

5-2014

# Benefits to Adolescents Who Perform Community Service: A Perspective from Adolescent Health Researchers

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## Recommended Citation

Hopkins, Gary; McBride, Duane C.; Featherston, Brent C.; Gleason, Peter C.; and Moreno, Jacqueline, "Benefits to Adolescents Who Perform Community Service: A Perspective from Adolescent Health Researchers" (2014). *Faculty Publications*. 19.

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# Benefits to adolescents who perform community service:

## *A perspective from adolescent health researchers*

Gary Hopkins, Duane C. McBride, Brent C. Featherston,  
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### INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Sentencing individuals to community service in the modern legal environment began in 1966 in Alameda County, California. Judges there began imposing work assignments as an alternative to jail for offenders who could not pay traffic fines. Eventually they extended use of the sanction to other low-level non-violent offenders as well.<sup>1</sup>

The practice spread across the America by the late 1970s, as the federal Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) provided funding to encourage it. LEAA concluded that incarceration for many non-violent offenders may increase recidivism by placing low level offenders in prisons with violent career criminals and further that formal conviction and incarceration severely limited future economic activities.<sup>2</sup> As Anderson noted:

“Sentencing offenders to unpaid labor inspired some judges’ creativity as they combined community service with jail or a fine or both. Offenders did low-level maintenance work for public agencies--clearing litter from playgrounds, sweeping up around public buildings or housing projects, cutting grass and raking leaves in parks, washing cars in an agency motor pool. Others did clerical work or answered phones. Thousands more were sent off to help out at hospitals, nursing homes, social service centers, and other nonprofit organizations.”<sup>1</sup>

Experimental studies have shown that community service as a part of a restitution rather than incarceration approach relates to lower rates of recidivism.<sup>3</sup>

Organized community service in the primary and secondary educational system began in the early 1970’s with the introduction of what is referred today as *service learning*. Much earlier, educator Arthur Dunn promoted community service in the community as a part of his civics class in Indianapolis around 1900<sup>4</sup> and eventually the act of service was combined with a curriculum to form service learning.

Defined, service learning “is a process of involving students in community service activities combined with facilitated means for applying the experience to their academic and personal development. It is a form of experiential education aimed at enhancing and enriching student learning in course material. When compared to other forms of experiential learning like internships and cooperative education, it is similar in that it is student-centered, hands-on and directly applicable to the curriculum.”<sup>5</sup> An example of service learning might be to take grade school students to a nursing home to visit elderly people. During the visit students might find that residents of the nursing home were born in the 1920’s. In order to make this a service learning experience and not simply community service (which in itself is valuable) the student would go back to school and learn who the presidents were in the 1920’s and what cars looked like in the 1920’s in order to link the visitation experience with the elderly to their school curriculum.

In the arenas of health, social scientists have learned over the past two decades that engagement in community service among adolescents often result in valuable outcomes. In other words, the persons being served are not the only ones benefiting from the experience, the providers of the service benefit as well.

The purpose of this paper is to share with the legal community some of what we as social science researchers have learned from our research and also learned from the research of others in both health and education regarding benefits of community service among adolescents. We also will share with the readers what we have learned about structuring a successful community service and/or service learning program or process.

### **BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE TO THE PROVIDER OF THE SERVICE; COMMUNITY SERVICE, RISKY SEXUAL BEHAVIOR AND TEEN PREGNANCY**

Researchers have exhaustively examined evaluations of teen pregnancy programs and reported what they refer to as “best practices.” Examining best practices in preventing teen pregnancy lists often reveal very similar findings. One item emerges over and over again and this is that youngsters who engage in

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service learning/community service are less likely to be involved in a teen pregnancy.<sup>6</sup> The statement regarding this item from our reference states, “service learning connects meaningful community service with academic learning, civic responsibility, and personal growth. It enables young people to study community issues in-depth, plan and initiate community action, and make a difference in their community.”<sup>6</sup>

The issues related to sexual behavior among the young are extensive. Risky sexual behaviors primarily include unprotected sex, multiple partners, and unfamiliarity with partners.<sup>7</sup> The United States has one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy among developed countries.<sup>8</sup> The number of births to mothers aged 15-19 years was 41.5 per 1,000 women in this age group According to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report from 2009.<sup>9</sup>

It has been estimated that the cost of teen pregnancy is \$9 billion per year in the United States.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the huge societal cost of teen pregnancy in the USA, teen pregnancy may also be a marker of sexual behavior that increases the risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections, such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).<sup>10</sup> The CDC<sup>11</sup> reported that the total number of new HIV cases decreased from 2001 to 2005; however, there was increase in new cases for people aged 15-29 years.

In 1997, an article<sup>10</sup> was published which described the impact of the Teen Outreach program, which focused on reducing teen pregnancy as well as reducing academic failure. The study investigated the impact of the program on 342 students in grade 9-12 and compared the participants to a control group who did not participate in the program. Teen Outreach consisted of three elements: 20 hours of supervised community service, classroom-based discussions of the students’ service experiences, and classroom-based discussions and activities that were related to the social-developmental tasks of adolescents.<sup>10</sup> The community service component allowed for the students to select their own supervised site within the community, and the students worked in settings such as hospitals and nursing homes, and also worked as tutors, participated in walk-a-thons, and other activities. The classroom component included discussions, role plays and guest speakers, and engaged the students regarding their experiences. Topics and themes were self-confidence, social skills, and self-discipline, values, how to deal with family stress, development and the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

In the Teen Outreach study, participants in the program had less than half the risk (42%) of school suspension compared to the control group, and course failure was only 39% as large as the control group.<sup>10</sup> Teen pregnancy was only 41% as large in the Teen Outreach group. Each of these results was statistically significantly, even after adjusting for sociodemographics and baseline levels of these behaviors, and potential biases in self-reporting.<sup>10</sup>

Another study of importance to service-learning as a preventive method for risky sexual behavior was a retrospective study of over 9,000 adult women in the San Diego area was conducted in the early 1990s.<sup>12</sup> This study analyzed for Adverse

Childhood Experiences (ACE) score (emotional, physical, or sexual abuse; exposure to domestic violence, substance abusing, mentally ill or criminal household member; or separated/divorced parent) among patients and sought to explain characteristics in individuals who were once pregnant as teens. The study suggested that engagement in early, unprotected sex leading to adolescent pregnancy may be indicative of an attempt for interpersonal connectedness and support that may have been missing in childhood among these women.<sup>12</sup> The investigators suggested that youth development programs focused on building competence and confidence through relationships with peers and mentors, promoting education, enhancing decision-making and autonomy and offering community service opportunities for at-risk youth who may be exposed to these “ACE” characteristics.<sup>12</sup>

Doug Kirby<sup>13-16</sup> is at the forefront of reviewing programs for effectiveness in delaying the initiation of sexual activity and identifying features related to successful and unsuccessful interventions. He reports that service learning programs among young people are effective in reducing adolescent unprotected sex, pregnancy and childbearing.

Other researchers confirm Kirby’s findings. Melchior evaluated the Learn and Serve programs throughout the United States.<sup>17</sup> Students in these programs spent an average of 77 hours providing various community services. Pregnancy rates among participants during the year in which they participated were lower than among non-participants.

O’Donnell and colleagues evaluated the Reach for Health community youth service learning program. Student participants in the service learning program delayed initiation of sexual intercourse, reduced the frequency of sexual intercourse, increased condom use and increased the use of contraception. Those with suicidal thoughts were more likely to talk to an adult than were nonparticipants.<sup>18</sup>

Although it is not clear why service learning has such positive effects, Kirby speculates that it may be because participants develop sustained relationships with program facilitators, which may encourage resilience or an enhanced feelings of competency and greater autonomy, along with the positive feeling that they are making a difference in the lives of others. Participating in service activities also reduces the opportunity to engage in problem behavior, especially during after-school hours.<sup>15</sup>

Preventing teen pregnancy is an important part of delinquency and crime prevention. In summing a wide variety of research, Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan<sup>19</sup> noted that the children of teen mothers and absent fathers had significant higher odds of using illicit drugs, engaging in delinquent and criminal activity and being in prison. Whatever strengthens the family and reduces teen pregnancy is important for the criminal justice system.

## **COMMUNITY SERVICE, CRIMINAL, SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND OTHER HEALTH RISK BEHAVIORS**

Scales and Benson<sup>20</sup> in their manuscript on social capital and prosocial orientation among youth reported that prosocial orientation was inversely correlated with all risk behavior patterns

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measured in their research including delinquency. Coefficients ranged from low to moderate (-.14 to -.25) between helping others and problem alcohol use, use of illicit drugs, use of tobacco, gambling, anti-social behavior, violence, school problems, and sexual behavior risk. Only for depression/suicide was the correlation negligible, although in the predicted direction.

Eccles and colleagues<sup>21</sup> reported similar findings describing that pro-social activities in their study consisted of community service involvement, school clubs/programs, performing arts, and team sport. Their results indicated that participation in community service in particular was associated with lower rates of underage drinking and illicit drug use. Another study by Klein and colleagues<sup>22</sup> concluded that adolescents involved in community service are likely to show an increase in basic social and decision-making skills and a decrease in violent criminal behavior and risky sexual behavior.

In our<sup>23</sup> analysis of data from Alaska high school students between the ages of 12 through 18 years from the CDC's 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), we found that students who engaged in volunteer activities for at least one hour per week were less likely to have been sexually experienced, been involved in binge drinking, ever used marijuana or ever used prescription drugs that were not prescribed for them by a physician.

## SERVICE LEARNING/COMMUNITY SERVICE AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

One of the benefits of engaging in service by youth is on academic performance. Children and teens who engage in service tend to earn better grades, have more cognitive skills, and are better at decision-making skills and problem-solving.<sup>24</sup> There seems to also be a reciprocal relationship between academic performance and service in that those with better grades tend to also be more involved in service activities.

In a nationally representative study involving more than 4000 high school students, Schmidt and colleagues<sup>24</sup> found that those participating in any type of service improved their academic performance. Students' grades increased by 12% and their civic knowledge increased by 16%. Although 27% of the students performed service as a requirement and the number of hours spent in service varied, the results remained significant. Furthermore, those relating directly with individuals in need had higher grades compared to those who performed other types of services.

A report from the National Service Knowledge Network cites many examples of how service engagement by youth has been related to benefits including higher grades in school.<sup>25</sup> Two of these examples include reports from alternative schools: In Michigan Laird and Black<sup>26</sup> reported that students who participated in Literacy Corps, a service-learning option in one alternative school, scored higher than their nonparticipating peers on the Michigan state assessment and in Kansas Kraft and Wheeler<sup>27</sup> found that alternative school students who participated in service-learning showed strong gains over time on measures of attitude toward school, on writing scores on a six-trait writing assessment, and in grade-point averages. In our analysis

of the previously noted YRBS Alaska data, we found that those who engaged in one hour or more of community service per week they were 50% less likely to earn D's and F's in school if they participated in volunteer activities in their community.

Academic performance is of high interest to the justice system. In a classic meta-analysis, Maguin and Loeber<sup>28</sup> found consistent inverse relationships across studies between academic performance and delinquent behavior. These relationships were stronger for males and whites, but they tended to hold in all groups regardless of socio-economic status. Academic performance is strongly related to future opportunities and a stake in conformity that reduces decisions to violate the law. By possibly improving academic performance, community service programs potentially directly, positively, impact community criminal behavior.

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The information and data presented here demonstrates clearly that the benefits of serving others are not only related to those being served but also to the person(s) providing the service. Research data show that community service can be an effective part of recidivism prevention and a part of broader community delinquency prevention programs. The "how to" part of this according to work by Doug Kirby importantly includes adults who perform these service activities with the service providing youth with structured time for preparation and reflection before, during and after the service.<sup>23</sup>

We suggest that when the courts impose community service activities on young people, (whether this might have application to adults we are not certain) that they engage high quality, caring adults to work with the courts and to engage in the service with the youth. In doing so we suggest the three step process of first meeting with the youngsters and talk about what you are going to do. The second step would then be to go with them to perform the service and lastly to reflect with them and talk about what they did and their feelings about these activities.

We would discourage the courts from sending young people out to do service without the engagement of an adult. We would encourage the court to order the community service be performed between the hours of 3:00 and 6:00 in the afternoon, which are the hours that the highest rates of drug use, sexual behavior and delinquency occur.<sup>29</sup>

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