



## Young Adults Sharing Their Perspectives

From the time of *Columbine* and even earlier, I had been struggling with the question of what teachers and other adults who are significant in the lives of teenagers could do to address the deeper issues that are frequently masked by the surface actions of teens. Primarily I wanted to find out what could give these young adults meaning. Similar to the situation of children with learning disabilities that are not visible—such as dyslexia and attention deficit disorder—the situation of young adults searching for meaning calls for probing that goes beyond the surface level of their actions, violent or destructive as these actions sometimes are. I knew I wanted to hear from young adults themselves, to get their answers to questions of meaning in their lives and to discover what blocks their search for meaning. This chapter and chapter 2 present the response from the young adults themselves and anticipate the books that are annotated in chapters 4 through 8.

I had done research for my doctoral dissertation that examined how literature, specifically texts designated as sacred, could offer stories and words that speak to some of the deeper issues of the human spirit. In creating a curriculum of “sacred texts of literature,” I read many books, poems, plays, and short stories; such writings have touched the human spirit of adults for centuries. These writings address the “large questions” that adults face—illness, death, violence, suffering, “bad things happening to good people.” But these large questions are not the property of adults alone. Adolescents—as anyone who teaches them or works with them knows only too well—face these same issues, but seldom are adolescents equipped with the resources to deal with these questions. For one, they simply have not lived long enough to have the

advantage of life experience. Additionally, teenagers confront many pressing issues related to identity, acceptance, their future, and adulthood. Could story bring meaning to the voids they face? Provide answers for them in this all too fragile period of their lives? What literature could touch their spirits?

Hearing what teenagers themselves say about their lives is crucial in knowing what issues they face, who they seek out for guidance, and what they might want to read, since all too often we as parents, teachers, or other older adults operate on what we think adolescents are experiencing. Building from this belief that the voices of teenagers need to be heard, in summer 2001, I applied for and received an ALAN (Assembly for the Literature of Adolescents of NCTE—National Council of Teachers of English) Research Grant to help me conduct a survey and compile the response of young adults, thirteen to eighteen. I created the survey shown in figure 1.1. I put the survey online—on a website that could be accessed only through a designated URL

#### Survey for Adolescent Readers in the Search for Meaning

##### Please tell us about yourself

##### Your age:

**Gender:** Male Female

**Type of High School:** Public Private Parochial

**School is in what kind of area:** Rural Urban

##### Size of high school:

Under 500 students  
500 to 1000 students  
1001 to 2000 students  
More than 2000 students

1. What are the major issues you face in your life? (i.e. peer pressure, separation of parents)
2. Where do you go to get advice or guidance for dealing with the issues listed above?
3. Have you ever read a book or some type of writing that helped you with the issues that challenge you? If so, name that book(s) or work(s):
4. What are some books or other writings that you'd recommend to your peers to read for finding advice or guidance?

Figure 1.1 Survey

that I distributed—because I did not want to be influenced or biased by postmarks that indicated a specific city, state, or part of the nation. I also wanted student anonymity as much as possible, so the only identifying demographic information requested was respondent gender and age, and type, location, and size of school. These demographics help in making observations about the data, particularly as they reveal distinctions in choices of books (by gender, for example).

I did, however, conduct the survey working primarily through English teachers, who presented the survey to their students and frequently monitored student response. By way of introduction, I included a letter to teachers explaining the research project, providing the URL where the survey was located, giving all contact information for me (including the website that explained the ALAN Research Grant), and expressing my appreciation for participation.

I noted in the letter that I created a permission form for administrators and parents to avoid any concerns either group might have about students in their school or their children participating. I sent the survey first to a network of teachers in western North Carolina and to schools where my students were doing Internship I and II. Many of my former students, then beginning English teachers, also had their students respond to the survey. The survey was published in a few public venues: the North Carolina English Language Arts Newsletter, the *ALAN Review* (Vol. 30, Fall 2002), a newsletter for the School Sisters of Notre Dame throughout the United States and Canada, and the newsletter for the Dakota Writing Project. I also worked with teachers and contacts I had from presentations at NCTE National Conventions as well as the teenagers from my family and of the families of former students in Minnesota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and other areas in the Midwest. All those participating in the survey were contacted directly or indirectly by me and needed access to the web URL to find the survey. Because participants had to know the online site of the survey or receive hard copies, I am reasonably certain there were few “crank” respondents.

I did not attempt to specify particular student groups—honors or Advanced Placement students, for example—because again, I wanted to hear from the “average” teenager. Thus I do not know specifically if respondents are reluctant readers or nonreaders or avid readers. However, from the responses to the question about what they might recommend to others to read, I did see many who commented, “I don’t read.” My goal was not only to find out what books these young adults do find significant, but also to go beyond their suggestions to make available to teachers, librarians, and parents more titles of

powerful, relevant stories to offer to teens. In selecting books to include in chapter 4 through 8, I used the titles that the student respondents gave and built on the information they shared about the issues in their lives and the sources of guidance they seek when making choices of their own.

### Demographic Information and General Comments

The survey became available online in late 2001. I continued to collect data through the summer of 2003. I got approximately 800 surveys in hard copy form; the other approximately 600 surveys were done online, primarily in the school setting. The data analysis in this chapter reflects the responses of 1406 individuals; the numbers below indicate how many respondents were part of each age group and the percentage, based on the 1392 participants who gave their age. Though I primarily aimed for responses from 13- to 18-year-olds, some respondents were younger than 13, some older than 18. The first part of the survey solicited demographic information; the second part presented four open-ended questions. The demographic information is shown in table 1.1.

Several charts are included within this chapter, detailing the results of the survey. For the purpose of compiling information and presenting it on these charts, the 10–13 year olds form one group; 14-year-olds, 15-year-olds, 16-year-olds are each separate groups; and those 17 and older are a group. The school demographic breakdowns were by type, location, and size. Table 1.2 indicates the type of school and the number of respondents for each type,

**Table 1.1. Number of Respondents by Age**

Age	Responses	Percent
10-year-olds	3	0.2%
11-year-olds	7	0.5%
12-year-olds	75	5.4%
13-year-olds	172	12.4%
14-year-olds	377	27%
15-year-olds	269	19%
16-year-olds	190	13.6%
17-year-olds	239	17.2%
18-year-olds	56	4%
19-year-olds	3	0.2%
21-year-old	1	.07%
Totals	1392	100%

**Table 1.2. Type of School and Number of Respondents**

Type of school	Responses	Percent
Parochial	320	23%
Private	249	18%
Public	837	59%
Totals	1406	100%

table 1.3 shows the location of school and the numbers for each, and table 1.4 indicates the size of school and the numbers for each.

Questions 1 and 2 allow for multiple answers and thus require some description or qualitative analysis as well as the quantitative. To address the multiple answers given by many respondents, I have done a tally of the first issue (Question 1) and first guidance source (Question 2) cited by responders; in a separate tally I have accounted for second issues and second sources of guidance from responses to these questions. There are participants who listed more than two issues as major in their lives and/or listed more than two sources of guidance. These are not reflected in the figures; I note the number of respondents who did cite more issues and/or sources of guidance in tables 1.6 and 1.8 (described in more detail below). In any case, the data are presented primarily to let us know what these young adults are experiencing and to hear how they describe their worlds.

**Table 1.3. Location of School and Number of Respondents**

Location of school	Responses	Percent
Rural	1151	82%
Urban	255	18%
Totals	1406	100%

**Table 1.4. Size of School and Number of Respondents**

Size of school	Responses	Percent
Under 500	543	39%
500–1000	177	13%
1001–2000	582	42%
Over 2000	74	6%
Totals	1376	100%

For the purpose of data analysis, I also grouped the issues, guidance sources, and types of books that respondents listed. The groupings regarding the major issues respondents face are:

- Separation of parents/divorce
- Illness and death of family members/friends
- Peer pressure: drinking, drugs, sex, weapons; moral and ethical choices
- Acceptance/self-esteem/being popular; getting made fun of/teased
- Family issues: parental expectations, abuse, alcoholism, fighting/conflicts
- School-related issues: academic achievement, grades, homework, extracurriculars, sports/winning, holding a job while attending school
- Emotional issues: stress, pressure, depression, suicide, bulimia/anorexia, addictions, dealing with the future, moving, finding free time
- Friendships/relationships/dating/conflicts
- War, terrorism, safety of family/country, poverty/money, social conditions, teen parents
- God/faitH/religious affiliation

### Survey Results

#### Question 1: What are the major issues you face in your life?

Table 1.5 summarizes the number of times each issue in Question 1 was listed first—in other words, how often it was the student's primary issue. The order of the issues listed below follows the categories numbered above. The percent is based on 1375 responses, since some participants did not list any issues.

**Table 1.5. Primary Issues and the Number of Responses for Each**

Issue	Responses	Percent
Separation of parents/divorce	113	8.2%
Illness/death of family members/friends	51	3.7%
Peer pressure	464	34%
Acceptance	74	5.4%
Family issues	97	7%
School issues	254	18.5%
Emotional issues	100	7.3%
Friendships	102	7.4%
Social conditions	20	1.5%
Faith	3	0.2%

The charts in figures 1.2 and 1.3 present the breakdown of primary issues connected to gender and age.

Note that for both females and males between 10 and 16, peer pressure ranked the highest. Since adolescent psychology indicates that in the early teen years the search for identity is a primary focus, the high percentage of respondents identifying peer pressure as their primary issue is not a surprise. Because peer pressure and school issues are those ranked highest, many books annotated in chapters 4 through 8 relate to these topics. Some of the books included there may seem more applicable to adult readers, but if several respondents named the book as helpful, I usually included it. Alternately, some books listed by participants may seem too "young" for 13- to 18-year-olds. Again, because I believe in the importance of taking the responses from survey respondents seriously, I have included books like *Tuck Everlasting* or *A Wrinkle in Time* or *The Giver*. As many of us who teach literature know, these books, which are allegorical, can be read on many levels and by readers of many ages. For *The Giver* in particular, the book with its utopist world holds much more meaning for older adolescents and young adults than for readers under 13.

What could be disturbing is that this category of peer pressure included the pressures to drink, use and abuse drugs, be sexually active, and make moral/ethical choices, indicating that many students as young as 13 are dealing with these issues. Ironically for males, by the time they are 16, 17, or older, peer pressure becomes far less of an issue; at the same time, they are gaining the maturity that might make drug and alcohol use and sexual activity somewhat more "safe." In females, the drop in the importance of peer pressure doesn't begin as noticeably until age 17 or older.

A second observation from the data, which again is not necessarily a surprise, is the emphasis for females 16 and older on school-related issues. This category includes acceptance into colleges and academic achievement, as well as the time management issue of juggling "extracurriculars," homework, and sports. Many respondents spoke of the stress of winning or doing well both academically and athletically as peers and family might expect. Males ages 17 and up show a jump in this category as well. Once again, this pressure to perform and succeed is a major theme in many of the books included in chapter 4. Another component of the school issues category was holding a job while attending school. Many students are affected by trying to work up to 40 hours a week and still manage coursework. Even having the energy to stay awake in classes when working an outside job becomes a factor.

For females, the next most important issue (though significantly fewer

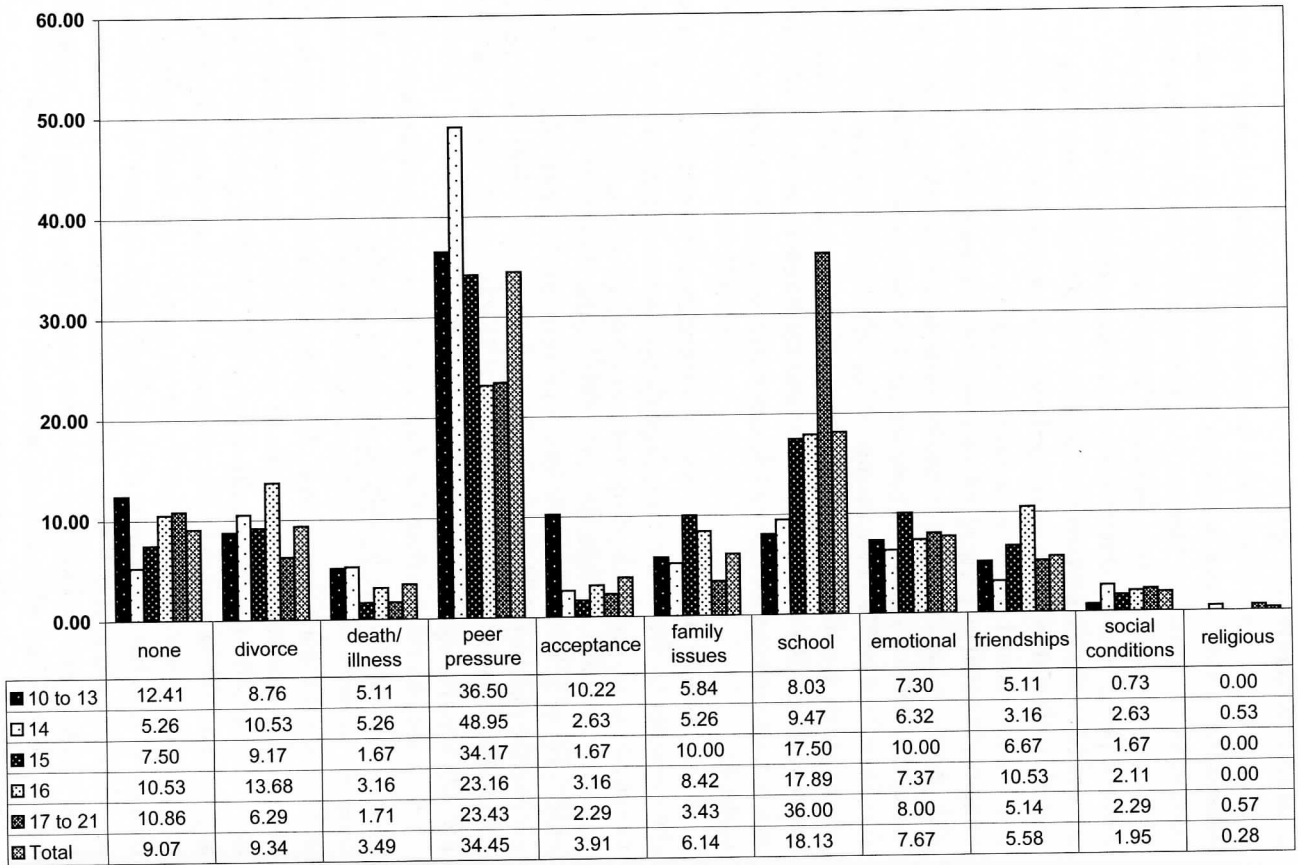


Figure 1.2. Chart of Males, First Issue (% of 726)

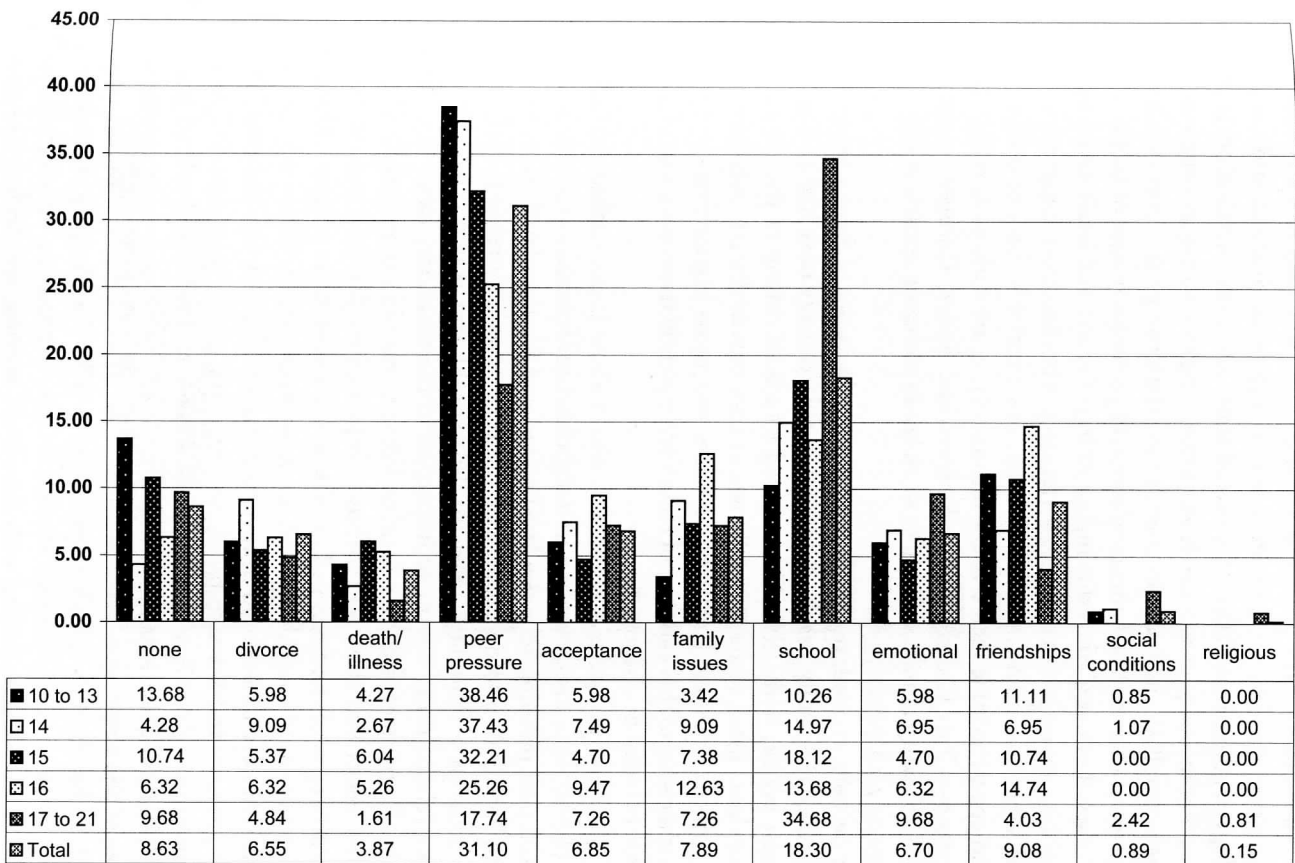


Figure 1.3. Chart of Females, First Issue (% of 680)

respondents indicate this) is friendships/relationships and dating. Sixteen-year-old females are the ones of all the age groups who rank this area highest. Once again, the data are consistent with developmental stages and the psychology of adolescents. Sixteen-year-old males also rank relationships higher than other male age groups do. It was interesting to see that an issue ranking higher overall for males than friendships/relationships is emotional issues. More often than not, American culture still promotes images of tough males and “men don’t cry,” thus this higher rating of emotional issues could signal what teen males are actually experiencing, whether their experiences are being addressed or not. I made a conscious effort to consider books that would appeal to male teen readers; fortunately, many authors of young adult literature—Chris Crutcher, Gary Paulsen, and Robert Cormier to name a few—have written and continue to write books featuring attractive male protagonists with great appeal.

If we were to combine the percentages for the issues of divorce/separation of parents and family issues, these issues would actually rank higher than (or at least on par with) the issues related to school. Many of the books the respondents listed relate to family issues; I see this as directly related to the percentages of respondents ranking these two issues higher than several of the other issues. This category of family and parental issues is a focus of many books included in chapter 4.

The charts in figures 1.4 and 1.5, which show issues ranked second by the respondents, also reveal some insightful data. Fourteen-year-old females ranked peer pressure, school-related issues, and family-related issues significantly higher as a second issue than did their male counterparts. Peer pressure remains a dominant issue for 14-year-old and younger females, but school-related issues rate more important in the secondary issues than they did in the primary issues for females. Fifteen-year-old males ranked school-related issues and friendships/relationships highest for their second issue. This may be because, compared to 14-year-old males, more 15-year-old males are participating in athletics and are beginning dating. While 16-year-old males ranked school-related issues lower than others, they also indicated that peer pressure and friendships/relationships are greater concerns for them. Those females 16, 17, and older are clearly focused on school-related issues and friendships/relationships, while these same issues rank fairly evenly for males of the same ages. Females 16, 17, and older ranked emotional issues much higher than their male counterparts as well. The category of emotional issues includes the following: stress, pressure, depression, suicide, bulimia/anorexia, addictions, dealing with the future, moving, and finding free time.

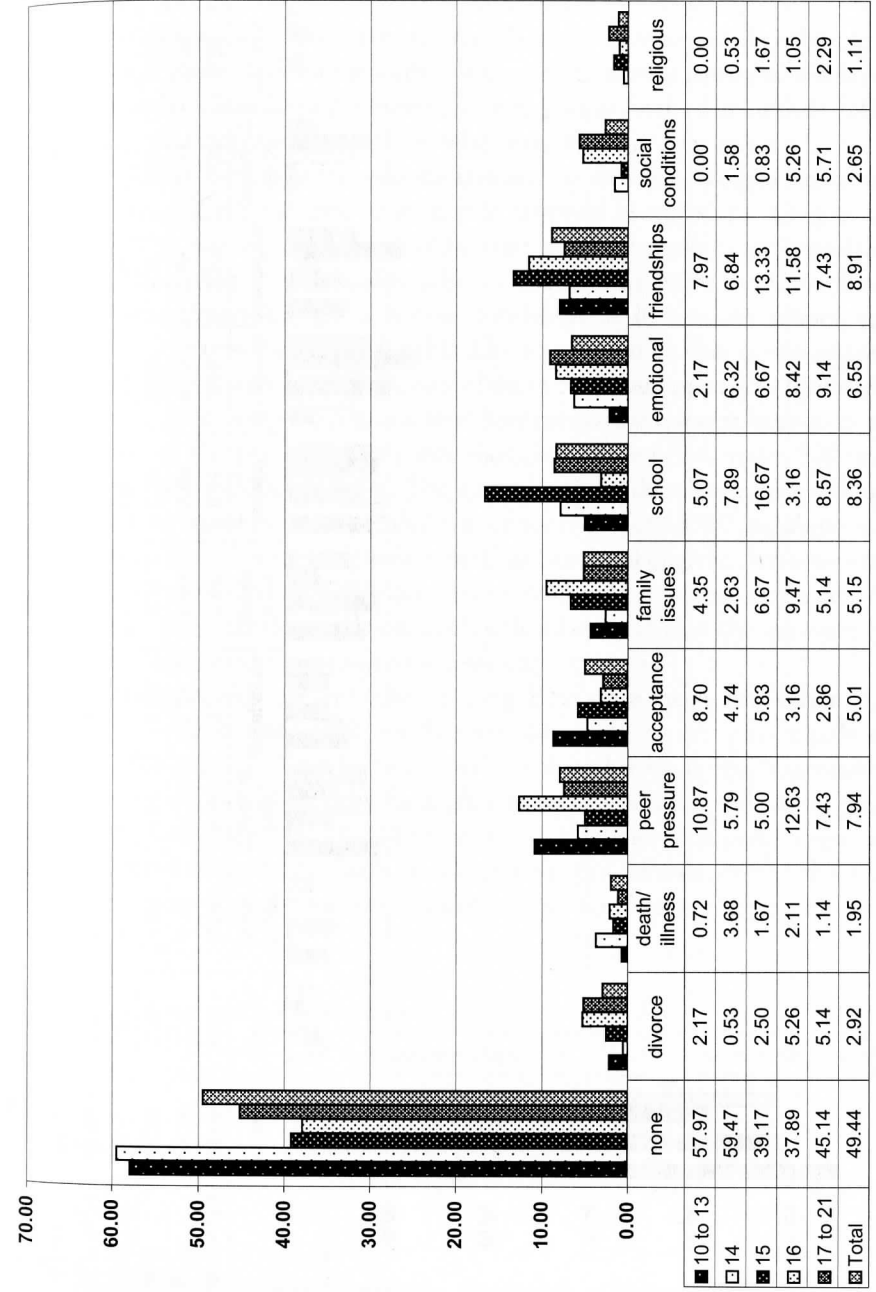


Figure 1.4. Chart of Males, Second Issue (% of 726)



Figure 1.5. Chart of Females, Second Issue (% of 680)

It is not unexpected that these issues would be of concern to females 16 and older when American culture so heavily emphasizes body image.

These charts show by gender and age what respondents listed as their first and second issues. I did not prioritize issues as I tabulated the data: whatever the respondent listed first became issue one, and so forth. The data in table 1.6 summarize responses from those who listed three or four issues.

The charts displaying the percentages for the first issue according to age groups and school size (see later in this chapter) reveal some age-specific insights. For the 10- to 13-year-olds, peer pressure ranks high regardless of size school, but in the smaller schools, presumably more rural, the issue of friendships/relationships is not as significant as it is when school size increases. One possible reason for this difference could be that in the smaller schools, students may know each other better. Fourteen-year-olds, regardless of school size, indicate throughout that peer pressure is a major issue in their lives, though the percentage is particularly high in schools under 500 and those with 1001–2000 students. The data also show that divorce/separation of parents is significant, particularly in schools of 500–1000 students. All other issues for 14-year-olds were scored as nearly negligible. Fifteen-year-olds show a rise in the school-related issues as school size increases; this result may mean that individuals know each other less and that the pressure to belong to some group is greater as school size increases.

The 16-year-olds present one striking difference from the other age groups. In schools under 500, for 16-year-olds, family issues rank nearly as high as peer pressure. If family issues were combined with divorce/separation, the percentage would actually be higher than the percent indicating peer pressure. Once again, the rural setting might influence this percentage. In many rural settings, particularly in western North Carolina, one of the primary locations from which respondents came, families are close-knit and

Table 1.6. Third and/or Fourth Issues

Ages	Total responses	More than 2 issues
12-year-olds	75	10
13-year-olds	172	24
14-year-olds	373	62
15-year olds	268	45
16-year olds	190	33
17-year-olds	239	18
18-year-olds +	60	6

important, but they also have many of the problems that families in more isolated geographical regions have. Friendships/relationships rated fairly high as an issue for the teens from schools with under 500 students and with 500–1000 students; this factor might indicate that dating is on the rise from age 16 on.

Not all that surprising, for those 17 and older the primary issue is school-related. This is the age group who are moving to college and who are confronting life after high school. The percentage of those 17 and older indicating the school-related issues rises with school size as well.

When comparing the school types, one obvious difference is the higher ranking of school-related issues for those in private or parochial schools. This factor may reflect the quality of the private and parochial schools, which focus more specifically on the college-bound. Also given that public schools are tuition free, more students from lower socioeconomic situations attend. For some of these students, education after high school is not an option or possibility. Families who send their children to private or parochial schools frequently have higher expectations of their children; for many of these adolescents, their parents have invested so much in tuition at the high school level that the parents demand their children perform well. Pressure to get good grades and to excel in sports and other extracurricular events was one of the school-related issues, and the high percentages for school-related issues bear this out.

Much of the information revealed by these various combinations of age groups, school size, and school type is not surprising. The variations in presentation of the data by combining different components, however, offer different perspectives, which is why I have included several different combinations of factors such as type of school to present the statistics. Readers should feel free to examine in detail those charts they find more relevant to the adolescents they meet and in their particular school contexts.

**Question 2: Where do you go to get advice or guidance for dealing with the issues listed above?**

The second question of the survey sought to identify where the teens went for sources of guidance on the issues they face. Again, I combined a range of sources into individual categories in order to process the data. Figures 1.6 to 1.9 delineate the primary and secondary sources respondents listed; the numbers for those who listed three or more sources of guidance will be cited similar to the ones above for issues. The categories for guidance sources and the

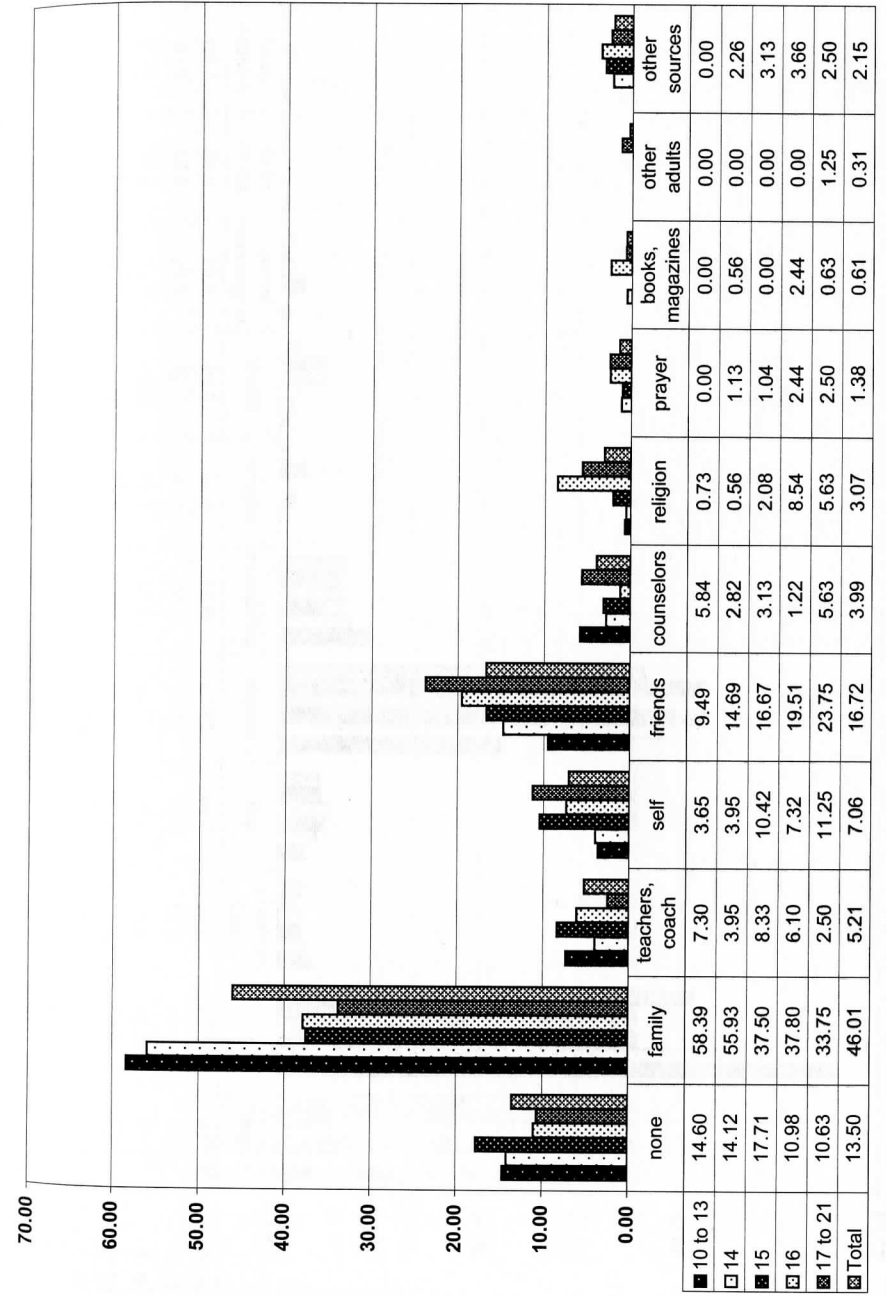


Figure 1.6. Chart of Males, First Guidance Source (% of 720)



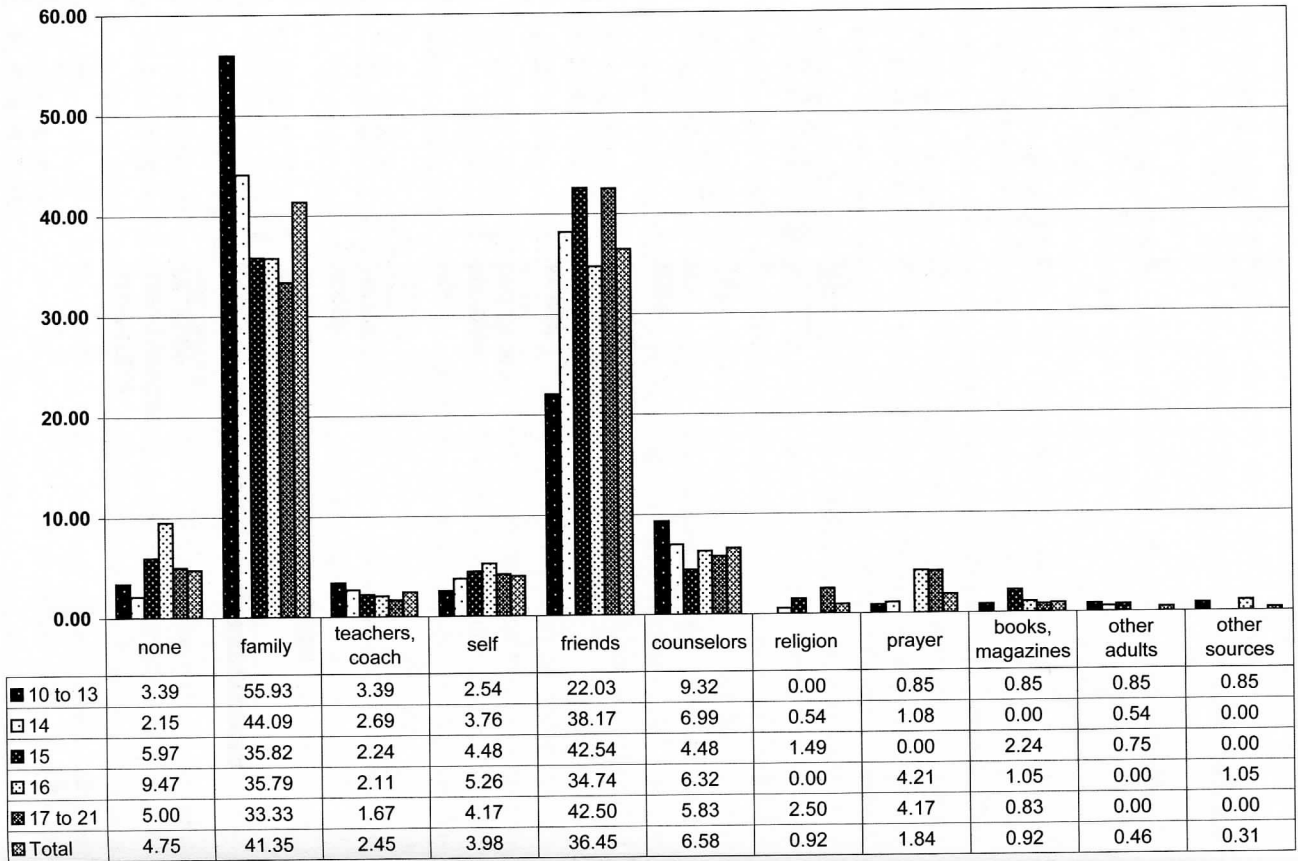


Figure 1.7. Chart of Females, First Guidance Source (% of 680)

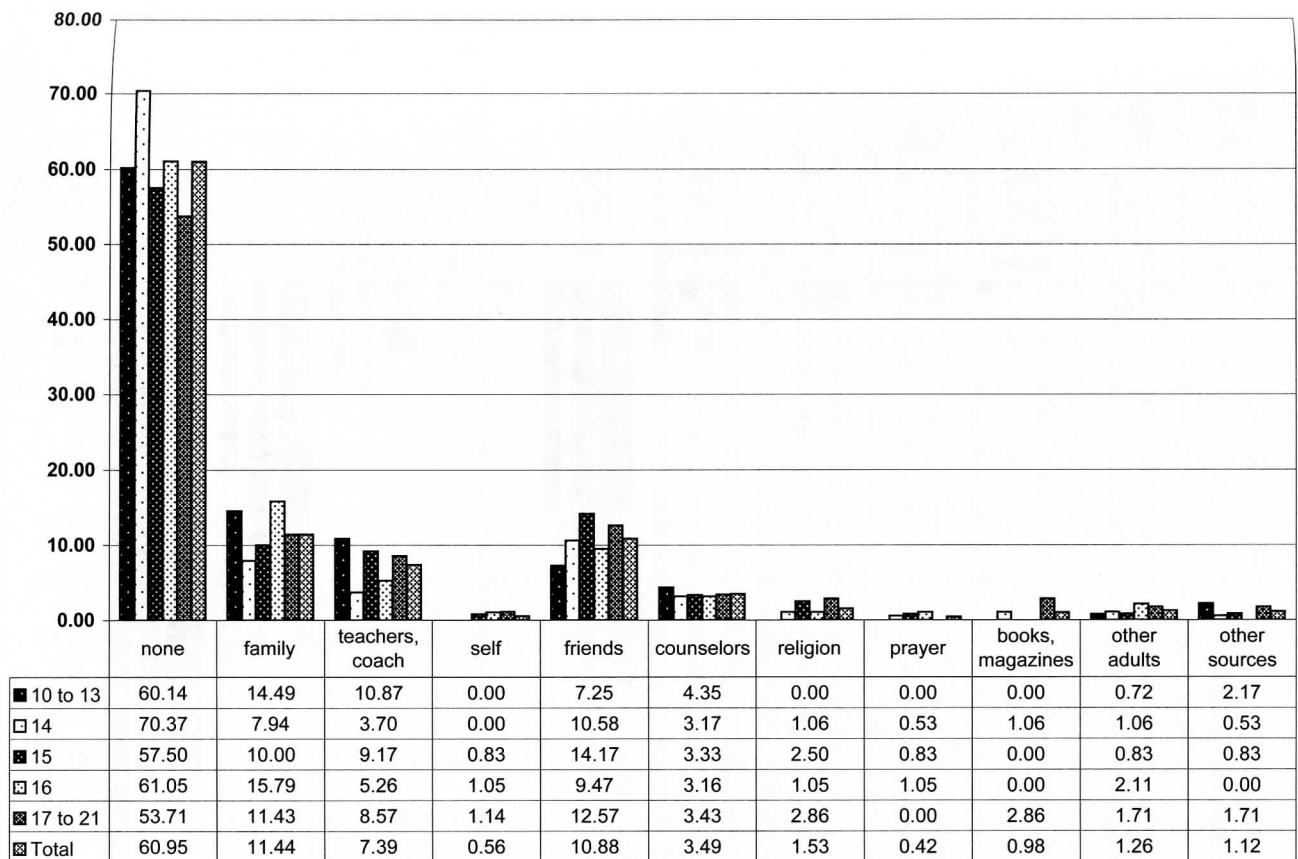


Figure 1.8. Chart of Males, Second Guidance Sources (% of 726)

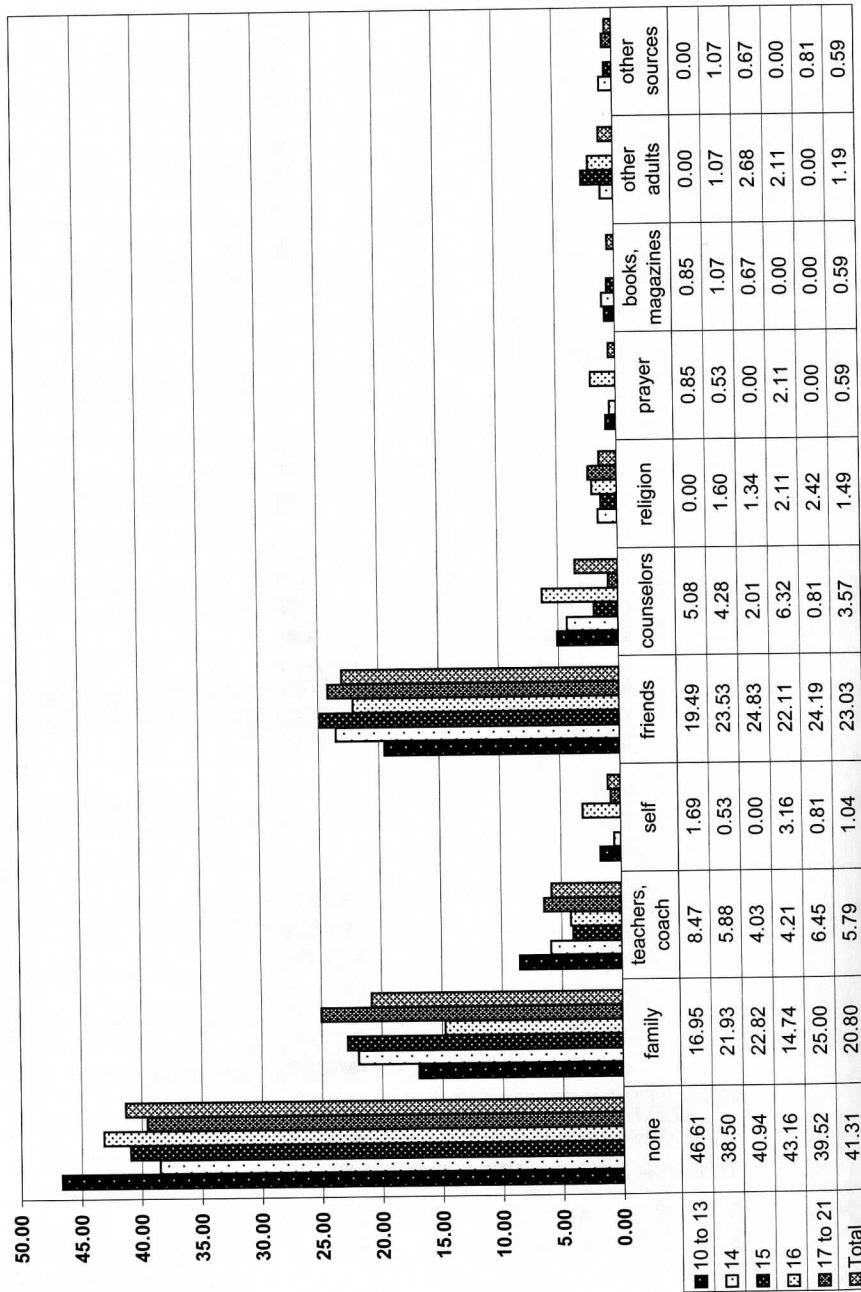


Figure 1.9. Chart of Females, Second Guidance Source (% of 680)

overall number of respondents indicating each category as the primary source of guidance are listed in table 1.7.

Figures 1.6 through 1.9 do not denote the number of respondents who said they have no source of guidance or do not choose to go to any particular guidance source, though there were some respondents stating they did not go to any source for guidance. For both males and females, family members (not solely parents, though parents were listed frequently) are the first source for guidance. As might be expected, 10- to 13-year-olds, regardless of gender, most frequently listed parents and family as the first choice for guidance; friends as a primary source of guidance is the next highest, though the percentage is significantly lower than for family. For all older adolescents, the difference between the percentages for “family” and “friends” is less significant. Again, adolescent psychology suggests that later adolescence is the stage when teens are moving toward greater independence from parents, so the percentage change is consonant with psychological studies.

Regarding type of school and the guidance sources selected, it is important to take into account that far more respondents attend public schools than private or parochial schools (refer back to table 1.2). For certain age groups, however, there are some differences. For example, the number of 15-year-olds who indicate family as their first guidance source is significantly lower for those in public schools than for those 15-year-olds in parochial schools. Thirteen-year-olds in public schools rated family much higher than friends/

Table 1.7 Categories of Guidance Sources and Number Indicating Category as a Primary Source of Guidance

Type of guidance	Primary source
Parents, siblings, grandparents/relatives	574
Teachers, coaches, principals	51
Self	72
Friends, peers	350
Guidance or professional counselors	69
Church, the Bible, pastors/ministers/priests, youth ministers, DARE	27
Jesus/God, prayer	21
Books, journaling, magazines	10
Neighbors, older adults, someone who can be trusted, scout leaders	5
Others: Internet, newscasts, TV, music, movies, running, solitude time, pets, plants	17
Total	1196

peers as sources of guidance compared to their counterparts in either private or parochial schools. Again, these additional combinations of data are provided to give more perspectives on the data.

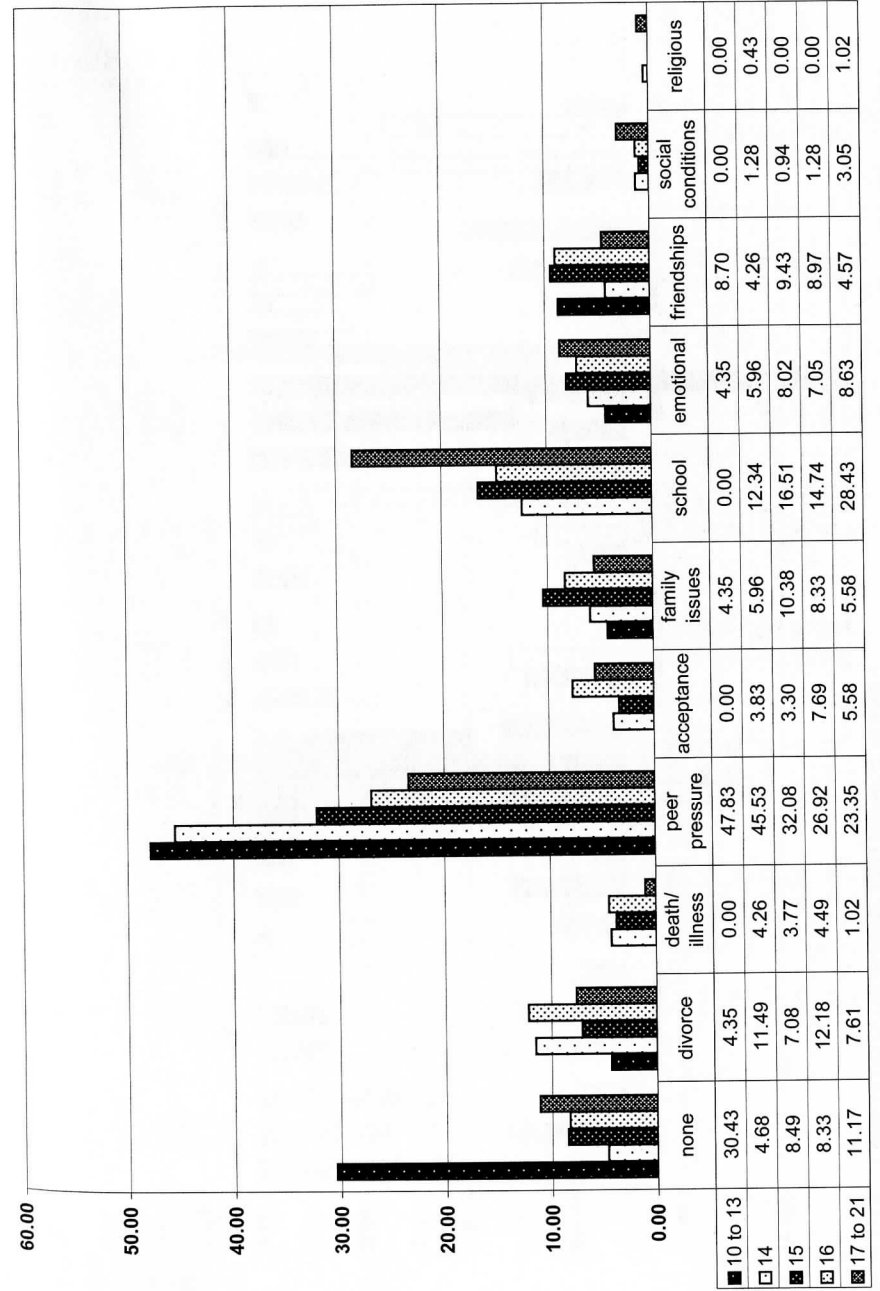
Many respondents listed only one source of guidance, which accounts for the high percentages of "none" in figures 1.8 and 1.9 presenting the second listed guidance sources. Many teens of all ages indicated they almost equally would go to family or friends for guidance. Sixteen-year-old females go to friends more often than to family. The number of males listing only one source of guidance is higher than for females, which is evident in the high percentage for "None" in figure 1.8.

The number of respondents within each age group that listed more than two sources of guidance is shown in table 1.8. For example, 75 12-year-olds participated in the survey and 11 gave more than two sources of guidance.

The data from Questions 1 and 2 are presented in several other combinations to allow for other interpretations. Readers are encouraged to explore the charts (figures 1.10 through 1.23) that most interest them. The data combined in figures 1.10-1.12 are type of school, age group, and percent of respondents identifying each issue as their primary issue. The data presented in figures 1.13-1.16 show school size, age group, and percent of respondents identifying each issue as their primary issue. These figures present type of school, age group, and first guidance source. The data combined in figures 1.20-1.23 are size of school, age group, and first guidance source.

**Table 1.8. Those Listing More Than Two Guidance Sources**

Ages	Participants	More than two sources
12-year-olds	75	11
13-year-olds	172	24
14-year-olds	373	54
15-year-olds	268	25
16-year-olds	190	23
17-year-olds	239	37
18-year-olds +	60	11



**Figure 1.10. Chart of Public Schools, First Issue (% of 837)**

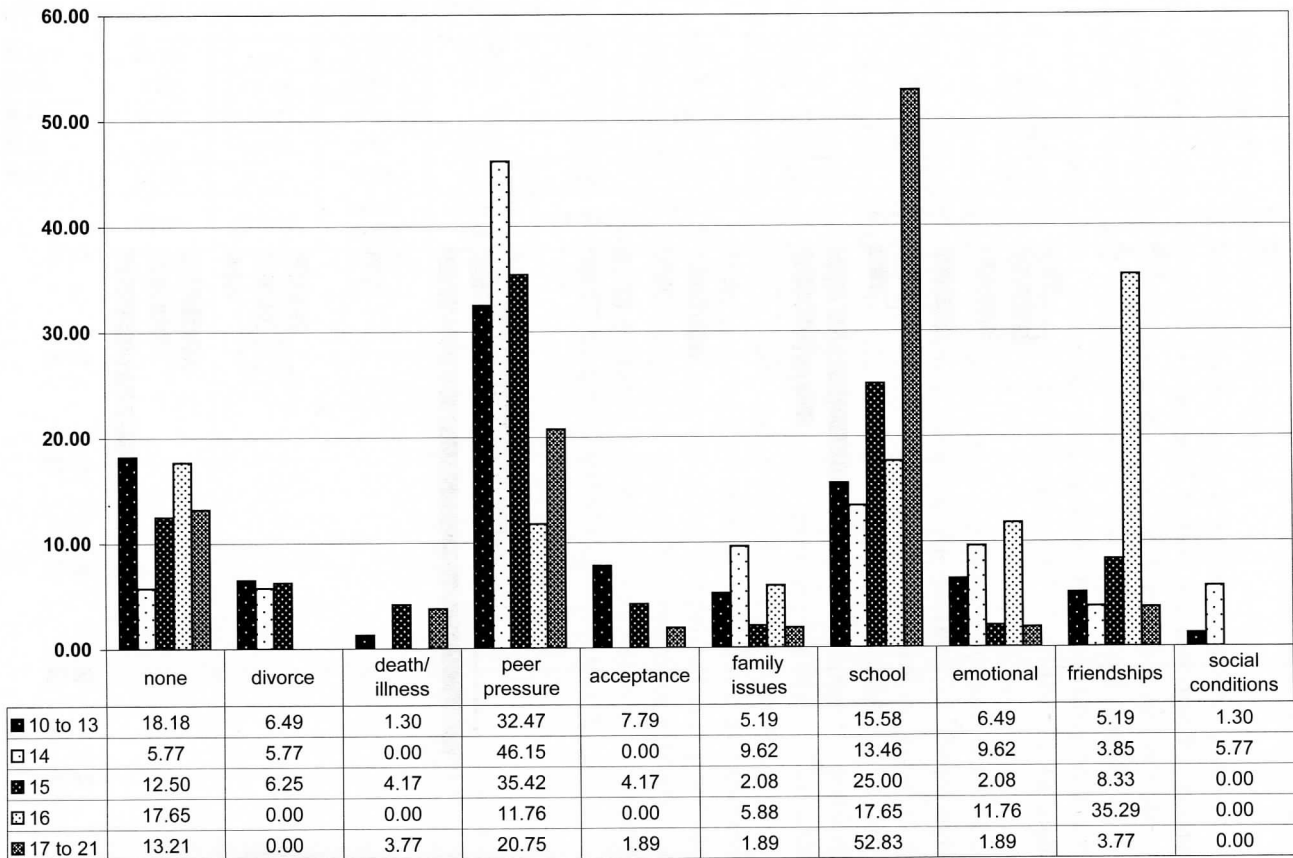


Figure 1.11. Chart of Private Schools, First Issue (% of 249)

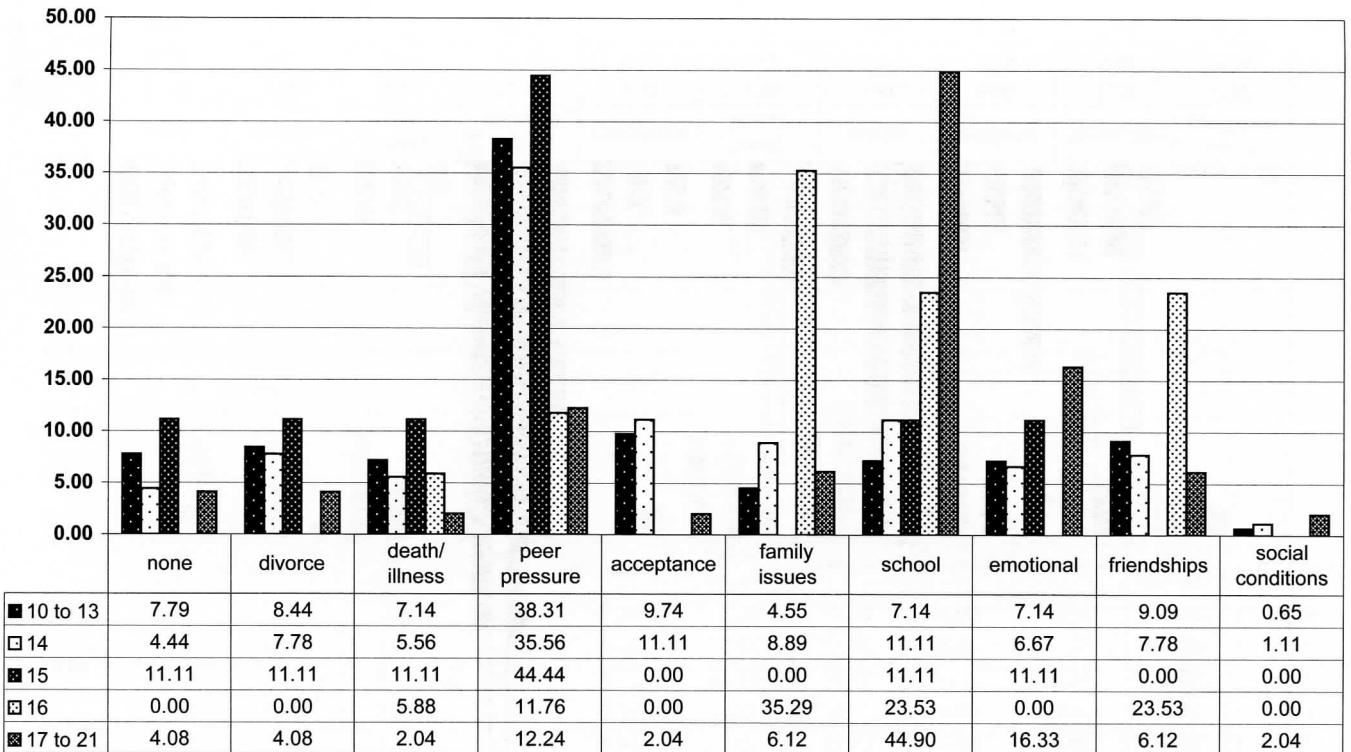


Figure 1.12. Chart of Parochial Schools, First Issue (% of 320)

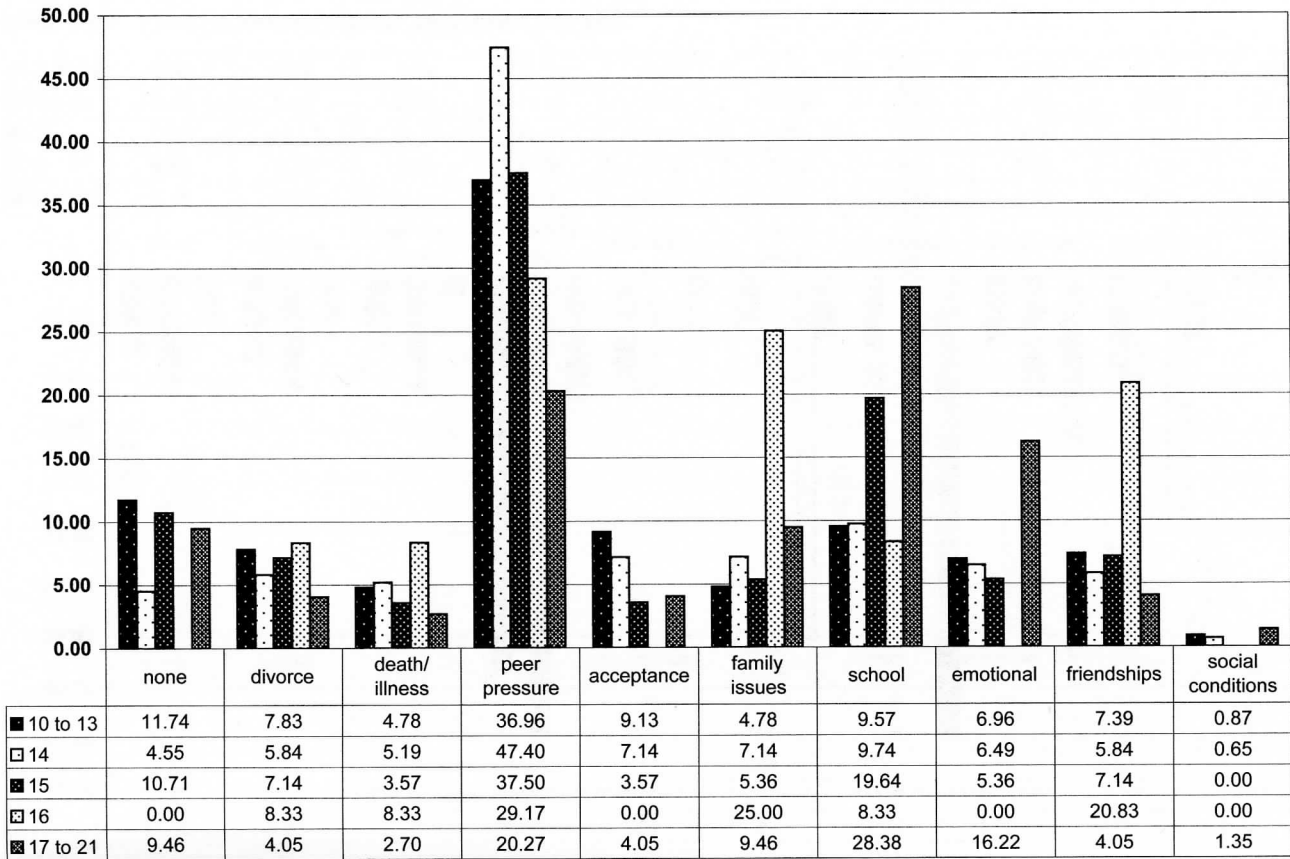


Figure 1.13. Chart of Schools < 500, First Issue (% of 543)

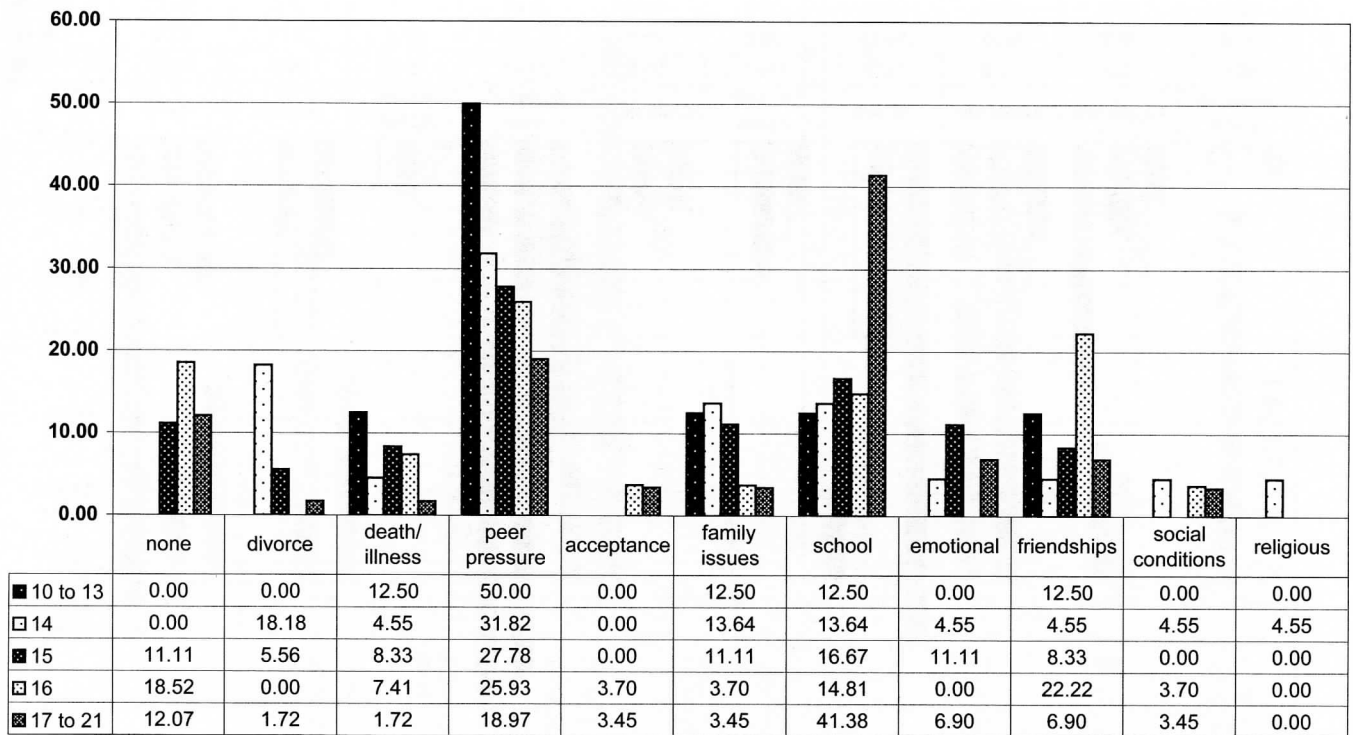


Figure 1.14. Chart of Schools 500–1000, First Issue (% of 543)

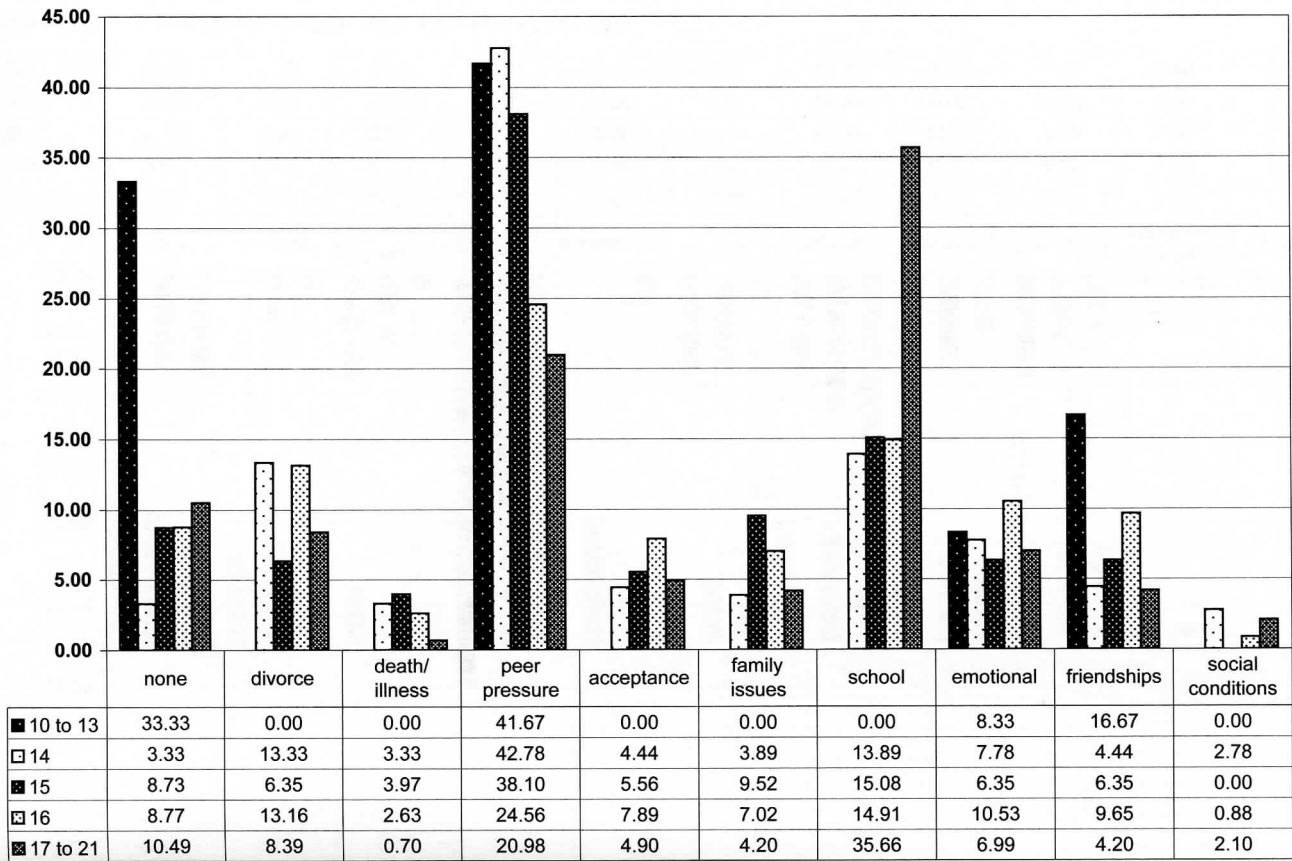


Figure 1.15. Chart of Schools 1001-2000, First Issue (% of 543)

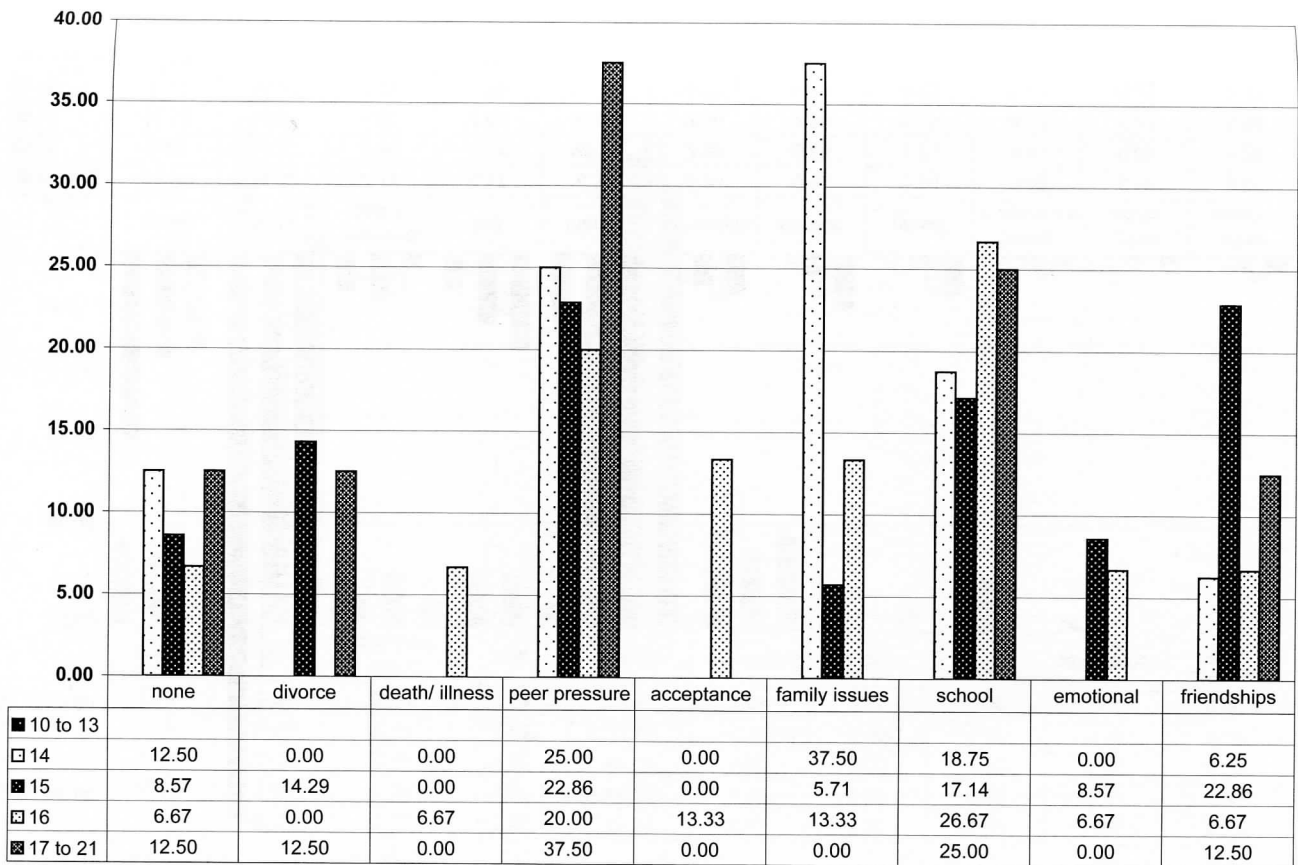


Figure 1.16. Chart of Schools > 2000, First Issue (% of 543)

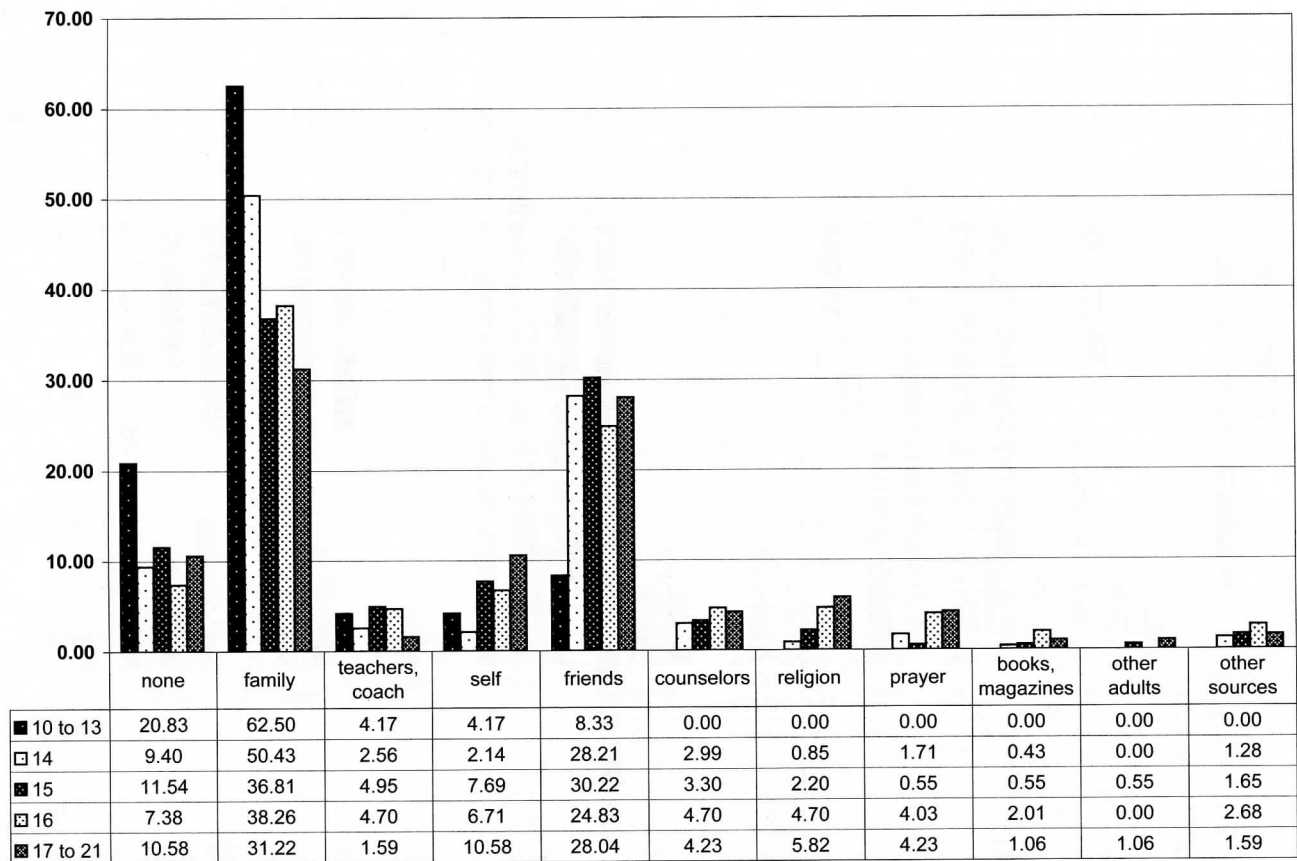


Figure 1.17. Chart of Public Schools, First Guidance Source (% of 837)

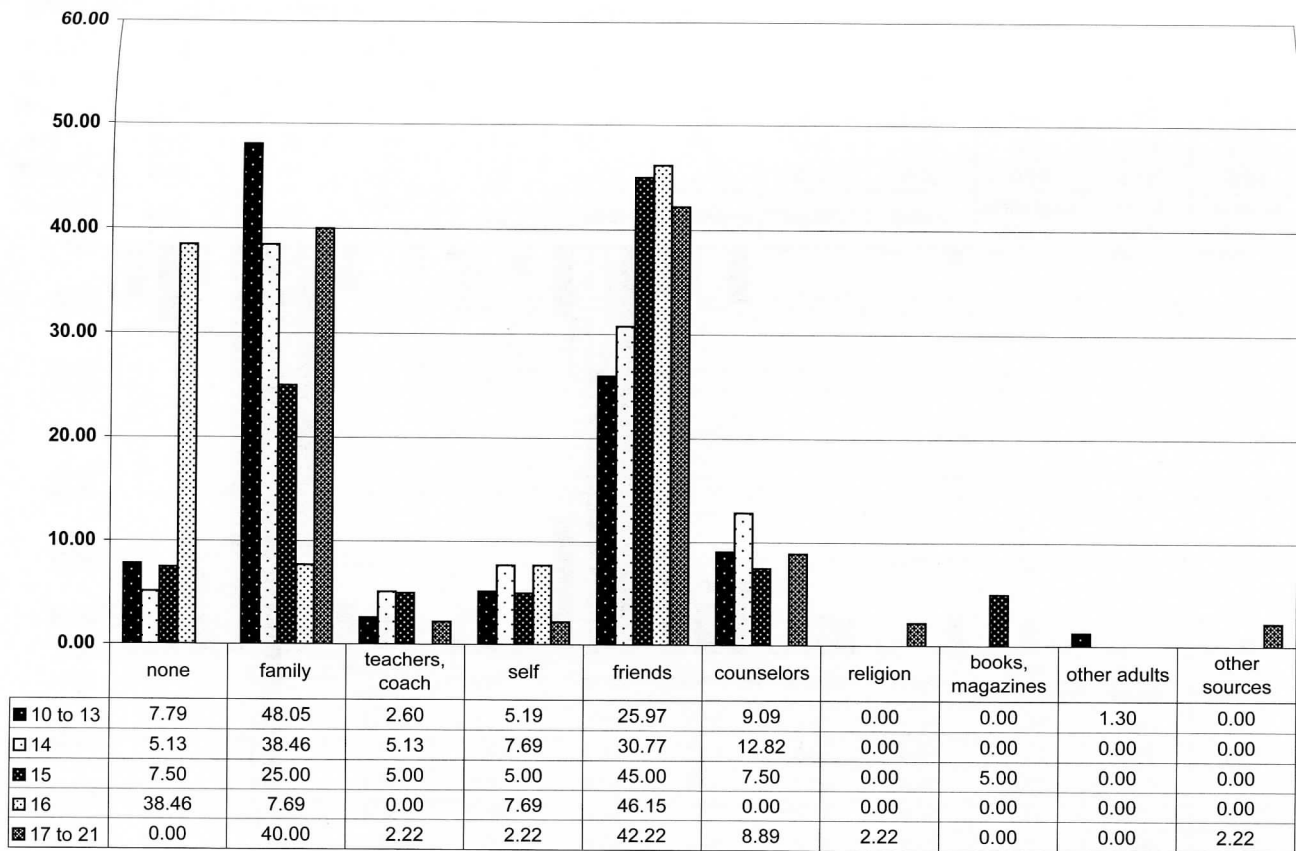


Figure 1.18. Chart of Private Schools, First Guidance Source (% of 249)

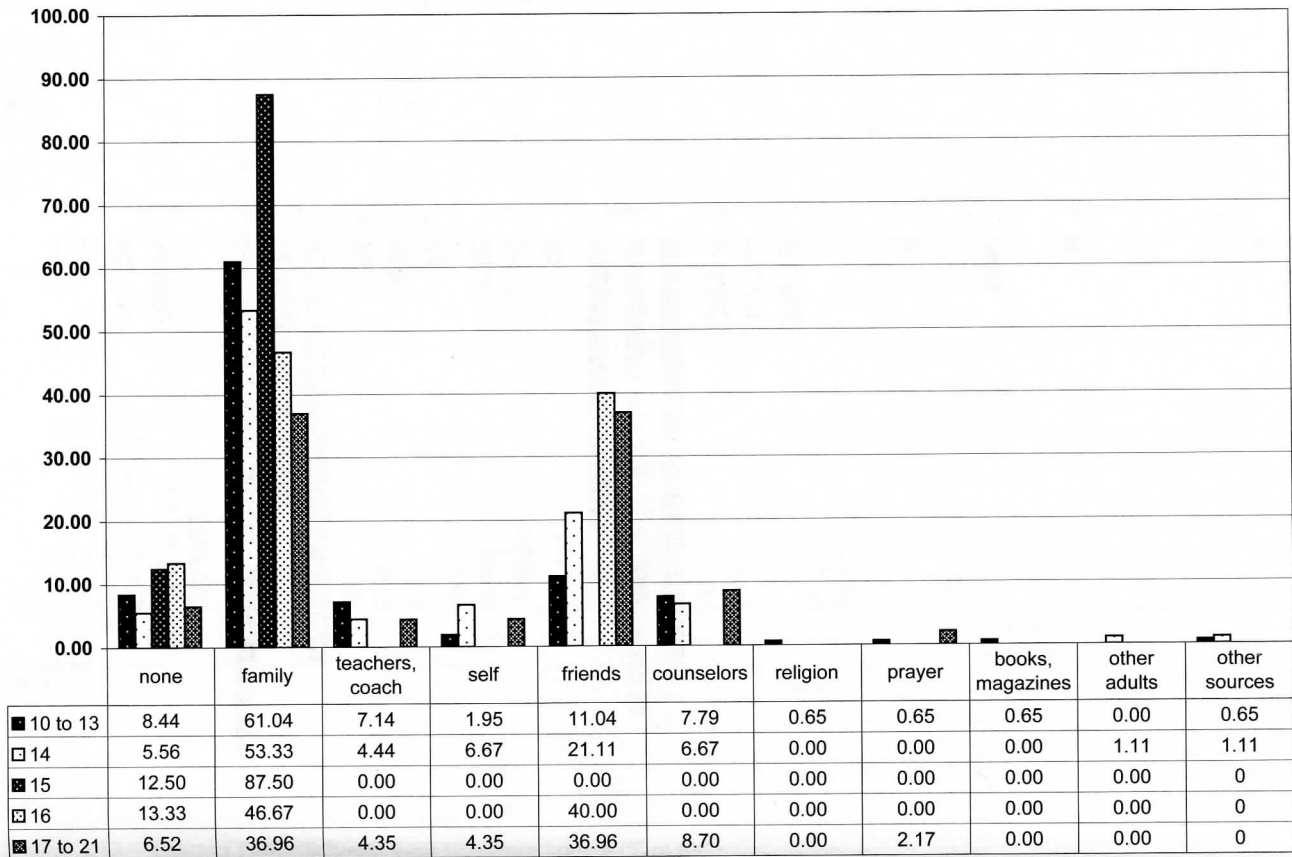


Figure 1.19. Chart of Parochial Schools, First Guidance Source (% of 320)

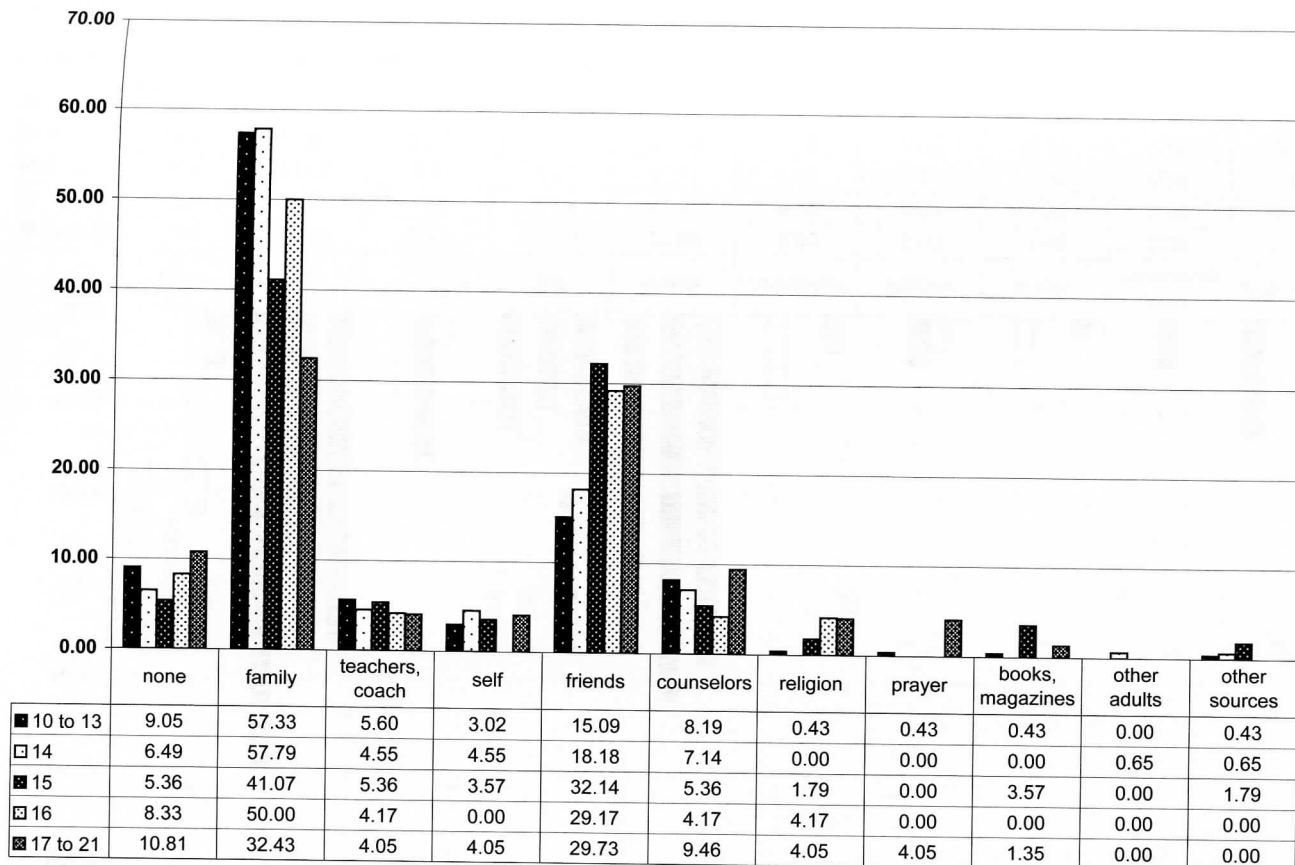


Figure 1.20. Chart of Schools < 500, First Guidance Source (% of 543)



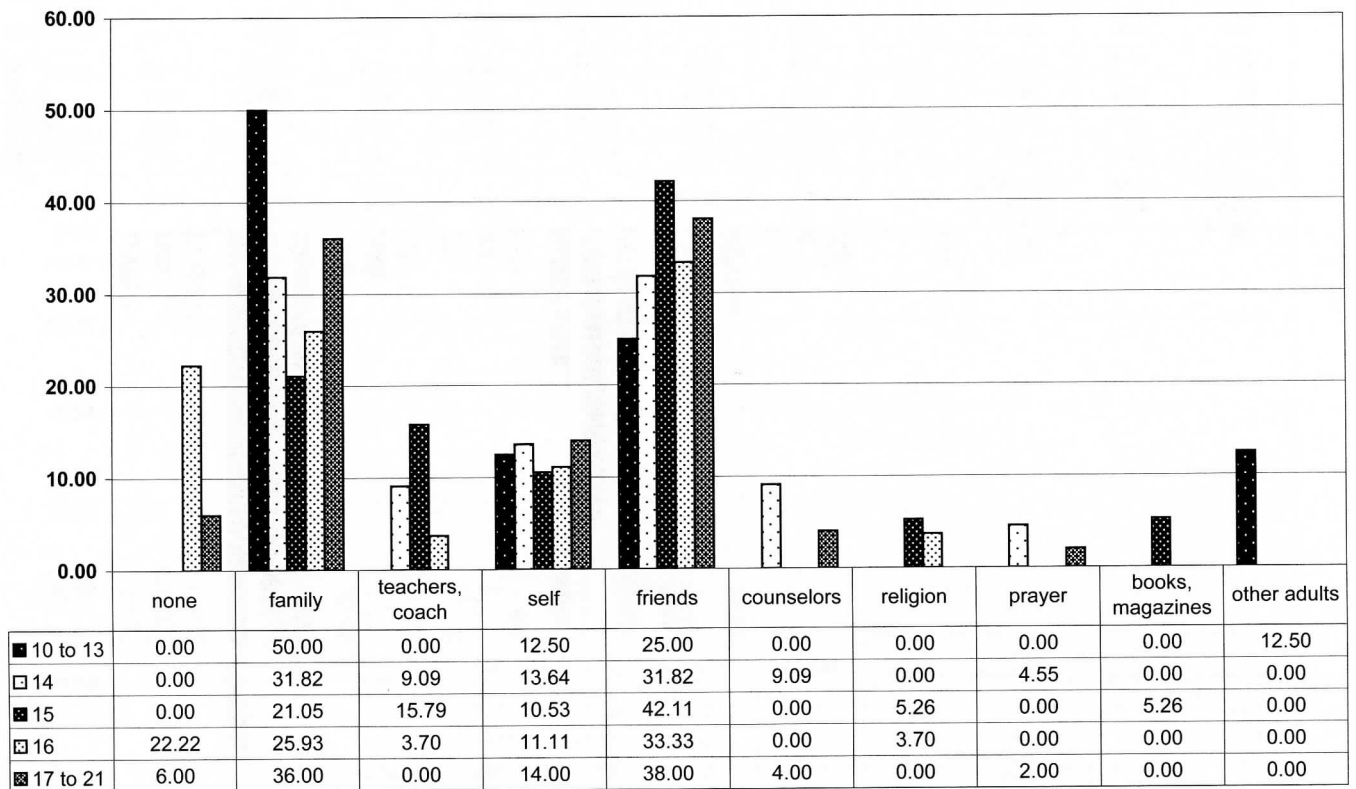


Figure 1.21. Chart of Schools 500–1000, First Guidance Source (% of 177)

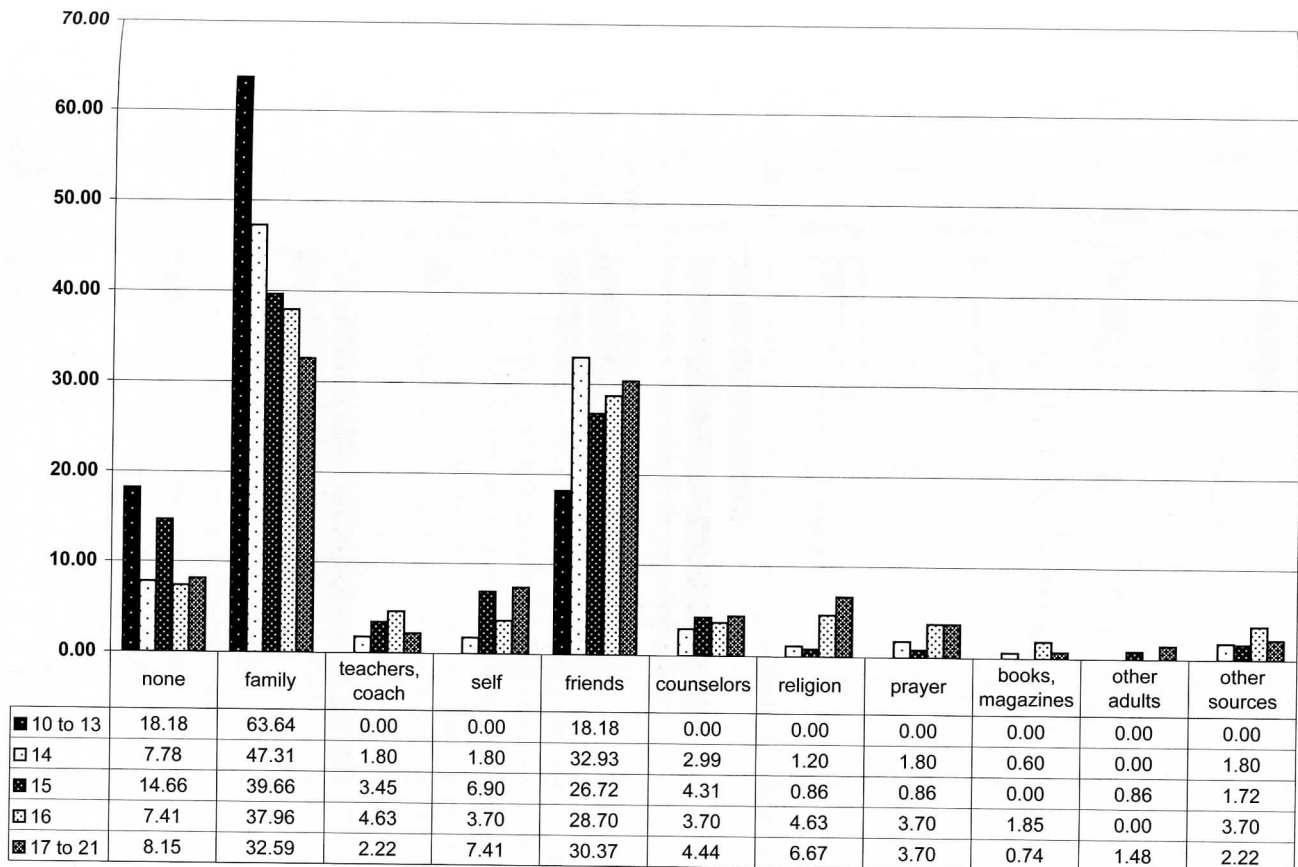


Figure 1.22. Chart of Schools 1001–2000, First Guidance Source (% of 582)

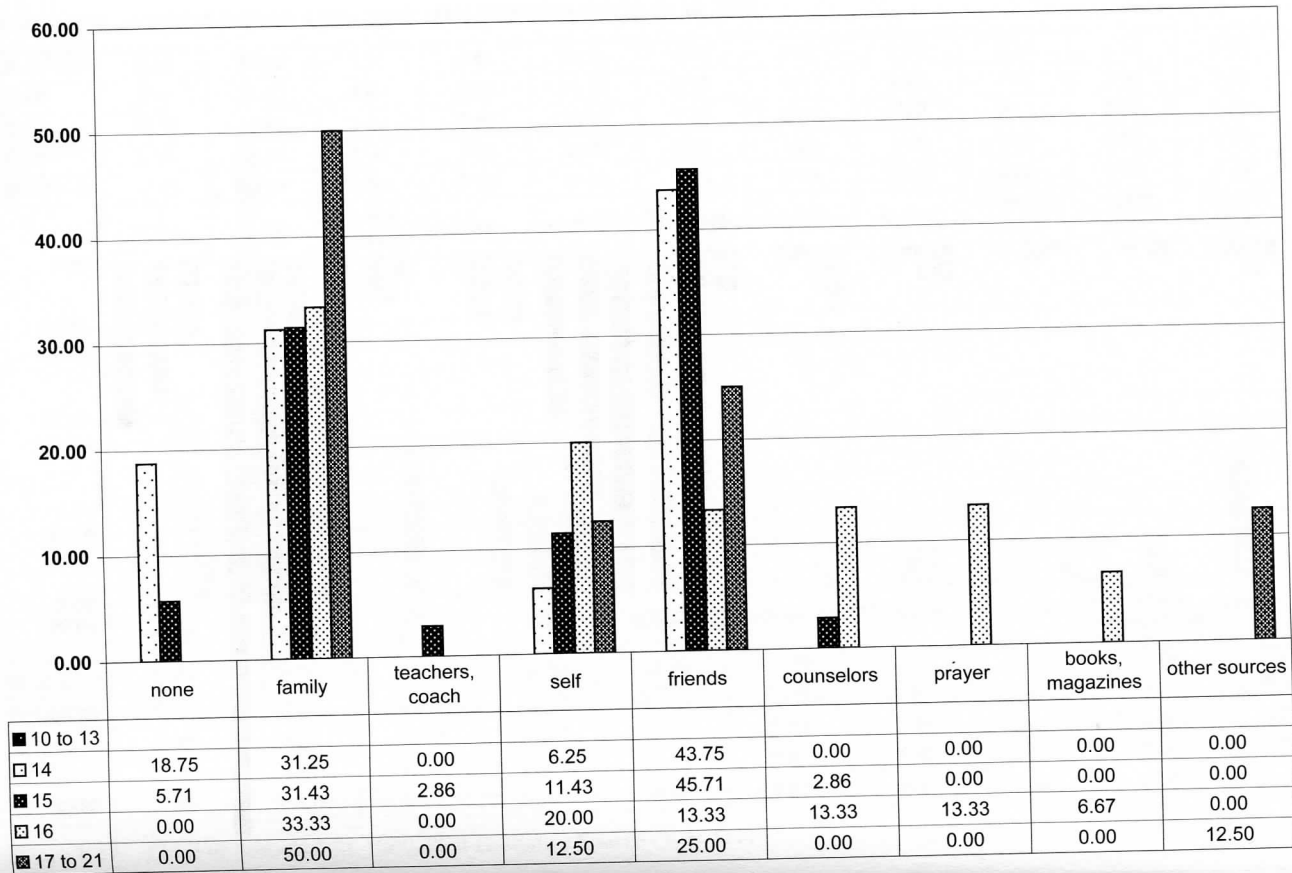


Figure 1.23. Chart of Schools > 2000, First Guidance Source (% of 74)