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Promoting Healthy Children,
Youth, and Communities

Unique Strengths, Shared Strengths

Developmental Assets Among Youth of Color

IN A TIME OF GROWING DIVERSITY in society (Table 1), stereotypes of youth of color as "at risk" remain widespread. The public, media, policy makers, and researchers too often focus only on the problems these young people face, leaving a gap in knowledge and dialogue about the strengths of young people across all racial/ethnic groups.

At the same time, there is a tendency for discussions about the needs and strengths of youth of color to become polarized between those who emphasize the *unique* life experiences and realities of these young people and those who focus only on the *shared* characteristics and needs that are relevant across multiple racial/ethnic groups. In reality, in order to support the healthy development of each young person *and* all young people, we need to recognize, understand, and tap into both the similarities and the differences.

The framework of developmental assets is a valuable tool for examining both dimensions. Grounded in extensive research in child and adolescent development, resiliency, and prevention, the developmental assets framework (Display 1) identifies positive relationships, opportunities, and personal characteristics that shape young people's healthy development. At its core, the framework seeks to promote a sense of social trust and shared responsibility by providing a tool for identifying and articulating the "common good" for all young people.

The framework is also a means of discerning both obvious and more subtle differences within and among groups of young people. These insights can lead to new understandings of how to increase the odds that young people from all racial/ethnic groups can thrive and be contributing members of society.

New analyses of surveys of 217,277 6th- to 12th-grade students (including 69,731 youth of color)[3] reveal two key findings:

1. Developmental assets play an important role

TABLE 1

Becoming a More Diverse Society

It is not news that, like many countries, the United States is becoming increasingly diverse. Between 1980 and 2000, the minority population in the United States grew 11 times as rapidly as the White, non-Hispanic population.[1] Today, about one-third of the children and adolescents in the United States (under age 18) are people of color. By 2020, 45 percent of young people (birth to 18) are expected to be people of color.[2] Here is an overview of the population of children and adolescents (under age 18) in the United States, based on the 2000 Census.

	Number	Percent of Total
White (not including Hispanic)	44,027,087	61
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	12,342,259	17
Black or African American	10,885,696	15
Multiracial	2,856,886	4
Asian American	2,464,999	3
American Indian or Native Alaskan	840,312	1
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	127,179	<1

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau (2002). Downloaded on October 1, 2003, from www.census.gov/population/www/cen2000/phc-t08.html.

DISPLAY 1

Search Institute's Framework of Developmental Assets (Ages 12 to 18)

This publication presents research on developmental assets, which are positive factors in young people, families, communities, schools, and other settings that have been found to be important in promoting young people's healthy development. Further details on developmental assets are available at www.search-institute.org/assets.

External Assets

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 advice and counsel from parents.
3. **Other adult relationships—**Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.
4. **Caring neighborhood—**Young person experiences caring neighbors.
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 adults in the community 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 one hour or more per week.
10. **Safety—**Young person feels safe at home, at school, and in 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.
13. **Neighborhood boundaries—**Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.
14. **Adult role models—**Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
15. **Positive peer influence—**Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.
16. **High expectations—**Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE OF TIME

17. **Creative activities—**Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.
18. **Youth programs—**Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community.
19. **Religious community—**Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.
20. **Time at home—**Young person is out with friends "with nothing special to do" two or fewer nights per week.

Internal Assets

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 doing at least one hour of homework every school day.
24. **Bonding to school—**Young person cares about her or his school.
25. **Reading for pleasure—**Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.

POSITIVE VALUES

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.

SOCIAL COMPETENCIES

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.

POSITIVE IDENTITY

37. **Personal power—**Young person feels he or she has control over "things that happen to me."
38. **Self-esteem—**Young person reports having a high self-esteem.
39. **Sense of purpose—**Young person reports that "my life has a purpose."
40. **Positive view of personal future—**Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.

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in shaping healthy development across all six of the racial/ethnic groups that were surveyed: African American, American Indian, Asian American, Latino/Latina, White, and Multiracial youth.

2. The relationship between different categories of assets and different outcomes varies somewhat across racial/ethnic groups.

These two findings—representing themes of unity and diversity—create an opportunity to identify and nurture uniquenesses within and among groups of young people while also highlighting the shared realities and opportunities that can unite communities in shared commitment and action.

The Power of Assets Across Racial/Ethnic Groups

Numerous academic[4] and practical[5] publications have documented the powerful, generalized relationship between developmental assets and a range of youth outcomes. That is, the more developmental assets young people experience, the less likely they are to engage in high-risk behaviors and the more likely they are to engage in thriving behaviors.

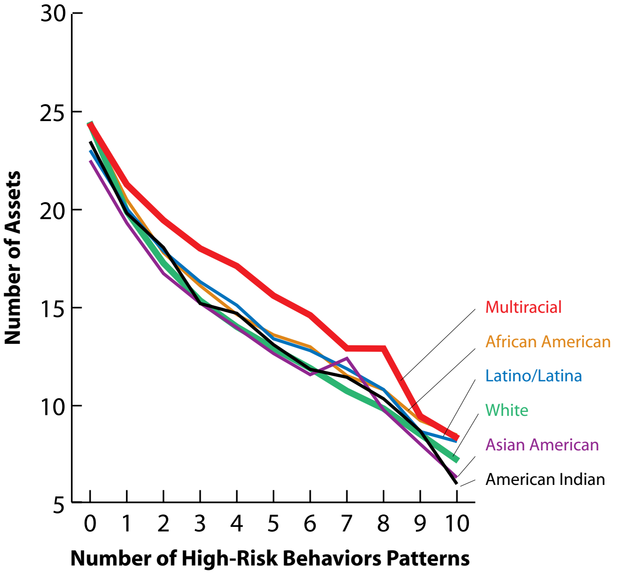
The challenge, however, is that, on average, 6th- to 12th-grade youth experience only 20 or fewer of the 40 development assets. This basic reality is true across all racial/ethnic groups studied, in communities of all sizes, and among both males and females. Indeed, the gap in assets points toward what Peter Benson calls "general and widespread ruptures in the American developmental infrastructure" that cross geographic, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic boundaries. He concludes: "All communities have significant proportions of adolescents who lack key developmental building blocks in their lives."[6]

Consistent with this previous research, these new analyses show that—*across all racial/ethnic groups and different socioeconomic situations*—young people who experience high levels of developmental assets engage in many fewer high-

FIGURE 1

High-Risk Behaviors* and Developmental Assets, by Race/Ethnicity

On average, young people with more developmental assets engage in *fewer high-risk behaviors* (out of 10 that are measured) than youth with fewer assets.

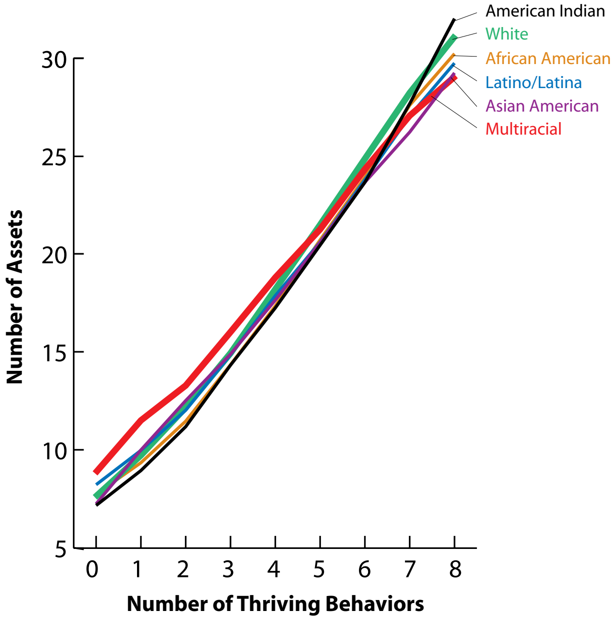


* The 10 high-risk behaviors measured in this survey are problem alcohol use, tobacco sue, illicit drug use, sexual intercourse, depression and /or attempted suicide, antisocial behavior, violence, school problems, driving and alcohol, and gambling.

FIGURE 2

Thriving Behaviors* and Developmental Assets, by Race/Ethnicity

On average, young people with more developmental assets engage in *fewer high-risk behaviors* (out of 10 that are measured) than youth with fewer assets.



* The 8 thriving behaviors measured in this survey are succeeds in school, helps others, values diversity, maintains good health, exhibits leadership, resists danger, delays gratification, and overcomes adversity.

risk behaviors and many more thriving behaviors than those young people with few assets.

Developmental assets and high-risk behaviors—Figure 1 shows that, on average, young people with more assets engage in fewer high-risk behaviors.[7] This finding is consistent across all six of the racial/ethnic groups studied. Conversely, the fewer assets young people of all six racial/ethnic groups experience, the more likely they are to engage in multiple high-risk behaviors. To illustrate, across all six racial/ethnic groups, youth who engage in no high-risk behaviors have, on average, 23 or 24 developmental assets.

In contrast, those who engage in 5 or more high-risk behaviors have, on average, 15 or fewer of the 40 developmental assets. At the extreme, those young people from all racial/ethnic groups who engage in 9 or 10 of these 10 high-risk behaviors report having, on average, only 6 to 9 of the developmental assets. Again, these findings are true and consistent across all six of the racial/ethnic groups studied. This pattern of relationships has important implications for policy and practice, since engaging in 2 high-risk behaviors can quickly (and easily) lead to engaging in more kinds of high-risk behavior.[8]

Thus, developmental assets play a key role in the *prevention* of a wide range of high-risk behaviors for young people with different racial/ethnic backgrounds. In addition, the research also points toward a *promotion* role; that is, the more assets young people experience, the more likely they are to report thriving behaviors such as valuing diversity, maintaining good health, and resisting danger.

Developmental assets play a key role in the prevention of a wide range of high-risk behaviors for young people with different racial/ethnic backgrounds, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Developmental assets and thriving—As shown in Figure 2, young people from all racial/ethnic groups are more likely to exhibit multiple thriving behaviors[9] if they experience more developmental assets. For all racial/ethnic groups, those exhibiting none of the 8 thriving behaviors have, on average, only 7 or 8 developmental assets. In contrast, those exhibiting all 8 thriving behaviors have, on average, 29 to 32 of the 40 assets. Thus, a strong and broad base of developmental assets plays an important role in thriving for young people from all racial/ethnic groups we studied.

Other investigations of the relation of academic achievement to developmental assets support the claim that the number of assets works powerfully across different racial and ethnic groups. In a study of economically poor Latino/Latina and African American urban high school students, Scales and colleagues reported that the average number of thriving behaviors increased by 24% among students experiencing 21 to 30 assets versus students with 11 to 20 assets, and that comparing youth with below average levels of assets (0–10) to youth with average levels of assets (11–20) resulted in a 52% increase in thriving behaviors.[10] These data, though preliminary, show the same kinds of strong associations between assets and positive behaviors among low-income youth of color that we typically see in our larger but less diverse aggregate dataset.

Race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status—Numerous researchers have documented that low socioeconomic status (SES) adds particular stresses and challenges that can interfere with healthy development for both majority and minority children and adolescents.[11] We also know that youth of color are disproportionately represented among low SES children and adolescents. Indeed, African American and Latino/Latina children are twice as likely to live in poverty as non-Hispanic White and Asian American/Pacific Islander children.[12] An important question, then, is whether the positive relationship between assets and outcomes also holds true for young people with different racial/ethnic backgrounds, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

To begin examining this question, we identified the 25% of youth in each racial/ethnic group with the lowest levels of assets and the highest levels of assets.[13] We also sorted them by their socioeconomic status.[14] Then we calculated the likelihood[15] of each group of young people engaging in 10 different high-risk behaviors and

8 thriving behaviors, depending on their levels of reported developmental assets. This analysis, as illustrated by one high-risk behavior and one thriving behavior in Table 2, highlights two important themes.

First, across all racial/ethnic groups and socioeconomic levels studied, young people with many assets (highest 25% in their racial/ethnic group) are much more likely to engage in thriving behaviors than those with few assets. They are also much less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors. This basic pattern holds true across all 8 thriving and 10 high-risk behaviors included in the analyses for all the racial/ethnic groups studied and regardless of SES level.

The selected thriving and high-risk behaviors in the table illustrate the patterns. Young people with high assets are at least twice as likely as their low-asset peers (lowest 25%) to maintain good health. In addition, the low-asset youth are at least three times as likely as their high-asset peers to engage in problem alcohol use. At the high end, there is an almost 10 times greater chance that low-asset White youth will engage in problematic alcohol use than high-asset White youth.

Second, the association between asset levels and reduced risks remains strong for youth across the socioeconomic spectrum. Regardless of SES, having many assets increases the likelihood of engaging in positive behaviors. Similarly, having few assets increases the probability of engaging in multiple high-risk behaviors across SES levels.

Thus, across all groups of young people, those with fewer assets are several times more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors and several times less likely to engage in thriving behaviors.

Similar results emerged in a recent longitudinal study of developmental assets among 6th- to 12th-grade students in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, which included an alternative measure of poverty: eligibility for free and reduced-price school lunches. This study found that experiencing fewer than 10 assets was two to five times as powerful in predicting high-risk behavior as was poverty. For example, young people (regardless of their levels of assets) who lived in low-income families were twice as likely as other youth to engage in antisocial behavior. In contrast, low-asset youth (regardless of their family economic status) were at least four times as likely as other youth to engage in antisocial behavior.[16]

TABLE 2

Probability of Engaging in Selected Thriving and High-Risk Behaviors, by SES Within Race/Ethnicity*

Race/Ethnicity	BEHAVIOR Problem Alcohol Use	Maintains Good Health
	How many times more likely are youth with ***fewer*** assets to engage in alcohol use than are youth with ***many*** assets?**	How many times more likely are youth with ***many*** assets to maintain good health than are youth with ***fewer*** assets?**
Low SES Youth		
American Indian	4.2	2.3
African American	6.4	2.5
Latino/Latina	3.4	2.9
White	7.1	3.2
Multiracial	7.5	3.9
All Other Youth (Not Low SES)		
American Indian	5.6	2.9
African American	5.4	2.0
Latino/Latina	3.5	2.8
White	9.9	3.0
Multiracial	6.4	2.9

EXAMPLE OF HOW TO READ THIS TABLE: Low SES African American youth with fewer assets (lowest 25% of African American youth) are 6.4 times as likely to engage in problem alcohol use as low SES African Amerian youth with many assets (highest 25% of African American youth).

* Asian American youth are not included in this chart due to small sample sizes in some cells.

** Youth with “fewer” assets are the 25% of youth in each racial/ethnic group with the lowest asset levels. Those with “many” assets are the 25% of youth in each racial/ethnic group with the highest asset levels.

Diversity in Assets Within Racial/Ethnic Groups

The power of developmental assets across racial/ethnic groups underscores that *all* young people benefit from the kinds of supports, opportunities, and personal characteristics that are captured in the asset framework. This conclusion does not imply that it is not also important to address the economic and social conditions that increase risks for children and adolescents in low SES families; rather, it suggests that a founda-

TABLE 3

Correlations Between Asset Categories and Selected High-Risk Behaviors, by Race/Ethnicity

		EXTERNAL ASSETS				INTERNAL ASSETS			
High-Risk Behaviors	**Racial/ Ethnic Subgroup**	**Support**	**Empowerment**	**Boundaries & Expectations**	**Constructive Use of Time**	**Commitment to Learning**	**Positive Values**	**Social Competencies**	**Positive Identity**
School Problems	American Indian	*		*		**	*	*	
	Asian American			*	*	**	*	*	
	African American			*		*		*	
	Latino/Latina			*	*	**	*	*	
	White	*		*	*	**	*	*	
	Multiracial	*		*	*	**	*	*	
Anti-Social Behavior	American Indian	*		**		*	**	*	
	Asian American			*		**	*	*	
	African American			*		*	*	*	
	Latino/Latina			*		**	*	*	
	White	*		**	*	**	*	*	
	Multiracial			**		**	*	*	
Depression and/or attempted suicide	American Indian								**
	Asian American	*							**
	African American								**
	Latino/Latina								**
	White	*	*						**
	Multiracial	*	*						**

* = correlation coefficient > .25; ** = correlation > .35. All correlations are negative.

tion of assets can bolster resilience for young people as they face these challenges.

Yet developmental assets do not necessarily work in the same ways for all youth. It is entirely possible (even probable) that different assets mean different things for diverse groups of youth. Indeed, as shown in Tables 3 (high-risk behaviors) and 4 (thriving behaviors), there are both similarities and differences in how assets might work in the lives of youth, depending on their race/ethnicity.[17]

Table 3 summarizes correlations between three high-risk behaviors—school problems, antisocial behavior, and depression and/or attempted suicide—and the eight categories of developmental assets by race/ethnicity. Table 4 displays the relation between assets and three thriving behaviors—maintains good health, suc-

TABLE 4

Correlations Between Asset Categories and Selected Thriving Behaviors, by Race/Ethnicity

		EXTERNAL ASSETS				INTERNAL ASSETS			
Thriving Behaviors	**Racial/ Ethnic Subgroup**	**Support**	**Empowerment**	**Boundaries & Expectations**	**Constructive Use of Time**	**Commitment to Learning**	**Positive Values**	**Social Competencies**	**Positive Identity**
Maintains Good Health	American Indian	*		*			*	*	*
	Asian American	*		*			*	*	*
	African American	*						*	
	Latino/Latina	*	*	*			*	*	*
	White	*						*	
	Multiracial	*	*	*			*	*	*
Succeeds in School	American Indian				*			*	*
	Asian American				*	**		*	
	African American					*			
	Latino/Latina					**		*	*
	White					*			
	Multiracial					**		*	*
Values Diversity	American Indian			*			**	*	
	Asian American					*	**	*	
	African American						**	*	
	Latino/Latina						**	*	
	White						**	*	
	Multiracial						**	*	

* = correlation coefficient > .25; ** = correlation >. 35. All correlations are positive.

ceeds in school, and values diversity. In each of these tables, asterisks denote a significant correlation (one asterisk for correlations greater than .25; two asterisks for correlations greater than .35) between the asset category sum score and a particular outcome.

Similarities—A number of columns in Tables 3 and 4, suggest an important relationship (as indicated by asterisks) between different asset categories and outcomes for all or nearly all racial/ethnic groups. For example, the commitment-to-learning category is related to school problems for all youth, suggesting that these kinds of internal commitments (e.g., achievement motivation, bonding to school, school engagement) are equally powerful, regardless of one's racial or ethnic background. Likewise, the asset category of support (including family support, positive family communication, and other adult relationships) seems to be significantly related to maintaining good health among all youth.

These charts only illustrate the consistent relationship between asset categories and high-risk and thriving behaviors. Correlations to other specific high-risk and thriving behaviors that are not included here show slightly different associations between other assets categories and other developmental outcomes. Furthermore, some assets and asset categories that do not contribute at the selected statistical cutoff level for specific outcomes are still important components of the overall framework and the additive nature of building these strengths. The point is that, taken as a whole, the framework names a positive foundation for both thriving and risk reduction across a wide range of areas.

Differences among and within racial/ethnic groups should be taken into account when seeking to promote the healthy development of children and adolescents.

Differences—In contrast to similarities noted above, there are also asset categories that seem to be most strongly related to particular outcomes for only selected racial/ethnic groups. For example, the absence of support assets seems particularly related to antisocial behavior for American Indian and White youth, but not as much for other youth. And constructive-use-of-time assets seem most strongly related to school success for American Indian and Asian American youth compared to other racial/ethnic groups. These findings suggest that there is a kind of specificity or uniqueness of these experiences for different groups of youth.

This analysis complements earlier research on the relationships between individual developmental assets and thriving. Using a subsample of 6,000 middle and high school students (1,000 from each of six racial/ethnic groups) surveyed during the 1996–1997 school year, Scales and colleagues found that some developmental assets (planning and decision making, time in youth programs) were strong predictors of thriving outcomes across all racial/ethnic groups. However, there were also important differences. For example, among African American youth, the developmental assets of self-esteem and reading for pleasure were found to be among the more important contributors to overall thriving. Among American Indian youth, on the other hand, some of the developmental assets that contributed the most were other adult relationships, creative activities, and caring.[18]

These varieties of relationships may signify something distinctive about how some youth interpret and/or experience developmental assets. Of course, these analyses do not explain why we may see these different patterns, nor do they show causal relationships. Future research will be needed to understand how developmental assets work in similar and unique ways in the lives of different groups of youth. Yet these initial analyses serve as an important reminder of the differences among and within racial/ethnic groups that should be taken into account when seeking to promote the healthy development of children and adolescents.

Developmental Assets as a Tool for Dialogue

Analysis of survey data from a diverse sample of young people is only a starting point. It is also important to engage in a more open-ended dialogue in communities with youth and adults about how they experience developmental assets and asset-building efforts. Is the framework valuable and relevant for specific communities of color? What culturally specific emphases or themes enrich the framework and increase its perceived value and relevance? As María Guajardo Lucero, former executive director of Assets for Colorado Youth, writes, "For the asset message to be most effective, it needs to be culturally inclusive, relevant across ethnicities, and respectful of the diverse approaches to nurturing a child."[19]

Several efforts have been undertaken that examine the asset-building issues and dynamics within particular groups of young people and in particular communities. In each case, developmental assets were found to be relevant and helpful, especially when the community was invited to shape its interpretation and application of the framework. These efforts point toward key strategies for developing culturally specific *and* inclusive asset-building efforts at the organization, community, state, and national levels.

Listening first—Project Cornerstone in Santa Clara County, California, launched its Outreach and Listening Campaign to ensure that the county's asset-building efforts created "an inclusive community movement for all our children and youth."[20] They began by using the asset framework as a dialogue tool in focus groups with youth and adults in three specific communities: gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT), Latino/Latina, and Vietnamese.

People in each of the focus groups and communities expressed unique perspectives on asset building and community life. For example, GLBT youth and adults noted the critical importance of the "relationships with other adults" asset in those cases when GLBT young people do not experience positive support at home. Latino/Latina community members particularly noted religious institutions as important community resources for asset building. And Vietnamese community members highlighted the challenge of balancing Vietnamese and American cultures. Through the dialogues, people in these specific communities began "owning" the framework so that it has become an important tool for building community and finding common ground.

Recognizing other "ways of knowing"— Leaders in Alaska recognized that life in rural Alaska is quite different from life in the "Lower 48," where most of the research on developmental assets was conducted. In addition, they recognized that social science research is not the only way of "knowing," so it was important also to listen to the wisdom of the community and traditions to determine whether and how developmental assets were relevant in that specific context.

Leaders in state government and the Association of Alaska School Boards began intentional dialogues with community members across the state—not to impose the asset framework on those communities, but to listen, learn, and discover whether the framework was relevant and, if so, how to build bridges between the specific realities and cultures of Alaska and the basic asset framework.

So they began asking Alaskans—more than 4,000 of them from more than 100 communities—how they might build assets. Out of this process, they developed a book, *Helping Kids Succeed—Alaskan Style,*[21] which uses the ideas and words of Alaskans to talk about how asset building is part of their lives and their traditions. More than 125,000 copies of this book have been distributed throughout the state. Increasingly, the language of assets is becoming part of life in dozens of villages and communities statewide.

Culturally specific innovation—As part of building a statewide commitment to asset building, Assets for Colorado Youth (launched by Search Institute; now independent) stimulated asset-building efforts in communities of color by awarding grants to organizations within various communities to develop culturally specific approaches to building developmental assets. Out of these efforts emerged a variety of culturally specific innovations, including translation and reinterpretation of the asset framework into multiple languages and linking the assets to *dichos,* traditional Mexican sayings or proverbs. Evaluators from OMNI Institute concluded that asset integration provided "a social space for partnerships to develop and dialogue to occur between groups where few of these social linkages previously existed."[22]

Toward Enriched Understanding

The analyses and examples presented here only begin the dialogue about the role of developmental assets among young people from different backgrounds. Focusing on developmental assets leads to many additional questions that still need to be explored.

Developmental assets and other forms of diversity—Racial/ethnic diversity (the focus of this article) is only one of many individual differences among young people. Much more needs to be known about the role of developmental assets in the lives of other groups of young people, including males and females, new immigrants, GLBT youth, youth with physical disabilities, youth with learning disabilities, youth from different types of families, and youth who are part of different religious traditions. In addition, much more exploration is needed of developmental assets in various contexts and settings, including urban and rural communities, low-income communities, and communities and cultures outside of the United States. In each case, it is important to examine and discover both the unique issues and strengths as well as what is held in common across all groups.

Deeper examination of variability within groups—The analyses presented here only begin to touch on some of the variability in developmental assets among young people. Within each of the broad racial/ethnic categories, there are multiple subgroups, cultures, nationalities, personalities and temperaments, and other factors that need to be examined to more fully understand how strengths emerge and are nurtured within specific groups of young people. For example, one cannot assume that Korean Americans, Japanese Americans, and Pakistani Americans are all the same just because they fit within a broad, imprecise demographic category of Asian Americans. As García Coll, Meyer, and Brillon write in regard to ethnic and minority parenting, "A delicate balance must be achieved between understanding the typical childrearing attitudes, values, and practices that a group holds as important, as well as the adaptations to the particular needs, history, and circumstances of a given family."[23]

Dialogue with culturally grounded models of development—The framework of developmental assets is intended to be inclusive of developmental strengths for young people from diverse backgrounds. It identifies and measures developmental resources that contribute to healthy development for all groups of young people. However, there is a need for deeper, culturally specific research that not only examines the dimensions and dynamics of positive development within different cultures but also takes into account the powerful influence of context and societal issues on young people's healthy development, as well as the differences within groups of youth.[24]

It is important then, to examine the framework in light of emerging understandings of human development that recognize the power of race, social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender in shaping development during childhood and adolescence. These explorations would include realities such as racism and other forms of discrimination and injustice.[25] What new insights into developmental assets and asset building would emerge from these examinations? How might this knowledge strengthen asset-building efforts with specific groups of children and adolescents?

Examining culturally specific meanings behind developmental assets and asset-building efforts—Even though it is likely that young people from different backgrounds all benefit from developmental assets, how do the culture and community shape how they experience and interpret developmental assets? As a major report from the National Academy of Sciences noted, it is likely that "there are some universal human needs that manifest themselves in specific characteristics or assets as indicators of the individual's well-being. Even so, it is likely that the exact manifestations vary depending on the cultural context."[26] Learning more about those unique accents and approaches will add richness, strength, and nuance to all asset-building and youth development efforts.

Exploring asset-building strengths within specific communities—Many communities of color and other forms of diversity likely have strengths for asset building that are less evident in majority cultures. For example, García Coll and her colleagues note that the expanded role of family and kinship networks in minority communities may serve as an important resource to protect children from economic hardship and some of the effects of oppression.[27] These extended relational networks are also likely important resources for building developmental assets. Specific explorations within a wide array of communities and cultures will no doubt identify additional strengths (generally overlooked or unrecognized in public dialogue and general research) from which other cultures and groups can learn.

For example, a Search Institute national study of adult engagement in the lives of young people found that African American and Hispanic/Latino/Latina adults were more likely than White adults to place a high importance on adult engagement in the lives of children and adolescents outside their immediate family.[28] A subsequent similar national study found that African American and Latino/Latina adults, more than

> **Through this strength-based approach, we have the potential not only to enrich the development of young people from all backgrounds and many life circumstances, but also to weave together a strong and diverse society that ensures that *all* young people are valued and thrive.**

White adults, were not only likely to see the importance of connecting with young people outside their family, but they also reported doing it more frequently than White adults.[29] These findings point to strengths for asset building in the African American and Latino/Latina communities that appear to be more dormant in the dominant White culture.

In addition, a rich, untapped area of inquiry involves examining the relationship between developmental assets and the skills and competencies that youth of color (and other minority youth) use to cope within their particular settings. For example, how might competencies such as functioning effectively in two or more cultures and dealing with racism or discrimination interact with their base of developmental assets? Do those cultural navigation skills, for example, make it easier for them to "acquire" assets from their family and broader community? Or does having a strong base of developmental assets actually help nurture those skills?

Implications for Policy Makers and Community Leaders

These findings on developmental assets across racial/ethnic groups, the experiences of asset building in communities of color, and the opportunities for new exploration suggest several policy and leadership directions for the future:

- Explore how the framework of developmental assets can be a tool for beginning dialogue about the "common good" and shared responsibility of everyone in society for the healthy development of young people from all racial/ethnic and cultural backgrounds.
- In response to occasional efforts to eliminate collecting information on race/ethnicity (such as the failed Proposition 54 in California, which would have restricted the ability of state and local government to collect "classifying" information on race, ethnicity, color or national origin), highlight the value for policy and community life of understanding the specific strengths of different groups as well as the similarities that they share. Recognizing and working with these similarities and differences are only possible when data are available that examine the issues.
- Rather than assuming uniformity within any racial/ethnic (or other) group of young people, recognize that any specific group of young people is itself diverse. Thus it is important to understand and respond to the multiple realities and experiences of the young people who are affected by particular policies or initiatives.
- Stimulate further research, dialogue, and public visibility for the shared and unique strengths of young people from all different backgrounds and socioeconomic situations. Highlight and seek to support the developmental strengths that are present even in communities that are highly stressed due to socioeconomic challenges.
- Use available funding and policy initiatives to stimulate innovations in promoting healthy development that tap the unique strengths of a specific culture or community. Ensure that mechanisms are in place for the results to be documented and shared with others.

Diversity, Unity, and the Common Good

As societies become increasingly diverse, we face critical questions about how to ensure the healthy development of all children and youth from all backgrounds and in a wide range of circumstances. If addressed effectively, these changes can yield new resources and strengths to the fabric of a nation built on immigrants and diversity. If not addressed effectively, however, they could further erode a sense of shared commitment and mutual respect, and exacerbate interracial conflict, misunderstanding, and injustice.

This new research suggests that the framework of developmental assets can be one important tool for learning, dialogue, and action across all racial/ethnic groups. The asset-building approach provides the opportunity to study and highlight the strengths of each culture, while also serving as an important reminder that there is as much variability within any racial/ethnic or cultural group as there is between cultural groups.

Research on developmental assets can help fill significant knowledge gaps in our understanding of healthy development among minority youth. It can also serve as an important reminder of commonalities across cultures and a shared responsibility—and capacity—for nurturing young people's healthy development. As Peter Benson has written:

> The developmental assets model purposefully identifies building blocks of development that have a kind of universal currency. . . . There is considerable empirical data to suggest that the 40 developmental assets, individually and in combination, do have developmental meaning and significance for youth, regardless of family background, race/ethnicity, or geographic location. And there is mounting qualitative evidence to support our intent to position the developmental assets as a "language for the common good," drawing people of a city together into a shared civic work.[30]

Through this strength-based approach, we have the potential not only to enrich the development of young people from all backgrounds and in many life circumstances, but also to weave together a strong and diverse society that ensures that *all* young people are valued and can thrive.

By Arturo Sesma Jr., Ph.D., and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, with analyses and contributions from Peter L. Benson, Ph.D., and Manfred van Dulmen, Ph.D.

Notes

[1] Hobbs, F., & Stoops, N. (2002). *Demographic trends in the 20th century* (Census 2000 Special Reports, Series CENSR-4). Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census. Downloaded on October 1, 2003, from www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/censr-4.pdf.

[2] Analyses by the authors of U.S. Census Bureau (2000). *Projections of the total resident population by five-year age groups, race, and Hispanic origin with special age categories: Middle series, 2016–2020* (NP-T4-E). Washington, DC: Population Projections Program, Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau. Downloaded on October 1, 2003, from www.census.gov/population/www/projections/natsum.html.

[3] The sample is an aggregate composed of 217,277 students in 6th-12th grade in public and alternative schools in more than 300 U.S. communities who completed the *Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behavior* survey in the 1999-2000 school year. This self-selected sample was then weighted to reflect the 1990 census data for community size and race/ethnicity. Thus, the sample is not statistically representative of 6th- to 12th-grade students, but it is very large and diverse. Fifty-two percent were female, and 48% male. The sample was racially/ethnically diverse, including 68% White students (N = 147,546), 14% African American (N = 29,618), 11% Latino/Latina (N = 22,838), 4% multiracial (N = 8,670), 3% Asian American/Pacific Islander (N = 6,497), and 1% American Indian (N = 2,108).

[4] See, for example, Lerner, R. M., & Benson, P. L. (Eds.) (2003). *Developmental assets and asset-building communities: Implications for research, policy, and practice.* New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers; and Scales, P. C., & Leffert, N. (1999). *Developmental assets: A synthesis of the scientific research on adolescent development.* Minneapolis: Search Institute.

[5] See, for example, Benson, P. L., Galbraith, J., & Espeland, P. (1998). *What kids need to succeed* (rev. ed.). Minneapolis: Free Spirit; and Search Institute (2002). *The asset approach: 40 elements of healthy development.* Minneapolis: Author.

[6] Benson, P. L. (2003). *Developmental assets and asset-building communities: Conceptual and empirical foundations.* In R. M. Lerner & P. L. Benson (Eds.). *Developmental assets and asset-building communities: Implications for research, policy, and practice* (pp. 19–43). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers (pp. 30, 34).

[7] The 10 high-risk behavior patterns measured in the survey are problem alcohol use, tobacco use, illicit drug use, sexual intercourse, depression and attempted suicide, antisocial behavior, violence, school problems, driving and alcohol, and gambling.

[8] See, for example, Dishion, T. J., Capaldi, D., Spracklen, K. M., & Fuzhong, L. (1995). Peer ecology of male adolescent drug use. *Development and Psychopathology, 7,* 803–824.

[9] The 8 thriving behaviors measured are: succeeds in school, helps others, values diversity, maintains good health, exhibits leadership, resists danger, delays gratification, and overcomes adversity.

[10] Scales, P. C., Foster, K., Mannes, M., Horst, M., Pinto, K., & Rutherford, A. (in press). School-business partnerships, developmental assets, and positive outcomes among urban high school students: A mixed-methods study. *Urban Education, 40* (March 2005). Also see Scales, P. C., & Roehlkepartain, E. C. (2003). Boosting student achievement: New research on the power of developmental assets. *Search Institute Insights & Evidence, 1* (1), 1–10. Available for downloading at www.search-institute.org/research/Insights.

[11] See Brooks-Gunn, J., & Duncan, G. (1997). The effects of poverty on children. *The Future of Children,* 7 (2), 55–71; and Sesma, A., Jr. (2003). Childhood poverty: Pathways and programs. *Healthy Generations: Childhood Poverty, 4* (1), 5–7.

[12] Moore, K. A., & Redd, K. (2002, November). Children in poverty: Trends, consequences, and policy options. *Child Trends Research Brief,* 1–8. Downloaded on October 14, 2003, from www.childtrends.org/r_resbrief.asp.

[13] In previous analyses, youth have been grouped by asset quartiles (0–10 assets, 11–20 assets, 21–30 assets, and 31–40 assets). However, this analytical approach did not allow us to run the kinds of analyses described here because of low sample size. Thus, we calculated low- and high-asset groups by looking at the distribution of 40 assets (this value ranges from 0 to 40) *within* each racial or ethnic group, and selecting the bottom 25% of this distribution (low assets) and the top 25% of this distribution (high assets) for each racial/ethnic group. For example, the cutoff for the bottom 25% for American Indians is 10 assets, whereas the cutoff for the bottom 25% of assets for African Americans is 14. Thus, these upper and lower parameters shifted a bit depending on the group. This relative distribution approach (instead of an absolute distribution based on the

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whole sample) seemed to represent each group better. It also created usable sample sizes for analyses while retaining distinctions between youth with many assets and those with few assets.

[14] The SES measure was created by identifying youth who reported that they lived in a single-parent home *and* had a mother who did not receive a high school degree. This measure, though imperfect, is a useful and widely applied proxy measure of socioeconomic status. See Entwistle, D. R., & Astone, N. M. (1994). Some practical guidelines for measuring youth's race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. *Child Development, 65,* 1521–1540.

[15] Relative probability, also called relative risk, provides an index of the probability or likelihood of something occurring in one group relative to that chance occurring in another group. So in a hypothetical example, if 60% of boys throw snowballs and 30% of girls throw snowballs, then boys are twice as likely as girls to throw snowballs. This statistic does not indicate the absolute risk, or incidence, of any behavior. Thus, only 21% of Asian youth with few assets engage in illicit drug use, and more than twice that level (46%) of American Indian youth with few assets engage in illicit drug use. However, the chance of low-asset youth in these two groups engaging in illicit drug use is similar (15.3 times and 10.6 times, respectively). These correlations do not show a cause-and-effect relationship between asset levels and outcomes.

[16] Roehlkepartain, E. C., Benson, P. L., & Sesma, A., Jr. (2003). *Signs of progress in putting children first: Developmental assets among youth in St. Louis Park, 1997–2001.* Minneapolis: Search Institute. Available for download at www.children-first.org.

[17] To illustrate these results, 3 high-risk behaviors and 3 thriving behaviors were selected. They adequately represent the patterns seen for the other 7 high-risk and 5 thriving behaviors not reported here.

[18] Scales, P. C., Benson, P. L., Leffert, N., & Blyth, D. A. (2000). Contribution of developmental assets to the prediction of thriving among adolescents. *Applied Developmental Science, 4* (1), 27–46.

[19] Lucero, M. G. (2000). *The spirit of culture: Applying cultural competency to strength-based youth development.* Denver: Assets for Colorado Youth, p. 5.

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22 OMNI Institute. (2003). *Creating social change: The growth of a statewide movement.* Denver: Colorado Trust. Downloaded on October 1, 2003, from www.buildassets.org/Impact/eval_home.htm.

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[24] American Psychological Association. (2003). Guidelines on multicultural education, training, research, practice, and organizational change for psychologists. *American Psychologist, 58* (5), 377–402.

[25] See, for example, García Coll, C. T., Lamberty, G., Jenkins, R., McAdoo, H. P., Crnic, K., Wasik, B. H., & Garcia, H. V. (1996). An integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children. *Child Development, 67* (5), 1892–1914.

[26] Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. (Eds.). *Community programs to promote youth development.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press, pp. 67–68.

[27] See, for example, García Coll, C. T., Lamberty, G., Jenkins, R., McAdoo, H. P., Crnic, K., Wasik, B. H., & Garcia, H. V. (1996). An integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children. *Child Development, 67* (5), 1892–1914.

[28] Scales, P. C. (2003). *Other people's kids: Social expectations and American adults' involvement with children and adolescents.* New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.

[29] Scales, P. C., Benson, P. L, & Mannes, M. (2002). *Grading grown-ups 2002: How do American kids and adults relate?* Minneapolis: Search Institute. Available for downloading at www.search-institute.org.

[30] Benson, P. L. (2003). Developmental assets and asset-building communities: Conceptual and empirical foundations. In R. M. Lerner & P. L. Benson (Eds.). *Developmental assets and asset-building communities: Implications for research, policy, and practice* (pp. 19–43). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers (p. 33).