Beyond the "Village" Rhetoric: Creating Healthy Communities for Children and Adolescents

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The role of community in child and adolescent development is emerging as a significant area of theoretical inquiry, research, and application. This article describes the development and utilization of a comprehensive community change effort designed to increase the attention of all community members toward strengthening core developmental processes for children and adolescents. It describes the development of 2 theoretical constructs, that of developmental assets and of asset-building communities. It presents a conceptual overview of both constructs, a descriptive account of the developmental assets within a large aggregate sample of approximately 99,000 sixth to twelfth graders, and a summary of change strategies shaping asset-building movements in over 200 communities.

The concept of community within the field of child and adolescent development owes considerable debt to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theoretical foundations on the ecology of human development, as well as to the significant work of Jessor and his colleagues on social-cultural influences on adolescent behavior (e.g., Jessor, 1993; Jessor, Graves, Hanson, & Jessor, 1968; Jessor & Jessor, 1977). This line of theory and research helped to trigger both a more coherent view of the child's embeddedness within a complex pattern of social institutions (Belsky, 1981; Zigler, 1990) and the design of community-based interventions aimed at a wide range of issues, including school readiness and the prevention of juvenile delinquency (Zigler, Taussig, & Black, 1992).

Lerner's (1986, 1992) work on developmental contextualization has added to the understanding of community context in its articulation of the ecologies that inform development and the ways in which adolescents influence their social contexts. The implications of this work for policy and program are significant (Lerner, 1995).

Socialization occurs principally, of course, within nuclear families and, especially for youth of color (Scales & Gibbons, 1996), also within their extended families. But families do not exist in isolation. They are part of neighborhoods and of larger communities that exert broad cultural and normative influences and offer positive and negative possibilities to specific youth. Some communities clearly are dangerous or "toxic" environments (Garbarino, 1995) due to extreme poverty, family and institutional disintegration, and crime. Other communities have relatively plentiful economic and social resources yet fail to connect youth with those
BEYOND THE "VILLAGE" RHETORIC

supports. Given the obvious importance of community, it perhaps is surprising that relatively little research has been done to define systematically the nature of community and its developmental impact (National Research Council, 1996). Nevertheless, it is clear that community has both direct and indirect effects on children and adolescents.

Werner and Smith's (1992) classic 30-year study of children born on the Hawaiian island of Kauai has shown that those who were most resilient as adults had the largest network of multigenerational kin and unrelated adults for support during childhood. More specifically, when they were children of elementary school age, they had more access than did their less resilient peers to supportive teachers, clergy, neighbors, and other caring adults outside the family.

Neighborhoods and communities can provide additional or compensatory nurturance to youth, specific expectations and norms for youth behavior, opportunities for young people to feel valued and valuable, and vehicles for youth to occupy their time with (Clark, 1988) high-yield leisure activities. The negative effects of poor or violent neighborhoods, for example, can be at least partially overcome through microprocesses such as effective childrearing practices, in which parents set strict boundaries on youth time and behavior (Durrant, Cadenhead, Pendergast, Slavens, & Linder, 1994). Macroprocesses such as higher proportion of affluent neighbors that youth may experience in poor but not extremely poor neighborhoods have been shown to have a positive effect on school completion, especially for boys (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Duncan, 1994).

As Coleman (1974) wrote a generation ago, one of the major mechanisms of developmental influence is adult–youth interactions through which "skills, culture, ideas, and information is transmitted" (p. 132). How young people understand what it means and what it takes to be productive and civically engaged citizens, as well as their belief in themselves as people who can achieve those goals, depends to a large extent on the cumulative influences of all the adult role models and connections they have. Indeed, the very experience of feeling that one has no meaningful role in the wider community has been cited as a root cause of many problems among youth (Nightingale & Wolverton, 1998).

Applications of the varied concepts of community are now common in a number of applied areas, including alcohol and other drug prevention (Hawkins & Catalano, 1992), student learning and achievement (Comer, 1997; Epstein, 1996), and health promotion (Waltberg, Reyes, Weissberg, & Kuster, 1997). A common theme running through these community-based theoretical and action formulations is the assumption that child and adolescent well-being requires the engagement and participation of multiple community forces and sectors. Recent studies have helped to define several of the dimensions of this necessary engagement. The initial publication of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Resnick et al., 1997) concluded that youth connectedness to multiple support networks such as family, school, and community serve as an important protective factor across multiple domains, including emotional health, violence, substance use, and sexuality.

In an analysis of the variability of violent crime in 343 Chicago neighborhoods, Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls (1997) suggested that the level of social cohesion among neighbors, combined with the level of shared commitment to take action when an understanding of the common good is threatened, is strongly linked to rates of violence, beyond what is accounted for by controls for demographic factors like income and residential stability. What is particularly germane is that the definition of the common good—the glue that unites neighbors in shared purpose and action—has to do with the welfare of neighborhood children.

Community and the Cultural Context

Community as an analytical and applied construct holds high promise. However, intentional efforts to mobilize and sustain the engagement of multiple community systems and energy face considerable obstacles (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1995; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1995). Community is, of course, a complex construct that occasionally is touted as a panacea for most social and human problems. Some of this potential overextension of the concept may be due to the relatively recent efforts to conceptualize the dimensions and dynamics of community that inform human development. Some of the current preoccupation with community may reflect a growing despair about the efficacy of more historical approaches to changing problematic trends in child and adolescent health outcomes, which typically viewed the individual child or adolescent as the appropriate target of change (Dryfoos, 1990). What this situation suggests is a cultural readiness for community-based approaches to human development and a demand to deepen the inquiry about how knowledge of the influence of community can be translated into effective community change efforts.

This article describes the development and utilization of a comprehensive community change effort designed to catalyze focused attention by residents and all primary and secondary socializing systems to strengthen core developmental processes over which the people and institutions of a community have significant control. This work includes the formation and dissemination of two theoretical constructs: developmental assets and asset-building community. Before describing this work,
we outline some of the features of the cultural context that signal rupture in key community dynamics. They are dynamics that, if repaired or renewed, may hold promise for advancing the constructive role of community in child and adolescent development. Unless they are addressed, they also represent obstacles to community-building. Accordingly, they frame part of the intellectual foundation guiding our formulation of asset-building communities.

This brief analysis focuses on extant or emerging cultural themes that potentially undermine the capacity of family, other socializing systems, and the residents of a city to create and sustain a vibrant developmental infrastructure, which, for the sake of this argument, includes sustained community commitment, both formal and informal, to placing children and adolescents at the center of civic life. Doing so requires norms, commitments, and forms of engagement not now typical in American communities. The following are some of the factors that may interfere.

Isolation of Families

The family typically is thought of as the primary agent of socialization. For families to operate out of strength, considerable societal and community engagement is necessary. These connections can enhance family functioning in a variety of ways, from information transmission and support to reinforcing the cultural importance and status of effective parenting. Additionally, family capacity is strengthened when partnerships of mutual support and trust unite around shared goals family, school, youth organizations, neighborhoods, and other socializing agents. Finally, public policy ought to be in place to assist communities in these support functions. The "goal of society should be to provide families with the support—including places, time, stability, status, recognition, beliefs, customs, and actions—that will enable them to establish the relationships and the environment necessary for healthy child development" (Bronfenbrenner & Neville, 1994, p. 18).

Theoretically, the family has high potential to promote developmental strengths. But even the best of families cannot optimize this development without the active assistance of other sectors. Comparing communities with high rates of healthy youth to communities with lower rates, Blyth and Leffert (1995) demonstrated that the factors differentiating the two kinds of communities are associated less with how youth perceive their families than with how they were connected to other socializing systems.

An extended exploration of the extent to which this society enhances family functioning is beyond the scope of this article. However, there is ample evidence, from trend studies in the United States to cross-national comparisons, that community supports for families are strained or, too often, absent. One factor has been labeled the privatization of families, the expectation, partially grounded in current public attitudes, that the family has sole or dominant responsibility for the care of children. Furstenberg (1993) has suggested that this is a radical departure from more historically prevailing social norms in which parents were understood to be representatives of the larger society: "Other adults in the community are no longer relied upon to supervise and sponsor children" (p. 253). Other trends interfering with the natural capacity of community to support families may include (a) changes in the workforce that lessen the availability of neighborhood adults during the workday; (b) patterns of social mobility that cause some families to enter communities without known or easily accessible support systems; and (c) consonant with civic disengagement, a growing national predilection for adults to disconnect from traditional affiliations and memberships, some of which, as in the case of religious communities, can provide networks of support.

Civic Disengagement

Currently, one of the most discussed phenomena influencing the workings of community is "the disappearance of social capital and civic engagement in America" (Putnam, 1996, p. 34). Healthy society, at least in Western terms, requires the mobilization of social networks and social norms to support the pursuit of shared goals (social capital) and the meaningful participation of citizens in building and being community (civic engagement). In the fields of political science and public affairs, the suppression of social capital and civic engagement are widely documented and discussed as positive explanations for historical downturns in voting behavior and as consequences of rising social mistrust, isolation, and individualism (Benson, 1997).

If we can extrapolate from this literature, the concept of civic engagement also is useful for analyzing processes of child and adolescent development within a community context. We take it as axiomatic that such core developmental processes as the transmission of values and standards, the provision of support, the establishment of checks and balances in behavior, and the promotion of belonging and empowerment depend to a large extent on consistent adult presence and voice. Further, we suggest that these kinds of core developmental processes are promoted best when such presence and voice is redundant, holding across many of the contexts of child and adolescent development (e.g., family, neighborhood, public gathering places, schools, congregations). This kind of vibrant developmental infrastructure requires considerable civic engagement in the lives of children and adolescents. And that, in
BEYOND THE “VILLAGE” RHETORIC

turn, requires social norms favoring engagement and a kind of self-selection by most community residents to connect and engage.

We are not aware of a scientific literature that documents and describes what social norms about engagement in the lives of children and adolescents prevail in this country. Several lines of research, however, suggest that norms favoring disengagement are commonplace. First, in the research on developmental assets discussed subsequently, we found in a large aggregate sample that certain developmental experiences that predict civic engagement are relatively uncommon among public school students in grades 6 through 12. These include sustained intergenerational relationships outside of family, the experience of neighborhood support, and the perception that adults in the community value youth. Recent public opinion poll data on adult views of children and adolescents are also relevant here. When asked to describe American youth, a majority of adults chose negative descriptors (e.g., undisciplined, disrespectful, unfriendly) as their initial response (Farkas & Johnson, 1997). These perceptions may function to retard engagement.

Professionalization of Care

In a rather pointed critique, McKnight (1995) described the evolution of the American service industry and its unintended consequence of suppressing community social capital and engagement resources.

The most significant development transforming America since World War II has been the growth of a powerful service economy and its pervasive serving institutions. Those institutions have [commoditized] the care of community and called that substitution a service. As citizens have seen the professionalized service commodify their communities, they have grown doubtful of their common capacity to care, and so it is that we have become a faceless society, populated by impotent citizens and ineffectual communities dependent on the counterfeit of care called human services. (pp. ix–x)

Intertwined with the social phenomenon of commoditization of care is the contemporary dominance of what is often called the deficit-reduction paradigm. In this paradigm, research and practice are steered to naming, counting, and reducing the incidence of environmental risks (e.g., family violence, poverty, family disintegration) and health-compromising behaviors (e.g., substance use, adolescent pregnancy, interpersonal violence, school dropout). This paradigm, it has been argued, dominates the services and strategies chosen to enhance child and adolescent health and historically has driven resource allocation in federal and foundation initiatives (Benson, 1997). The point here is not that deficit-reduction as a way of thinking and mobilizing action is misguided. But as a dominating paradigm, it may unintentionally strengthen both the overprofessionalization of care and civic disengagement. These processes may well be symbiotic. That is, civic disengagement and professionalized forms of addressing child and adolescent health may feed each other. Part of the value of the emerging line of inquiry and practice commonly called positive youth development is the naming of developmental outcomes to be promoted through mechanisms requiring coordination and collaboration among both public sector and community-based entities (Pittman & Cahill, 1991).

Moving beyond a problem-focused paradigm does not mean that we do away with services and interventions. It is necessary, of course, that one address substance abuse and adolescent pregnancy directly through interventions and treatment. It is also necessary to address large social problems like poverty and forms of victimization such as the increasing numbers of children and adolescents infected with, or left orphaned by, HIV and AIDS (e.g., Levine & Stein, 1994; Michaels & Levine, 1992). Addressing these problems through professionals and programs is necessary, but they are not sufficient. Positive youth development approaches are just as necessary and should be put in the hands of real people, in real communities, rather than solely those of the professional service delivery systems.

Loss of Socialization Consistency

To transmit a coherent and constructive world view to children and adolescents, primary socializing systems (e.g., family, school, youth organizations, neighborhoods, religious institutions) must provide some semblance of consistency in message. If, for example, we seek to nurture the value of environmental responsibility, our success is enhanced when youth are exposed to multiple settings that are symbolizing, articulating, and modeling this core value.

Price, Cioci, Penner, and Trautlein (1993) have noted that healthy development requires youth to be supported and surrounded by positive “webs of influence.” In their view, this means not only that family, school, and community influences are consistent in the positive norms and opportunities they provide young people. It also means that there are abundant connections among family, school, and community resources in youth’s lives: Parents are involved with schools, schools work seamlessly with community resources, and communities provide plentiful support and resources that strengthen families. The better those connections, the tighter the webs of influence and the harder it is for youth to “fall through the cracks.” Connell, Halpern Felscher, Clifford, Crichlow, and Usinger (1995) noted that a critical element of work with communities, particularly disadvantaged communities, is to help build a consistency of values and norms, as
well as mutual support, among the various adults in young people’s lives. Together, those resources create a network of positive influence in which child and adolescent development can be constructively advanced. As Scales (1996) noted:

There is evidence that when young people see all these sectors of their lives delivering the same messages about expected behavior and providing the supports to act on these expectations, then behavior in fact becomes healthier and their risks decrease. (p. 226)

Coleman and Hoffer (1987), in their pioneering investigation of school success, reported that achievement is dramatically advanced when students are embedded in relationships and systems that articulate a shared set of values and perspectives about schooling and achievement. They posit that such embeddedness is rapidly deteriorating as a core developmental process, as is seen in their analysis of the National High School and Beyond data set.

Damon (1995) viewed polarization as a core factor explaining the demise of consistency:

Of all the distortions in today’s public conversation about youth, the most disturbing is the unnecessary polarization of opinions about education and child rearing. Oppositional thinking rules the day. ... Beyond the havoc that it wreaks with the truth, polarization around matters of child rearing leads to paralysis among the groups of elders who should be mobilizing to provide young people with guidance. The paralysis created by oppositional thinking has been a main contributor to the lack of direction that plagues so many young people these days. To combat widespread youthful demoralization, responsible adults need to show solidarity rather than discord with one another. (pp. 95-96)

It is our assumption that in all communities, all people—regardless of income, political persuasion, religious ideology, or race—share some common core of what is defined as good. Subgroups, families, and individuals may have additional perspectives that add richness beyond this common core. But the common core must be named through a process of safe community dialogue. Then it can become a matter of broad and deep intentionality to articulate, model, and symbolize this shared commitment in all places of interaction with youth. To do otherwise—via silence or inconsistency—invises confusion and risks soft commitment to the best of this culture. Some important work on reclaiming consistent messages at the community level is now occurring (Damon, 1997).

Marginalization of Youth

Modern industrialization has meant that the socialization of children and youth has increasingly moved outside of the family’s sole control (Hess, Petersen, & Mortimer, 1994). In addition, compulsory education has been extended in most societies. Secular changes such as those witnessed in compulsory education have resulted in a shift in socialization function from families to schools and other contextual sources of influence. The transition period between childhood and adolescence has lengthened because of this longer educational period, and adolescents are not automatically well-integrated into society (e.g., Rutter, 1980). Scholars (e.g., Lewin, 1939; Muuss, 1975) increasingly have described adolescents as being marginalized; young people are denied access to useful roles (Hess et al., 1994; Nightingale & Woverton, 1993). Coleman (1994) has suggested that youth are kept in “‘holding tanks,’ so to speak, with difficulty in moving from the holding tanks to the productive economy” (p. 34). Indeed, adolescent problem behaviors have been frequently attributed to the lack of these roles (e.g., Erikson, 1968).

To summarize, our focus has been to identify some of the core community dynamics needed to undergird and support community-wide intentionality and effectiveness in the important task of promoting core developmental targets. A number of interlocking processes threaten the developmental infrastructure of a community, by which we mean citizen and system engagement in the tasks of support giving, boundary setting, expectation and value transmission, competency building, and empowerment.

This necessary but fragile developmental infrastructure is not the only infrastructure within the community needed to enhance child and adolescent well-being. Certainly, economic infrastructures (e.g., affordable housing, job availability, reasonable wages for work) and service infrastructures (e.g., treatment and intervention systems) also are instrumental in advancing human development. Although these infrastructures are interrelated, our work focuses on the first of these: reclaiming or strengthening the human developmental infrastructure. Moving in this direction requires different strategies than are frequently found, for example, in community collaborations to strengthen service delivery (as in the case of models for the “co-location” of services). It could be said that our work is about triggering the co-location of core developmental processes (e.g., support, empowerment, value transmission, belonging). However, in a healthy community, all of these infrastructures (developmental, economic, service) need to be viable and effective.

The remainder of this article describes the development and utilization of two theoretical constructs in stimulating local, community-based movements to strengthen the developmental infrastructure. The first of these is a framework of developmental assets, a set of “building blocks” that when present or promoted appear to enhance significant developmental outcomes among youth. This framework has a dual purpose. By
framing an overarching conceptualization of essential developmental targets, it invites theoretical and scientific scrutiny. Second, it is designed as an essential first step in the transformation of community, providing a language about positive development that can unite community across political and class lines and across socializing systems to promote the common good. The language shift to the elements of development to be promoted (rather than prevented) is an intentional strategy to empower individual citizens, families, neighborhoods, religious institutions, and other community actors to reenvision, claim, and act on their inherent developmental power. The second construct to be discussed is that of asset-building community and the strategies needed to move toward it.

The Developmental Asset Framework

The framework of developmental assets establishes a set of benchmarks for positive child and adolescent development, weaving together in an a priori conceptual model a taxonomy of developmental targets requiring both family and community engagement to ensure their acquisition. The original configuration of 30 developmental assets was described in several publications (Benson, 1990; Benson, 1996b; Benson, Espeland, & Galbraith, 1994) as well as in data-based reports developed for each of 460 school districts. These reports were based on Search Institute’s Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors, a survey designed to measure the developmental assets. In 1996, the model was expanded to 40 developmental assets, based on analysis of data gathered on 254,000 students, additional synthesis of child and adolescent research, and consultations with researchers and practitioners.

The framework’s intellectual foundations are rooted in empirical studies of child and adolescent development, with additional focus on the more applied literature of prevention, protective factors, and resiliency. How one captures this extensive scientific legacy in a finite number of developmental targets depends on one’s definition of healthy outcomes. The assets initially are framed around the second decade of life, roughly spanning the middle school and high school years. The research synthesis focused on integrating developmental experiences that are widely known to inform three types of health outcomes: (a) the prevention of high-risk behaviors (e.g., substance use, violence, sexual intercourse, school dropout); (b) the enhancement of thriving outcomes (e.g., school success, affirmation of diversity, the proactive approach to nutrition and exercise); and (c) resiliency, or the capacity to rebound in the face of adversity.

In further delimiting the number of potential elements, we looked for developmental factors that, when present, were particularly robust in predicting health outcomes and for which there is evidence that their predictive utility holds across sex, race–ethnicity, and family income. Finally, the assets were conceived to reflect core developmental processes. Accordingly, they include the kinds of relationships, social experiences, social environments, patterns of interaction, norms, and competencies over which a community of people has considerable control. That is, the assets are more about the primary processes of socialization than the equally important arenas of economy, services, and the “bricks and mortar” of a city.

The 40 developmental assets are both a theoretical framework and a research model. Because the model is also intended to have practical significance for the mobilization of communities, the 40 assets are placed in categories that have conceptual integrity and that can be described easily to the people of a community. As seen in Table 1, they are grouped into 20 external assets (i.e., health-promoting features of the environment) and 20 internal assets (e.g., commitments, values, and competencies). The external assets are grouped into four categories: (a) support, (b) empowerment, (c) boundaries and expectations, and (d) constructive use of time. The internal assets are placed in four categories: (a) commitment to learning, (b) positive values, (c) social competencies, and (d) positive identity. The scientific foundations for the eight categories and each of the 40 assets are described in more detail in Benson (1997) and Scales and Leffert (in press).

The external assets refer to the positive developmental experiences of relationships and opportunities that adults provide. They emerge through constant exposure to informal interactions with caring and principled adults and peers, and they are reinforced by a larger network of community institutions. The internal assets are competencies, skills, and self-perceptions that young people develop gradually over time. Communities can ensure that young people have external assets, but internal assets do not simply occur; they evolve gradually as a result of numerous experiences. From a community mobilization standpoint, it is conceptually sound to organize around increasing the external assets, but the growth of internal assets is a slower, more complex, and idiosyncratic process of self-regulation.

The support assets cover a range of opportunities for experiencing affirmation, approval, and acceptance, within multiple settings (family, intergenerational relationships, neighborhood, school). These experiences include relational support and warm and caring environments (Scales & Gibbons, 1996; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994).

The empowerment assets represent a constellation of factors that encourage children and adolescents to become actors within community, with a focus on being valued and useful within community (Zeldin & Price, 1995). The asset of safety is seen as an important subtext for empowerment.
Table 1. 40 Developmental Assets

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<th>Asset Type</th>
<th>Asset and Description</th>
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| External Support         | 1. Family support: Family life provides high levels of love and support.  
                            2. Positive family communication: Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and  
                              young person is willing to seek parent(s) advice and counsel.  
                            3. Other adult relationships: Young person receives support from three or more non-parent adults.  
                            5. Caring school climate: School provides a caring, encouraging environment.  
                            6. Parent involvement in schooling: Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed  
                              in school.  
| Empowerment              | 7. Community values youth: Young person perceives that community adults value youth.  
                            8. Youth as resources: Young people are given useful roles in the community.  
                            9. Service to others: Young person serves in the community 1 hr or more per week.  
                           10. Safety: Young person feels safe in home, school, and the neighborhood.  
| Boundaries and Expectations | 11. Family boundaries: Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person’s  
                               whereabouts.  
                           12. School boundaries: School provides clear rules and consequences.  
                           14. Adult role models: Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.  
                           15. Positive peer influence: Young person’s best friends model positive, responsible behavior.  
                           16. High expectations: Both parents and teachers encourage the young person to do well.  
| Constructive Use of Time | 17. Creative activities: Young person spends 3 or more hr per week in lessons or practice in music,  
                               theater, or other arts.  
                           18. Youth programs: Young person spends 3 or more hr per week in sports, clubs, or organizations  
                              at school and/or in community organizations.  
                           19. Religious community: Young person spends 1 or more hr per week in activities in a religious  
                              institution.  
                           20. Time at home: Young person is out with friends “with nothing special to do” 2 or fewer nights per week.  
| Internal Commitment to Learning | 21. Achievement motivation: Young person is motivated to do well in school.  
                              22. School engagement: Young person is actively engaged in learning.  
                              23. Homework: Young person reports 1 or more hr of homework every school day.  
                              24. Bonding to school: Young person cares about his or her school.  
                              25. Reading for pleasure: Young person reads for pleasure 3 or more hr per week.  
                              26. Caring: Young person places high value on helping other people.  
                           27. Equality and social justice: Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing  
                              hunger and poverty.  
                           28. Integrity: Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.  
                           29. Honesty: Young person tells the truth even when it is not easy.  
                           30. Responsibility: Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.  
                           31. Restraint: Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other  
                              drugs.  
| Positive Values           | 32. Planning and decision making: Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.  
                              33. Interpersonal competence: Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.  
                             34. Cultural competence: Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different  
                              cultural–racial–ethnic backgrounds.  
                           35. Resistance skills: Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.  
                           36. Peaceful conflict resolution: Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.  
                           37. Personal power: Young person feels he or she has control over “things that happen to me.”  
                           38. Self-esteem: Young person reports having high self-esteem.  
                           39. Sense of purpose: Young person reports “my life has a purpose.”  
                           40. Positive view of personal future: Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.  

Early models for understanding what impacts adolescent development focused on the singular effects of the family environment on child development. Recent explanations have gone beyond those models and have suggested that the socialization strategies in the broader community are no less important for adolescent development (e.g., Furstenberg, 1993; Sampson, 1997). As such, the boundaries and expectations assets address the importance of clear and consistent messages in a number of different contexts (including families) in which adolescents are involved and the presence of adults and peers who model positive and responsible behaviors.

The constructive use of time assets pertain to the important array of constructive opportunities that should be available to all young people, particularly in the 10- to 18-year-old range. Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested that healthy development should include a
variety of such activities. Ideally, these are settings that connect youth to caring adults who help to nurture their skills and capacities (e.g., Blyth & Leffert, 1995; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Dubas & Snider, 1993). Religious institutions are one of the few remaining intergenerational communities to which youth have access. They are places of multiple generations, with people bound together, to a greater or lesser degree, through a shared perspective and shared values. The congregation as an intergenerational community, however, represents potential more than reality, because most communities of faith have become as age segregated as is the rest of society. Nevertheless, there is an extensive scientific literature that shows that religious participation more broadly enhances caring for others and helps reduce multiple forms of risk-taking behavior, even after controlling for family background (e.g., Donahue & Benson, 1995).

The commitment to learning assets include a combination of personal beliefs, values, and skills known to enhance academic success (Scales & Leffert, in press). They include an engagement in learning activities, a sense of belonging to the school environment, the motivation to do well, and expectations for success (e.g., Eccles & Midgley, 1990; Wentzel, 1993). Commitment to learning has a number of sources. Parental attitudes, encouragement, involvement, and modeling are key. The quality of schooling matters, through its formal and informal curricula. Norms that encourage high attention to educational tasks, by peer group and community, also are instrumental.

The six positive values assets represent prosocial values and values of personal character (e.g., Brooks-Gunn & Paikoff, 1993; Chase-Lansdale, Wakschlag, & Brooks-Gunn, 1995; Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, & McNalley, 1991). These six reflect a significant public consensus on values, with some evidence that they approximate a universal core of values within advanced technological societies. As important, there is research evidence supporting the role of each in health promotion (Scales & Leffert, in press).

The social competencies assets include a personal skill set needed to deal with the myriad choices, challenges, and opportunities presented in complex societies. They generally refer to adaptive functioning in which the individual may call on personal and environmental resources (Peterson & Leigh, 1990; Waters & Scoufe, 1983). Social competence is thought to develop within social contexts (Lerner, 1987) and includes planning and decision making skills, interpersonal and cultural competence, resistance skills, and the ability to resolve conflicts peacefully (e.g., DuBois & Hirsch, 1990; Mann, Harmoni, & Power, 1989; Zimmerman, Sprecher, Langer, & Holloway, 1993).

Identity formation is a critical task of adolescent development (Erikson, 1968). As such, the positive identity assets focus on young people’s views of themselves in relation to their future, self-esteem, and sense of purpose and power (e.g., Diener & Dweck, 1980; Garmezy, 1993; Harter, 1990).

Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors

Since 1989, Search Institute has conducted numerous studies of 6th- to 12th-grade students in public and private schools across the country. The first aggregate report, The Troubled Journey: A Portrait of 6th-12th Grade Youth (Benson, 1990), based on survey data from 112 school districts, documented the shape of developmental assets, risk behaviors, and their interrelations among 47,000 students.

The 156-item survey instrument, Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors (A&B; Search Institute, 1996), measures each of the 40 developmental assets and a number of other constructs, including developmental deficits, thriving indicators, and high-risk behaviors. The high-risk behaviors include substance abuse (alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs), sexual intercourse, antisocial behavior, violence, school failure, attempted suicide, and gambling. Many of the high-risk behavior items are drawn from federally funded national research studies.

The survey is administered anonymously in a classroom setting. The instructions are standardized. Students place completed surveys in an envelope, which is then sealed and mailed to Search Institute for processing and generation of a school district report. Typically, school district studies represent a complete census of all 6th- to 12th-grade students attending school on the day the survey is administered. It should be noted that school districts self-select into these studies, often as part of a community strategy to mobilize around the developmental asset framework. The report developed for each city often becomes a widely shared public document framing a community-wide call to action.

To communicate effectively with diverse community audiences, the measurement of each asset is simplified into a single percentage of youth who have the asset. We have found that this dichotomous approach to reporting, which we recognize affects reliability, is much more understandable to the citizens of a community than are reports based on scale means. Most important, it also allows for a very simple summation of the average number of assets youth within a community possess that, as described subsequently, can be used to predict at-risk behavior. Each of the assets is measured by one or more survey items, with a minimum of five response options. These items are combined and then converted into a binary variable for each asset.²

²Psychometric properties of the survey will be discussed in a forthcoming article in this series.
Sample Description

The sample for the series of studies we report here and in subsequent articles in this series represents an aggregate of 99,462 youth in Grades 6 through 12 in public or alternative schools from 213 U.S. cities and towns who took the survey during the 1996–1997 academic year. The sample reported here included only those communities who had surveyed at least one grade from Grades 6 through 9 and one from Grades 10 through 12. Not all communities administered the survey to students in all Grades 6 through 12; a comparison of schools that surveyed all grades with those that did not survey all grades revealed a few minor differences. Thus, data pertaining to the entire sample are reported here.

The sample was made up of approximately equal numbers of boys and girls (49,138 and 49,620, respectively) and included 40% sixth to 8th graders and 60% 9th to 12th graders. The race or ethnicity of the sample was predominantly Caucasian (86%), with 5% multiracial, 4% Latino-Latina, and 2% each African American, American Indian, and Asian-Pacific Islander. The sample developed in the 1997–1998 school year will add additional urban strength to this aggregated data set. Approximately 25% of the sample lived in what would be described as the country or on a farm, about 34% in small towns under 10,000 people and about 35% in towns or small cities with populations from 10,000 to 250,000 residents. Only 4% of youth in this aggregate sample were from major metropolitan areas with a population greater than 250,000. Ten percent or fewer of adolescents’ parents had failed to graduate from high school. Nearly 30% of both mothers and fathers had graduated from high school, and another 40% had graduated from college or graduate school. Thus, the sample overrepresents Caucasian youth from smaller cities and towns, whose parents have higher-than-average formal education. Although this aggregate sample was not nationally representative, it was, nevertheless, large and diverse and provides a sense of how youth in a significant number of communities describe their lives.

Given the overrepresentation of Caucasian youth from small towns, with higher-than-average parental education, it is likely that our data underestimate youths’ risk behaviors and overestimate their assets. Moreover, the communities that have asked Search Institute to conduct the surveys are arguably socially organized and give a high priority to youth development, probably a higher priority than does the average community. Thus, our data probably underestimate the degree of concern we ought to have about the developmental infrastructure for most youth, particularly among the economically disadvantaged.

The mean number of assets based on an index of 0–40 binaries for this aggregate sample is 18.0. By grade, the mean decreases from 21.5 in Grade 6 to 17.2 in Grade 12. Boys average three assets fewer than girls (16.5 and 19.5, respectively). Means for communities range from 16.5 to 20.0 across all 213 cities. A particularly important finding is that the mean number of assets is relatively similar when comparing students in different community sizes (communities ranging in size from under 10,000 to those of 250,000 or more). Although there is variability between communities, it is less than expected and reinforces the sense that all communities have significant proportions of youth who lack key developmental building blocks in their lives.3

Family income was not measured in the survey. However, in a study done in Minneapolis, we looked at how the developmental assets vary as a function of the city’s 11 planning districts, which differ substantially in average family income, property values, and resources. Across these 11 geographical areas of the city, the average number of 40 assets ranged from 16.7 to 20.1 (Benson, 1996a). Not surprisingly, as average wealth rises, assets rise. But putting this in context, note that the difference is only about three developmental assets when comparing the least and most affluent planning districts.

Table 2 shows the percentage of youth possessing each of the assets by grade within sex. Although these data are cross-sectional, we observed decreases in reports of many of the assets over the developmental period from 6th to 12th grades, particularly between 6th and 7th and between 7th and 8th grades. There appears to be a steeper decline among some of the assets as compared to others. For example, among 6th-grade boys, 45% report that their parents are involved in their schooling; this percentage declines, consistent with other reports (e.g., Eccles & Harold, 1993), to only 15% by 12th grade. Similarly, 44% of 6th-grade girls report that their parents are involved in their schooling, declining to 19% among 12th-grade girls. Because of the large sample size, separate analyses of variance (ANOVA) examining the Sex x Grade effects of these differences revealed either significant main effects of sex, grade, or an interaction of sex and grade on almost all of the assets. The effect sizes (Cohen, 1988) comparing sex, grade, and their interaction generally range from small to moderate with a few of the interactions yielding a large effect size.

Relation of Developmental Assets to Behavior

As part of the data report, communities received a breakdown of the percent of students falling within each level of assets. Based on the aggregate sample, these

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3The variability between communities and the meaning of that variability for community change strategies will be elaborated further in a forthcoming article in this series.
percentages are as follows: Twenty percent have 0-10 assets, 42% have 11-20 assets, 30% have 21-30 assets, and 8% have 31-40 assets. These percentages, when yoked with the association of asset levels to behaviors, become a significant information source for the community mobilization process.

Table 3 shows the percentage of 6th- to 12th-grade youth who report that they engage in patterns of risk behaviors by their level of assets. The table also shows how we have defined each risk behavior pattern. Note that for each of the 10 variables, the percentage of students reporting risk behavior patterns declines as the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Asset Description</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
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<td>31</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 99,462.
BENSON, LEFFTERT, SCALES, & BLYTH

Table 3. Relation of Assets to Patterns of High-Risk Behavior Among an Aggregate Sample of 6th–12th-Grade Youth Surveyed During the 1996–1997 School Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>% With High-Risk Patterns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High-Risk Behavior Patterns</td>
<td></td>
<td>0–10 Assets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>Has used alcohol three or more times in the past month or got drunk once or more in the past 2 weeks</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco</td>
<td>Smokes one or more cigarettes every day or uses chewing tobacco frequently</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illicit Drugs</td>
<td>Used illicit drugs three or more times in the past year</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Intercourse</td>
<td>Has had sexual intercourse three or more times in lifetime</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression-Suicide</td>
<td>Is frequently depressed and/or has attempted suicide</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antisocial Behavior</td>
<td>Has been involved in three or more incidents of shoplifting, trouble with police, or vandalism in the past year</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>Has engaged in three or more acts of fighting, hitting, injuring a person, carrying or using a weapon, or threatening physical harm in the past year</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Problems</td>
<td>Has skipped school 2 or more days in the past month and/or has below average</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving and Alcohol</td>
<td>Has driven after drinking or ridden with a drinking driver three or more times in the past year</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambling</td>
<td>Has gambled three or more times in the past year</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 99,462.

level of assets rises, suggesting a rather omnibus connection between asset levels and risk reduction in multiple behavioral arenas. We have observed these patterns across grade, sex, race–ethnicity, family composition, and in all communities studied. For example, the risk behavior pattern of alcohol use is defined as having used alcohol three or more times in the past month or gotten drunk one or more times in the past two weeks. Among youth in this sample who report few assets (0–10), 53% also report this pattern of alcohol use. Alcohol use is reported less frequently among youth with higher assets, falling to only 3% among youth in the highest asset group (31–40).

Table 4 shows the percentage of 6th- to 12th-grade youth who report positive behaviors and attitudes (i.e., thriving indicators) by their level of assets. The opposite pattern from that which was seen in Table 3 can be seen here, in that youth who report fewer assets are less likely to also report each of the thriving indicators. For example, we define that a youth maintains good health if he or she pays attention to healthy nutrition and exercise. Among youth in this sample who report few assets, 25% report that they pay attention to healthy nutrition and exercise. Healthy nutrition and exercise is reported more frequently among youth with higher assets, with 88% of youth in the highest asset category reporting that they maintain good health. These two tables, based on the aggregate sample, mimic the patterns seen in each of the 213 separate city or school district reports. These relations frame part of the public presentation of the developmental asset framework.

It must be emphasized, however, that the data displayed in Tables 3 and 4 are correlational in nature, and the assets are not necessarily causal influences. For example, it is possible that these positive assets could be consequences of an adolescent's refusal of alcohol rather than the assets causing risk reduction per se (e.g., Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Although these patterns are correlational and must be tested in research designs that may elucidate more causal inferences, it is still striking to note that this pattern has been observed consistently across the many communities in which we have surveyed youth.

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4The relations among assets, risk behaviors, and thriving indicators will be elaborated further in forthcoming articles in this series. In regression analyses done to date, we found that the developmental asset framework tends to explain significant and meaningful variance in the high-risk patterns and thriving indicators.

5We have two longitudinal studies currently underway in which we hope to provide a deeper understanding of the relations observed in this large-scale cross-sectional analysis.
Table 4. Relation of Assets to Thriving Indicators Among an Aggregate Sample of 6th–12th-Grade Youth Surveyed During the 1996–1997 School Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>% With Thriving Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0-10 Assets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Succeeds in School</td>
<td>Gets mostly A's on report card</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps Others</td>
<td>Helps friends or neighbors 1 or more hr per week</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values Diversity</td>
<td>Places high importance on getting to know people of other racial-ethnic groups</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintains Good Health</td>
<td>Pays attention to healthy nutrition and exercise</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibits Leadership</td>
<td>Has been a leader of a group or organization in the last 12 months</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resists Danger</td>
<td>Avoids doing things that are dangerous</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delays Gratification</td>
<td>Saves money for something special rather than spending it all right away</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcomes Adversity</td>
<td>Does not give up when things get difficult</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 99,462.

The observation that assets have a cumulative or "pile-up" effect such as that shown in Tables 3 and 4 adds to emerging literature on this phenomenon. Many studies have addressed the effects of risks and protective factors as moderators of developmental outcomes (e.g., Garmezy, 1985; Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Jessor, 1991; Jessor, Donovan, & Costa, 1991). Such studies have suggested that problem behaviors tend to covary (Elliott, 1993; Garmezy, 1985; Jessor et al., 1991) and that some risk factors potentiate the effect of other risk factors (Jessor, Van Den Bos, Vanderryn, Costa, & Turbin, 1995; Rutter, 1979). These studies have also shown the cumulative impact of risk factors on involvement in problem behaviors. However, fewer studies have highlighted the cumulative effect of protective factors in the reduction of problem behaviors or on the promotion of positive behaviors (Jessor, 1993). Jessor and colleagues (Jessor et al., 1993) reported that the higher the number of protective factors, the lower the involvement in problem behaviors. In addition, Jessor demonstrated that, in interaction with risk factors, protective factors can moderate problem behaviors. These findings were consistent within cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses, and the model worked sufficiently across sex and ethnic group differences.

Extrapolation to Children

As communities began to work on strengthening the developmental foundation for youth using the asset framework as a guide, it became clear that a congruent framework for younger children was needed. It was easy for people to see that the developmental assets framework for adolescents built upon a foundation established in childhood and that the asset language might offer a helpful lens for understanding issues pertaining to development during the first decade of life. To develop the asset framework for children from birth to age 11, we consulted child and youth practitioners and the developmental research literature. In this way the emerging framework would be grounded firmly in what is known about healthy development but would also communicate clearly to parents and practitioners (Leffert, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 1997). In essence, we used the existing framework as a way of capturing what the assets might look like in younger children, and as such, the framework represents a preliminary step in conceptualizing the developmental assets for children from birth to age 11. We have not developed tools to measure these assets in children, and consequently, the development of this downward extension of the asset framework is exploratory in nature.

Figure 1 shows the framework of developmental assets and its hypothesized progression from infancy through adolescence across four developmental age periods: (a) infancy–toddler, (b) preschool, (c) middle childhood or the elementary school age, and (d) adolescence (Leffert et al., 1997). As can be seen, we have extended the external–internal distinction as it continues to offer a way of clearly understanding the asset categories, but it is not directly applicable to infants and young children. Our review of the literature suggests that during infancy and early childhood all of the assets would externally surround the child through important relationships, with the responsibility for building the assets in the hands of parents and other caregivers. Ideally, infants and young children are cared for in a sensitive and responsible manner, and they are exposed to many situations that build assets.4

4A complete description of the developmental assets framework for children can be found in Leffert et al. (1997).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Birth</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Birth Place</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Disability Status</th>
<th>School Attendance</th>
<th>Special Education Services</th>
<th>Previous Education</th>
<th>Previous School District</th>
<th>Previous School Name</th>
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Asset-Building Community

Inherent in the developmental assets framework and the descriptive research findings it generates are a set of ideas crucial for beginning community change efforts. Local reports on the developmental asset framework intend to promote a set of shared understandings with both conceptual and motivational import. Some of these shared understandings are:

- The developmental assets begin to frame a territory of positive human development that benefit all children and adolescents;
- Middle school and high school students (nationally and in the community) typically experience less than half of these developmental assets;
- The developmental assets serve as important protective and thriving factors;
- The developmental assets need to be nurtured by the community at large, not just by families or institutions.

Understanding how communities can activate their influence and more intentionally shape local developmental infrastructures now frames much of Search Institute's work. To a considerable extent, our work on defining the dynamics of asset-building community and the strategies that promote meaningful and long-term community change is a work in progress, integrating theory, field research, and evaluation in an ongoing effort to expand and refine the vision and change strategies (Benson, 1997). This work is informed by: (a) the synthesis of a wide variety of literature (e.g., community development, organizational and systems change, social movements); (b) the ongoing efforts of over 200 communities nationwide that have launched, or are in the process of launching, asset-building initiatives (most have emerged since 1995); (c) a subset of pilot communities studied more intensively; (d) longitudinal studies recently begun in three Minnesota and Colorado communities that are designed to track changes in developmental assets and the strategies that account for these changes; and (e) forums involving experts in social and community change.

Defining Community

The term community has rich and varied connotations and a growing number of meanings and usages. We define community largely as a geographic area rather than as a community of association or as one’s perceived community. It refers typically to a town, city, or municipality, defined by school district boundaries. We chose this approach because much of the socialization energy that can be mobilized for children and adolescents occurs within geographically overlapping systems of schools, neighborhoods, youth organizations, parks, and religious institutions within a municipality.

Of course, community is more complicated (Wynn, Richman, Rubenstein, & Littel, 1987). When systems of socialization overlap (as when school districts draw students from multiple towns), community must be thought of as several cities, a county, or other area. In large urban centers, the geography that defines a particular child’s community might be a neighborhood or section of the city where most socialization is experienced.

Community, then, in this work is a geography of influence and has definable boundaries that can be plotted for most children. However, socialization influences can easily stretch across these boundaries. Television is a prime example of an influence that crosses community boundaries. Thus, defining community as a neighborhood may have utility in that the most influential relationship may be in the child’s proximal environment, but a broader definition, going even beyond geography, may be necessary to fully capture the comprehensive influences that affect assets.

Just as community has many different connotations, the term healthy community is used by many disciplines and can have various emphases. We focus that emphasis primarily on geographic communities that effectively organize social life (i.e., its residents and its systems) to consistently promote developmental assets among young people, from birth through age 20.

Healthy communities for children and adolescents are places with a shared commitment. They are distinguished as relational and intergenerational places that emphasize support, empowerment, boundaries, and opportunities and a shared commitment to developing internal assets. Developmental assets become a language of the common good, and the commitment to engage citizens and systems pursuing this common good is visible, long term, and inclusive. It is important to note that this is a vision of the developmental infrastructure. As such, it must be recognized that there also are economic and service infrastructures that are needed to address additional immediate community concerns such as jobs, safety, and racial and socioeconomic inequities.

As communities organize to become asset-building places, the health and well-being of youth should improve. Work is currently underway to test this hypothesis. We also expect the effect to be bidirectional; healthy youth also enhance the welfare of the community.

Following are some of the images we should be able to observe in healthy communities, as contrasted with communities not engaged in collective asset building:

- All residents build caring relationships with children and adolescents and express this caring through dialogue, listening, commending positive behavior,
knowing their names, acknowledging their presence, involving them in decision making and doing things with them.

- Neighborhoods develop intentional mechanisms to name, know, and engage children and adolescents in constructive ways.
- Families elevate asset development to top priority for their own children and their children’s friends.
- Religious institutions mobilize their capacity for naturally occurring intergenerational relationships, parent education, value development, quality structured opportunities, and service to the community.
- Schools place priority on becoming caring environments for all students, provide additional opportunities for the nurture of values deemed crucial by the community, strengthen curricular activities, and use connection to parents to escalate parental involvement and reinforce the importance of family attention to assets.
- Youth organizations train leaders and volunteers in asset-building strategies and provide a continuum of opportunities for healthy relationships with adults and peers.
- Businesses that employ teenagers address the assets of support, boundaries, commitment to learning, values, and social competencies. Employers develop family-friendly policies and provide mechanisms for employees to build relationships with youth.
- Through policy, training, and resource allocation, city government moves asset development to top priority.

Ultimately, rebuilding and strengthening the developmental infrastructure in a community is not a program run by professionals. It is a movement of people and systems that arises from and continually recreates a community-wide sense of common purpose and creates a normative culture in which all residents are expected by virtue of their membership in the community to promote the positive development of children and adolescents.

Core Principles

The classic tenets of community-building and community development (Mattessich & Monsen, 1997; Stone, 1996) and child and adolescent development (e.g., Wynn, Richman, Rubinstein, & Littell, 1987) are relevant to this complicated work of understanding and promoting community change. Hence, our conceptual model of change includes a series of core tenets. The first is the classic principle of collaboration. All socializing systems in a town or city must work together in an asset-building community. These include youth organizations and religious institutions, as well as neighborhoods, schools, and families. These all have potential for directly promoting developmental assets, and success of an initiative will depend on how well each system is activated, trained, and supported in its efforts (Benson, 1997).

At the same time, there are sectors within a community whose influence is more indirect but whose participation in a community-wide spirit of responsibility is still necessary. One such sector is local government, which, through policy, resource allocation, and advocacy, can advance the power of socializing systems. Others include community education, libraries, health care providers, higher education, and the media, each of which has an important teaching and mobilization role (Benson, 1997).

The business sector has both direct and indirect influence. Direct influence can be exercised through its support for and mentoring of adolescent employees. Indirect influence is exercised through policies that enhance asset-building such as family-friendly policies and paid release time for employees to serve as mentors, volunteers, or coaches. In addition, the business and corporate sector can play an important role (along with other philanthropic entities) in providing resources (i.e., financial and in-kind) to support the community mobilization process (Benson, 1997).

The second principle is comprehensiveness. It refers to the understanding that social issues are interconnected. Hence, change is facilitated when the effort seeks to alter all the interconnected parts. For example, economic revitalization requires strategies to simultaneously tackle housing, employment, wages, job training, and education. In the case of child and adolescent development, comprehensiveness means, in part, that threats to health such as adolescent pregnancy, alcohol and other substance use, school failure, and antisocial behavior cannot be solved individually. Rather, they must be seen as symptoms with pervasive underlying causes, which can be described as a decay of the developmental infrastructure (Benson, 1997).

Comprehensiveness also has two additional meanings in this context.

1. An asset-building initiative should seek to promote the larger territory of all 40 developmental assets, not just a subset of them. This reflects the cumulative nature of the developmental assets.
2. Asset-building efforts necessitate comprehensive strategies, in which policy, programs, and human relationships are integrated to create a daily web of asset-building for all children and adolescents.

The third principle is broad and sustained civic engagement. In building healthy developmental communities, the critical actors are the residents who live or work within the boundaries of community. They have considerable power and capacity to promote developmental assets. The role of traditional leadership
BEYOND THE "VILLAGE" Rhetoric

Long-term change will be possible when a passion for becoming an asset-building community becomes deeply grounded in social norms and the self-definitions of the residents. It is the people (neighbor, parent, parishioner, shop owner, coach, teacher) who can sustain a movement across many incarnations of leadership. These same people can also begin to embody the shifting norms and encourage their peers to do the same. Thus, the vision for asset-building communities emphasizes the importance of the individual transformation and action alongside organizational commitment and actions (Benson, 1997).

The sixth principle germane to building developmental assets is the need for both depth and breadth. Depth refers to repeated or redundant experience. For example, research show that the value of family support is enhanced by its frequency and quality. Although evidence is less clear, the positive developmental consequences of neighborhood caring are enhanced when it is experienced long-term with the participation of multiple actors. (See review in Scales & Leffert, in press.) Breadth pertains to the reach or scope of planned change within a community and on signals, based on the research discussed earlier, that most children and adolescents within a community lack many of the developmental assets. By extension, the target for building developmental assets is the universe of children and adolescents within a community.

Conceptual Model of Change

Since 1994, more than 200 cities have begun or are beginning the planning process of intentional community-wide initiatives to unleash long-term citizen and system commitment and action. Those cities and towns are using the developmental assets paradigm to unify community sectors around a shared vision and to empower both individual citizens and multiple socializing systems. Most of these initiatives emerge on their own and most become part of a network supported with national and regional conferences, print and video resources, and expanding training services and consulting. These cities include urban centers like Seattle, Albuquerque, Minneapolis, and Orlando, many middle-size cities, as well as suburbs and rural communities in 32 states.

This community change process emphasizes high levels of grassroots engagement, cross-sector leadership, and sustained attention to public awareness and civic engagement. The models of change and of evolving evaluation are grounded in the traditions of social movements, community empowerment, and capacity-building. This rapidly expanding arena of inquiry and action involves a number of elements, including planned change models and a long-term focus on studying the dynamics of multiple asset-building initiatives.
Our goal is to inform best practices for planning, launching, and sustaining initiatives as well as to pinpoint replicable dynamics that alter the actions of citizens and socializing systems.

Figure 2 presents a working model that unites many of the points described in this article. It begins with a set of goals and combines these with a set of recommended community change strategies. These include a sustained commitment to public education and awareness-building in which the concept, theory, and implications of the developmental assets framework are communicated to all residents through multiple dissemination mechanisms. A number of resources have been developed to help catalyze and support those local communications systems. Current research efforts at Search Institute include investigations of effective dissemination mechanisms for urban families disconnected from mainstream media and related forms of traditional communication and the development of strategies, based on emerging public health models, for moving individuals from awareness to action (Andresen, 1995).

The model hypothesizes that the effective and sustained implementation of these systems of communication, coordination, planning, training, networking, and capacity-building (all pursued more within a social movement context than a traditional program context) will lead to a series of changes that begin with widespread individual-level change, normative change among opinion makers and indigenous leaders as well as residents, leading to system-level change across institutions. In turn, the model predicts changes in youths' developmental assets that reflect and promote short-term and long-term behavior change. The model has helped frame a comprehensive evaluation system in Colorado, as described subsequently. The model also has certain limitations requiring additional conceptualization; it is biased in a linear direction and insufficiently captures the random and chaotic nature of much "planned" change within a social movement. Understanding what are and will be more organic interactions among these many constructs is necessary.

### Evolving Support Systems for Community Initiatives

As the number of communities and places that were embracing the asset framework grew, it became increasingly clear there was a need for a facilitative support structure that was matched to the nature of the movement itself. Initially this structure came in the

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3 These research efforts are underway with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and W. K. Kellogg Foundations.
BEYOND THE "VILLAGE" RHETORIC

form of a series of "Link 'n' Learn" half-day meetings. Those involved in using the framework in their community mobilization efforts could come and network with others and share their inspirations and challenges. These meetings served to set a tone of shared learning and networking.

However, as the demand for speaking, training, and consulting grew, it quickly became clear that a more systematic operating structure was needed. In the spring of 1996, Search Institute launched the Healthy Community—Healthy Youth Initiative, a comprehensive community-change effort involving research, evaluation, resource development, training, and consultation. The goal of this initiative was to facilitate and encourage asset-building movements that are more the creation of local ingenuity than the adoption of a prescriptive model. Accordingly, we have begun a shift from a primarily reactive mode to a proactive, intentional mode of providing speaking, training, networking, evaluation, and consulting services to initiatives around the country. Critical to the philosophy behind this effort is the belief, as noted earlier, that the 40 developmental assets paradigm is a useful way to capture and frame a community vision of what youth need to succeed, which is then strategically addressed by unleashing local mechanisms of planning and support. Rather than creating curricula or programs that defined how asset-building takes place, emphasis is placed on empowering communities to design important change efforts and their own ways of building assets.

As the asset building initiatives continued to spring up around the country, several regions appeared ready for more sustained support. Community initiatives in New Mexico and in New England led in 1996 to the positioning of regional consultants.

In the spring of 1996, another source of energy around asset building was emerging in Colorado based on a number of community efforts and the desire of those communities for a statewide support system. In early 1997, the Assets for Colorado Youth Initiative was launched. The initiative is staffed by Search Institute through an office in Denver and intentionally creates a combination of microgrants, public awareness campaigns, training, consulting, and networking activities to support efforts in dozens of communities. This initiative includes three grant programs centered around mobilizing communities, building statewide partnerships, and innovative efforts at asset building directly with youth. Even in setting up a grant-making effort, however, care was taken to ensure that the initiatives in communities were not driven by the funds but rather by an overall community vision. All grants are kept small in size (less than $30,000 in any 1 year, for up to 3 years) and designed to reinforce and help resource local efforts to build assets.

On a parallel track with the increasing intentionality about community mobilization, Search Institute also was being asked to work with national and local youth development organizations of various types. Just as the early community efforts recognized the need to mobilize across sectors and create a set of integrated roles for multiple players in the community, it also became clear that greater depth was needed in particular sectors. The first two sectors where this emerged, partly due to the availability of resources and the nature of their primary work, were the religious—congregational sector and national youth development organizations.

A major effort to utilize the asset framework as a tool in youth development programs within a community's faith communities was initiated in a project called Uniti Congregations for Youth Development. This project sought to unite many religiously based youth workers from diverse faith traditions around a common understanding of what youth need to succeed and then help them develop ways that they could integrate those efforts into their youth work and congregations as a whole. This effort now is operating in seven sites around the country supported by a series of resources and trainings. It also has spawned a series of efforts within various faiths and denominations to incorporate the asset paradigm within their own systems.

Within the youth development organization sector, the dynamics were somewhat different. These organizations have been doing positive youth development for many years. As the youth development approach was emerging across the country, both through the asset paradigm and the efforts of others (e.g., Academy for Educational Development's Center for Youth Development and Policy Research in Washington, DC, Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago), so was the need for accountability. The efforts of United Way of America and others to become increasingly outcome-driven led several youth development organizations within the National Collaboration for Youth to seek ways of using a measurement-based, explicit statement of what youth need to succeed as a possible basis for evaluation. These circumstances then provided the opportunity to present the asset framework through a series of national and regional meetings sponsored by different youth development organizations. These efforts often then connected to or initiated local asset—

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"The Healthy Community—Healthy Youth Initiative is supported by a number of community, regional, and national foundations. Lutheran Brotherhood, a national fraternal benefit society with headquarters in Minneapolis, provides major corporate sponsorship as well as a network of volunteers and professionals, which assist with some local mobilization efforts.

"Assets for Colorado Youth is a 5½-year initiative supported by the Colorado Trust.

"The Dewitt Wallace—Reader's Digest Fund supports this multi-site effort."
BENSON, LEFFERT, SCALES, & BLYTH

building efforts to bring sector-specific work together with community-based efforts. The YMCA of the United States is one example. Asked to bring together the literature on the impact of youth development for use by local YMCAs, the resulting report, Making the Case (Leffert, Saito, Blyth, & Kroenke, 1996), led to the creation of a very simple, posttest only survey that was designed to assess how activities at YMCAs inform developmental assets.

Evaluating a Movement: Challenges and Opportunities

Although the asset framework has been grounded in research from many fields and has been driven in part by the survey designed to measure assets, the need for and difficulties involved in evaluating the larger movement of community, regional, and organizational changes is complex and still in its infancy. Because virtually all of the initiatives around the country are spontaneous efforts and not funded in any way by a central source, it has been very difficult to get even a basic understanding of what is being implemented, how the asset paradigm is being utilized, whether there are major local evaluation efforts underway, and how useful different resources and services have been.

Recent efforts to capture some of this information more systematically have come from a survey of over 200 communities that claim to be using the developmental assets paradigm. This survey, with a 70% response rate, provides several insights—most notably that communities are using multiple frameworks to mobilize their communities and that help on evaluation is the single area of highest need.

Fortunately, as part of the Assets for Colorado Youth Initiative described previously, a systematic series of evaluation efforts are underway. These include statewide surveys of adults and youth at multiple points in time as well as carefully designed 4-year longitudinal studies of several thousand adolescents and parents in two communities that are mobilizing around the asset paradigm. In addition, 10 other communities are part of a series of implementation and outcome studies designed to address critical research questions. Through those efforts, and a number of similar but smaller scale efforts in selected other communities, a base of findings is gradually being built that will inform the field about the effectiveness and challenges of utilizing a nonprogrammatic, movement-oriented change strategy.

Conclusion

The constructs of developmental assets and asset-building community represent promising approaches.

Critical scientific and conceptual issues remain. Among issues requiring deep and sustained inquiry are:

1. The definition and refinement of the territory of developmental assets.
2. The generalizability of the paradigm.
3. The measurement of the asset framework.
4. The determinants of developmental assets within each of multiple sectors (e.g., families, schools, youth organizations, neighborhoods, religious institutions).
5. Models of effective youth engagement within community initiatives.
6. Strategies for leadership development and renewal.
7. The degree to which intentional community change strategies can alter developmental asset profiles.
8. The impact of community-level variables (e.g., size, diversity, economics, region) on the change process.
9. The sustainability of change.

What is emerging is a multidisciplinary line of inquiry that examines the intersection of community and child and adolescent development. A major part of the inquiry is learning from and with many communities initiating what might be construed as naturalistic social "experiments" in unleashing their developmental capacity and building their developmental infrastructure. Ultimately, the most critical question is how communities can be supported to integrate and simultaneously pursue strength-building in three community infrastructures: economic, service delivery, and development. The goal of this integration is to develop a combination of policy, resources, and actions, which will meet basic human needs, reduce threats to human development, provide humane and effective access to services, and promote healthy development.

References


BEYOND THE "VILLAGE" Rhetoric


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