

Introduction

It was 2:00 in the morning. Fourteen-year-old Natalie's parents had gone to bed hours ago, and the house was quiet. Startled awake by the telephone, Natalie's mother listened as a police officer asked her to pick up her daughter at a friend's house.

Earlier that day, Natalie had gotten her parents' permission to spend the night at Christy's house. But Natalie hadn't mentioned that Christy's parents were out of town for the weekend. Word spread quickly, and it wasn't long before a loud and crowded party was underway.

After several calls from irate neighbors, the police came and broke up the party. Charges filed against the party-goers ranged from curfew violation to possession and consumption of alcohol, disturbing the peace, property damage, and resisting arrest. Natalie, like some of the other teenagers, was given a ticket for possession of beer.

Maybe you or a friend have been in a similar situation. Or maybe this hasn't happened to you. But if it did, would you know what to do if the police told you that you had broken the law?

- In 1990, there were 27 million juveniles ages 10–17 in the U.S.
- By the year 2010, there should be 33.8 million.

Source: Juvenile Offenders and Victims: A National Report. National Center for Juvenile Justice, 1995.

Situations like Natalie's happen all the time. Most of the teenagers at the party knew they were doing things their parents probably wouldn't approve of. But many had never really thought about the fact that they were also breaking several laws. It had never crossed their minds that their actions could lead to fines or an arrest. They were simply having a good time with friends.

Knowing about laws that affect you and others your age can help you make better decisions about what you should and

shouldn't do. Being informed could help you to decide whether or not to:

- cut class
- use a fake ID
- obey your teacher
- smoke cigarettes
- make a crank call
- gamble
- get a job
- stay out really late
- get into a fight.

What Are My Rights? won't tell you everything you need to know about how laws are passed and enforced, and it won't tell you how the government works. It *will* tell you which laws affect you and why. It will also tell you what happens if you break the law and get caught. It will help you to understand the laws, recognize your responsibilities, and appreciate your rights. Each chapter has an introduction that orients you to certain issues, followed by question-and-answer sections that cover topics that concern you and your friends.

It wasn't too long ago that young people had no recognizable rights. During the last century, and as recently as thirty years ago, children were mainly considered the property of their parents. Many children and teenagers labored for twelve-hour days in horrible working conditions because they had no protection under the law. Thankfully, times have changed. You and other young people now have rights that protect you within your family, at school, on the job, at the doctor, and in your community.

Your state legislature and city council are responsible for seeing that laws exist to protect and serve youth and the community as a whole. The authority to act for the people in passing laws and enforcing them in the nation's courts comes from the United

The One Thing Teens Want Most from Life

Choices	All (%)	Boys (%)	Girls (%)
Happiness	28	23	32
Long/enjoyable life	16	18	14
Marriage/family	9	8	11
Financial success	8	11	5
Career success	8	9	6
Religious satisfaction	8	7	7
Love	7	6	7
Personal success	6	6	5
Personal contribution to society	2	3	2
Friends	2	3	1
Health	2	2	2
Education	2	1	2

Source: The Mood of American Youth survey taken in April, 1996, by the Horatio Alger Association. 1,500 teens were surveyed; 938 responded. Because some teens didn't respond, the figures don't total 100%.

States Constitution, the Bill of Rights,* and state constitutions (which closely follow the U.S. Constitution). Just as federal and state laws in America regarding teenagers differ, the laws of Canada vary among the provinces. Some Canadian laws and related community resources are included in this book, along with U.S. laws and resources.

Many teenagers have questions about the law—“What if my best friend is shoplifting?” “Is it illegal to be in a gang?” “Could I go to jail?” “What if my parents die?” “What if I win the lottery?”—but they don't know where to turn for answers. *What Are My Rights?* is designed to be your first stop for exploring these and other legal questions. It covers childhood issues as well as concerns of the later teen years. The first chapters address parental authority, your rights at school, and issues of law while you're on the job. Other chapters discuss rights of a more personal nature, those that

* See Chapter 2, pages 30–31.

deal with your body and growing up. The final chapter considers the more somber side of the law—the consequences of willful misconduct or bad judgment—and offers basic information about the legal system.

Throughout this book, you'll find "FYI" (For Your Information) sections with descriptions of resources—including other books, national organizations, and Web sites—that you can turn to for information and advice.* You'll also find listings for toll-free telephone numbers and hotlines. But if something in this book applies to you, it's best to speak *first* with someone you know and trust. If possible, talk things over with your parents. Consider telling a teacher, school counselor, or youth leader at your place of worship. Think of another adult you can talk to—someone who will listen, understand, and give you good advice. You probably know at least one adult who will help you and stand by you.

In this book, you'll also find true stories of teenagers who have spoken out or changed the law to benefit youth. You'll read about different ways you can stand up for yourself and invoke your rights. Knowledge is power. As you learn more about legal issues, think about what *you* might do to bring about positive change at home, at work, at school, and in your community.

* If you don't have access to the Internet at home or at school, ask at your local library about free community Internet access.