

**“Summer Jobs Reduce Crime and We Can Prove It”**  
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By Dr. Gia Elise Barboza

For the past year I have been involved with a youth violence prevention initiative that has two primary goals: 1) to reduce risk and deviance among an at-risk population; and 2) to empower youth by increasing social relationships with supportive adults in their community. Part of my work with the collaborative, which was initiated by both the State Street Foundation and the City of Boston, has been to document the effectiveness of a comprehensive employment experience in achieving these goals.

In my primary role as researcher, I approached the task with extreme skepticism. I set out to measure any observed changes in the youth during the time they were “exposed” to the program, and then if the program was successful, I would document the causal mechanisms responsible for that change.

Indeed, the data suggested a reduction in some of the many deviant behaviors that we measured, such as physical fighting, weapon carrying and authority conflict (defined as not listening to authorities such as parents or teachers). The power of the results, however, did not lie with the quantitative data.

The survey data was brought to life, so to speak, through the voices of the youth themselves. I have spent several hours talking to them about their personal experience with the program, particularly about how the program has helped them navigate the cruel world in which many of them by chance find themselves having to cope. No matter what adversity I might have had to deal with in my own life, I was completely unprepared to accept the circumstances in which some of these youth are living.

The adversity that these young children between the ages of 13 and 19 have to deal with is incredible, but what is even more incredible is their gracefulness in handling that adversity, an inexplicable acknowledgment that they can overcome it, their uncanny ability to cope when most would give up, their desperate longing for a better life and the perspicuity, intelligence, depth and ingenuity they possess for unraveling the inconsistencies of the social, political and economic world in which they have been marginalized, overlooked and largely forgotten. They are well aware of the fact that they cannot be completely forgotten, however. These are the youth society scapegoats when bad things happen – they are who we blame for any and all of societal ills such as teenage pregnancy, poverty, substance abuse, gangs and crime while at the same time giving other children a pass for the same behavior.

Youth development does not exist in a vacuum. Developmental outcomes do not depend exclusively on individual level factors such as personal characteristics and psychological makeup – as many people want to believe. Rather, developmental trajectories are guided as well by our institutions, such as schools, hospitals and the police, relationships with parents and teachers and community context. The multiple contexts of youth development are in disarray for many of these youth.

The survey confirms the community level trauma: 50 percent of these youth reported being affected by violence in the community and 58 percent said they never or seldom feel safe on their commute to school. Nevertheless, only 16 percent claimed to never or seldom feel safe in school, which is probably why one young man told me that he purposely failed school so that he would not graduate because school was one of the few places he felt safe. One factor that is consistently overlooked is that these

youth did not choose the circumstances in which they were born yet as a society we continue to compare them to youth living in suburbia.

Stop here and do a thought experiment: could you have managed to complete high school if none of your basic needs for housing and/or safety were met? As a 17 year old, were you capable of figuring out how to meet these basic needs? Indeed, some of these youth struggle under these circumstances as well. Almost 1 in 5 of these “at risk” youth were absent from school on 10 or more occasions.

The question that is often asked, “Why are these youth failing out of school?” has a very clear answer. Nevertheless, like most questions we ask about things we have not experienced ourselves, it is misguided. The question we should be asking is, “How are these youth able to finish high school given the circumstances in which they live?”

Surprisingly, despite the fact that almost 70 percent of the youth surveyed claimed to be eligible for free or reduced lunch, more than 60 percent responded being fairly or very well off, and 90 percent stated that they would like to finish high school and go on to college. The question becomes, why is there such a discrepancy between their aspirations and the reality in which they live? According to my colleague Andy Sum, this reality is that nearly 5 in 10 black male students attending Boston public schools will not complete high school (45 percent). If you have children, would they be able to cope with these sorts of issues?

The answer, I believe, is that they would cope similarly – some would manifest anger and resentment towards institutions they grow to believe are inherently biased and untrustworthy, others would resort to substance abuse, a few might become criminally involved, but the overwhelming majority would persist through and become model citizens. But how? We take for granted all the networks we have access to – including our parents. These youth do not have the social networks they need to become connected in positive ways – social networks that are reinforcing and cumulative. Intermediary organizations such as the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, the Private Industry Council, Action for Boston Community Development and Youth Opportunities Unlimited provide social support and connect these disconnected youth to employment opportunities quickly and efficiently. The job prospect is merely a carrot, however; once the youth are enrolled in the program my research suggests that it is through the provision of educational support, job training and professional development, structure and incentive that promotes the acquisition of skills that supports these youth in achieving their own goals.

Moreover, these programs expose youth to mentors and peers that they can identify with and who emphasize alternative choices to negative behavior. Employment programs such as these provide the key ingredients for a positive youth development program that is a first step towards a sustainable model for change.

As skeptic turned believer in the crucial role that a comprehensive employment experience provides in helping at risk youth overcome the barriers they face, I hope that this summer is at least as successful as last summer in employing youth throughout Boston.

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