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APPLE'S WHOLE NEW TEEN SCENE

By **MARCUS BARAM** and **ASHLEY CROSS**



Marisa Bass, 16, high school senior at Riverdale in The Bronx
- Michael Sofronski



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August 10, 2003 -- THEY do more than just wear baggy pants, watch MTV and look cool.

Teenagers in New York are making more of an impact than ever after a decade in which kids became the fastest-growing demographic in the city, according to the census.

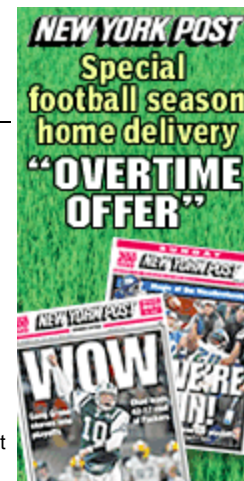
Those aged 13 to 19 years, almost 800,000 of the city's residents, now represent about 9 percent of all New Yorkers.

Older generations often deride teenagers in the city as "different," and the census shows they are.

Today's New York teenager, according to the census, often won't live with both parents, may not be graduating high school on time, usually does not have a job, more often than not speaks at least two languages and spends thousands of dollars every year.

The Bronx and Brooklyn are the youngest boroughs, where more than 27 percent of the population is aged 17 and under. Manhattan is the oldest borough, where only 17 percent of the population is high-school age or younger. About 23 percent of the population is 17 or younger in Queens, while in Staten Island those aged 17 and under represent about 26 percent of the population.

"We're seeing the new baby boom of the early 1980s, combined with an influx of immigrant families," says Michael Zisser, director of The Door, a Manhattan-based youth development agency. "The school-age population has grown considerably, and this is an extremely diverse group."



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While whites are the largest ethnic group in New York, with 35 percent of the general population, the numbers are different among young New Yorkers. Hispanics dominate among city teens aged 15 to 19, accounting for 33 percent of the population at that age. About 29 percent of the demographic is black, 24 percent is white. Asian kids represent only 6 percent of teens - but their numbers are growing rapidly, with a 33 percent increase since 1990.

IN a rapidly changing

world, the new New York teenager lives a far different life than his or her parents at the same age.

One of the most startling statistics about New York kids today is that the number of those with jobs is far below the national average.

About one in every three New Yorker aged 16 to 19 in the job market remain unemployed. That's nearly twice as high than the national figure.

And those jobs tend to be unskilled positions such as retail sales and food service, although many city teens do work part-time in skilled technical jobs.

The outlook is not bright for those teens seeking full-time work.

"It's the nature of businesses in the city," said Michael Dolfman, the regional commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. "They're not hiring teenagers, when there are so many qualified adults looking for work and teenagers don't have the skills."

"This raises serious issues for the long-term economy. If these teens don't build up that experience, it will be more difficult for them in the future to find jobs. We'll have a pool of workers who don't have skills."

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While many city teens might not work, it doesn't seem to curb their spending power.

Teens in New York spent an estimated \$10 billion last year, according to NPD Group Inc., a market information company that measures consumer behavior. They are regarded as major players in computer, fashion and music sales.

The city's current crop of teenagers is different in numerous other ways.

Although the average size of a city family is 3.27 people, more teenagers are growing up in non-traditional families, with about 40 percent of those under age 17 residing with one parent or living with an aunt or grandparent.

The numbers are higher in some boroughs, like The Bronx, where only 44 percent of kids live with both parents. Staten Island is the most traditional family borough, where 80 percent of kids live with both mom and dad.

EXPERTS say the rise in non-traditional family situations is a result of soaring divorce rates, families being separated through immigration and young pregnancies.

"Many young people just aren't ready to become parents," said Eddie Silverio, the director of youth programs at Alianza Dominicana, a social services center for Dominican-Americans.

It is highly common in the city, he said, for young mothers to rely heavily on their own mothers to care for the baby.

"I call it second parenting, where you have these middle-aged parents caring for their grandkids," Silverio said. "I see these second parents giving their 5-year-old grandson money for school and then turning around and giving a few hundred bucks to their 22-year-old daughter to tide her over while she looks for a job."

Overall, the number of teen parents has remained steady for the last five years, statistics show. Almost 9 percent of births in the city are by teenage mothers.

Among the city's Puerto Rican and Mexican populations, teenage mothers account for 16 percent of births, while in neighborhoods such as East Harlem and the South Bronx, almost one in five births is to a teenage mother.

Almost 90 percent of these teen mothers are not married.

At school, many of today's teenagers are struggling, particularly those from lower-income families.

Almost half of New York's public high-school students fail to graduate within four years, and almost 30 percent of them end up dropping out of school.

In some grades, more students are flunking standardized math and English tests than are passing, and about 84 percent of the 2002 high school graduating class fell short of gaining the 65 percent passing mark required to earn a state Regents diploma.

But today's teenager in New York is often more multi-lingual than their parents.

While most speak English, almost a third also are fluent in Spanish. In The Bronx, the number of Spanish speakers equals the number of English speakers.

About 11 percent of city teens say they speak English and another non-Spanish language, with Russian and French predominant.

The census found city teens are doing a better job of steering clear of serious crime. The number of juveniles detained for felony charges decreased by over 4 percent since 1990, although the number of youth locked up for misdemeanors increased by 13.3 percent.

According to the New York City Department of Juvenile Justice, the average daily population in secure detention in 2000 was 379 youths.

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