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Original article

A Longitudinal Study of Youth Assets, Neighborhood Conditions, and Youth Sexual Behaviors

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: To prospectively determine whether individual, family, and community assets help youth to delay initiation of sexual intercourse (ISI); and for youth who do initiate intercourse, to use birth control and avoid pregnancy. The potential influence of neighborhood conditions was also investigated.

Methods: The Youth Asset Study was a 4-year longitudinal study involving 1,089 youth (mean age = 14.2 years, standard deviation = 1.6; 53% female; 40% white, 28% Hispanic, 23% African American, 9% other race) and their parents. Participants were living in randomly selected census tracts. We accomplished recruitment via door-to-door canvassing. We interviewed one youth and one parent from each household annually. We assessed 17 youth assets (e.g., responsible choices, family communication) believed to influence behavior at multiple levels via in-person interviews methodology. Trained raters who conducted annual windshield tours assessed neighborhood conditions.

Results: Cox proportional hazard or marginal logistic regression modeling indicated that 11 assets (e.g., family communication, school connectedness) were significantly associated with reduced risk for ISI; seven assets (e.g., educational aspirations for the future, responsible choices) were significantly associated with increased use of birth control at last sex; and 10 assets (e.g., family communication, school connectedness) were significantly associated with reduced risk for pregnancy. Total asset score was significantly associated with all three outcomes. Positive neighborhood conditions were significantly associated with increased birth control use, but not with ISI or pregnancy.

Conclusions: Programming to strengthen youth assets may be a promising strategy for reducing youth sexual risk behaviors.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

This is the first study to follow youth over an extended period to assess prospective associations among multiple youth assets, objectively measured neighborhood environment, and teen sexual behavior. The results provide strong evidence that youth with specific assets avoid sexual risk behaviors, and that the neighborhood environment is also important to consider.

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The 2010 United States (US) teen birth rate was 34 per 1,000 teenagers aged 15–19 years, the lowest US rate ever recorded [1]. Despite the decrease, the US teen birth rate is significantly higher than other industrialized nations. The 2008 teen birth rates for Australia, Canada, and Sweden were 17, 14, and 6 per 1,000 teens,

respectively [2]. Moreover, aggregated data from 1995 to 2000 show teen birth rates of 9 to 31 per 1,000 teens for Sweden, Canada, Australia, and Great Britain, compared with 51 births per 1,000 teens for the US [3]. These data indicate that the US has chronically higher teen pregnancy rates.

High teen birth rates persist despite numerous programs intended to prevent teen pregnancy [4]. These programs have been in existence for the past few decades, and more recently have focused on specific sets of mediators, such as knowledge of the risks of unprotected sex and self-efficacy regarding saying no to sexual advances. The programs typically intervene directly with youth, with less focus on family and community factors that may also influence sexual risk behaviors. Most US teenagers (96% of females and 97% of males) receive some form of sexuality education before age 18 [5]. Some of these programs reduce initiation of sexual intercourse (ISI) rates and increase rates of protected sexual intercourse [4]. These traditional teen pregnancy programs are important, but other approaches to reducing sexual risk behavior should be explored. For example, a recent review of teen pregnancy prevention programs found evidence of effectiveness for 28 programs, four of which were classified as youth development programs [6].

Youth development programming addresses youth risk reduction through strategies to strengthen “youth assets,” which represent skills, competencies, relationships, and opportunities that help youth to overcome challenges and successfully transition through developmental stages into adulthood [7–9]. Assets, such as aspirations for the future and parent–child communication, are theorized to influence youth behavior via individual, family, and community pathways, a perspective that is similar to the socioecological approach to understanding and predicting health behaviors and outcomes [10–12].

Cross-sectional research suggests that specific assets may protect youth from engaging in risk behaviors including early ISI and unprotected sexual intercourse [13–15]. Prospective research has typically focused on a few assets (e.g., family level assets) and reported mixed results, and has suffered from significant limitations. For example, a review of longitudinal research on correlates of youth ISI found nonsignificant, small, or varying effects (e.g., by race or age) for factors (e.g., family processes, school attitudes), similar to the assets assessed in the present study [16]. The authors noted at least two limitations of the research: (1) attrition and missing data were high, which resulted in a median of approximately 40% of participants being excluded from analyses; and (2) the temporal sequence of assets and the occurrence of sexual behavior were not always clearly established [16]. Another review of 30 studies of asset-building programs found that 15 programs significantly improved at least one sexual health outcome, and that effective programs were more likely to focus on the school context, family processes, and youth-level assets [17]. Longitudinal research of multiple youth assets and sexual behavior is a feasible and logical step in the process of understanding how to reduce teen birth rates [17].

There is emerging evidence that the neighborhood environment is also associated with youth sexual behavior. Cross-sectional studies have found that contextual differences between neighborhoods are related to youth sexual intercourse [18] and that specific neighborhood factors such as social disorganization (e.g., residential stability) are associated with ISI [19]. Longitudinal studies have found that lower neighborhood socioeconomic status was associated with increased youth sexual risk behaviors [20,21]. Other prospective research reported

associations among dimensions of caregiver affect and youth sexual behavior, and found that in some cases the associations varied because of the amount of neighborhood disadvantage [22]. Roche and Leventhal [23] found that family management practices were more strongly associated with lower odds of ISI as neighborhood disorder increased; but surprisingly, family practices were associated with increased odds for ISI at lower levels of neighborhood disorder. Finally, a recent study found that among youth living in higher-poverty neighborhoods, girls with college aspirations and boys with positive life expectations were at greater risk for ISI [24]. These findings indicate that neighborhood factors as well as youth assets merit further investigation [25,26].

Most studies of neighborhood context have used aggregate census data or subjective data collected from participants [19–24]. An exception was a cross-sectional study that found that poor neighborhood conditions, as objectively determined by the Broken Window (BW) assessment instrument, were significantly related to higher rates of gonorrhea [27]. A goal of the current study was to use similar methodology by assessing neighborhood conditions using the BW assessment tool to determine whether the physical condition of the neighborhood is associated with youth sexual risk behaviors and if youth asset–sexual risk behavior associations differ when the physical condition of the neighborhood is considered.

This study builds on research linking assets and neighborhood environment as factors associated with the reduction of youth sexual risk behaviors [14–24,28]. To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate associations among multiple youth assets, objectively assessed neighborhood conditions, and youth sexual behaviors in a longitudinal research design. The purposes of this study were to: (1) prospectively investigate associations among assets, neighborhood conditions, and youth sexual behaviors; and (2) determine whether associations between youth assets and sexual risk behaviors vary as a result of neighborhood conditions.

Methods

Sampling and data collection

We stratified census tracts in a Midwestern city and the immediate surrounding area by income and race/ethnicity using 2000 census data, and then randomly selected them with the goal of obtaining a diverse community-based study population by oversampling census tracts in which greater numbers of minorities resided. We conducted door-to-door canvassing within the 20 selected census tracts to obtain the baseline sample of youth and parents. One youth (aged 12–17 years) and one parent from each consenting household participated in the study [29].

We collected data from youth–parent pairs using computer-assisted personal/self-interviewing procedures conducted in their homes by two-person interviewing teams. Parents and youth were interviewed simultaneously but in separate rooms. Youth completed the risk behavior items in private using the computers with wav sound files and headphones to minimize any potential reading problems. We collected five waves of data annually beginning with the baseline survey conducted in 2003–2004 and concluding in 2007–2008.

Measures

Variables reported by the youth were: age at baseline, sex, race/ethnicity, family structure, assets, and sexual behaviors.

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