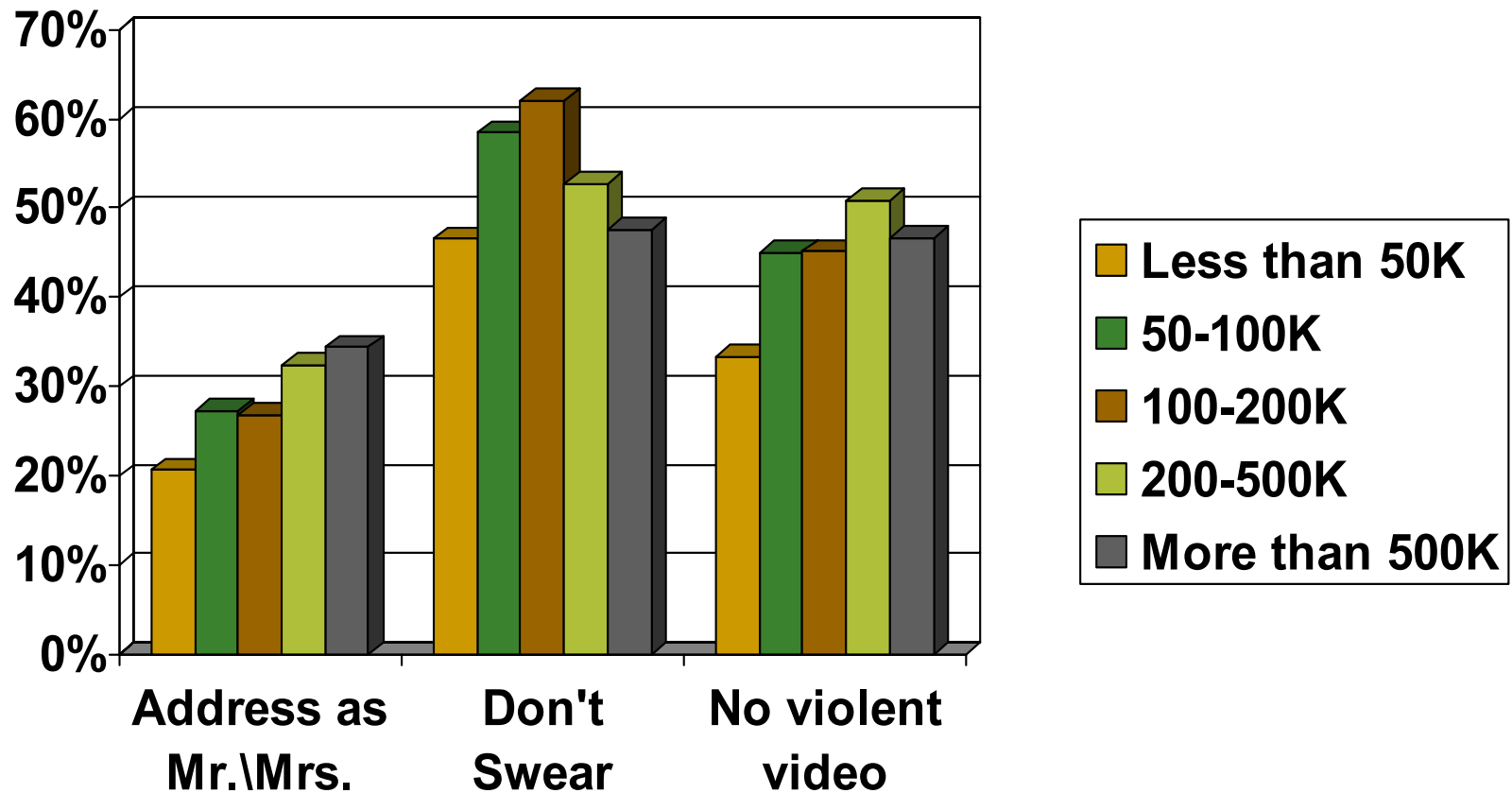
# I. More Permissive Parenting

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# Today's parents are less strict than their parents were



# What they are required to do

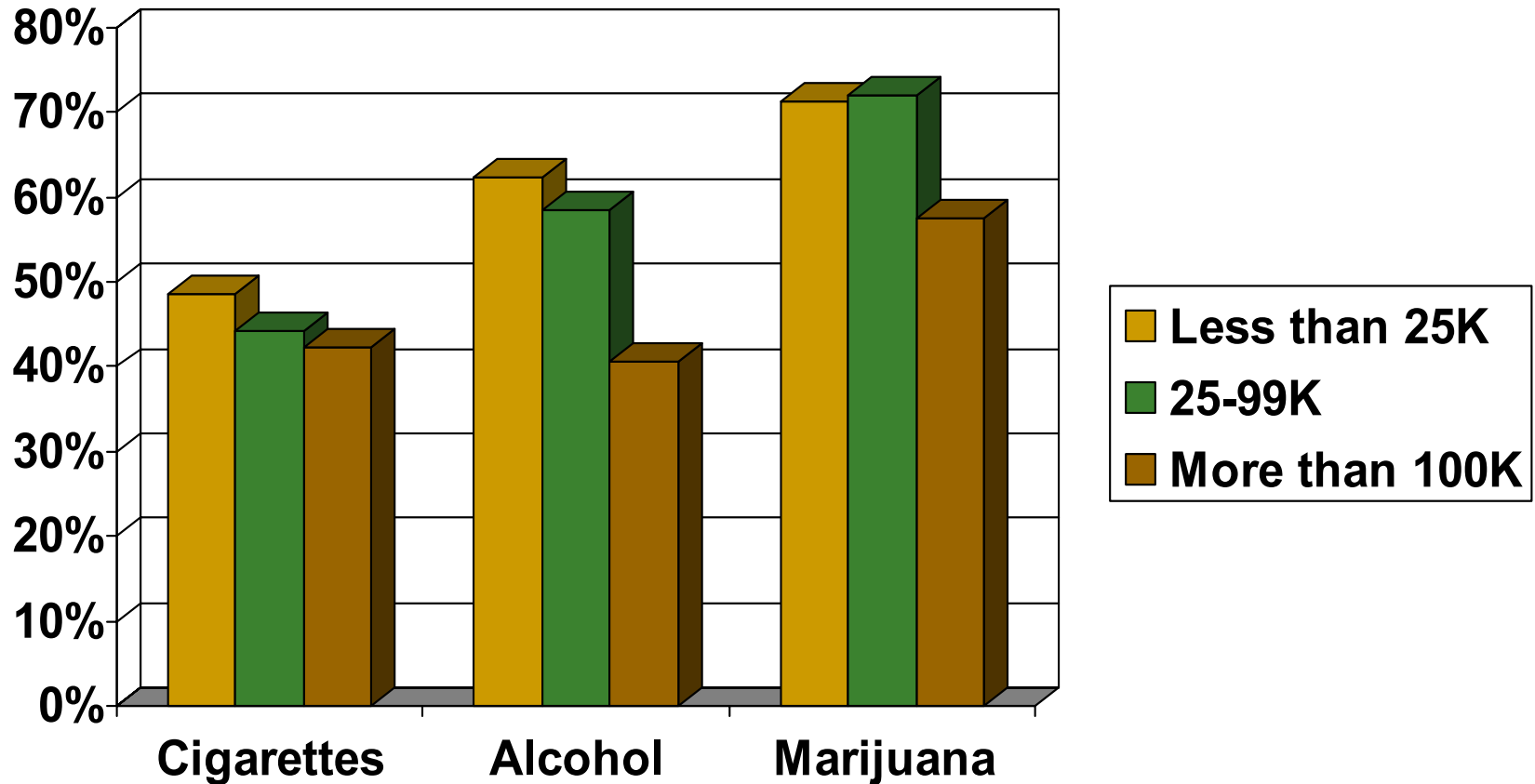


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Secondary data analyses also show that affluent parents are less strict and have more lenient attitudes towards drugs

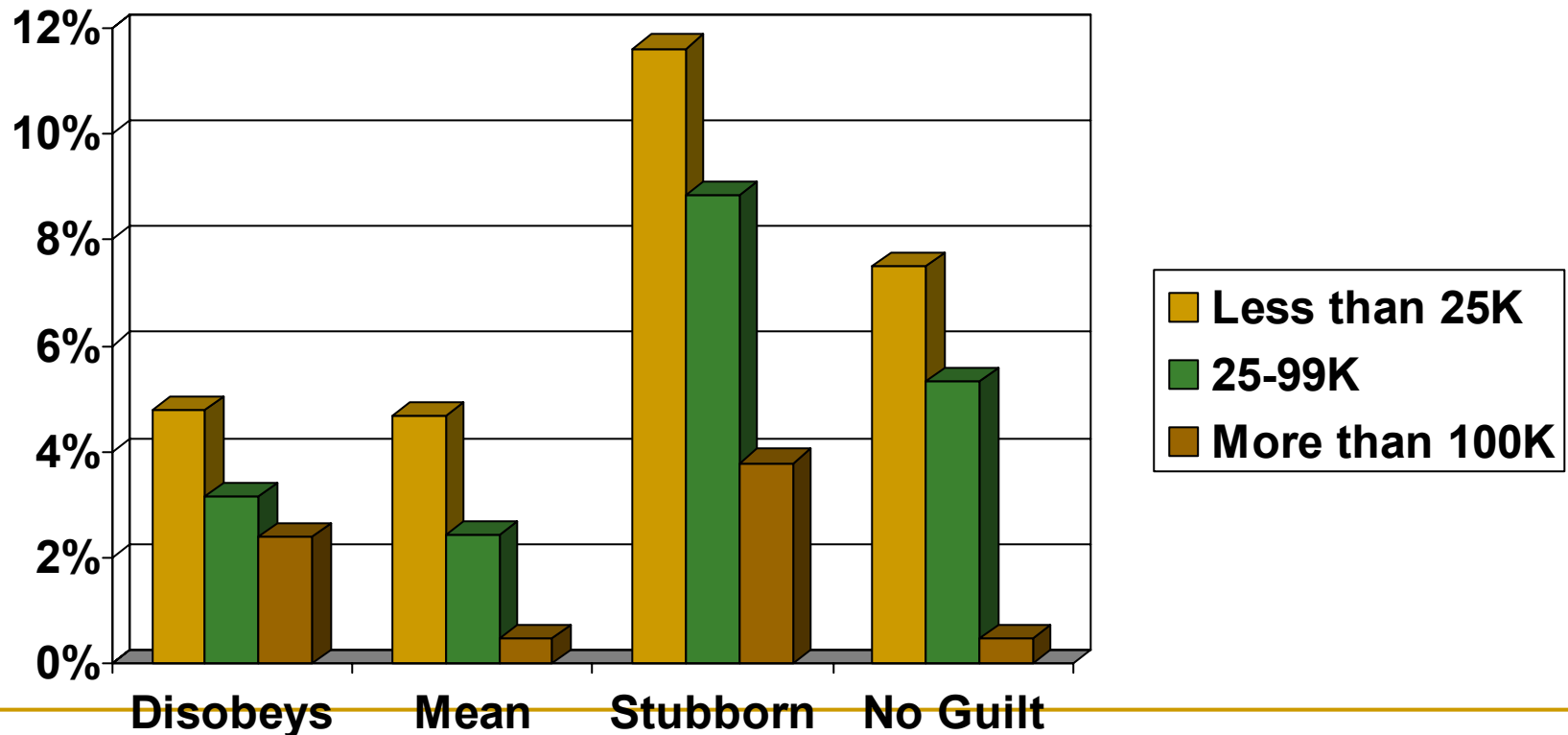
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# Percentage of Adults Who Believe That Substance Use by 19 Year Olds Is Very Wrong or Extremely Wrong – By Income Group



4746 participants in the 1995 PHDCN  
Community Survey

# Percentage of Parents Who Believe That Their Child Often Engages in Problem Behavior – by Income Group



3557 adult respondents from the PSID child development supplement

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*About half the kids are really spoiled and they know it. They can get away with anything. Like it doesn't matter what they do, their parents are like: "Oh it's OK honey".*

Stephanie – 17 year old junior attending a private school

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## II. Less Family Time

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# Time Use Changes Since 1981

- Children's time is more structured (sports participation has doubled)
- Attendance at religious services down 40%
- Children spend more time in school (homework up 50% for elementary school children)
- Family conversation is down 100%

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# III. Increased pressure for academic and career success

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# Students are more goal oriented and perfectionistic today

**Principal:** When I came to this school in the 70s and into the 80s - there was an informality about the way kids approached their work. Today they are much more focused - I'm hesitant to use the word driven - but I think the word applies. School is more work than it is play. And, not only serious work, but hard work.

**n:** And work with the goal of....what?

**Principal:** Well, I'm not sure they always know what the goal is except that it is to be a success, which in the short term means college - I don't know that it is much clearer, beyond that.

**an:** Who made them this way?

**Principal:** Well, I think society, parents, schools like ours. We're all guilty of it to a certain extent but each of us would blame the other two.

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IV. Greater societal affluence  
accompanied by an increased celebration  
of wealth and luxury

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In 1972, the most popular reason freshman gave for enrolling in college was “To help me develop a meaningful philosophy of life”. Today it is “to become very well-off financially”

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# V. More Overprotection

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## Parents want their children to feel no pain

**ounselor:** There are some days that I think, “This is almost absurd.” And that’s when I think about this indulgence thing....we’re trying to think of every aspect of their lives now that money is not a problem and we’re OK and we can take care of our external needs, let’s make sure that every part of their life is taken care of. Do they have the right friends? Are they being nice? Are they being bullied? You want to control everything and make their life just perfect and that’s what I find. That everybody wants their life to be perfect. An example is, they go on a ski thing every Wednesday afternoon they go to B\_\_\_ skiing. A bus comes to get them. One mother came in the other day and had...she had warmed her child’s mittens and hung them in his cubby so that when he came out and went to ski , his mittens would be warm.

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# Affluent teens recognize that pampering makes them less effective people

(Leah, age 17)

In terms of spoiled I think, if you've grown up in such a pampered environment it's a lot harder for you to deal with not having things. And I've been in places where I've lived in a tent for six weeks. We're we didn't have electricity and we could only take a shower every other day because there was a drought. This was on a farm. We would have to cook our own food and feed the chickens and do all this stuff. I think I had a lot less of a problem with not being able to blow dry my hair at night and getting dirt on me because I haven't always been pampered like that. You sort of appreciate things more and I think a lot of these kids don't appreciate very much what they have because they are so used to having it. Because no one has ever said no to them.

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One needs challenges in order to learn how to cope with stress.....

**Therapist:** There has to be some adversity. It helps you develop an *inner* sense of the capacity to adapt and prevail. If every thing is taken care of externally, you end up empty inside. Then all your difficulties get externalized too, so that if you , you fail out of film school, its not because you did anything wrong its because there is somebody on my thesis committee who really took a dislike to me.

**Dan:** Absolutely, it's always that. I just heard about a kid who didn't get into his first choice college and now his parents are suing his high school. It's the schools fault, not the child.

**Therapist:** Exactly, That's the thing I see most frequently.

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# PPM Survey Results - Risk and Protective Factors

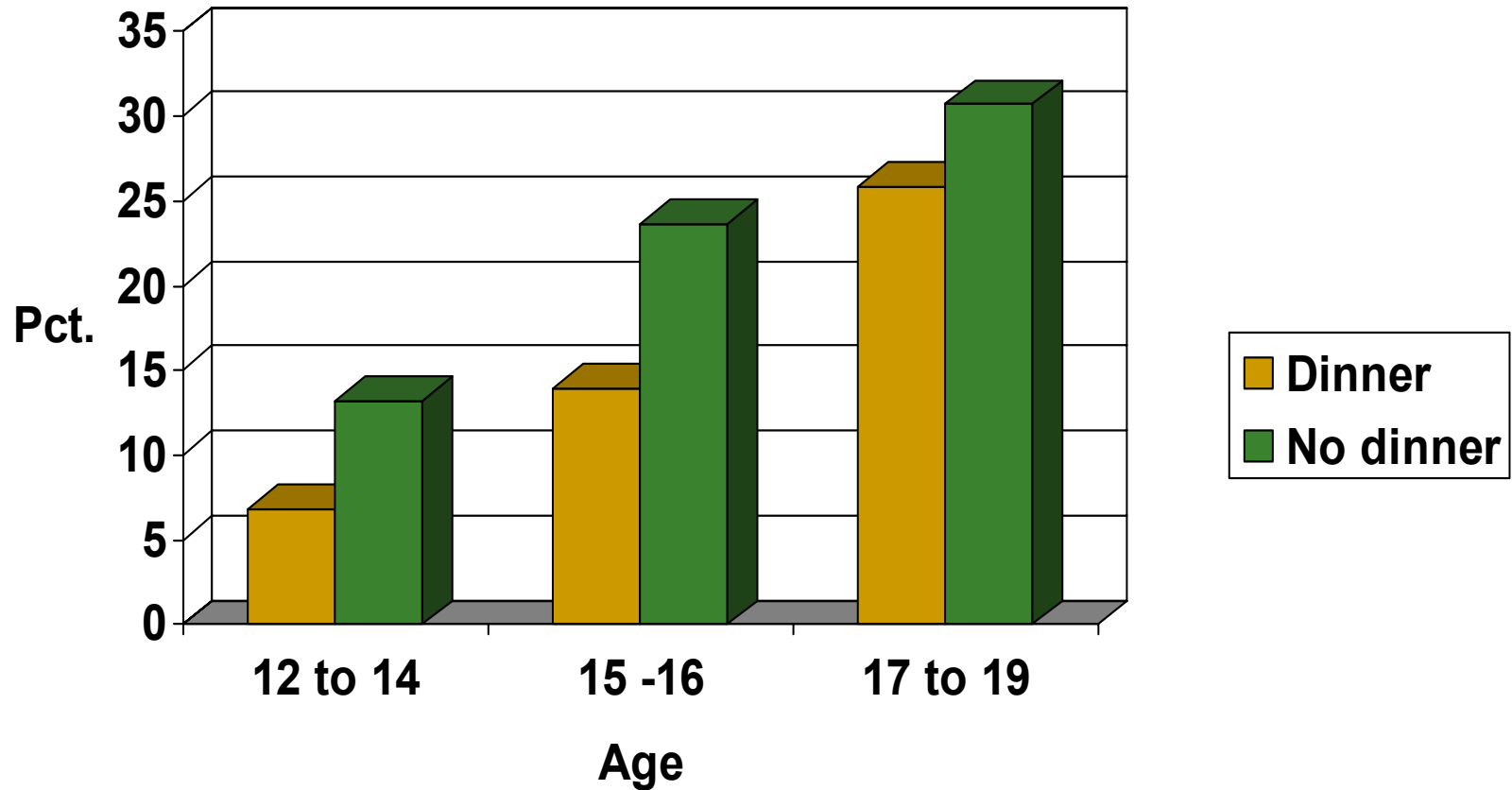
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# “Family” Eats Dinner Together on a Regular Basis

- Child is less likely to:
    - Be depressed
    - Underachieve in school
    - Use drugs
    - Have permissive attitudes about sex
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# Pct. Of Teens Who Drink More Than Monthly



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# Mother or Father Is Described As Lenient

- Child is more likely to:
    - Have an eating disorder
    - Underachieve
    - Have permissive attitudes towards sex
    - Be mean to others
    - Use Creatine\steroids
    - Rate self as “spoiled”
-

# Final model: Past month drug use

	Parameter estimate	Odds ratio
Intercept	-3.35	-----
AGE (13-18)	.199	1.22
Parents not strict about swearing	.363	1.44
Family often eats dinner together	-.399	.671
Parents don't forbid violent video R rated movies	.476	1.61
Child reports self as very spoiled	.759	2.14
Child has summer job	.403	1.50

Kindlon (2000) - PPM Survey; adolescent report; N=647

# Five Risk Factors for Problem Behavior

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- Parents are divorced
  - Family doesn't eat dinner together on a regular basis
  - Parents are not strict about child having to keep room clean
  - Child has a telephone in his\her bedroom
  - Child is not regularly involved in community service
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