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WAKE-UP CALL

The Nation's children are at risk

Digest these facts:

* One third of 13 year-olds acknowledge having used illicit drugs.
* Educational achievement levels of eighth graders have remained stagnant, while the educational needs of the workplace have increased.
* The homicide rate for those 10 years to 14 years of age more than doubled from 1985 to 1992.
* One of five adolescents is growing up in poverty.
* Smoking among eighth graders rose by 30 percent from 1991 to 1994.

These are the frightening findings of a new Carnegie Corp. report, "Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century." With these findings, the more immediate question may be: How do we help adolescents survive until the next century?

The report, a 10 year study of children 10 to 14 years old, is the first to examine the problems of youths in this age group. And, as if one were needed, it ought to be a **Wake-Up Call** to our seemingly indifferent nation.

"The social costs of severely damaging conditions that shatter lives in adolescents are terrible, not only in their impact on individuals but also in effects that damage the entire society - the costs of disease and disability, crime and violence, alienation and hatred," the report says.

San Diego County is home to over 2.6 million people; more than 520,000 of them are children under the age of 14. Last year, juvenile court cases rose to 8,845. This year, the county decided under a new state law to put its first 14 year-old on trial for murder as an adult. But clearly, tougher punishment by itself is not going to cure the massive problem all of us must help solve.

One of the main problems facing children in early adolescence is the lack of supervision between the end of the school day and the time working parents get home. According to the Carnegie report, "Unsupervised after-school hours represent a period of significant risk for engaging in substance abuse and sexual activity."

Last year, parents who earned less than $14,400 spent 25 percent of their income on child care, according to the U.S. Commerce Department. Families with annual incomes of $54,000 spent 6 percent or less. Mothers on public assistance find that earnings from low wage jobs won't even cover their child care expenses.

More comprehensive after-school programs must be developed so young adolescents will always have a link to adults. Across San Diego and the country, schools and community groups have begun to tackle the problem, many with good results.

Child care is, first and foremost, a parental responsibility. If the problems facing our young are to be managed, parents absolutely must become more involved with their children beyond providing the fiscal basics. However, the quality of life of our leaders of tomorrow must be assured by each of us. **We can pay now, or we can pay later!**

- Editorial, "Union Tribune"

GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON PHYSICAL FITNESS AND SPORTS

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