

## Andrews University Digital Commons @ Andrews University

---

Faculty Publications

Behavioral Sciences

---

6-2014

# Decades of Research Shows Adolescents Do Better With Community Service Rather than Incarceration

Gary L. Hopkins  
*Andrews University*, [ghopipad@gmail.com](mailto:ghopipad@gmail.com)

Duane C. McBride  
*Andrews University*, [mcbride@andrews.edu](mailto:mcbride@andrews.edu)

Brent C. Featherston

Peter C. Gleason  
*Loma Linda University*

Jacqueline Moreno  
*University of California - Riverside*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/behavioral-pubs>

 Part of the [Juvenile Law Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hopkins, Gary L.; McBride, Duane C.; Featherston, Brent C.; Gleason, Peter C.; and Moreno, Jacqueline, "Decades of Research Shows Adolescents Do Better With Community Service Rather than Incarceration" (2014). *Faculty Publications*. 25.  
<http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/behavioral-pubs/25>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Behavioral Sciences at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact [repository@andrews.edu](mailto:repository@andrews.edu).

# Decades of Research Shows Adolescents Do Better With Community Service Rather than Incarceration

Gary L. Hopkins, MD, DrPH

With contributing authors:

Duane C. McBride, PhD

Brent C. Featherston, JD

Peter C. Gleason, PhD

Jacqueline Moreno, MPH

**T**he purpose of this article is to share with the legal community some of what we as social science researchers have learned from our research and the research of others, regarding the health and education benefits of community service among adolescents. In other words, we will attempt to answer the question of whether there are benefits of performing community service to the individuals performing the service, and to describe what these benefits are.

Sentencing individuals to community service in the modern legal environment began in 1966 in Alameda County, California. Judges there began imposing work assignments as an alternative to jail for offenders who could not pay traffic fines.<sup>1</sup>

Eventually courts extended use of the sanction to other low-level non-violent offenders.<sup>1</sup> The work assignments grew increasingly diverse.

Sentencing offenders to unpaid labor inspired some judges' creativity as they combined community service with jail or a fine or both. Offenders did low-level maintenance work for public agencies—clearing litter from playgrounds, sweeping up around public buildings or housing projects, cutting grass and raking leaves in parks, washing cars in an agency motor pool. Others did clerical work or answered phones. Thousands more were sent off



to help out at hospitals, nursing homes, social service centers, and other nonprofit organizations.<sup>1</sup>

The practice spread across the United States by the late 1970s, as the federal Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) provided funding to encourage it. LEAA concluded that incarceration for many non-violent offenders may increase recidivism by placing low-level offenders in prisons with violent career criminals, and further, that formal conviction and incarceration severely limited future economic activities.<sup>2</sup> Experimental studies have shown that community service as a part of a restitution approach rather than an incarceration approach relates to lower rates of recidivism.<sup>3</sup>

Organized community service in the primary and secondary educational system began in the early 1970s with the introduction of what is referred to today as *service-learning*. Much earlier, in around 1900<sup>4</sup>, educator Arthur Dunn promoted service in the community as a part of his civ-

LEAA concluded that incarceration for many non-violent offenders may increase recidivism by placing low-level offenders in prisons with violent career criminals, and further, that formal conviction and incarceration severely limited future economic activities.<sup>2</sup>

---

ics class in Indianapolis and eventually the act of service was combined with a curriculum to form “service-learning.”

Service-learning “is a process of involving students in community service activities combined with facilitated means for applying the experience to their academic and personal development. It is a form

of experiential education aimed at enhancing and enriching student learning in course material. When compared to other forms of experiential learning like internships and cooperative education, it is similar in that it is student-centered, hands-on, and directly applicable to the curriculum.<sup>5</sup> An example of service-learning is taking grade school students to a nursing home to visit elderly people. During the visit, students might find that residents of the nursing home were born in the 1920s. In order to make this a service-learning experience and not simply community service (which in itself is valuable), the student would go back to school and learn who the United States Presidents were in the 1920s and what cars looked like in the 1920s in order to link the visitation experience with the elderly to their school curriculum.

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

### **Benefits of community service to the provider of the service**

#### *Community Service Reduces Risky Sexual Behavior and Teen Pregnancy*

Researchers have exhaustively evaluated teen pregnancy programs and reported what they refer to as “best practices.” Comparing individual researcher’s “best practices” often reveals very similar findings. One item repeatedly emerges: youngsters who engage in service-learning or community service are less likely to be involved in a teen pregnancy.<sup>6</sup>

“Service-learning connects meaningful community service with academic learning, civic responsibility, and personal growth. It enables young people to study community issues in-depth, plan and initiate community action, and make a difference in their community.”<sup>6</sup>

The issues related to sexual behavior among the young are extensive. Risky sexual behaviors primarily include unprotected sex, multiple partners, and unfamiliarity with partners.<sup>7</sup> The United States has one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy among developed countries.<sup>8</sup> There are 41.5 births per 1,000 women in the 15- to 19-year-old age group, according to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report from 2009.<sup>9</sup> It has been estimated that the cost of teen pregnancy is \$9 billion per year in the United States.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the huge societal cost of teen pregnancy, teen pregnancy may also be a marker of sexual behavior that increases the risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections, such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).<sup>10</sup> The CDC reported that the total number of new HIV cases reported each year decreased from 2001 to 2005; however, there was an increase in those years of new cases of HIV in people aged 15 to 29 years.<sup>11</sup>

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

In the Teen Outreach study, participants in the program had less than half the risk (42%) of school

Social scientists have also learned over the past two decades that engagement in community service among adolescents often yields valuable outcomes for the adolescents' health.

suspension compared to the control group, and course failure was only 39% as large as the control group.<sup>10</sup> Teen pregnancy was only 41% as large in the Teen Outreach group. Each of these results was statistically significant, even after adjusting for sociodemographics, baseline levels of these behaviors, and potential biases in self-reporting.<sup>10</sup>

Another important study regarding service-learning as a preventive method for risky sexual behavior was a retrospective study of over 9,000 adult women in the San Diego area that was conducted in the early 1990s.<sup>12</sup> This study analyzed the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) score (emotional, physical, or sexual abuse; exposure to domestic violence, substance abusing, mentally ill or criminal household member; or separated/divorced parent) among patients and sought to explain characteristics in individuals who were once pregnant as teens. The study suggested that engagement in early, unprotected sex leading to adolescent pregnancy may be indicative of an attempt for interpersonal connectedness and support that may have been missing in childhood among these women.<sup>12</sup> The investigators suggested that youth development programs focused on building competence and confidence through relationships with peers and mentors, promoting education, enhancing decision-making and autonomy, and offering community service opportunities for at-risk youth who may be exposed to these “ACE” characteristics.<sup>12</sup>

Doug Kirby<sup>13-16</sup> (who, until his sudden death in 2012, was a Ph.D. and scholar at ETR and Associates, an organization whose work focuses on improving the lives of young people) produced work that remains at

the forefront of reviewing programs for effectiveness in delaying the initiation of sexual activity and identifying features related to successful and unsuccessful interventions. He reported that service-learning programs among young people are effective in reducing adolescent unprotected sex, pregnancy, and child-bearing.

Other researchers confirm Kirby’s findings. Melchior evaluated the Learn and Serve programs throughout the United States.<sup>17</sup> Students in these programs spent an average of

Scales and Benson, in their manuscript on social capital and pro-social orientation among youth, reported that pro-social orientation was inversely correlated with all risk behavior patterns.

77 hours providing various community services. Pregnancy rates among participants during the year in which they participated were lower than among non-participants.

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

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

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

### **Community service reduces criminal behavior, substance abuse, and other health risk behaviors**

Scales and Benson, in their manuscript on social capital and pro-social orientation among youth, reported that pro-social orientation was inversely correlated with all risk behavior patterns measured in their research, including delinquency (that is, as the adolescents performed more pro-social behaviors, their engagement in at-risk behaviors decrease).<sup>20</sup> Coefficients ranged from low to moderate (-.14 to -.25) between helping others and problem alcohol use, use of illicit drugs, use of tobacco, gambling, anti-social behavior, violence, school problems, and sexual behavior risk.

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

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

#### *Community Service Improves Academic Performance*

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

In a nationally representative study involving more than 4,000 high school students, Schmidt and colleagues found that those participat-

Another study by Klein and colleagues concluded that adolescents involved in community service are likely to show an increase in basic social and decision-making skills and a decrease in violent criminal behavior and risky sexual behavior.<sup>22</sup>

ing in any type of service improved their academic performance.<sup>24</sup> Students' grades increased by 12% and their civic knowledge increased by 16%. Although 27% of the students performed service as a requirement and the number of hours spent in service varied, the results remained significant. Furthermore, students working directly with individuals in need had higher grades compared to those who performed other types of services.

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

vice per week were 50% less likely to earn D's and F's in school.

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

#### **Discussion and recommendations**

The information presented here demonstrates that the benefits of serving others accrue not only to those being served, but also to those providing the service. Research data shows that community service can be an effective part of recidivism prevention and a part of broader community delinquency prevention programs. Importantly, Doug Kirby recommends that adults who perform these service activities with youth

provide structured time for preparation and reflection before, during, and after the service.<sup>23</sup>

We suggest that when the courts impose community service activities on young people, that they engage high quality, caring adults to work with the courts and to be involved in the service with the youth. The literature on adolescent and high-risk behaviors is clear that there are potential benefits of engaging youngsters with adults, even with non-family adults. Although parents are clearly among the most important and influential adults in the lives of young people, adolescents do develop relationships with adults besides their parents. These relationships may include teachers, coaches, friends' parents, neighbors, counselors, and religious leaders. The relationships may develop through existing social networks or as part of formal mentoring programs. Research clearly shows that relationships with pro-social non-parental adults can have a strong positive effect on adolescent development.<sup>29</sup> We would urge the courts to consider engaging well-screened adults to work with adolescents in providing helpful services to others.

In the process of designing these community service projects for youth, we suggest a three-step process. First, meet with the youth and talk about the planned activity. Second, accompany them to perform the service. Third, reflect with them and talk about what they did and their feelings about these activities.

We would discourage the courts from sending young people out to do service without the engagement of an adult. We suggest that the courts order that the community service be performed between the hours of 3 and 6 p.m., which are the



hours when the highest rates of drug use, sexual behavior and delinquency occur.<sup>30</sup>

### Endnotes

1. Anderson DC. Community Service: A Productive Way to Punish. In: *Sensible Justice: Alternatives to Prison*. New York: The New Press. 1998. Chapter available at <http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/a/anderson-justice.html>. Accessed March 24, 2014.
2. McBride DC, Dalton SG. Criminal justice diversion for whom? In: Cohn A, Ed., *Criminal Justice Planning and Development*. Sage Research Progress in Criminology; 1977:103-116.
3. Schneider AL. Restitution and recidivism rates of juvenile offenders: results from four experimental studies. *Criminology*. 1986;24:533-552.
4. The History of Service Learning. Los Angeles County Office of Education. [http://www.lacoe.edu/Portals/0/Curriculum-Instruction/SLHistory\\_doc.pdf](http://www.lacoe.edu/Portals/0/Curriculum-Instruction/SLHistory_doc.pdf). Accessed March 24, 2014.
5. Definition of Service Learning. Fayetteville State University, Office of Civic Engagement & Service Learning. <http://www.uncfsu.edu/civic-engagement/service-learning/definition-of-service-learning>. Accessed March 24, 2014.
6. Best Practices in Teen Pregnancy Prevention Practitioner Handbook [Published 2003]: Abstract. *Journal of Extension*. 2003;41(2). <http://www.joe.org/joe/2003april/tt1.php>. Accessed March 24, 2014.

We would discourage the courts from sending young people out to do service without the engagement of an adult.

7. Grossman M, Markowitz S. I did what last night? Adolescent risky sexual behavior and substance abuse. *Eastern Economic Journal*. 2005;31:383-405.
8. Singh S, Darroch J. Adolescent pregnancy and childbearing: levels and trends in developed countries. *Family Planning Perspectives*. 2000;31:14-23.
9. HIV, Other STD and Teen Pregnancy Prevention and San Bernardino Students [Fact Sheet]. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/yrbs/pdf/hiv/sanbernardino\\_hiv\\_combo.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/yrbs/pdf/hiv/sanbernardino_hiv_combo.pdf). Published 2009. Accessed March 24, 2014.

10. Allen J, Philliber S, Herrling S, Kuperminc GP. Preventing teen pregnancy and academic failure: experimental evaluation of a developmentally based approach. *Child Development*. 1997;64:729-742.

11. HIV-AIDS Surveillance Report. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pdf/statistics\\_2005\\_HIV\\_Surveillance\\_Report\\_vol\\_17.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pdf/statistics_2005_HIV_Surveillance_Report_vol_17.pdf). 2005. Vol. 17. Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Published 2005. Revised June 2007. Accessed March 29, 2014.

12. Hillis SD, Anda RF, Dube SR, Felitti VJ, Marchbanks PA, Marks JS. The association between adverse childhood experiences and adolescent pregnancy, long-term psychosocial consequences and fetal death. *Pediatrics*. 2004;113:320-327.

13. Kirby D. Understanding what works and what doesn't in reducing adolescent sexual risk-taking. *Family Planning Perspectives*. 2001;33:276-281

14. Kirby D. Antecedents of adolescent initiation of sex, contraceptive use and pregnancy. *American Journal of Health Behavior*. 2002;26:473-485

15. Kirby D. Emerging Answers 2007: research finding on programs to reduce teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. <http://www.urban.org/events/thursdayschild/upload/Sarah-Brown-Handout.pdf>. Accessed March 24, 2014

16. Kirby D. The impact of abstinence and comprehensive sex and STD/HIV education programs on adolescent sexual behavior. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*. 2008;5:6-17.

17. Melchior A. Summary Report: National Evaluation of Learn and Serve America. Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University, Center for Human Resources; 1999. Available at: [http://www.cpn.org/topics/youth/k12/pdfs/Learn\\_and\\_Serve1999.pdf](http://www.cpn.org/topics/youth/k12/pdfs/Learn_and_Serve1999.pdf). Accessed March 29, 2014.

18. O'Donnell L, Stueve A, Wardlaw D, O'Donnell C. Adolescent suicidality and adult support: the reach for health study of urban youth. *American Journal of Health Behavior*. 2003;27:633-644.

19. Sigle-Rushton W, McLanahan S. Father absence and child well-being: a critical review. In: Moynihan DP, Smeeding TM, & Rainwater L, eds. *The Future of the Family*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation; 2004:116-154.

Research data show that community service can be an effective part of recidivism prevention and a part of broader community delinquency prevention programs.

20. Scales PS, Benson PL. Indicators of Positive Youth Development: Prosocial Orientation and Community Service (Draft Paper). Prepared for Indicators of Positive Youth Development Conference, convened by Child Trends, Washington, DC. [http://childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Child\\_Trends-2003\\_03\\_12\\_PD\\_PD-ConfScaBen.pdf](http://childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Child_Trends-2003_03_12_PD_PD-ConfScaBen.pdf). Published March 2003. Accessed March 24, 2014.

21. Eccles JS, Barber BL, Stone M, Hunt J. Extracurricular activities and adolescent development. *Journal of Social Issues*. 2003;59:865-889.

22. Klein JD, Sabaratnam P, Auerbach M, Smith S, Kodjo C, Lewis K, Ryan, Dandino C. Development and factor structure of a brief instrument to assess the impact of community programs on positive youth development: the Rochester Evaluation of Asset Development for Youth (READY) tool. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2006;45:252-260.

23. Hopkins GL, McBride DC, VanDerwaal C, Fayard C, Gleason PC, Kannenberg W, Moreno J & Roberts J. The power of serving others in preventing risk behaviors among adolescents. 2014. Manuscript in preparation for submission.

24. Schmidt JA, Shumow L, Kackar H. Adolescents' participation in service activities and its impact on academic, behavioral, and civic outcomes. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 2007;36:127-140.

25. Impacts of service-learning on participating K-12 students. National Service Knowledge Network. <https://www.nationalservicelearningresources.gov/impacts-service-learning-participating-k-12-students>. Published December 2002. Revised May 2007. Accessed March 24, 2014.

26. Laird M, Black S. *Service-learning evaluation project: Program effects for*

*at risk students*. Presentation at 2nd International Service-Learning Research Conference, October 2002, Nashville, TN. Available at <http://www.lions-quest.org/pdfs/ServiceLearningSFCEvaluation.pdf>. Accessed March 24, 2014.

27. Kraft N, Wheeler J. Service-learning and resilience in disaffected youth: A research study. In: Billig SH, Eyler J, eds. *Advances in service-learning research: Vol. 3. Deconstructing service-learning: Research exploring context, participation, and impacts*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age; 2003:213-238.

28. Maguin E, Loeber R. Academic performance and delinquency. *Crime and Delinquency*. 1996;20:145-204

29. Bernat DH, Resnick M. Connectedness in the lives of adolescents. In: DiClemente RJ, Hansen WB, Ponton LE, eds. *Handbook of Adolescent Health Risk Behavior*. New York, NY: Plenum Press; 2009:375-390.

30. VanderWaal C, Powell LM, Terry-McElrath YM, Yanjum B, Flay B. Community and school drug prevention strategy prevalence: differential effects by setting and substance. *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 2005;26:299-320.

## About the Author

**Gary L. Hopkins, MD, DrPH**, is Research Professor in the Department of Behavioral Sciences, and Director of the Center for Prevention Research for the Institute for Prevention of Addictions, at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

