Where Need Meets Opportunity: Youth Development Programs for Early Teens

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Abstract

Early adolescence is a time of burgeoning independence, autonomy, and focus on peers. It is also a time when individual interests, skills, and preferences become salient to young people. Not surprisingly, out-of-school programs designed to capture the interest of early teens are diverse in focus and varied in structure, ranging from sports teams to drop-in recreation centers, from museum apprenticeships to mentoring relationships between an individual teen and an adult. This article describes the array of various organizations that offer programs and services for youths in their early teens.

It explains the philosophy of positive youth development that has emerged as a unifying theme in this long-standing but newly self-conscious field. Principles of best practice are reviewed, as are five key implementation challenges: increasing participation by youths; expanding access to programs, especially in low-income communities; improving funding; evaluating program effectiveness; and coordination with other youth services. The article closes with a discussion anticipating the new opportunities that accompany the attention and funding now going toward positive youth development programs that enrich the lives of young people through informal learning.
Public/Private Ventures, and the Search Institute (which now encompasses the pioneering Center for Early Adolescence)—have described the developmental needs of youths and have articulated how communities can ensure that their youths have opportunities to be safe, develop competence, and forge positive relationships with adults and peers.

Opinion polls reveal that the public is concerned about the nation’s young people and supports programs that help schools and families provide the guidance that young adolescents need. For example, a 1998 poll revealed that 93% of parents and nonparents support expansion of after-school activities and more than 80% said they would be willing to have tax dollars used for this purpose. Similarly, a wide majority of individuals surveyed recently by Public Agenda expressed worry that American society does not offer enough constructive activities or meaningful roles to its young people, and 60% said they viewed after-school programs as an effective way to help young people.

Parents insist that they want their children involved in constructive and engaging community programs when school is out, as a recent survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education shows. The majority of parents want their children to attend after-school programs, and most believe the programs should focus on educational enrichment, such as computer clubs, arts classes, music courses, and community service.

Young people themselves report similar views about what they want and need from programs during the nonschool hours. In a series of focus groups held near Washington, D.C., young people explained that they want constructive activities to engage their bodies, hearts, and minds during the time they are not in school. They want very much to prepare for their futures. They want safe places to go, grow, learn, work, and “just hang out.” They want structure balanced with choice. They want a voice in determining the programs, services, and opportunities. They want to learn and practice new skills. They want to spend more quality time with caring adults and with other young people. They want to contribute to the work of the larger society. And—yes—they want to have fun.

The harmony between what young people need to grow toward productive adulthood and what they want to do during their free time represents a substantial opportunity for program planners, funders, policymakers, parents, and young people. Building on a study of community-based youth development programs for young adolescents undertaken by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in the early 1990s,
this article describes the diverse array of programs for young teens—from Girl Scouts and Little League to museums and mentoring programs—and it examines the philosophy of positive youth development that increasingly informs program offerings for young people. It also identifies critical issues of program implementation that confront this rapidly growing field, and reviews emerging evaluation findings that suggest the impacts that well-implemented programs can have on the lives and behaviors of participants.

Mapping the Universe of Youth Development Programs

According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics, about 17,000 youth development organizations were active in the United States in 1990. There is no standard definition of a youth development program, as a diverse array of out-of-school activities, programs, and organizations (largely private and voluntary) combine to form the youth development sector. Some programs are affiliated with national youth-serving organizations; others are sponsored by public institutions or agencies, including parks and recreation departments, libraries, schools, and police. Some are operated by private organizations with broad mandates such as religious groups, museums, and civic organizations, while others are run by freestanding grass roots community-based organizations.

Adopting the framework used by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, this article organizes programs by institutional auspices, then looks across programs to identify commonalities and differences that exist independent of auspice. For instance, programs in each category vary in their goals and content (sports, academic enrichment, vocational guidance, or community service). They also vary in structure. Some offer a facility where youths can gather; others link youths to a mentor or troop that can meet anywhere. Some programs focus on a single activity—for example, sports or the arts—while others offer a broad array of choices to youth participants. Many groups that once thought of themselves as providing recreation have come to define their service as "informal education" or youth development. Programmatic substance is at issue, not just semantics. Past recreation programs saw their purpose as providing fun and preventing harm, but today youth development programs are more intentional about teaching young people new knowledge and allowing them to practice useful life skills.

What distinguishes youth development programs from the vast array of ameliorative services is their emphasis on supporting the normal socialization and healthy development of young people. If the entire spectrum of youth services can be thought of as a continuum, youth development services would be at one end and social control or incarceration would be at the other. In between these ends of the continuum would fall primary prevention (of problems such as substance abuse, adolescent pregnancy, juvenile crime, and the like); short-term intervention; and long-term treatment. While some youth development organizations may offer some prevention and intervention programs, their focus is on promoting normal development; providing environments and relationships that nurture and challenge young people; building their competencies; and treating them as resources.

Who Provides Programs for Early Teens?

Youth development programs for early teens are provided by a wide variety of groups, both private and public. The common overarching purpose sketched out in the previous paragraph belies the diversity of auspices and offerings. The following approach is one way of categorizing and analyzing the major providers.

National Youth-Serving Organizations

National youth-serving organizations represent the largest single category of youth development programs for early teens. These long-standing programs are familiar throughout the nation, and include 4-H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCA, YWCA, Girls Incorporated,
Camp Fire, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and Junior Achievement. The National Collaboration for Youth, an interagency council of the nation’s 25 major youth-serving organizations, notes that its member agencies serve more than 30 million young people each year, making this system second only to the public schools in the number of youths served annually. Indeed, nearly 50% of eighth graders in the nationally representative sample surveyed by the U.S. Department of Education reported participation in programs sponsored by one of these groups. Most of these agencies serve youths in the age range from 5 to 18, with much of their membership clustering around the early adolescent years.

The programs offered by national youth-serving organizations share a number of common features. For instance, most hold a commitment to promoting prosocial values and building a variety of life skills (such as leadership, problem solving, and decision making), and most rely on small groups and trained leaders, both paid and volunteer, for program delivery. Most adopt a pedagogy that involves hands-on education, cooperative learning, and age-appropriate programming strategies.

Key differences also separate the programs provided by the national groups. For instance, some organizations (Y's, Boys and Girls Clubs, Girls Incorporated centers) run programs in their own facilities, while others (Scouts, Camp Fire, 4-H) operate through troops or groups that can meet in schools, churches and synagogues, community centers, even private homes. The structure of the Big Brothers/Big Sisters and other mentoring programs is a professionally supervised one-to-one match between an adult volunteer and a young person.

The troop and mentoring programs rely primarily on volunteers who work directly with young people. In contrast, the facility-based programs more often use paid staff, supplemented by volunteers, to deliver the majority of their services. Programs organized around troops tend to meet once a week for one or two hours, while facility-based organizations usually offer programming for 20 to 40 hours per week, although not all youths participate in the full array of offerings at these sites. Mentors and youths often determine themselves how often and how long to get together, as long as a minimal level of contact is maintained.

Some organizations offer a comprehensive array of youth development programs designed to address the needs of the “whole child,” while others emphasize specific kinds of knowledge and skills. For example, the traditional Junior Achievement program teaches entrepreneurship skills as small groups of young people work with adult volunteer leaders from the corporate community to design and implement their own small businesses. In contrast, the core program of Girls Incorporated encompasses six areas: careers and life planning, health and sexuality, leadership and community action, sports and adventure, self-reliance and life skills, and culture and heritage.

National youth organizations also vary in the amount of autonomy offered to local affiliates to shape program content. At one end of this continuum (the “top-down” approach) are the scouting organizations, which provide a well-developed national program with handbooks, uniforms, badges, and management guidelines. Using the “bottom-up” approach are the YMCA and YWCA, which provide few nationally developed programs and encourage local variation in service offerings. Other options balance national guidance with local autonomy. For example, the national offices of both Boys and Girls Clubs and Girls Incorporated develop core programs, which they encourage affiliates to adopt by offering training, recognition, and incentives that may include pass-through funds.

The demographic profile of youth participants, in terms of socioeconomic status, and racial and ethnic background, differs markedly among these organizations. For example, Boys and Girls Clubs and Girls Incorporated serve high percentages of low-

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income and minority youths, while the scouting organizations tend to underserve these groups. Surprisingly, some organizations have not determined the demographics of their current service populations—at least on the national level.

**Programs Sponsored by Public Agencies**

The division between private and public is not clear cut in the youth development sector. Although the major national youth organizations (with the exception of 4-H) are private, nonprofit organizations, many receive public dollars through federal, state, and local funding streams. Nonetheless, it is useful to consider public-sector sponsorship as distinct from private sponsorship and separate from the public funding provided to privately organized programs. Two public-sector institutions stand out as offering substantial youth development programming for young adolescents—public libraries, and parks or recreation systems.

Young people represent at least half of all public library users, who turn to libraries not only for their books but also because they provide safe havens in troubled neighborhoods.

Like public libraries, parks and recreation services exist in nearly every locale, providing facilities (community centers, parks, pools, athletic fields, golf courses, playgrounds, tennis courts, outdoor nature centers) as well as programs (teams, leagues, sports instruction, arts and crafts, games, dance, drama, social recreation, special events). Although they are open to the entire community, these services are frequented primarily by children and youths. Over the past two decades, however, public funding for parks and recreation services has been cut dramatically—despite government reports noting the benefits of youth participation in community recreation programs. At the same time, other parks and recreation departments have expanded services for youths in innovative ways. An excellent example is the Chicago Parks Department, which identified a community need for after-school programs and then established 40 new programs serving 4,500 children annually. In Arizona, the Phoenix Parks, Recreation, and Library Department provides ongoing sports and recreation activities, and actively involves young adolescents in planning its City Streets program, with teen rap sessions, career and health fairs, teen councils, drug education, dance programs, modeling, cooking, Nintendo tournaments, DJ lessons, talent shows, fashion shows, and teen festivals. The Parks and Recreation Department in Portland, Oregon, plays a lead role in that city’s youth development infrastructure, working to ensure that all young people have access to constructive out-of-school activities. Foundations are participating in new public-private partnerships in Detroit and San Francisco that seek to rebuild municipal...
youth sports and recreation programs. In all of these instances, strong leadership at the municipal level, in the mayor’s office, and in the recreation department itself has played an important role.

**Youth Sports Organizations**

Sports organizations and sports programs are popular with young people, whether they are affiliated with national organizations such as the American Youth Soccer Organization or the Little League, or run in a more informal way by local parks departments or community organizations. The 1988 national study of eighth graders mentioned earlier indicated that about 45% of boys and 30% of girls participate in out-of-school team sports, many participating in more than one sport. In general, sports activities are coached by volunteer leaders with little training in either their specific sport or in principles of youth development.

The popularity of sports among American youths suggests that such programs have untapped potential to promote positive youth development and to engage even greater numbers of young adolescents. A national study conducted in 1989 revealed that youth participation in sports programs peaks at age 10 and declines steadily throughout adolescence. Both boys and girls reported that their motivation to participate in sports was to have fun, learn skills, become fit, and compete. In explaining why they dropped out of programs, they usually stated that they were no longer having fun or had lost interest. Many youths indicated they would return if improvements were made in coaching, scheduling, organization, and programming.

**Broad-Based Private Organizations**

When the French social commentator Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the early 1800s, he made the observation that “Americans of all ages, all conditions and all dispositions constantly form associations.” Although some observers lament the apparent decline in this propensity, America still offers a dazzling array of organizations, associations, clubs, and social communities, many of which provide programs and services for young people. Included in this category are religious organizations, adult service clubs, such as Rotary or Kiwanis; intergenerational programs offered by various sponsors; and private or quasi-private community institutions, including museums.

Religious youth programs attract the partici-
pation of one-third to one-half of American youths, according to the results of surveys. Specific estimates vary because, with few exceptions, religious youth programs are uncertain about the numbers of youths they serve. Religious youth leaders report noticeably higher participation among 10- to 15-year-olds than among older teens, estimating that 50% to 75% of youth members are under the age of 15. Age-related rites of passage, such as Confirmation and Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, play an important role in maintaining young adolescents' interest in religious participation. Patterns of participation differ across religious denominations, reflecting in part the varying financial support and leadership emphasis given to work with youths.18

Regardless of denominational auspice, however, religious youth organizations generally seek to foster moral development and promote young people's social and emotional growth. About 80% of the programs are led by adult volunteers and usually offer a mix of small groups of same-age peers, formal instruction, worship services that may be conducted by young people, special events such as retreats and camps, youth leadership councils, and community service projects.18

Programs that are designed to foster youth development build on the strengths of young people, recognizing their need for both ongoing support and challenging opportunities.

America's vast network of adult service clubs—including the Association of Junior Leagues, Kiwanis, Rotary, and adult fraternities and sororities—support programs for young people. Some sponsor "junior" chapters of the adult groups—for example, the Interact Clubs of Rotary International, the Squires program of the Knights of Columbus, the Key and Builders Clubs of Kiwanis International. Others develop structured national programs that bring their adult members into regular contact with teenagers, such as the Teen Outreach Program developed by the Association of Junior Leagues. Still others support local youth groups financially, by sponsoring sports teams or college scholarships, by providing equipment or recognition awards, or by holding career fairs or other events.19

Adults' concerns about young people are beginning to be addressed in a structured way through intergenerational programs sponsored by such well-known groups as the American Association of Retired Persons and by newer groups like Civic Ventures. These programs link youths with older adults in one-to-one and small-group relationships, often with an educational focus. Proponents of this concept have made eloquent written policy arguments about the need for such programs and about ways to expand them.20 For instance, the Experience Corps recruits and trains older adults to work with young people in elementary school literacy programs and in out-of-school settings such as youth organizations and public libraries. Explicitly tied to the Corporation for National Service, this innovation stands a good chance of becoming widespread if its pilot phase proves to be successful.

Museums represent an important sector of the informal education community, providing an avenue for many young people to learn firsthand about art, history, science, and diverse cultures. Although museums have traditionally attracted young people through occasional school field trips and fee-for-service courses, some museums have now initiated programs built on principles of best youth work practice. One example is YouthALIVE! (Youth Achievement through Learning, Involvement, Volunteering, and Employment), coordinated by the Association of Science-Technology Centers in cooperation with the Association of Youth Museums. Since 1991, this national program has helped some 60 local youth museums and science centers offer young adolescents intensive hands-on educational enrichment and work-based learning. During the program's first three years of implementation, more than two-thirds of the participants in YouthALIVE! were African American and more than half were girls (two groups who are often underrepresented in other museum programs).21
Independent Youth Organizations

Grass roots youth organizations play an important role in many American communities, although they have seldom been counted or studied explicitly. An exploratory study of independent youth organizations conducted in 1991 by the Carnegie Council concluded that these groups did a particularly good job of reaching low-income adolescents. More than half of the programs studied defined their primary role as enhancing youth development. With fragile funding, individual programs often focus on a limited number of services. As a group, however, grass roots youth organizations offer a wide array of services that may include life-skills training, substance-abuse education, counseling, crisis intervention, community service, academic tutoring, communications skills, peer counseling, sex education, job readiness and career awareness, health education, physical fitness and sports, arts programs, and safe havens. While these youth groups are hard to categorize and highly idiosyncratic, they are potentially powerful resources that can contribute to the healthy development of young people, especially those living in high-risk environments.

Best Practices in Positive Youth Development

Social-science theory and research findings have identified the basic developmental needs that all young adolescents strive to meet as they grow and mature. (See the article by Eccles in this journal issue.) A healthy transition to adulthood results from a complex process throughout childhood and adolescence. Current theory suggests that young adolescents need opportunities for physical activity, development of competence and achievement, self-definition, creative expression, positive social interaction with peers and adults, a sense of structure and clear limits, and meaningful participation in authentic work. Experts and intermediary organizations active in the youth-serving field have translated these insights into a conceptualization of positive youth development, from which practical guidance for program leaders and staff can be derived.

Positive youth development refers to an ongoing growth process in which all youths endeavor to meet their basic needs for safety, caring relationships, and connections to the larger community while striving to build academic, vocational, personal, and social skills. Programs that are designed to foster youth development build on the strengths of young people, recognizing their need for both ongoing support and challenging opportunities. They stand in contrast to programs that attempt to “fix” young people by addressing particular problem behaviors such as school dropout, early pregnancy, or substance abuse. Youth development programs may seek to prevent problems, but by their nature they have a broader focus, recognizing that—in the words of one leader—problem-free is not fully prepared.

Youth development experts have increasingly paid attention to the ways in which the community environment can protect young people against negative choices and support their healthy development in such areas as educational success, interpersonal strength,
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A community assessment is likely to focus the attention of local leaders on the availability and quality of programs that support youth development. But do existing programs indeed offer positive experiences to youths? Two recent studies have confirmed that good youth development programs operate in ways that are consistent with solid developmental theory. Public/Private Ventures examined participation patterns and program delivery in 15 local organizations that were affiliated with national youth programs—Boys and Girls Clubs, Girls Incorporated, and the YMCA. In each case, five local programs were chosen for analysis because they were well implemented and applied a youth development philosophy to their work. Overall, although the assessment did not examine youth outcomes directly, the researchers concluded that these facility-based programs offered activities that were attractive to young people, fostered their healthy development, and elicited participation at a level significant enough to make a positive difference in the lives of many youths.

Another study of community youth programs used ethnographic methods to learn more about those programs which, according to local youths, provided the most effective and comfortable learning environments. The study was carried out in 30 regions of the United States and involved more than 120 local organizations that worked with more than 30,000 young people over the past decade. Some were nationally affiliated groups such as Y’s and Boys and Girls Clubs; others were grass roots groups. The programming in these organizations tended to focus on community service, athletics linked to academics, or the arts. As participant-observers, the researchers studied the organizations that were popular with young people and identified principles of best youth work practice. They discovered that within these particular programs, youths (1) were offered rich learning experiences, (2) relished their active engagement in problem solving and decision making, (3) were treated as resources and felt needed, and (4) found opportunities to develop positive relationships with adults and peers.

Principles of best practice provide general guidelines rather than a specific blueprint for program design. But these principles, in combination with solid program examples, can help practitioners move from idea to action. Good program models abound, but several issues seem to stand in the way of widespread implementation. The next section will examine several of these challenges.

Issues in Program Implementation

Even the most sophisticated program planners face real challenges in their efforts to develop or expand effective programs for young adolescents. These include making programs attractive and relevant to the target audience (participation issues), increasing access for youths in low-income communities, securing adequate financial resources, developing realistic ways to measure effectiveness, and coordinating efforts with other youth-supportive services, including schools.

Issue 1: Participation

Participation in youth development programs (religious youth programs, sports...
programs, Scouts, Ys, 4-H, Camp Fire, and others) tends to drop off during early adolescence. The explanation for this phenomenon is probably multifaceted. Existing programs may not meet the developmental needs or interests of young teens; adolescents have more choice than younger children about how to spend their free time; and adult leaders may be more comfortable with younger children and so develop programs more suited to their interests.

Despite the well-documented trend of declining participation among early adolescents, some organizations have developed successful approaches for attracting and retaining young teens in their programs. These approaches were distilled by the Carnegie study into “principles of best practice” for youth development programs serving young adolescents. (See Box 2.) When young people describe what they like best about participating in out-of-school youth activities, they often cite “fun and friends” and “voice and choice.” These ideas are reflected in the principles of best practice drawn from effective real-world programs.

Several other factors—including income, gender, and race—influence who joins youth development programs. (See Figure 1.) The national survey of eighth graders in 1988 mentioned earlier revealed that boys and girls were equally likely to participate in organized out-of-school activities (71% and 72% participated in at least one activity), although they joined different activities. Figure 1 also shows that white eighth graders were more likely than young teens of color to be involved in out-of-school activities. The most striking difference separates low-income youths from their more affluent counterparts. In 1988, some 40% of eighth graders in the lowest-income quartile did not participate in any organized activity, while only 17% of the youths in the highest-income group were not involved.

In-depth studies of specific communities reveal that low-income neighborhoods, both urban and rural, are the least likely to offer consistent support and a wide array of developmental opportunities to adolescents. One study of community resources available for youths ages 11 to 14 contrasted a low-income, African-American neighborhood in Chicago with an affluent, primarily white suburb. The suburban community offered three times as many services as the inner-city community. It provided a rich array of choices that emphasized educational enrichment, while the inner-city programs focused on academic remediation and personal support. Public agencies were a more significant resource in the suburban community than at the inner-city site. Public middle schools offered nearly seven times as many extracurricular activities per week, and public park districts provided eight times the number of activities during an average week. On the other hand, churches played a larger role in the inner-city neighborhood.

Unequal access to programs and supportive institutions is no doubt a key factor explaining the different participation rates by youths in low-income and in affluent families.

**Issue 2: Access**

As the previous discussion hinted, the issue of participation is closely related to that of access. Major barriers to participation that especially affect youths living in low-income areas include transportation, location of services (which includes safety considerations), and whether or not there are fees for services or for required items like uniforms. More subtle access issues—especially for young adolescents, who have radar about such matters—is whether or not they will be made to feel welcome at the organization or program. Issues of race and gender as well as physical ability/disability influence young people’s perceptions of access and decisions about participation. The principles of best practice presented in Box 2 suggest that programs address these challenges by thoughtful planning and concerted outreach. To extend their reach to underserved youths, programs take their services to the neighborhoods where low-income youths live or attend school. They recruit, train, and support diverse staff and volunteers who are skilled at working with low-income populations.
Best Practices in Community Programs for Young Adolescents

Regardless of their content and approach, programs that respond to the needs and interests of young adolescents follow certain principles of best practices. Responsive community programs for young adolescents should:

1. Tailor their content and processes to the needs and interests of young adolescents. Good programs listen carefully to the voices of young people at the planning stage and provide active, meaningful roles for youths throughout implementation.

2. Recognize, value, and respond to the diverse backgrounds and experiences that exist among young adolescents in contemporary America. Good programs are sensitive to the differences among young adolescents, particularly those based on race, ethnicity, family income, gender, and sexual orientation.

3. Work collectively as well as individually to extend their reach to underserved adolescents. Good programs work to increase the access of young people living in low-income areas to supportive community programs, keeping youth needs rather than organizational concerns at the center of their outreach efforts.

4. Actively compete for young people's time and attention. Good programs assess their competition (everything from television to youth gangs), and find ways to make their programs more attractive than passive or antisocial pursuits.

5. Strengthen the quality and diversity of their adult leadership. Good programs recruit carefully and invest in staff (and volunteer) development as a regular cost of doing business, recognizing that the quality of adult leadership is critical to program success.

6. Reach out to families, schools, and other community partners in youth development. Good programs strive to maintain solid working relationships with parents and other community institutions, on behalf of young people.

7. Enhance the role of young people as community resources. Good programs encourage young people to play meaningful leadership roles within their organization. They work actively to ensure that teenagers have opportunities to contribute their talents to the larger community.

8. Serve as vigorous advocates for and with youths. Good programs consider advocacy with and on behalf of youths a part of their work, to ensure that the best interests of children and youths are not ignored in decision-making forums.

9. Specify and evaluate their intended outcomes. Good programs are clear about the results they are trying to achieve, and they develop reliable documentation systems and realistic assessment measures.

10. Establish solid organizational structures, including energetic and committed board leadership. Good programs are generally found in well-governed and well-managed organizations that are stable enough to maintain continuity of relationships for young people at this critical juncture in their lives.

Providing outreach to low-income youths has financial implications, however, and funding is another of the key ongoing issues faced by youth organizations of all types.

**Issue 3: Funding**

While little systematic research exists about funding patterns of youth organizations, it is clear that in this country, the financing of youth development programs suggests they are viewed as "nice but not necessary." The organizations report that their boards and staffs spend inordinate amounts of time and other organizational resources generating enough financial backing to do their work. In general, it is fair to say that four words characterize the funding of youth development programs in American society: diversity, instability, inadequacy, and inequity.32

**Diversity**

As might be expected, different funding patterns exist for the different types of youth organizations. The traditional youth-serving organizations tend to receive most of their support through private sources. Local United Ways are, and have long been,
core supporters of youth-serving organizations across the country, although United Way support to most agencies has decreased in recent years—owing to increased local competition for the approximately $3 billion collected and distributed by 1,300 United Way affiliates nationwide. Some organizations, such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, receive substantial revenues from participants through membership dues and uniform sales, as well as income earned from the public (mainly through cookie sales).

While the scouting organizations receive little government support, other national youth groups have recently increased their ability to generate public dollars. For example, in 1996, Boys and Girls Clubs of America received more than $10.3 million in government grants and contracts, up from $4.7 million in the previous year. The 4-H system receives substantial public support through county, state, and federal sources (for example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture). By partnering with their local public schools, youth development programs may be able to expand their work in low-income communities through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, a new initiative of the U.S. Department of Education. This program was funded at $40 million in 1998 and at $200 million in 1999, and may be further expanded in subsequent years. (See the article by Dryfoos in this journal issue.)

Federal grants to other youth organizations have supported substance-abuse prevention, pregnancy prevention, juvenile justice, and informal science education programs. According to a 1997 report issued by the General Accounting Office, 15 federal agencies and departments administer 28 different programs for at-risk and delinquent youths, totaling more than $4 billion annually. However, this report did not distinguish between youth development and other kinds of services (primary prevention, short-term intervention, long-term intervention, and social control/incarceration), so it is difficult to know how much of this money is directed toward the youth development end and the primary prevention end of the youth services continuum. Funds from the U.S. Justice Department and the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention have recently supported youth mentoring, safe havens, youth clubs, and youth recreation programs, although the bulk of justice and substance-abuse expenditures continue to be allocated to treatment and control. (See the commentary by Barnes-O'Connor in this journal issue.)

Over the past 5 to 10 years, national and community foundations have become an increasingly important source of program dollars for youth development organizations. For example, the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund is investing in the professional development of staff at youth-serving organizations both nationally and locally, supporting the adaptation of four promising models of community schools, and encouraging the expansion of youth development programs in youth and science museums and public libraries. Several national foundations have formed a Youth Development Funders Network to share grantmaking lessons and plan strategies for strengthening the youth work field.

Since the early 1990s, the Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth has encouraged local community foundations (of which there are now some 400) to expand their purview to include youth development. More than 100 member foundations in the Coalition now work to provide direct financial support for youth development in their communities and play larger roles in planning, convening, coordinating, and advocating. Other foundations are focusing on specific communities: The Soros Foundation recently launched a $25 million five-year effort to strengthen and expand after-school programs in New York City; the Charles Hayden Foundation supports youth development work in New York and Boston; the Skillman and Haas foundations are mounting new citywide efforts in Detroit and San Francisco to expand youth recreation programs; and Kauffman and
Lilly are concentrating on youth development efforts in Kansas City and Indianapolis, respectively.

Although diversity of funding sources is generally considered a strength, for individual agencies the picture is often more a crazy quilt than the multilegged stool recommended by experts. For example, one New York City youth agency reportedly has 110 funding sources—most with different application forms and reporting requirements. So, while funders’ increased attention to youth development is a positive trend, the lack of coordination and coherence represented in this diversity remains a challenge for individual organizations and for the field as a whole.

**Instability**

Although the funding picture for youth organizations has improved over the past decade, the field continues to struggle with an unstable funding base. Unlike public schools or the child welfare system, the youth development field has no major permanent public funding streams, and is therefore at risk when there are changes in political winds or administrations. (See the commentary by Walker in this journal issue.) Much of the public support for youth organizations comes through “discretionary” grants programs, which are particularly susceptible to political shifts. This issue surfaced dramatically in the 1980s, when youth organizations were forced to adjust to precipitous cutbacks in public funding for human services, generally. Between Fiscal Years 1982 and 1989, private giving offset only 46% of the cumulative reductions in federal spending in areas of interest to nonprofit organizations. This seismic shift in public support has caused many youth organizations to diversify their funding sources, compete harder for available grant dollars, increase efforts to solicit contributions from individuals and corporations, and develop strategies for earning income.

**Inadequacy**

Despite recent increases in sources of support, youth development organizations have to compete with one another for their own slice of a relatively small funding pie. Some observers attribute this problem to the lack of major public support for youth development or “primary” services. Unlike many other developed countries, the United States tends to invest in youth programs (other than public education) only when young people have veered significantly off course. Public expenditures underwrite group homes for juvenile offenders rather than programs to provide young people with constructive alternatives—despite mounting evidence that juvenile crime escalates in the nonschool hours. One scholar of international youth policy noted that, in the United States, it is easier to obtain a million dollars to study juvenile purse-snatching than a thousand dollars to study youth theater or dance groups. In contrast, the United Kingdom provides public support for youth development programs through the British Youth Service and the National Youth Agency. Similarly, Norway and Sweden have national policies that encourage young people to become involved in nonschool youth development programs and that provide regular financial support for such programs.
However, the past few years have seen the emergence of unprecedented coalitions in the United States that may result in new public investment strategies. For example, an organization called Fight Crime: Invest in Kids is bringing police chiefs and prosecutors together with traditional youth service providers to advocate for increased public spending on youth development programs.

**Inequity**

Current funding patterns in the United States contribute to the inequities of service delivery. Because local programs tend to be supported primarily by local funding sources, poor communities are less likely to be able to provide adequate youth development programs than are more affluent areas. Reliance on fees for service also means that youths from poor families are not able to participate in some of the nation's best-known programs.39

A 1990 study found that only 25% of grass roots youth development organizations operate with annual budgets of more than $25,000. Meanwhile, a number of the national youth development programs receive widespread philanthropic and charitable support—in some instances, more than they can actually use. For example, the national Boy Scouts of America organization has generated annual surpluses for several years in a row and now reports assets of more than $250 million. Similarly, Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. in 1995 reported $133 million in assets and an annual surplus of national revenues over expenses of $5.4 million.

By contrast, grass roots community-based youth programs are often fragile and highly "local" in both their purview and funding base. A 1990 study found that only 25% of grass roots youth development organizations operate with annual budgets of more than $25,000.22 Such small groups are likely to be run primarily by volunteers, and both the services they offer and the numbers of young people they serve are limited by what has been called "insufficient funds and bare-bones staffing."24

However, most youth development leaders now realize that in today's climate of accountability and management for results, such anecdotal evidence is of limited value. Instead, there is a push to establish hard evidence about program effectiveness. Outcome evaluations cluster around two types of programs: those that seek to prevent or reduce such problem behaviors as substance abuse and adolescent pregnancy; and those that promote normal socialization and positive development. Initiatives that seek to prevent or reduce specific risk behaviors are often called "categorical" programs (and are supported through "categorical" funding). In many youth agencies, however, programs designed to promote normal socialization and positive development are thought of as the "core" program. The categorical and core programs are sometimes combined in a single organization, as is illustrated below.

In summary, although financial support for youth development programs has expanded in recent years, challenges remain. The crucial ones are bringing coherence and stability to funding sources, ensuring that the total investment is adequate to the task, and developing mechanisms to channel more financial resources to the places they are needed most—low-income communities.

**Issue 4: Program Effectiveness**

Despite the extensive reach of youth development programs and the potential they have for promoting positive youth development, little systematic analysis of their effectiveness has been conducted. For years, youth organizations have relied on soft evidence of their effectiveness, including testimonials and self-reports by participants and their parents. For instance, a 1987 survey of alumni of 4-H and other youth groups found that alumni believed participation in the program had contributed to their personal development by giving them pride of accomplishment, self-confidence, the ability to work with others, the ability to set goals and to communicate, employment and leadership skills, and opportunities for community service.40

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Effectiveness of Programs Targeting Specific Problems

Several studies have shown that participation in targeted prevention programs can reduce high-risk behaviors among teenagers. For example, in four consecutive annual evaluations, participants in the Teen Outreach Program sponsored by the Association of Junior Leagues International were shown to be less likely than their nonparticipant peers to have experienced either pregnancy or school failure.41

An experimental evaluation of Girls Incorporated’s Friendly PEERsuasion substance-abuse prevention program for young adolescents showed that the program reduced the incidence of drinking among participants who had not previously used alcohol. The program also led girls to leave situations where friends were using harmful substances and to disengage from peers who smoked or took drugs.42 Another targeted intervention developed by Girls Incorporated, the Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy Program, also showed positive results. A three-year study involving 750 young women (ages 12 to 17) indicated that participation in all four components of the program was associated with lower overall rates of pregnancy. Participation in individual components—such as assertiveness training or parent-daughter communication about sexuality—led to more specific pregnancy-reduction effects.43

Finally, an outside evaluation of a dropout prevention program operated by WAVE, Inc. showed that participation was associated with improved school attendance, lower dropout rates, and improved scores in work readiness, math, reading, and self-esteem.44

Effectiveness of Basic, Positive Youth Development Programs

Though the biggest gap in the youth development field is evaluation of the basic or core services of youth development organizations, three studies have addressed this issue.

The earliest of the three studies was an evaluation of Boys and Girls Clubs that began as an assessment of the effectiveness of its SMART Moves (substance-abuse prevention) program. The evaluation matched five Clubs located in public housing settings that had implemented this targeted intervention with two control sites in each case: one public housing site with a Boys and Girls Club that did not offer SMART Moves and one public housing site that did not have a Club at all. The evaluators found that although few differences in impact emerged between the Clubs that did or did not offer the SMART Moves program, larger differences separated housing projects that had Clubs from projects that did not have one. Among youths who lived in public housing and had access to a Boys and Girls Club, program participants were more involved in constructive education, social, and recreational activities. In addition, they were less involved in unhealthy, deviant, and dangerous activities. Adult family members in Club communities, compared with parents in the no-Club sites, were more involved in youth-oriented activities and school programs. The Clubs were associated with an overall reduction in alcohol and other drug use, drug trafficking, and drug-related crime.45 In other words, this evaluation suggested that the presence of a Boys and Girls Club and its core program (not just a targeted intervention) made a positive difference in the lives of children, their families, and other community residents.

A recent major study of the mentoring program provided by Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America also showed powerful effects. To evaluate this core service, researchers studied nearly a thousand 10- to 16-year-olds who had applied to Big Brothers/Big Sisters for an adult mentor but were still on a waiting list. Half of these young people, randomly chosen, were matched with a Big Brother or Big Sister, while the rest stayed on a waiting list. Eighteen months later, the differences between the two groups were dramatic. The involvement of an adult mentor in a young person’s life for just one year decreased first-time drug use by 46% and cut school absenteeism by 52%.
drug use among teenagers generally was on the rise); (2) cut school absenteeism by 52%; and (3) reduced violent behavior by 33%. Mentored youths were also more likely to perform well in school, get along better with family and friends, be less likely to assault someone, and be much less likely to start using alcohol. These effects were sustained for both boys and girls, across races.  

A third study—of the Quantum Opportunities Program—found that long-term participation in a comprehensive year-round program had significant positive effects on economically disadvantaged high school youths. The intervention developed for this research-demonstration project offered components that are typical of youth development programs, including academic enrichment and remediation, community service opportunities, academic and career counseling, adult mentors, and close peer relationships. Using a randomized design, this five-year longitudinal study in four sites showed powerful results. Compared with youths in the control group, program participants showed better high school graduation rates, higher enrollment in postsecondary education, lower teen pregnancy rates, and a higher level of community involvement.  

In summary, a growing body of evidence exists on which to base public and social policy, including financial investments. The problem in this field is not—as it is in some other arenas—that evaluations show no results. On the contrary, the few outcome evaluations that have been undertaken demonstrate many positive effects. The biggest problem is that few studies have been funded. In addition, thorny methodological problems exist in the youth development field, where concrete outcomes are frequently underspecified, where participation is voluntary (and therefore self-selection and attrition are likely to occur), and where good measurement tools are few and far between. However, recent progress in addressing all of these issues should encourage policymakers, funders, researchers, and practitioners to collaborate on ways to learn more about programs that—to quote the American Youth Policy Forum—“DO make a difference for youth.” Building the public policy and social investment case for expanding youth development programs for young adolescents will require support for more and better outcome evaluations. In the world of scarce resources, the best candidates for such investments are those programs that are carefully designed and implemented, have shown promising results, and stand a good chance of widespread replication.  

Issue 5: Coordination with Other Youth Services  

The staff of youth development programs increasingly recognize the need to work in meaningful partnerships with other community institutions, especially schools. Rather than viewing schools as having responsibility for academic achievement while they are working on “everything else,” community organizations are seeing youth development as a shared responsibility. This shift is generating profound changes around the planning, funding, and delivery of services as communities across the country experiment with new institutional arrangements on behalf of young people.  

For example, many communities are designing community schools or extended-service schools—partnerships between public schools and community organizations that increase young people’s access to safe places, enriched education, and positive relationships at all hours of the day and evening. These partnerships take many forms, from the federally supported 21st Century Community Learning Centers, in which the public school is the lead agency and grantee, to the Children’s Aid Society’s Community Schools in which the public school and youth agency are equal partners in all aspects of the services from the design of the facility to ongoing management. (See the article by Dryfoos in this journal issue.)  

A key issue in the implementation of community schools is the extent to which the after-school program connects with and enriches the school curriculum. While most
observers would agree that children's needs are best addressed when coordination and enrichment occur, in reality these aims are difficult to achieve. Often the after-school program is offered in isolation from the daytime program, resulting in a missed opportunity to reinforce children's learning and to provide an integrated experience. Equally often, extended-day programs miss the opportunity to engage children in enriched learning through experiences that are different from what happens during the school day. For many extended-day programs, the programmatic “default drive” is remediation (especially tutoring) and help with homework. While there is a place for such services, the focus of the extended day should be enrichment and the provision of learning opportunities that complement and supplement what happens during the regular school day.

After-school programs can extend children's “time on task” without duplicating exactly what happens during the school day. Creative program designers know that you can teach reading, math, and science through cooking or woodworking class, performing and visual arts, individual and team sports, and planning and implementing community service programs. Chess clubs and technology classes provide perfect opportunities to practice logic, persistence, concentration, and critical thinking skills. A pioneering study of why disadvantaged children succeed or fail in school revealed that children whose out-of-school time included 20 to 35 hours of constructive learning activities per week fared better in school. In describing constructive learning activities, the researcher cited the following: discussions with knowledgeable adults or peers, reading for pleasure, writing letters or in diaries, homework, hobbies, chores, and problem-solving games.48

The current unprecedented national policy attention to extending children's learning time, exemplified by the increased federal commitment through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, provides important opportunities to apply the best available knowledge and reconfigure community resources on behalf of young adolescents in communities across America. The challenge is to ensure that schools and community organizations are full partners in this work, and that young people's needs and opinions are valued in the process of program expansion.

**Conclusion**

In thinking about ways to improve services for youths, it is always useful to consider the bottom line. The goal of youth development programs, both in and out of school, is productive adulthood. Labor economists who have analyzed the mismatch between the American economy and its education system outlined a set of “new basic skills” that all young people need if they are to succeed in the contemporary economy. These skills include: the ability to read and do math at a minimum ninth-grade level; problem-solving skills; written and oral communication skills; the ability to work in groups with people different from oneself; and knowledge of and comfort with technology. This analysis of national education data reveals, however, that half of America’s 17-year-olds do not possess this set of skills.49

The challenge is clear. All youth-serving institutions in American society have a role to play in helping young people prepare for productive adulthood. Community youth programs are well positioned to add value to the work of schools and families by building on young people's current knowledge and strengths. In addition, they can provide young people with the support, protection, guidance, and opportunities that will allow them all to take their places as the next generation of America's workers, family members, and citizens.


6. The National Center for Charitable Statistics, now a division of the Urban Institute, developed a National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities to categorize tax-exempt organizations. One category within this taxonomy is called “youth development,” and in 1990 this category encompassed 17,000 organizations. However, it is very likely that organizations in other categories—for example, arts and culture or religion—involve substantial service to young people.


10. A 1992 analysis of the annual reports of these organizations revealed that the service population of Boys and Girls Clubs and Girls Incorporated centers was about 51% minority and two-thirds low income. The Boy Scouts reported that about 18% of its membership was minority, and the Girls Scouts reported minority membership at 14.1%.

11. Other public-sector systems provide services for children and youths that do not fall primarily into the youth development arena: the child welfare system, which arranges foster care, adoption, and child protection services; and the juvenile justice system.


