

## Exploring the Psychosocial, Behavioral, and Academic Effects of Participation in Different Activity Combinations: Preliminary Analyses

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Jodie Roth, Margo Gardner, & Jeanne Brooks-Gunn

National Center for Children and Families, Teachers College, Columbia University

Considerable evidence exists on the relations between specific kinds of after-school activities and youth outcomes. However, youths often participate in more than one type of activity. Consequently, it is important to understand the manner in which different *combinations* of activities may influence development. The following preliminary analyses explore this question.

### Data Source

The *National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS:88)*

- Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education
- Followed a nationally representative sample of eighth graders through high school into early adulthood

### Analytic Sample

- 15,748 students who completed 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade questionnaires and provided valid data on school-sponsored and non-school sponsored activities (10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade high school dropouts not included)
- 50% boys, 50% girls
- 71% white, 12% Hispanic, 9% African American, 7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Native American

### Measures

- Key independent variables
  - Activity participation. Dichotomous measures of participation in a number of school sponsored (sport, band/orchestra, school play, student government, honor society, newspaper/yearbook, service clubs, academic clubs, hobby clubs, FTA/FHA/FFA) and non-school sponsored activities (hanging out with friends, using computers, hobbies, leisure reading, going to the park/gym/pool, playing ball, youth groups, community service, driving around with friends, phoning friends, spending time w/ parents, talking w/other adults, arts classes, sports lessons, religious activities). Activity combination variables were created from these measures.
- Control variables
  - Gender, ethnicity, parent education, and 10<sup>th</sup> grade outcomes on dependent variables
- Dependent Variables
  - Psychosocial/Attitudes. Self-concept, locus of control, attitudes toward premarital sex
  - Behavioral. Drug and alcohol use, cigarette smoking, school disciplinary problems, arrest
  - Academic. Preparedness for class, absenteeism, educational expectations, standardized test scores

### Results

I. In an initial set of analyses, 12<sup>th</sup> grade outcomes were examined as a function of 10<sup>th</sup> grade participation in all possible combinations of the three most commonly reported school sponsored activities (sports, academic clubs, and musical groups) and the three most commonly reported non-school sponsored activities (youth groups, classes and lessons, and community service).

- Combinations of school-sponsored activities. Overall, those who participated in a combination of sports and either academic clubs or musical groups performed best across measures of 12<sup>th</sup> grade psychosocial, academic, and behavioral adjustment. However, analyses indicate that when only participating in one of the three selected activities, sports participation showed the greatest impact. Relative to those who did not participate in any of the three activities during 10<sup>th</sup> grade, those who

only participated in sports demonstrated better academic outcomes during 12<sup>th</sup> grade (i.e., less absenteeism, higher educational expectations). However, those who participated in 10<sup>th</sup> grade sports also reported more 12<sup>th</sup> grade drug and alcohol use than non-sports participants. This effect was attenuated somewhat by simultaneous participation in musical groups.

- Combinations of non-school sponsored activities. Those who participated in a combination of youth groups and either community service or classes and lessons demonstrated better locus of control, better preparedness for class, higher educational expectations, less absenteeism, less drug and alcohol use, and less cigarette smoking during 12<sup>th</sup> grade than those who did not participate in any of the selected activities. Analyses revealed no other differences between participants as a function of activity combination.

II. In a second set of analyses, the effects of 10<sup>th</sup> grade participation in both school sponsored and non-school sponsored activities were examined simultaneously. Activity combinations were constructed from those activities that appeared to have the largest and most consistent effects (whether beneficial or adverse) on 12<sup>th</sup> grade outcomes. These included school sports, student government, community youth groups, religious activities, and hanging out with friends. All possible combinations of these activities were used in the analyses.

- Students who participated in structured school-based and/or non-school based activities generally demonstrated better 12<sup>th</sup> grade outcomes than those who did not participate in any structured activities. There were few differences, however, among participants as a function of specific structured activity combination. Exceptions to this pattern were limited to the domains of educational expectations and attitudes toward premarital sex. Combinations involving sports and student government were generally associated with higher educational expectations than combinations involving only religious activities and/or youth groups. Additionally, combinations involving religious activities and youth groups were uniquely associated with attitudes toward premarital sex. Those who only reported participation in religious activities and youth groups indicated the least favorable attitudes toward premarital sex. However, simultaneous participation in school sports and student government diminished the effects of religious activities and youth groups on attitudes toward premarital sex, such that those who endorsed all four activities reported more favorable attitudes toward premarital sex than those involved only in religious activities and youth groups.
- Relative to participation in structured activities, spending unstructured time in peer groups appears to be less advantageous. It is important to note that, with few exceptions (i.e., absenteeism, smoking), those who endorsed spending unstructured time with friends were no *worse* off than those who did not participate in any of the five activities. Moreover, individuals who combined participation in unstructured peer activities with participation in other structured activities demonstrated better 12<sup>th</sup> grade outcomes than those who only reported participation in unstructured peer activities. This tended to be true regardless of the type of structured activities endorsed.

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

With one exception (i.e., the relation between school sports and substance use), these analyses confirm previous research indicating that participation in structured activities is associated with positive psychosocial, behavioral, and academic outcomes. Contrary to our predictions, however, the effects of activity participation appear to be relatively non-specific, such that participation in one combination of structured activities is generally not associated with markedly better outcomes than participation in another combination of structured activities. Future analyses will be aimed at determining whether this is true for different subgroups of youths.