

What Makes People Cheat?

Cheaters seem to be everywhere these days -- in sports, in corporate boardrooms, and in the highest levels of government.

By [R. Morgan Griffin](#)

Reviewed By [Brunilda Nazario, MD](#)

WebMD Feature

Are you a cheater? You may not think so. Sure, you may not be perfect, but you probably consider yourself a reasonably honest citizen.

But think harder. In high school or college, did you ever swipe a paper off the Internet and hand it in as your own? Ever padded your resume with a misleading or outright false job description? Have you taken an extra deduction or two on your taxes, maybe writing off a dinner with friends as a business expense? Do you really pay for that deluxe cable line-up, or is your hook-up not quite legit?

If you're guilty of any of these sins, you're not alone. Experts in many different fields -- education, sports, and law, for instance -- believe that cheating has become more common and more accepted in recent years.

"We've got scientists and professors who cheat, journalists who cheat, lawyers who cheat, and CEOs who cheat," says Charles Yesalis, MPH, ScD, a professor of health and human development at Pennsylvania State University. It seems like everybody's doing it.

If cheating is more common, the question is, why are we more likely to cheat than previous generations? And what does cheating do to us? How does it harm our society, our families, and ourselves?

Is Cheating Really Worse These Days?

Experts say some amount of cheating is inevitable in any culture. When the first human beings set out the first rules for ethical behavior, there was no doubt some scheming wretch who started working out ways to bend them.

But levels of cheating in a society can rise or fall, says David Callahan, author of *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead* and co-founder of the public policy center Demos. He and other experts think that they're on the rise. It's hard to find definitive numbers to establish that cheating is more common across the board -- after all, can you trust a survey of liars? But there are good surveys of academic dishonesty, and the results are not reassuring.

"Over the long haul, there's certainly been an increase in cheating [in school]," says Donald McCabe, professor of management and global business at Rutgers Business School and founding president of the Center for Academic Integrity. Some of McCabe's own surveys of college students have shown a 30% - 35% increase in some types of cheating during the 1990s.

Yesalis has studied the use of performance-enhancing drugs in athletes for more than 25 years and worked as a consultant for the U.S. Olympic Committee, the NCAA, the NFL, and many other organizations. He says the problem has only gotten worse and worse.

"For the last 20 or 30 years, we've had this idea that there are only a few bad apples in the barrel,"

Yesalis tells WebMD. "But in reality, in many, many different sports, there are only a few good apples."

There's also plenty of anecdotal evidence on the nightly news. There's the respected historian David Ambrose lifting numerous passages from other authors. There's Jack Kelley, an award-winning reporter for *USA Today*, who wrote hair-raising stories about risking his life again and again -- witnessing a suicide bombing and escaping pursuit by Chechen thugs, for instance. He said that God was looking out for him; his editors settled on the more mundane explanation that Kelly made the stories up.

There's also Danny Almonte, the 14-year-old Little Leaguer who pretended to be 12, and this year's story about the Balco investigation, which implicates six Olympic athletes in a doping scandal. We've also got Martha Stewart, Enron, and politicians who have been caught lying to the American public.

Why Do We Cheat?

Some people cheat to become famous. Take Rosie Ruiz, who for a short time was the women's winner of the 1980 Boston marathon. But it turned out -- although Ruiz denied it -- that she hadn't run the race at all and had probably snuck in 1/2 a mile from the finish line.

According to most experts, Ruiz is the anomaly -- most cheaters aren't usually looking for that kind of public attention. Instead, people cheat to keep up, or to get by. That's why a college student who downloads a plagiarized paper off the Internet doesn't want an A paper, he wants a B paper. He's not cheating in school to win an essay contest; he just wants to pass the class and move on.

Callahan argues that our nation's emphasis on getting rich -- coupled with fear of financial insecurity -- has fostered the spread of cheating.

"Societies [that place] the greatest emphasis on getting rich while having the fewest avenues to get rich in a legitimate fashion tend to be societies with the greatest amount of cheating," says Callahan. While there are plenty of legitimate opportunities to get rich in the U.S., Callahan observes that they don't extend equally to everyone.

He sees a nation that's obsessed with getting rich and terrified of losing out. We've been encouraged to think in Darwinian terms: We're all in a desperate struggle against each other to make it to the top. Failure is disastrous.

Experts note that the pressure starts when we're young. For some parents, not getting their child into the right preschool -- let alone college -- supposedly spells social and economic ruin. High school students are encouraged to fret relentlessly about college. They're pushed by their parents to get perfect grades, play sports, join a dozen extracurricular clubs, and take up esoteric hobbies or rare musical instruments in order to stand out to admissions officers.

"For young people, the pressure is greater than ever, and the competition is greater than ever," Callahan tells WebMD. It makes cheating in school an attractive option, he says.

That pressure doesn't let up when people get out of school. Many people feel insecure in their jobs and worry about the future. If staying afloat takes a little cheating, many people are willing to do it.

Everybody's Doing It

Callahan likens cheating to a contagion. The more people do it, the more it becomes accepted. The more it's accepted, the more people do it.

"If you're in an environment where cheating is the norm, a lot of people will just go along," Callahan tells WebMD.

In fact, if you feel like everyone is cheating, then *not* cheating seems foolish, Callahan says. You're just shooting yourself in the foot -- you'll suffer while all the other cheaters get ahead. Being scrupulously honest may seem like a nice idea, but to some people it's pointless, as quaint and as practical as ditching your computer and writing with a quill.

Yesalis argues that the same is true for athletes who feel pressured to use performance-enhancing drugs.

"I think that only a tiny minority of athletes actually *want* to use these drugs, but everyone sees them as tools of the trade," says Yesalis. "The advantage conveyed by these drugs can be so great, that it's not the difference between coming in first and coming in second or third. It's the difference between coming in first and not making the team at all."

No one wants to be the first one to quit using drugs on principle. "Many athletes feel like they can't afford to unilaterally disarm," Yesalis tells WebMD.

In addition, cheating sets an example for others. Yesalis argues that this is especially true of athletes using drugs.

"A lot of this doesn't trickle down, it cascades onto our kids," says Yesalis. "The latest figures from the CDC show that over a million kids in this country have cycled on anabolic steroids. To think that there's no connection between elite athletes using drugs and our kids using them is the height of naiveté."

But role models closer to home might make a big difference, too. No one can know whether a parent who steals cable is more likely to raise a child who starts cheating in school. But it might be true.

"Kids who have parents who cheat are probably more likely to cheat themselves," says Callahan. "If people in positions of authority or role models are cheating, then I think it sends a signal to young people that cheating is OK."

What Does Cheating Do to Us?

Many people might argue that cheating is a victimless crime. Who's being hurt?

Callahan counters that cheating has a real and corrosive effect on society. Society is premised on people accepting and obeying the rules. Why do we stop at a stoplight on a desolate road in the middle of the night? Or why don't we steal a pack of gum when we know that the cashier isn't looking? Part of it may come from the fear that we're secretly being watched. But another reason is that most of us have agreed to be bound by the rules of our society. Cheating breaks those rules, and the effects can be far-reaching.

"Cheating is harmful because it betrays your responsibility to the community," says McCabe. "It can make community standards fall apart."

Imagine being treated by a doctor who never took an exam in medical school without a cheat sheet? Or

finding out that your home team only won because they had the most effective doping regimen? We all rely on the fact that people -- like doctors and athletes -- are what they seem, that they're qualified and have earned their position.

Although there's little firm evidence, some experts think that cheating in one part of your life may lead to cheating in others. "People who cut corners early in life -- such as cheating a lot in school -- may bring that habit to the workplace," says Callahan.

Cheating also forces you to lie to yourself. Callahan says that many cheaters develop rationalizations for why they cheat.

We say we lie on our taxes because we think tax rates are too high. We say we're cheating in school not because we couldn't do the assignment on our own but because it's much faster to copy. We say we have an illegal cable hook-up because we're protesting the monopoly of the local cable company. The more excuses you need to justify your behavior, the more compromised your ethical compass. You may ultimately wind up feeling like a fraud, unworthy of the things you have.

Being a Chump

Obviously, cheating will never go away. In his book, *The Cheating Culture*, Callahan discusses the frequent cheating that went on during the Olympic Games in ancient Greece 2,500 years ago. So if this summer's Olympics spotlight a new crop of cheating athletes, they'll be part of an ignoble but ancient Olympic tradition.

Combating systemic cheating in our society requires some dramatic changes, experts say. McCabe strongly suggests that colleges adopt formal honor codes in order to fight cheating in school. Callahan argues that we need to create a more equitable society where the opportunities for the rich and the poor are not so starkly different.

On an individual level, McCabe argues that you should examine your own actions. Remember that there are more important things than getting ahead or having a perfect GPA.

"If you get a B while everyone else got an A because they were cheating, that's a good B to have," says McCabe.

Callahan agrees that we need to put less stress on individual achievements and relax a little. "Parents can recognize that life is not a linear set of accomplishments," says Callahan. "People can find their way, and a kid doesn't need to jump through every hoop perfectly in order to lead a secure life."

Many people feel pushed into cheating because everyone else is doing it -- they don't want to be the lone chump who does things honestly. But if you're in that position, Callahan has some interesting advice: Take a stand and be a chump. You may feel better about yourself if you do.

Published Aug. 4, 2004.

SOURCES: D. Callahan, *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead*, Harcourt, 2004. David Callahan, author, *The Cheating Culture*; co-founder and director of research, Demos, New York. Donald McCabe, PhD, professor of management and global business, Rutgers Business School, Newark, N.J.; founding president, Center for Academic Integrity. Charles Yesalis, MPH, ScD, professor of health and human development, Pennsylvania State University.

© 2004 WebMD Inc. All rights reserved.