



Does it pay to participate? Neighborhood-based organizations and the social development of urban adolescents

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Abstract

Research on the developmental gains associated with participation in youth-service organizations has not kept pace with the proliferation in funding for these kinds of programs. Advocates describe them as important venues for youth to connect to mainstream institutions and to promote social and cognitive development, especially among underserved minority youth. Using data collected from 546 urban African-American mothers and their children in Chicago, we compare the availability of youth-serving organizations in poor and non-poor neighborhoods and consider whether participation has some positive implications for youth on a number of developmental assets. A theoretical model is proposed to consider the mechanisms by which youth may be affected. The findings suggest that when available, youth participation in locally based organizations is greater in more disadvantaged neighborhoods and that participation has important and positive implications for youth's self-concept as well as their academic commitment and educational expectations. While participation may also help to connect youth to prosocial neighborhood peers, school-based peers appear to be the most important friendship networks for encouraging a normative orientation toward academic attainment. The policy implications of these findings are discussed in terms of ways to help youth develop prosocial competencies in organized social settings during after-school hours.

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1. Introduction

As youth progress through adolescence they must acquire the developmental assets necessary to cope emotionally, socially and physically as independent adults (Allen, Moore, Kuperminc, & Bell, 1998; Scales, Leffert, & Lerner, 1999). It is during this critical period in the life course development that children gain the experiences necessary to bolster self-concept and promote favorable expectations in their own abilities, qualities that are invaluable for successful navigation toward adulthood (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999; Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002). As such, the acquisition of these assets is seen as an important predictor of future achievement and, particularly for poor African-American youth who grow up in disadvantaged circumstances, plays a pivotal role in their development (McLoyd, 1990; Ogbu, 1981).

Extant literature has focused on various important social supports that aid in the acquisition of these developmental attributes, namely the role played by family (Conger, Conger, & Elder, 1997; Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1997), peers (Crane, 1991; Rankin & Quane, 2002), and teachers (Dryfoos, 1994; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). More recently, attention has centered on the effectiveness of organized extracurricular or after-school leisure activities in promoting successful youth development during out-of-school time (Broh, 2002; Brown & Theobald, 1998; Gerber, 1996; Halpern, Barker, & Molland, 2000). In particular, studies emphasize the positive effects of participation on various educational outcomes, such as educational aspirations, grades, and school completion (Broh, 2002; Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999; McNeal, 1995). Proponents of such activities argue that they help cultivate skills and values that are conducive to academic achievement, such as heightened self-esteem and self-confidence as well as a positive work ethic. These activities also expose participants to more conventional peer social networks (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Marsh, 1992; McNeal, 1995; Rehberg, 1969). Whether these benefits hold for low-income minority youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods has not been directly addressed in the research literature but it is reasonable to speculate that disadvantaged youth stand to benefit most from their involvement because they have fewer institutional alternatives available to them that can serve this purpose (Broh, 2002).

We know from past research that African-American families from neighborhoods of concentrated poverty are less likely to participate in various community-based activities such as summer recreational programs, organized sporting activities, or youth-serving organizations, due in part to a dearth of such resources in many of these neighborhoods (Connell & Halpern-Felsher, 1997; Furstenberg et al., 1999; Rankin & Quane, 2002). However, what we do not know is whether African-American youth who do participate realize any positive gains in comparison to their non-participating counterparts. It is this question we focus on here. In particular, our analysis explores whether neighborhood disadvantage affects participation rates among urban African-American adolescents and if youth from these neighborhoods realize any important advantages from being involved with such programs. Since peer influences are especially important in this developmental period, we are also interested in the kinds of associations youth are likely to form and the social competencies they are likely to develop due to their participation. To answer these questions we use data gathered from a random sample of African-American mothers and their children in majority minority middle-class and poor neighborhoods of Chicago.

2. Disadvantaged neighborhoods and youth development

Research on the role of neighborhoods has proliferated in the past two decades, largely due to the influential work of Wilson (1987, 1991, 1996), which calls attention to the social isolation of

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