

Signs of Progress in Putting Children First

Developmental Assets among Youth in St. Louis Park, 1997–2001

By
Eugene C. Roehlkepartain
Peter L. Benson
Arturo Sesma

Released May 29, 2003

Prepared by Search Institute for St. Louis Park's Children First Initiative



**Signs of Progress in Putting Children First:
Developmental Assets among Youth in St. Louis Park, 1997-2001**

By Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, Peter L. Benson, and Arturo Sesma

Copyright © 2003 by Search Institute

Search Institute
615 First Avenue, Northeast, Suite 125
Minneapolis, MN 55413
www.search-institute.org

Copyright © 2003 by Search Institute. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever, mechanical or electronic, without prior written permission from Search Institute except in brief quotations or summaries in articles or reviews, or as follows: The Children First initiative and its partners may reproduce or adapt this report, in full or in part, for noncommercial, educational purposes.

Contents

Acknowledgments	4
Foreword: Bringing a Vision to Life	5
By the Children First Executive Committee	
Executive Summary: Signs of Progress in Putting Children First	7
Introduction: Assets in St. Louis Park: A Story of “Firsts”	9
1. An Asset-Based Profile of St. Louis Park Youth	15
2. Normal Patterns of Asset Development	25
3. A Solid Foundation for Life: The Power of Assets	29
4. Have Levels of Assets Changed in St. Louis Park?	43
5. An Innovation with Impact: The 9th Grade Program	49
6. Implications for the Future	57
Postscript: Making Asset Building a Way of Life	60

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, we thank the young people and their families in St. Louis Park who, since 1997, have contributed to this study. Your thoughtful participation in this project by completing surveys is a gift to your community and to asset-building efforts across North America as we seek to learn how young people experience developmental assets through adolescence. What you have said through the surveys and through honest dialogue about life in St. Louis Park will be part of your lasting legacy in your community.

We also thank the administration and staff of the St. Louis Park Schools (District #283), who have been instrumental in conducting these surveys in the schools and providing the additional school records that make this study unique in the nation. Principals and teachers have been generous and understanding in sacrificing class time for students to complete the survey. Special thanks to Superintendent, Dr. Barbara Moore Pulliam, who gave district support for administering the survey, to Mary Bollmann, Lucas Bogle, Penny Chilhart, and Lynda Stanley, who assisted with data access, and survey coordinators in each of the buildings who were instrumental in data gathering.

Throughout this study, the leaders and partners in the Children First initiative have been key allies, advocates, and supporters of this study. Special thanks to Karen Atkinson, the Children First coordinator, who has paved the way for much of Search Institute's work with the school district and worked closely in the survey administration, interpretation, and communication.

Since 1997, numerous colleagues and consultants at Search Institute have been instrumental in various stages of this research project, from data collection and analysis to report development. Special thanks to the following people who have served on this project team during the past six years: Karen Bartig, Tamra Boyce, Mary Byers (copy editor), Manfred van Dulmen, Ph.D. (statistical consultant), Craig Edelbrock, Ph.D. (research consultant), Deborah Grillo, Nancy Leffert, Ph.D., Peter C. Scales, Ph.D., Nancy Tellett-Royce, Renee Vraa, and Jean Wachs.

Finally, Search Institute was able to invest in this important study because of Lutheran Brotherhood (now Thrivent Financial for Lutherans), which has provided generous support for Search Institute's Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth initiative since its inception in 1995. Beginning in 2003, support for Search Institute's HC•HY initiative has been provided by the Thrivent Financial for Lutherans Foundation.

Foreword

BRINGING A VISION TO LIFE

By the Children First Executive Committee

It has been more than a decade since leaders and other residents of St. Louis Park joined together to launch the Children First initiative. This initiative was different from most community-wide efforts focused on children and youth:

- ❑ Instead of focusing on preventing specific problems, Children First emphasizes building strengths, using Search Institute's research-based framework of developmental assets as a foundation.
- ❑ Instead of designing new community-wide programs, we sought to encourage each youth, adult, parent, neighbor, organization, and system in the city to find creative ways to help build assets either informally or formally.
- ❑ Instead of starting a new organization and hiring a centralized staff, we built a partnership from across the community to inspire, guide, and coordinate efforts.
- ❑ Instead of working to meet the needs of just a few targeted young people in the community, we challenged the community to improve the lives of all young people and their families—including those who are struggling the most.
- ❑ Instead of expecting quick fixes and short-term successes, we concentrated on the long-term process of strengthening relationships and community so that all young people could thrive.

We were guided by a vision, not a map. We relied on the imagination, creativity, commitment, and capacity that we knew were present throughout this community to make a difference.

With this report, we have new evidence to suggest we're moving in the right directions. We celebrate together that today's youth in St. Louis Park are better off than they were five years ago. We celebrate the many ways in which people and institutions in the Park have taken responsibility and made a difference. We celebrate that the future looks promising for our young people.

At the same time, this report reminds us that our work is not yet done and our vision still lies before us. Yes, the overall level of assets among young people has gone up. Yet young people in St. Louis Park are just as likely to experience very few developmental assets (0–10 assets) as they are to experience most assets (31–40 assets). Many people in the community are committed to building assets, but others have not even heard of the developmental assets or Children First. Although momentum remains strong among many residents and groups, others are struggling with shifting interests, demands, and priorities that can distract them from the asset-building vision.

As partners in Children First, it is our hope that this report will accomplish three things for our community:

1. Affirm and honor those youth and adults, parents and neighbors, organizations and systems that have contributed to building assets in the community.
2. Introduce those who are not familiar with this approach to its scope and potential, and then help them feel invited to join the asset-building team; and
3. Prompt new energy, insights, innovations, and commitments that will keep the vision alive for years to come.

Former St. Louis Park School Superintendent Carl Holmstrom, whose visionary leadership birthed and guided Children First in its early years, once said, “When everyone shares a vision for a healthy community, our children prosper.” We invite our friends, neighbors, and colleagues in St. Louis Park to join with us in continuing this vision—for the sake of our children and our community.

Brad Bakken, cochair (Citizens Independent Bank)

Luke Johnson, cochair (student, St. Louis Park High School)

Nancy Tellett-Royce, vice-chair (Search Institute)

Bridget Gothberg (City of St. Louis Park)

Mick Johnson (Park Nicollet Foundation)

John Luse (St. Louis Park Police Department)

Charlie Meyer (City of St. Louis Park)

Barbara Moore Pulliam (St. Louis Park Schools)

Tim Rauk (Wooddale Lutheran Church)

Karen Atkinson, coordinator (Children First)

Executive Summary

SIGNS OF PROGRESS IN PUTTING CHILDREN FIRST

Developmental Assets among Youth in St. Louis Park, 1997 – 2001

For the past decade, St. Louis Park and its Children First initiative have been at the forefront in a national movement to create strong and healthy communities for children and adolescents. Guided by Search Institute's framework of 40 developmental assets and its vision of asset-building communities, a citywide partnership has worked to encourage youth and adults, parents and neighbors, businesses and schools, synagogues and churches—everyone in the community—to work together toward a positive future for St. Louis Park's young people.

Beginning in 1997, St. Louis Park partnered with Search Institute in a multiyear study of developmental assets among 6th- to 12th-grade youth. This study is unique in measuring developmental assets longitudinally (1997, 1998, and 2001) and in linking young people's asset profiles to their actual school records. This report presents the findings from this study and their implications for St. Louis Park's residents, leaders, and institutions.

An Asset-Based Profile of St. Louis Park Youth

- ❑ On average, St. Louis Park young people experience 20.4 of the 40 assets. This overall level has risen significantly across the three survey administrations.
- ❑ While there are some slight differences in overall levels of assets when comparing youth from different family backgrounds, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and family income levels, what is most striking is that these differences are not as profound as one might presume.

Normal Patterns of Asset Development

- ❑ As is true in all communities, levels of developmental assets in St. Louis Park decline sharply for both females and males from grades 6 to 8 and begin to show recovery by grade 12. Throughout that process, females, on average, report higher asset levels than males.
- ❑ Almost all of the gender differences in assets are found in the area of internal assets. Levels of external assets are roughly the same for both females and males in each grade.
- ❑ In the same way that assets tend to decline normatively during adolescence, this study also shows a steady increase in the levels of engagement in high-risk behaviors between grades 6 and 12.

A Solid Foundation for Life: The Power of Assets

- ❑ Young people who have more assets are much more likely to do well in school, avoid high-risk behaviors, and engage in positive, thriving behaviors. Levels of assets when youth are younger also associated with achievement, as well as high-risk behaviors and thriving, up to three years later.

- ❑ The relationship between assets and positive outcomes is evident for all ages of youth, for youth from different cultural backgrounds, and for youth from different family structures and economic situations.
- ❑ Young people's level of developmental assets is a much better predictor of students' academic achievement, risk behaviors, and thriving than other measures that are often used, including race/ethnicity and family economic status.

Have Levels of Assets Changed in St. Louis Park?

- ❑ Assets have increased on average, and risk behaviors have decreased.
- ❑ Some young people show substantial gains in assets that persist over time.
- ❑ After appearing to be headed toward serious trouble, some groups of youth have shown dramatic reversals and have achieved good high school outcomes.

An Innovation with Impact: The 9th Grade Program

- ❑ Although not integrally linked to the longitudinal study of St. Louis Park youth, the 9th Grade Program at St. Louis Park High School is an important innovation. It provides some of the first evidence from an independent evaluation that a focused, intensive asset-building approach can have measurable impact in the lives of young people.
- ❑ An evaluation conducted by the Minnesota Institute of Public Health has found that the program has helped to cut academic failure rates in half and also to reduce use of alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana during the first three years of implementation.
- ❑ Although not designed as part of the evaluation of the program, analysis of data from the longitudinal study suggests that the 9th Grade Program may also be enhancing young people's developmental assets.

Implications for the Future

- ❑ This study points to encouraging signs of progress. It also reminds us that the work is not complete, and suggests some new directions for dialogue and action. These include:
- ❑ Celebrate progress and commitment in the community.
- ❑ Reach out to those who are not yet on the asset-building team.
- ❑ Examine who is being left behind
- ❑ Continue to develop creative innovations
- ❑ Continue to monitor and learn in order to strengthen and sustain efforts.

Making Asset Building a Way of Life

This study points in a positive direction. We see initial evidence of positive change in St. Louis Park. The city can celebrate that today's young people appear to be better prepared for the future. The challenge and opportunity are not only to learn more about what has contributed to these positive changes, but also to renew and strengthen efforts so that all children and youth in St. Louis Park from all backgrounds, cultures, and family situations have the opportunity to grow up in a strong, healthy, and caring community.

Introduction

ASSETS IN ST. LOUIS PARK: A STORY OF “FIRSTS”

When it comes to envisioning and creating a community where young people are valued and can thrive, St. Louis Park is a city of “firsts”:

- In 1993, St. Louis Park was the first city in the nation to embrace Search Institute’s developmental assets framework as the guiding approach to community-wide mobilization on behalf of young people. Today, close to 600 communities across the United States and Canada use asset-building approaches—and look to St. Louis Park as a model and trailblazer.
- In 1994, it launched Children First, a community-wide asset-building initiative.
- In 2000, it developed one of the first in-depth school innovations based on asset-building principles, the 9th Grade Program.
- With this report, St. Louis Park is the first community to conduct and release an in-depth, longitudinal study of developmental assets, in partnership with Search Institute.

Developmental Assets: The Foundation

At the core of this vision was Search Institute’s research-based framework of developmental assets—positive experiences, opportunities, relationships, and personal qualities that have a tremendous influence on young people’s lives and choices. Extensive research across the nation shows that the 40 developmental assets help young people make wise decisions, choose positive paths, and grow up competent, caring, and responsible. See page 10 for the complete developmental asset framework.

In community after community, young people from all backgrounds and cultures experience, on average, half or fewer of these 40 assets. This reality has challenged hundreds of communities to unite around a shared vision of rebuilding the foundation of developmental assets so that more and more young people have the opportunity to grow up successfully.

Search Institute's Framework of 40 Developmental 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, 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.

For adaptations of the framework for younger children, visit www.search-institute.org/assets.

This page may be reproduced for educational, noncommercial uses only. Copyright © 1997 by Search Institute, 615 First Avenue Northeast, Suite 125, Minneapolis, MN 55413; 800-888-7828; www.search-institute.org.

Children First: The Strategy

In 1993, St. Louis Park leaders and residents joined together behind a bold, innovative vision. They imagined a community . . .

- . . . where stressed families would get the support they needed.
- . . . where everyone in town would think like a parent and care like a parent: bus drivers, businesspeople, doctors, retired residents, neighbors, teachers, clergy.
- . . . where families, businesses, government, organizations, schools, congregations, and neighborhoods—everyone—all would work closely together to build a web of support and shared values for children and teenagers.
- . . . where, if a child lacks support at home, for whatever reason, someone else is there to provide it.
- . . . where all children and teenagers have the support, boundaries, commitments, positive values, and skills they need to grow up healthy, productive, and caring.

This initiative, which came to be called Children First, was “a call to individuals, families and organizations to give kids the care and support they need.” It would differ from many other initiatives for children and teenagers in the following ways:

- ❑ Instead of relying on major new funding, major collaboratives, or targeted programs, it would rely on the energy, creativity, and resources already present in the community’s institutions, residents, and leaders.
- ❑ Instead of focusing on a “targeted” group of children or youth, it would focus broadly on all children and teenagers (birth to age 21).
- ❑ Instead of focusing on reducing specific problems or deficits, it would emphasize building the positive foundation of assets that make it more likely that young people will thrive, avoid risks, and “bounce back” from challenges.
- ❑ Instead of relying only on parents, teachers, and other professionals to nurture children and youth, it sought to engage all residents—youth and adult—in the responsibility of raising healthy children and teenagers.

Five founding community sectors came to the table to keep the vision alive and guide the initiative: business, city government, education, faith, and health. Together, these partners have worked to ensure that the asset-building philosophy becomes deeply rooted in St. Louis Park. Through their efforts, the word has spread throughout the community, and many organizations and individuals are a part of this movement.¹

¹ For much more information on the history of the Children First initiative, see Ramsey, R. D. (1999). *The Children First story: How one community partnership is learning to put its children and families first*. St. Louis Park, MN: Children First.

Assets among St. Louis Park Youth: The New Study

While the asset-building movement is grounded in a research framework, the vast majority of research on developmental assets has consisted of “snapshots” of youth in communities. (Researchers refer to these as “cross-sectional studies.”)

However, there is so much more to learn! For example, how are assets related to specific outcomes for specific groups of young people? As young people grow older, do their asset patterns change? Can the overall levels of assets change in a community?

In 1997, St. Louis Park embarked on another first: to collaborate with Search Institute in a multiyear look at developmental assets among 6th- to 12th-grade youth. This study didn’t involve just taking the survey over and over again. It includes some important features that make it an important new investigation for St. Louis Park as well as an important research case study for the asset-building movement across North America. Here are some key features of this study. (For information on the sample of youth involved, see page 14.)

- ❑ All students in grades 6 through 12 were surveyed in fall 1997, fall 1998, and fall 2001. In total, 4,891 students were surveyed. This broad data set allows us to examine overall patterns of assets and whether levels of assets in the community have changed during the time the study was in process.
- ❑ With the cooperation of the school district, each student’s surveys are linked to that student’s records.² This allows us to see how assets are related to actual grades and other variables, not only to what students self-report.
- ❑ Three hundred and sixty students were surveyed longitudinally across the three data collections. That is, these students took the survey all three times, and their answers can be linked as they grew older. This allows us to see, for the first time, how assets both change and stay the same across time. It also allows us to examine whether having certain assets when you’re younger predicts your assets and behaviors when you’re older.

Each of these features makes this study a unique and important knowledge base for asset building. It is crucial to note, however, that this is complex research, and there are limitations in the study. The longitudinal sample is relatively small, which restricts how much detailed data it offers.

In addition, because this was not an evaluation of the Children First initiative, it does not provide any direct information about what young people experienced in their communities and families that might have contributed to changes. Thus, it gives insights into changes that have occurred, but it does not show *why* they occurred. Finally, since there is no comparison

² Most Search Institute surveys are strictly anonymous and include no identifying information on students, so that it is impossible to link the findings to other information about the students. In this study, each student’s identification number was attached to the surveys, allowing for actual school records to be linked for analysis. However, strict protocols were followed to ensure that no student’s survey results would ever be provided to the school district, and no student’s name or personal identifying information would be provided to Search Institute. Parents were notified in advance of each survey administration and given the option for their child not to participate in the study.

community in this study, we cannot determine for certain whether the patterns in the data reflect broader trends in the culture or whether they are unique to St. Louis Park.

That said, it must be emphasized that this study has much to offer to the leaders and residents of St. Louis Park. Not only does it give new insights into developmental assets, their power, and how they “work” in young people’s lives, it also provides a unique opportunity to reflect on the activities and progress that have been made in the past decade of asset-building work.

But, perhaps most important, it can stimulate new visions, new creativity, and new energy for the future. What can we learn about what St. Louis Park can do next? Given the history, it’s likely to be another innovative first!

The Sample for the Study

	Total	October 1997	October 1998	October 2001
Cross-Sequential Survey*				
Total Sample	4,893	1,615	1,678	1,600
Female		801	829	791
Male		801	836	799
American Indian		16	17	28
Asian/Pacific Islander		76	74	72
Black/African American		84	85	91
Hispanic		22	33	40
White		1,305	1,354	1,247
Multiracial		103	104	110
Longitudinal Sample**	360			
Survey Instrument:	<i>Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors</i> , a 156-item survey that measures developmental assets, high-risk behaviors, thriving indicators, developmental deficits, and selected demographic variables.			
Administration:	This survey was administered each year in classrooms by teachers in St. Louis Park schools. Students sealed their completed surveys in envelopes, which were sent to Search Institute for processing. Measures were taken to ensure data quality, including elimination of surveys with inconsistent responses and missing data.			
Data Privacy:	Each student's identification number was attached to her or his surveys, allowing for actual school records to be linked for analysis. However, strict protocols were followed to ensure that no student's survey results would ever be provided to the school district, and no student's name or personal identifying information would be provided to Search Institute. Parents were notified in advance of each survey administration and given the option for their child not to participate in the study.			

* Numbers do not sum due to missing data.

** Youth in the longitudinal sample were in grades 6, 7, and 8 in fall 1997 when the first survey administration was conducted. These same youth were surveyed in fall 1998 and fall 2001 so that data for these individual youth could be linked across time.

Chapter 1

AN ASSET-BASED PROFILE OF ST. LOUIS PARK YOUTH

Although many St. Louis Park residents and leaders are very familiar with the developmental assets and previous research on St. Louis Park youth, many people have moved into the community since Children First was launched in the early 1990s. Thus, an important foundation for understanding this report is to have a basic understanding of developmental assets and the overall patterns of developmental assets among St. Louis Park youth.

This chapter presents the most recent data on developmental assets in St. Louis Park (fall 2001), showing asset patterns for various subgroups of youth in the city.

Key Findings

- ❑ In 2001, the average St. Louis Park student reported having 20.4 of the 40 developmental assets.
- ❑ Different young people experience different patterns of developmental assets. For example, females, on average, experience more assets than males. Further, younger youth tend to experience more assets than older youth.
- ❑ While there are some slight differences in overall levels of assets when comparing youth from different family backgrounds, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and family income levels, what is most striking is that these differences are not as profound as one might presume.
- ❑ Thus, all groups of young people—regardless of background—struggle with not experiencing enough of the assets. Yet these building blocks of healthy development can be available to young people from all backgrounds. We know this because some youth in St. Louis Park across all of these demographic differences experience high levels of developmental assets (31–40 assets).

Overall Levels of Developmental Assets among St. Louis Park Youth

The average 6th- to 12th-grade student in St. Louis Park experiences 20.4 assets, based on the 2001 survey of St. Louis Park students. This percentage is slightly higher than the 19.3 average reported in Search Institute’s aggregate sample from surveys of 217,000 students in 318 communities across the United States during the 1999-2000 school year.

Thus, the average St. Louis Park student—and students across the country—experiences only about half of the 40 assets that provide a solid foundation for healthy growth into adulthood.

Most and Least Common Developmental Assets

Young people are more likely to report experiencing some assets than others. Table 1 shows the percentages of St. Louis Park students who report each of the 40 developmental assets.

Here are the most and least common assets among young people in St. Louis Park in 2001:

Most Common Assets	Least Common Assets
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive peer influence (75%)• Family support (73%)• Positive view of personal future (73%)• School engagement (70%)• Achievement motivation (69%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive family communication (30%)• Youth as resources (30%)• Planning and decision making (29%)• Community values youth (26%)• Reading for pleasure (26%)• Creative activities (20%)

Table 1**Assets in St. Louis Park 6th- to 12th-Grade Youth (Fall 2001)**

Asset Category	Developmental Asset	Percentage of St. Louis Park Youth Reporting Each Asset
External Assets		
Support	1. Family support	73%
	2. Positive family communication	30%
	3. Other adult relationships	47%
	4. Caring neighborhood	39%
	5. Caring school climate	32%
	6. Parent involvement in schooling	38%
Empowerment	7. Community values youth	26%
	8. Youth as resources	30%
	9. Service to others	48%
	10. Safety	54%
Boundaries and Expectations	11. Family boundaries	45%
	12. School boundaries	52%
	13. Neighborhood boundaries	50%
	14. Adult role models	35%
	15. Positive peer influence	75%
	16. High expectations	48%
Constructive Use of Time	17. Creative activities	20%
	18. Youth programs	62%
	19. Religious community	62%
	20. Time at home	51%
Internal Assets		
Commitment to Learning	21. Achievement motivation	69%
	22. School engagement	70%
	23. Homework	63%
	24. Bonding to school	60%
	25. Reading for pleasure	26%
Positive Values	26. Caring	51%
	27. Equality and social justice	52%
	28. Integrity	67%
	29. Honesty	65%
	30. Responsibility	61%
	31. Restraint	57%
Social Competencies	32. Planning and decision making	29%
	33. Interpersonal competence	45%
	34. Cultural competence	48%
	35. Resistance skills	47%
	36. Peaceful conflict resolution	56%
Positive Identity	37. Personal power	45%
	38. Self-esteem	53%
	39. Sense of purpose	64%
	40. Positive view of personal future	73%

Assets among Specific Subgroups of Youth

An asset-building philosophy emphasizes the need for *all* young people to experience as many as possible of the 40 developmental assets. But not all young people experience assets in the same ways and at the same levels. Further, there are many questions in this society and this community about whether some young people have more asset-building opportunities than others. Are there particular groups of young people who experience most of the assets, while others experience only a few?

Yes, some young people do experience many more assets than other young people do. But we cannot look at standard categories of gender, grade, race/ethnicity, family composition, or family economic status to learn which youth have assets and which youth do not. Although there are some important differences in asset experiences among these different groups of youth, Figures 1–5 show that that overall levels of assets across these demographic categories are strikingly consistent. There are differences, but they are relatively small (between 18 and 21 out of 40 assets).

In other words, youth in all traditional demographic categories experience, on average, similar levels of assets. Most young people—across all demographic groups—experience too few developmental assets.

Gender

The demographic factor that is most consistently associated with differences in levels of assets is gender. In St. Louis Park (and nationally), males, on average, experience about three fewer assets than girls.³ (See Figure 1.)

Grade

As shown in Figure 2, asset levels drop significantly from 6th grade through junior high, then stabilize later in high school. In St. Louis Park, 6th graders reported having almost 25 assets. By grades 9, 10, and 11, that level drops to about 19 assets, with some recovery in grade 12.

While these data from 2001 do not show the journey of specific young people, this pattern reflects, in part, a normal developmental process. Chapter 2 examines longitudinal data from St. Louis Park that allow for a more thorough exploration of how assets change for individual young people as they grow up. In the meantime, these most recent data remind parents, teachers, other adults, and community leaders that young people need extra support and positive guidance as they enter adolescence.

³ For more information on gender differences in assets, see Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, E. C. (2001, summer). Connecting with boys: Closing the asset gap,” *Assets: The Magazine of Ideas for Healthy Communities & Healthy Youth*, pp. 6-9. Available at www.search-institute.org/assetmag/summer01/boys.html.

Figure 1
Levels of Assets among St. Louis Park Youth, by Gender (2001)

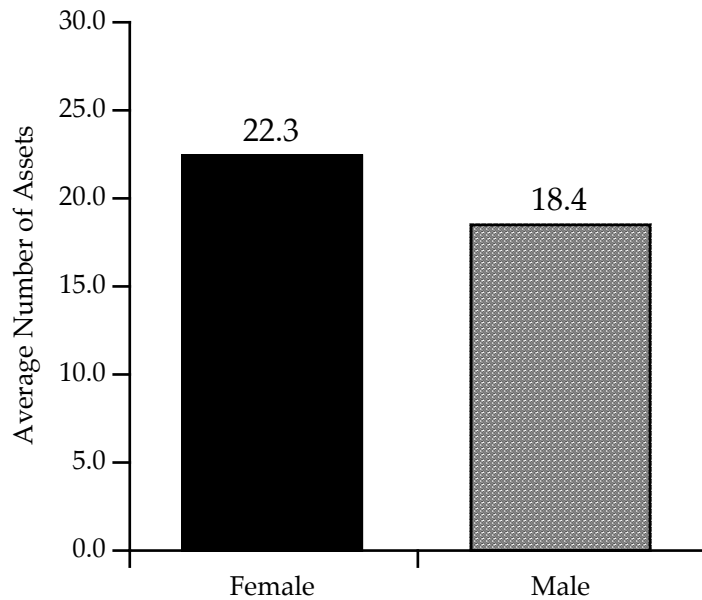
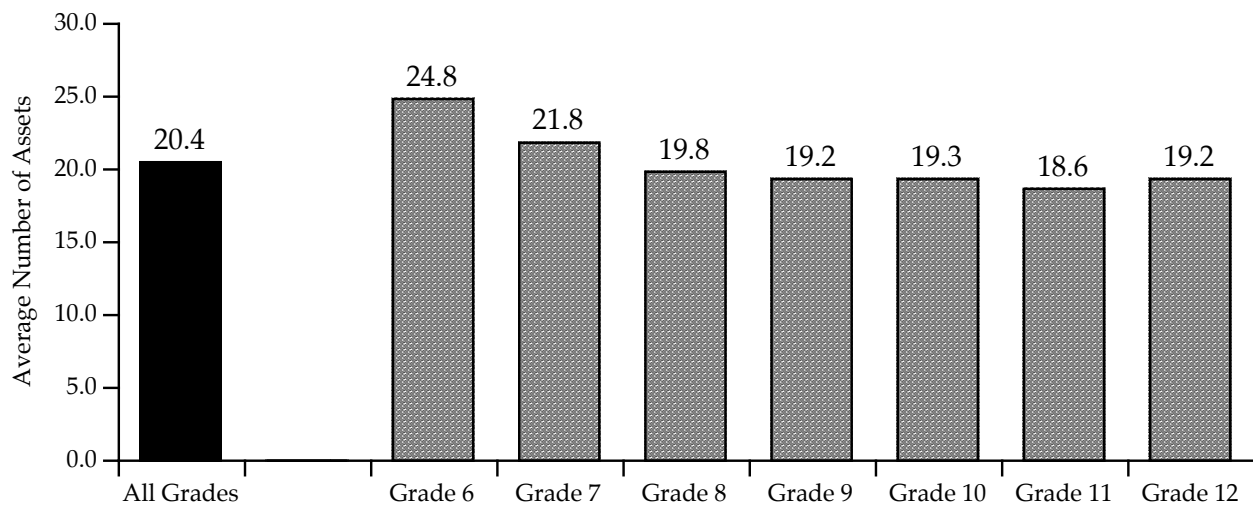


Figure 2
Levels of Assets among St. Louis Park Youth, by Grade (2001)



Race/Ethnicity

St. Louis Park's youth population is growing more and more diverse along with the broader community and society. The asset profile is a reminder that people from all cultures and backgrounds bring strengths to the community. Although there are slight differences, the overall level of assets that young people experience does not vary dramatically across different racial/ethnic groups of young people. (See Figure 3. More details on asset levels in different racial/ethnic groups of youth are shown in Table 2.)

Family Composition

In light of the increase in the number of single-parent families in the past 20 years, many people have wondered about and studied how these changes have affected children. Do children in single-parent homes face more obstacles in growing up?

The data from the 2001 survey in St. Louis Park is consistent with survey findings in other communities: young people in single-parent families experience, on average, three fewer assets than youth in two-parent families (Figure 4). This finding suggests that, yes, many youth in single-parent families may not have as many supports and resources to contribute to their healthy development.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the difference is not as dramatic as some may presume. Furthermore, as shown in Table 2, some St. Louis Park youth from single-parent families experience high levels of assets. Similarly, some youth from two-parent families experience few developmental assets. These findings affirm that youth from all types of families can build a solid foundation for development, though it may be more challenging for some youth and their families.

Family Economic Status

We know from extensive research that poverty can undermine healthy development for children and youth.⁴ Thus, an important question for communities and society is how to reduce the percentages of children and families living in poverty. In addition, efforts are needed to understand how to “buffer” the effects of poverty on development for those children and adolescents who do live in poverty.

It is important to note, then, that young people whose families live in poverty (based on whether the young person qualifies for free or reduced-price lunches at school) experience slightly fewer assets than those whose families do not (Figure 5). Yet, once again, the gap is not as dramatic as we might presume. As shown in Table 2, some youth in poverty experience both high and low levels of developmental assets. The same is true for children whose families do not live in poverty. Thus, the number of developmental assets one experiences is not determined by one's family income.

⁴ For more information on the effects of poverty on development, see Duncan, G., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (Eds.) (1997). *The consequences of growing up poor*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Figure 3
Levels of Assets, by Race/Ethnicity⁵

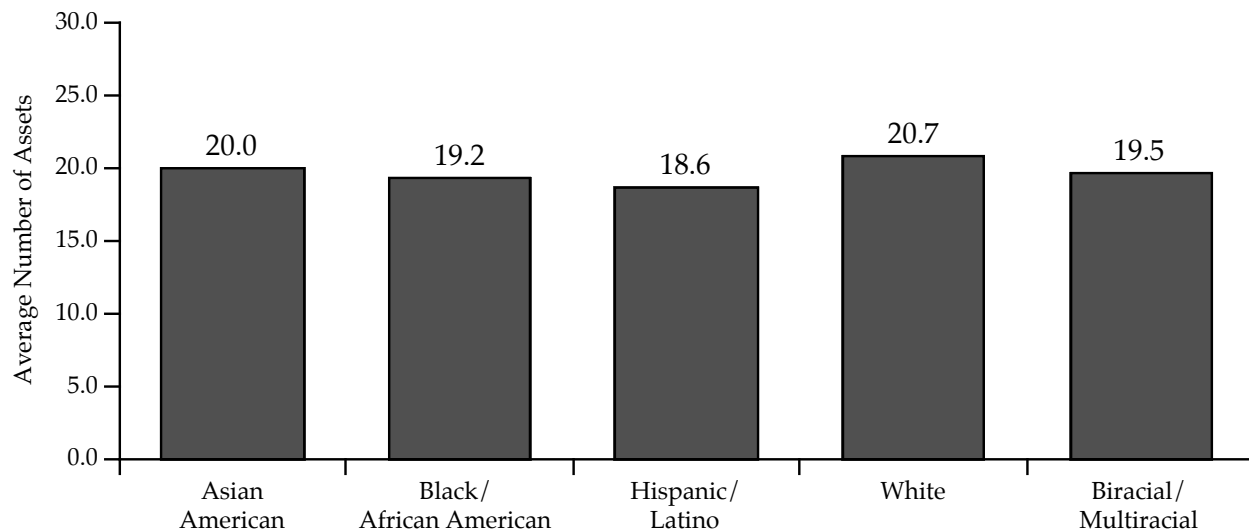


Figure 4
Levels of Assets, by Family Composition

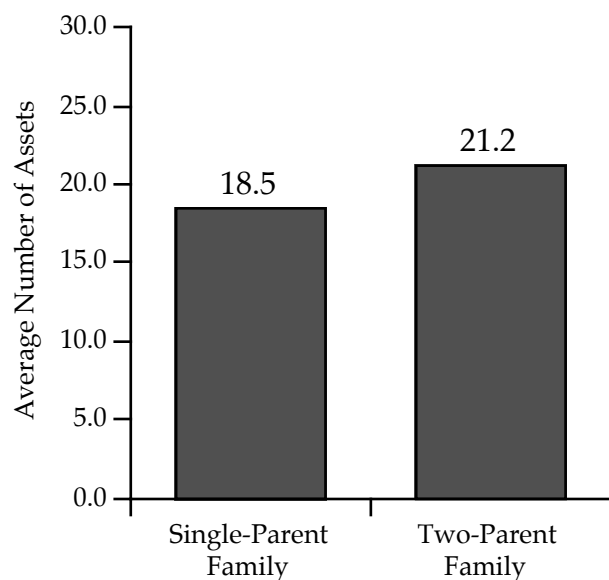
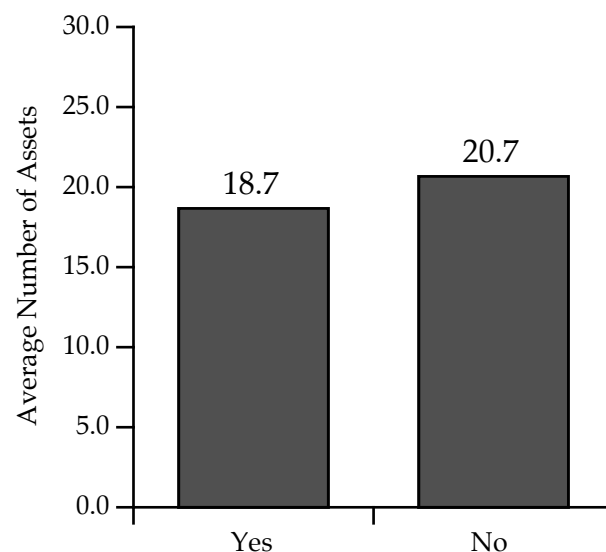


Figure 5
Levels of Assets, by Family Poverty⁶



⁵ The sample of Native American youth in this sample is under 30, so it cannot be reported separately. This Search Institute policy is designed to maintain the anonymity of individual young people who complete the survey.

⁶ Based on eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch. Those in the “yes” column are eligible owing to low family income. This is an imprecise measure of family economic status; however, it is the most accurate measure available in this study, as families do not report their income to schools, and self-reports of family income by young people are not reliable.

Different Levels of Assets among St. Louis Park Youth

Of course, not all young people experience 20 assets. That's the average. Some young people experience more than 30 assets. Others experience fewer than 10.

Figure 6 shows the percentages of St. Louis Park youth who experience different levels of assets. In this community, 12% of 6th- to 12th-grade students experience 0-10 of the assets, making them most vulnerable to high-risk behaviors and least likely to thrive. On the other end of the spectrum, 12% of St. Louis Park youth experience 31 to 40 assets.

Table 2 reminds us that young people from all different demographic groups experience assets at all levels—though there are meaningful differences in the percentages of various subgroups of youth who experience different levels of assets. Thus, one cannot assume, for example, that a young person from a two-parent family always experiences a lot of assets and that a young person from a single-parent family never does. Some young people from single-parent families experience many assets; some young people from two-parent families do not.

This finding reinforces for us that no personal background characteristic guarantees that young people will have lots of assets—or that they won't. Building assets is possible for all groups of young people.

Figure 6
St. Louis Park Youth Experiencing Different Levels of Assets

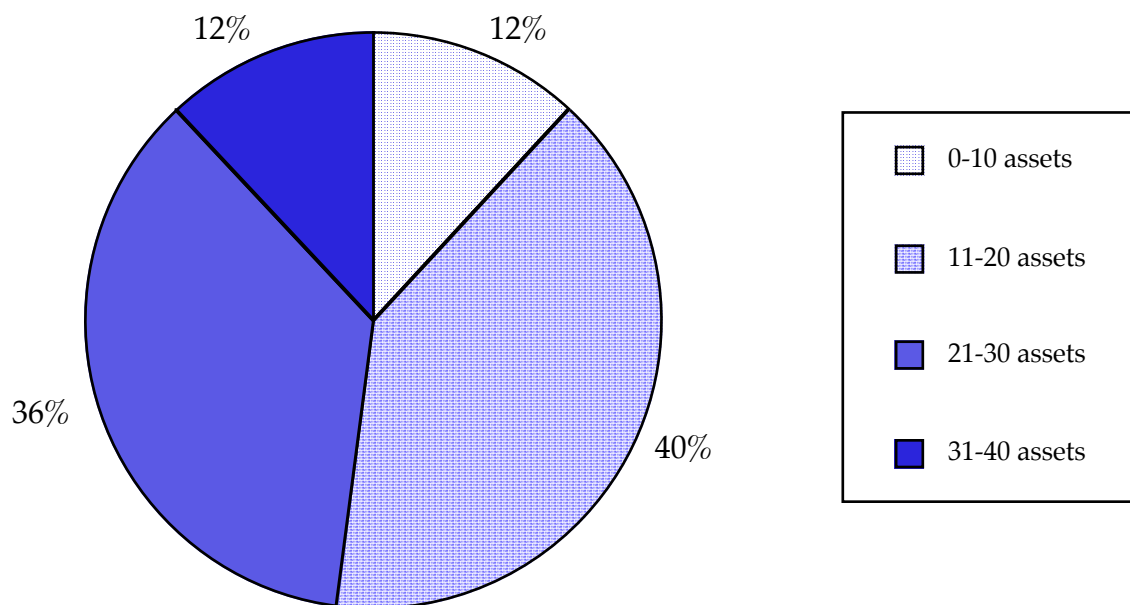


Table 2
Levels of Developmental Assets among St. Louis Park Youth,
by Selected Characteristics (2001)

	Reports 0 – 10 Assets	Reports 11 – 20 Assets	Reports 21 – 30 Assets	Reports 31 – 40 Assets	
All	12.0%	39.5%	36.2%	12.3%	100%
Gender					
Female	6.3%	34.8%	41.0%	17.9%	100%
Male	18.0%	44.4%	31.1%	6.5%	100%
Grade					
Grade 6	3.3%	26.0%	44.8%	26.0%	100%
Grade 7	11.1%	33.2%	38.1%	17.7%	100%
Grade 8	17.8%	36.0%	33.8%	12.4%	100%
Grade 9	14.1%	43.2%	34.1%	8.6%	100%
Grade 10	10.4%	47.5%	33.5%	8.6%	100%
Grade 11	15.7%	45.1%	32.7%	6.5%	100%
Grade 12	11.2%	46.7%	37.3%	4.7%	100%
Race/Ethnicity					
Asian American	9.4%	48.4%	34.4%	7.8%	100%
Black/ African American	6.8%	54.8	34.2%	4.1%	100%
Hispanic/Latino	16.1%	38.7	41.9%	3.2%	100%
White	11.7%	37.8	37.2%	13.3%	100%
Biracial/Multiracial	17.9%	35.8	32.6%	13.7%	100%
Family Composition					
Single-parent	16.2%	45.9%	30.5%	7.4%	100%
Two-parent	10.1%	36.8%	38.8%	14.4%	100%
Family Poverty⁷					
Yes	12.2%	51.0%	28.6%	8.2%	100%
No	12.0%	37.6%	37.4%	12.9%	100%

⁷ Based on eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch. Those in the “yes” column are eligible owing to low family income.

NORMAL PATTERNS OF ASSET DEVELOPMENT

Adolescence is a dramatic period of adjustment for most youth as they expand their world beyond the family and neighborhood. They face the challenges of widening roles and increasing responsibilities, and they begin to clarify their own values and identity apart from their parents. This is a universal process of separation and individuation that is often stressful but, at the same time, is necessary to lay the foundation for successful transition to adulthood.

The St. Louis Park multi-year study has yielded new knowledge about how assets develop through adolescence. This information adds insights into asset-building strategies and expectations for asset-building efforts throughout the junior and senior high years.

Key Findings

- ❑ Levels of developmental assets decline sharply for both females and males from grades 6 to 8 and begin to show recovery by grade 12. Throughout that process, females, on average, report higher overall asset levels than males.
- ❑ Almost all of these gender differences in assets are found in the area of *internal* assets, with females being more likely to experience the internal assets at all grade levels. Levels of *external* assets are roughly the same for both females and males in each grade.
- ❑ In the same way that assets tend to decline normatively during adolescence, this study also shows a steady increase in the levels of engagement in high-risk behaviors between grades 6 and 12.

Asset Patterns through Adolescence

As Figure 7 indicates, total assets decline sharply for both females and males from 6th to 8th grade, reach a bottom between 9th and 11th grade. Then they begin to show some recovery by 12th grade. These age differences (seen previously in cross-sectional studies) have now been verified longitudinally following the same group of adolescents as they develop through the high school years. It is also clear that, on average, females report higher levels of assets than males at each age. However, both genders show remarkably similar developmental changes in levels of assets during adolescence.

Patterns of Internal and External Assets across Time

Almost all of the gender differences in assets are found in the internal rather than external assets. That is, females report significantly higher levels of internal assets than males at every age, but about the same levels of external assets. As shown in Figures 8 and 9, , internal assets decline from grade 6 to 8, bottom out and then begin to recover throughout adolescence. External assets, on the other hand, decline throughout adolescence, reaching their lowest level in about 11th grade.

Setting Realistic Goals for Asset Building

These findings regarding normal patterns of development remind us of the need for realistic goals and expectations for community asset-building initiatives and those who live and work with young people. Asset-building efforts cannot prevent some decline in assets as young people move into adolescence. Adolescence is—and should be—a time of significant change, stress, and adjustment for most youth and their families. The goal, then, should not be to overcome these normal and important developmental processes, but, instead, to help children make the best possible passage through adolescence and prepare them for a successful transition to adulthood. The goal would be, then, to:

1. Reduce the level of declines in assets early in adolescence;
2. Foster an earlier “bottoming out” of reported assets; and
3. Facilitate an earlier and larger recovery of levels of assets—particularly internal assets—by late adolescence.

Figure 7
Normal Patterns of Asset Development, by Gender (Multi-Year Data)

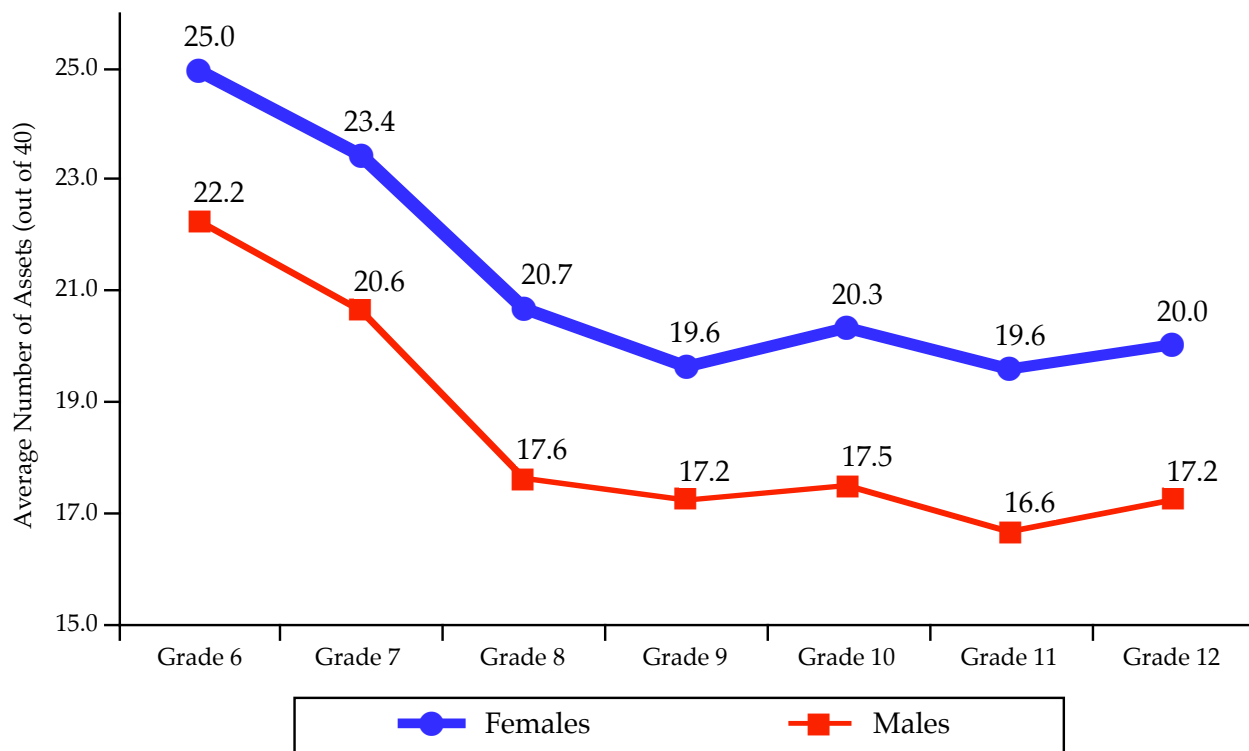


Figure 8
Changes in EXTERNAL Assets

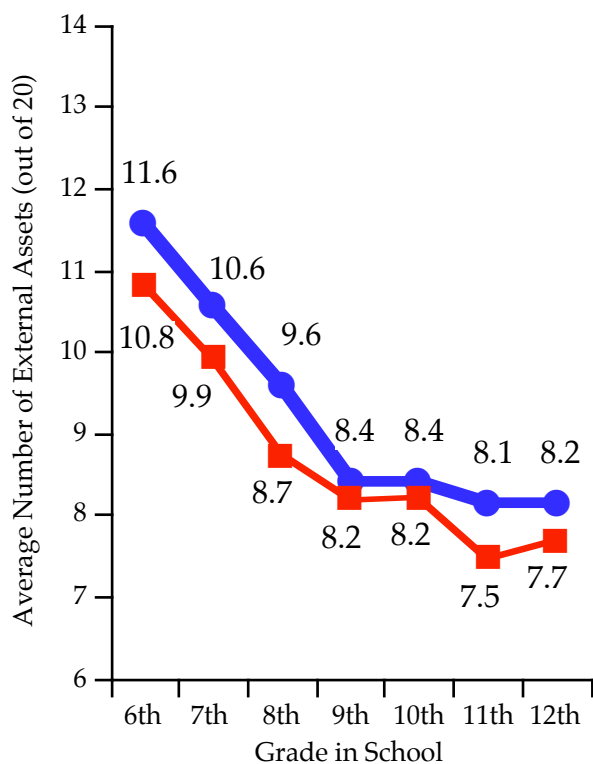
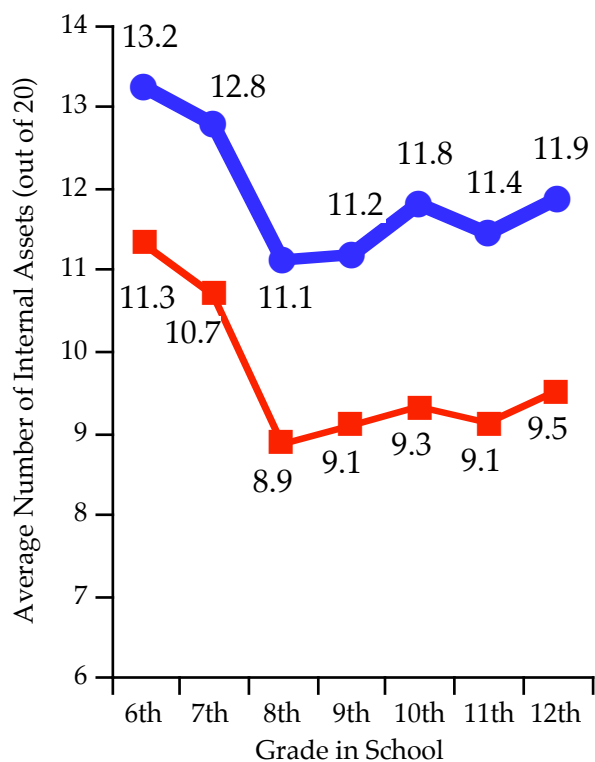


Figure 9
Changes in INTERNAL Assets

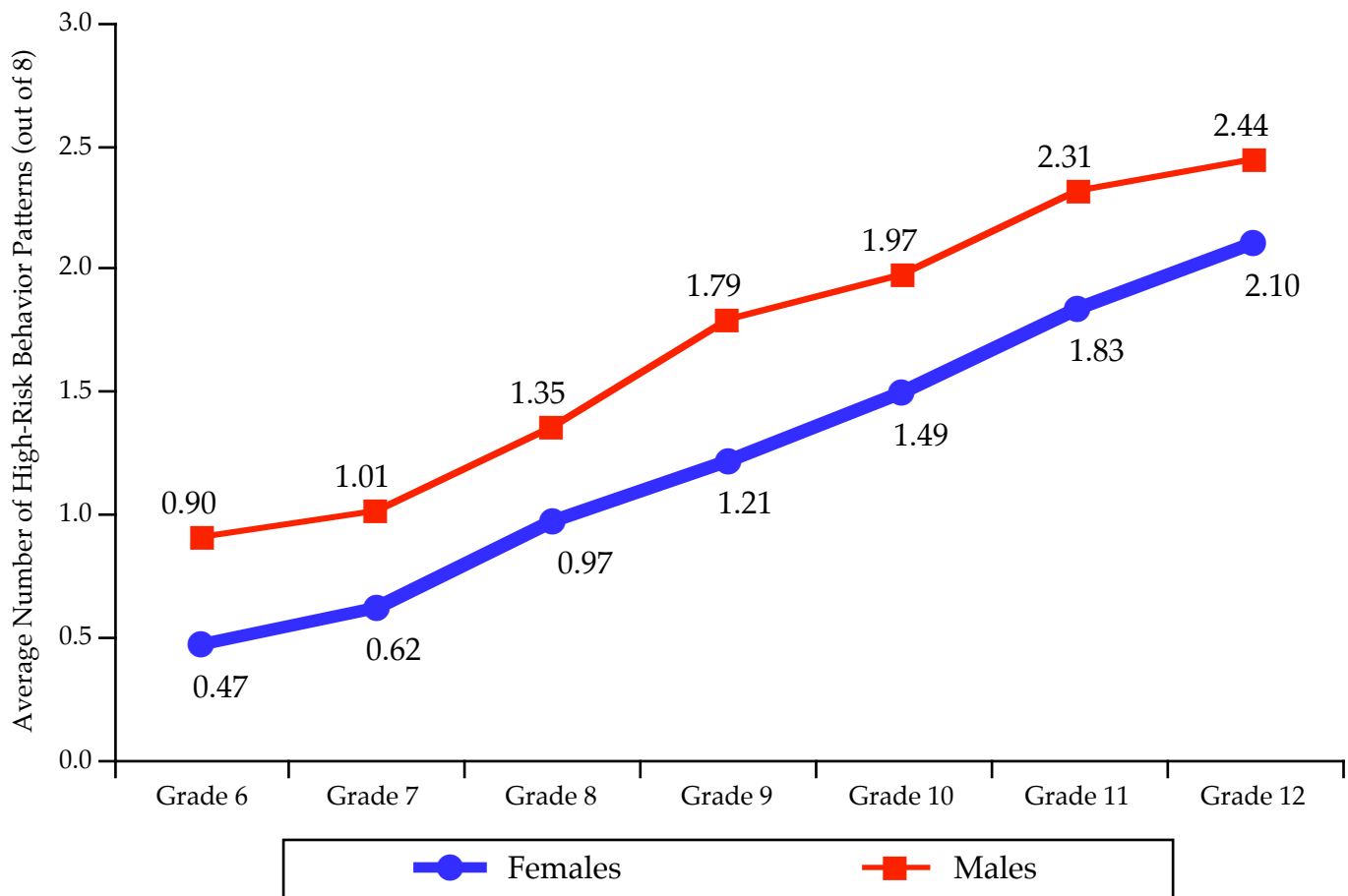


Patterns in the Development of High-Risk Behaviors

The study also sheds light on the development of risk behaviors. It is no surprise that risk behaviors increase throughout adolescence. Figure 10 shows the average development of high-risk behavior patterns⁸—for females and males. Females report significantly fewer high-risk behavior patterns than males at every age. In addition, both show a linear increase in the number of high-risk behavior patterns throughout middle school and high school.

Again, this finding provides a context for interpreting the benefits of a community asset-building initiative. Any reduction in the number of high-risk behavior patterns youth engage in—or even slowing the rate of increase in these behaviors—would have far-reaching benefits to the youth, their families, and the entire community.

Figure 10
Normal Patterns of Risk Behaviors, by Gender (Multi-Year Data)



⁸ Based on measures of 10 high-risk behaviors ranging from tobacco use, sexual activity, alcohol and drug use, to school problems and violence.

Chapter 3

A SOLID FOUNDATION FOR LIFE: THE POWER OF ASSETS

Since Children First was launched a decade ago, people in St. Louis Park have known that developmental assets matter in young people's lives. Indeed, the early research on assets showing the difference they make in young people's behaviors motivated many institutions, leaders, and other residents to invest energy, passion, and resources in building developmental assets.

Search Institute has consistently reported in St. Louis Park and other communities across North America that the more developmental assets young people experience . . .

- ❑ The *more likely* they are to engage in a wide range of thriving behaviors, such as being successful in school, valuing diversity, maintaining good health, and taking leadership responsibilities (promotion); and
- ❑ The *less likely* they are to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors, including use of alcohol and other drugs, violence and antisocial behavior, problems in school, gambling, and eating disorders (prevention);
- ❑ The *more likely* they are to overcome challenges or obstacles in life (resiliency).

This new study adds important new insights into the relationships between developmental assets and these kinds of youth outcomes. These findings emerge from three new aspects of this study:

1. Conducting the survey in a community across multiple years (including a subsample of youth tracked longitudinally) allows for examining the power of assets across time;
2. Linking the survey data to actual student records (e.g., grades) allows for connecting student self-reports of assets (which are subjective) to objective measures; and
3. A range of new analyses highlight the relationships between behavioral outcomes and specific categories of assets.

Key Findings

- ❑ Young people's asset levels are strongly associated with their actual grade point average, class rank, risk behaviors, and thriving at the same time.
- ❑ In addition, their asset levels when they were younger moderately correlate to the same outcomes when they are three years older.
- ❑ Some categories of assets are more strongly associated with specific outcomes. For example, boundaries and expectations and constructive use of time are particularly important for reducing use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.
- ❑ Developmental assets are a much better predictor of students' academic achievement, risk behaviors, and thriving than other measures that are often used, including race/ethnicity and poverty.

The Power of Assets: A Snapshot in Time

The traditional way of demonstrating the power of assets has been to show how young people's assets as reported in the survey are related to the positive and negative outcomes that are examined in the same survey (cross-sectional analyses). This study adds two new elements to what's known about assets and outcomes. First, we can link asset information to actual school records. Second, we can examine whether asset levels are related to future outcomes.

When we look cross-sectionally, we confirm that St. Louis Park youth with more assets are more likely to do well in school (based on grade point average and class rank). They are also more likely to report thriving behaviors and less likely to report a wide range of high-risk behaviors. Based on data from the 2001 sample, we can describe the following relationships between assets and a range of outcomes when measured concurrently:

High-risk behaviors—The more assets young people report experiencing, the less likely they are to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors. This relationship holds true across 10 different high-risk behavior patterns measured in the survey of St. Louis Park youth, including alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, sexual intercourse, violence, antisocial behavior, and gambling. The charts on the facing page illustrate this relationship.

Thriving—In addition to reducing involvement in high-risk behaviors, high levels of assets contributes to young people's thriving behaviors. The survey measures eight indicators of thriving, including valuing diversity, maintaining good health, exhibiting leadership, and overcoming adversity. Figure 11 illustrates this relationship.

School success—Young people who report having more developmental assets are more likely to have higher grade point averages and a higher class rank. This finding is significant, since GPA and class rank are measures of actual academic performance, not young people's self-reported success in school.

When we focus on GPA, we find that the total number of assets is correlated with GPA at a level of .35 for females and .45 for males, which are considered moderately strong relationships in social science research. That is, between one-third and one-half of differences in GPAs among students can be accounted for by the level of assets they report. Similarly with class rank, the correlations are .33 for females and .40 for males, which are also considered moderately strong statistical relationships.

In each of these cross-sectional analyses, then, the statistical relationships are considered moderately strong for most measured outcomes for both females and males.⁹ These correlations, which range in magnitude from .33 to .61, represent moderately strong relationships between assets and a range of socially important adolescent outcomes.

⁹ Total assets concurrent correlations are as follows: With risk behaviors: -.50 for males; -.48 for females. With thriving: .52 for males; .61 for females.

Figure 11
The Power of Assets to Prevent Risky Behaviors (2001 data)

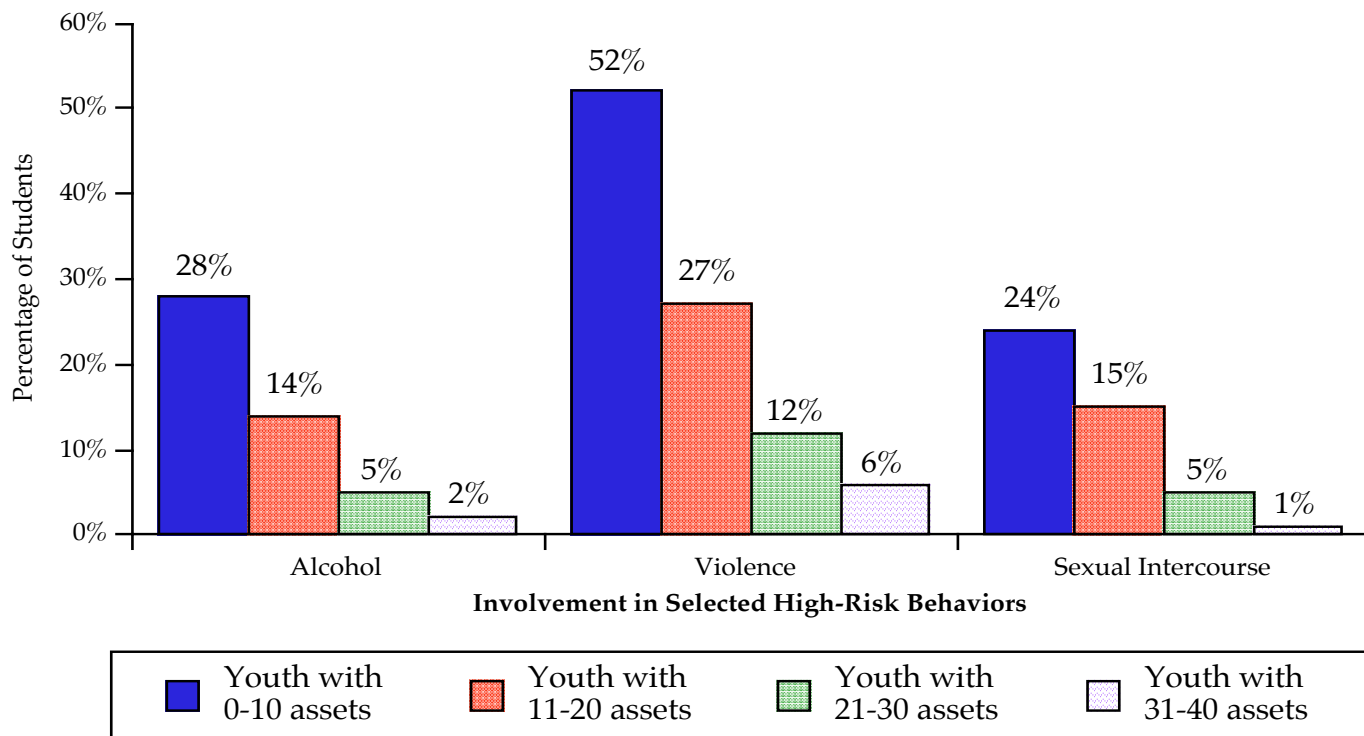
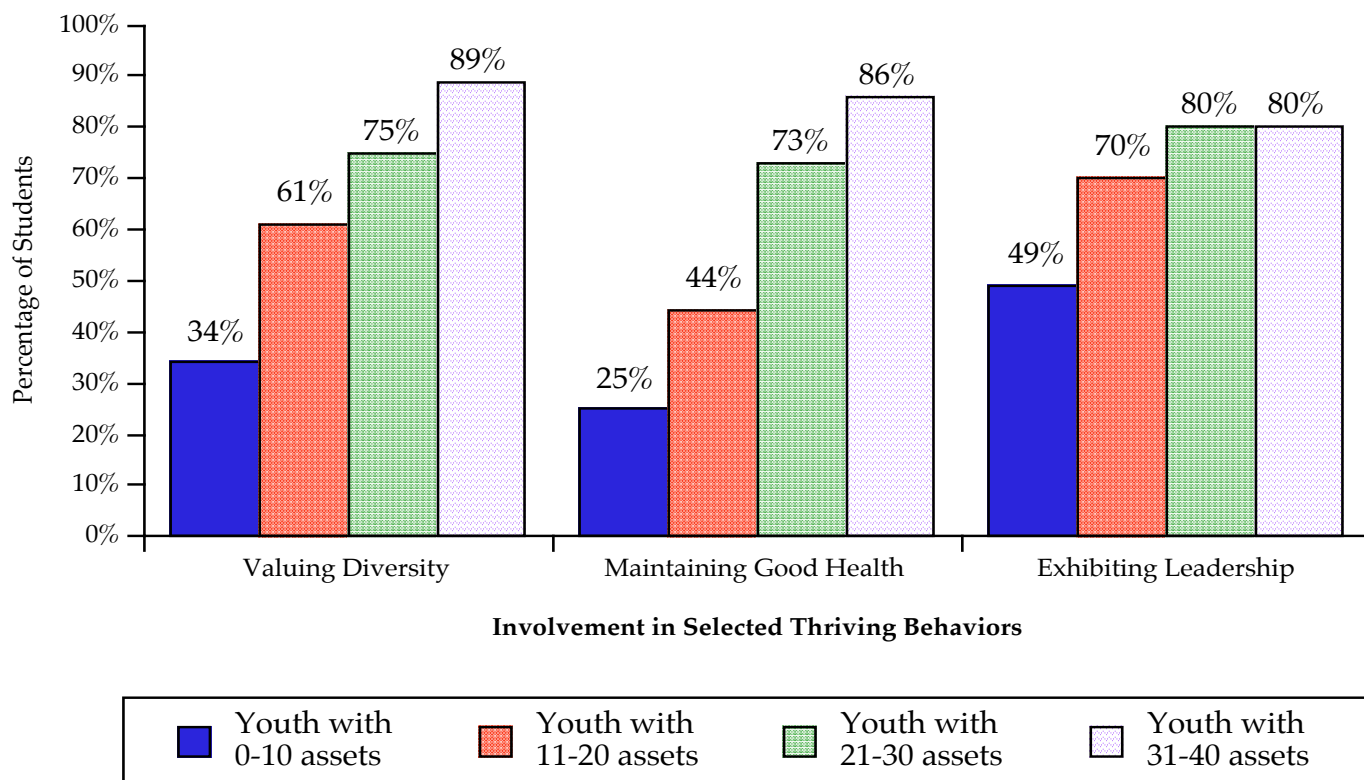


Figure 12
The Power of Assets to Promote Thriving (2001 data)



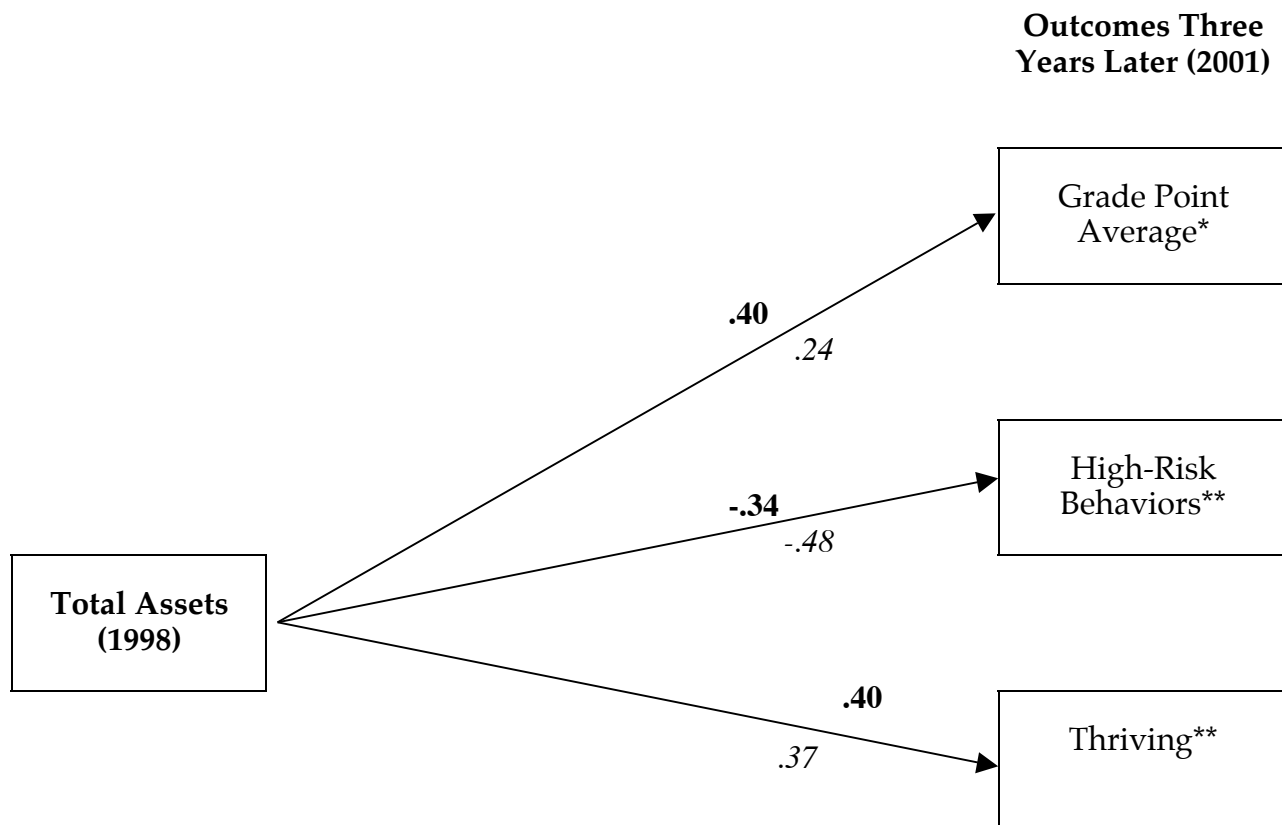
Power of Assets across Time

In addition to these concurrent relationships (assets being associated with various behaviors at a given point in time), the longitudinal part of the St. Louis Park study offers, for the first time, the opportunity to examine the power of assets over time. That is, if youth report having a high number of assets in 8th grade, for example, how much does that experience correlate with their behaviors three years later?

Analyses show that assets are significantly related to youth outcomes three years later. That is, the level of assets young people report in 8th grade gives a indication of how they will be doing three years later. Figure 13 shows correlations between assets and several outcomes three years later. All of these relationships are statistically significant, and the average magnitude of more than .30 represents moderate predictive power over three years.

Although preliminary (owing to a relatively small sample size) and correlational, these findings suggest that a strong asset base can, indeed, provide a foundation that guides young people's decisions both now and in the future. The opportunity emerges, then, to strengthen assets for young people in early adolescence (when asset levels naturally decline), preparing them with a stronger foundation for healthy growth and development as they move toward adulthood.

Figure 13
Correlation of Assets to Outcomes Three Years Later (Longitudinal Data)



Bold: Males

Italic: Females

All relationships are statistically significant ($p < .01$).

* Based on actual student records.

** Based on young people's self-reported behaviors.

The Power of Assets for All Groups of Youth

The relationship between assets and positive outcomes is clear for the overall population of young people in St. Louis Park. However, are assets more or less important for some groups of young people than others? Or are there some groups of youth for whom the 40 assets identified in this framework do not have as much power (and thus are less important)?

Consistent with general findings regarding the power of assets, we find that assets protect from high-risk behaviors and promote thriving behaviors among youth from different backgrounds, including race/ethnicity, family composition, and family economic status.

IMPORTANT NOTE: These comparisons indicate how assets affect the lives of different subgroups of youth, with the major theme being that assets are important in the lives of all groups of youth. Differences in youth thriving and risk involvement based on these analyses should be interpreted with caution because of the small sample sizes in some categories.

The power of assets across racial/ethnic groups—Assets are important for all youth, regardless of their racial/ethnic background. Figure 14 illustrates this point, showing that the more assets reported by both white and minority¹⁰ youth, the less likely both groups are to engage in high-risk behaviors and the more likely they are to engage in thriving behaviors.

The power of assets across different types of families—In the midst of social changes in families, there are ongoing concerns about whether and how living in a single-parent family may affect children’s development. Figure 15 shows that building assets is a powerful strategy for young people from both two-parent and one-parent families (including those young people who live only with their mother, their father, or sometimes with each parent separately).

The power of assets for youth from low-income families—Finally, as noted earlier, living in poverty adds significant challenges for healthy development. While it is important to strengthen efforts to reduce the number of children and adolescents living in poverty, it is also important to build assets for and with those youth from low-income families. Figure 16 highlights that having more assets is associated with positive outcomes both for youth who do and do not qualify to receive free or reduced-price lunches.

Again, given the small sample for minority youth, it is impossible to know if differences between white and minority youth are meaningful. The more important theme is that, as assets increase, risk behaviors decrease and thriving behaviors increase.

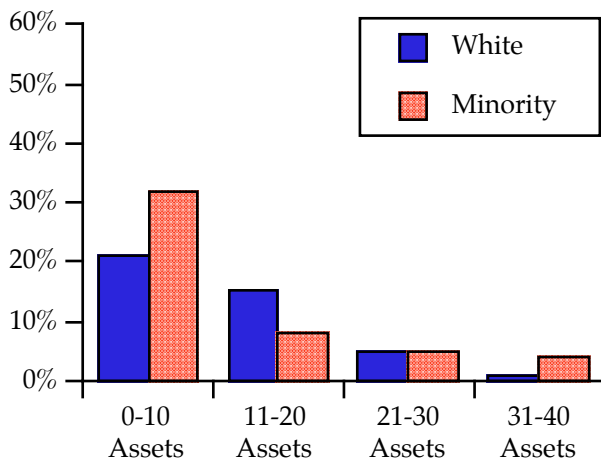
Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of building assets for and with all young people from different backgrounds, families, and economic situations. That does not mean that “one size fits all”; rather, it suggests that finding appropriate ways to build strengths for and with all young people has tremendous potential for enriching their development and strengthening community.

¹⁰ Small sample sizes prevent us from analyzing differences among various racial/ethnic groups of young people in St. Louis Park. Forthcoming analyses by Search Institute of data from more than 300 communities will add greater detail to understanding the associations between assets and various outcomes for young people from specific racial/ethnic backgrounds.

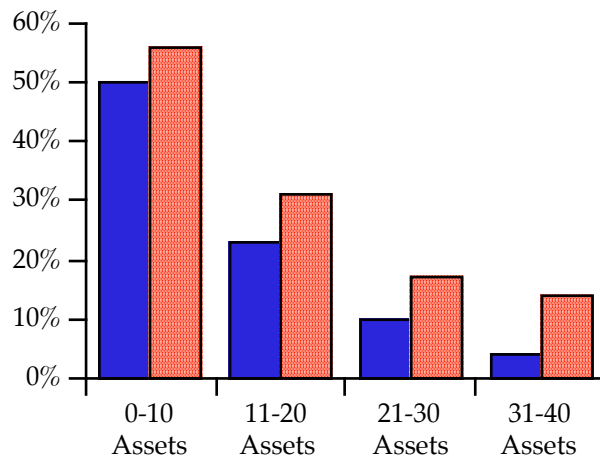
How to read these figures: Figures 14-16 can be difficult to understand at first. Here is how they work: First, all youth were grouped into four categories (quartiles) based on how many assets they reported. Thus, each chart shows a pair of columns for 0-10 assets, 11-20 assets, etc. Then, within each of these categories, we analyzed the percentages of youth who report each behavior. Thus, these percentages do not add to 100%; rather, each column shows the percentage of white or minority youth *with that level of assets* who engage in each behavior.

Figure 14
The Power of Assets to Protect and Promote, by Race/Ethnicity

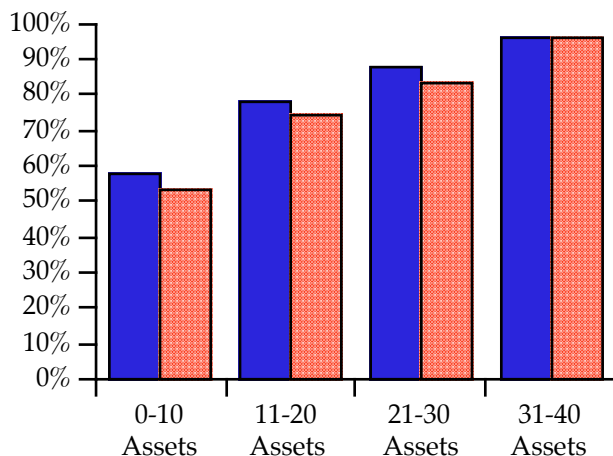
White and minority youth are less likely to abuse alcohol if they have more assets.



White and minority youth are less likely to be violent if they have more assets.



White and minority youth are more likely to help others if they have more assets.



White and minority youth are more likely to maintain good health if they have more assets.

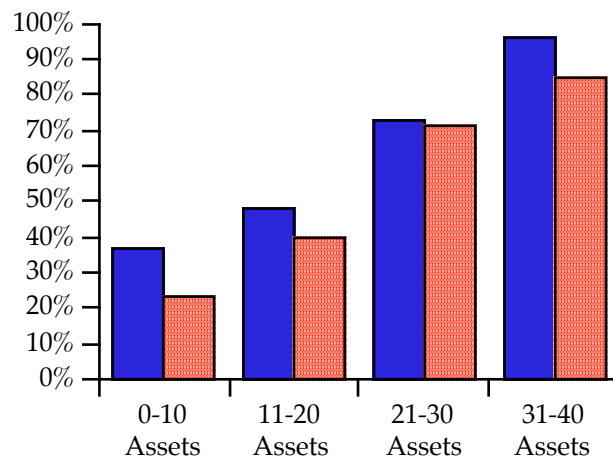
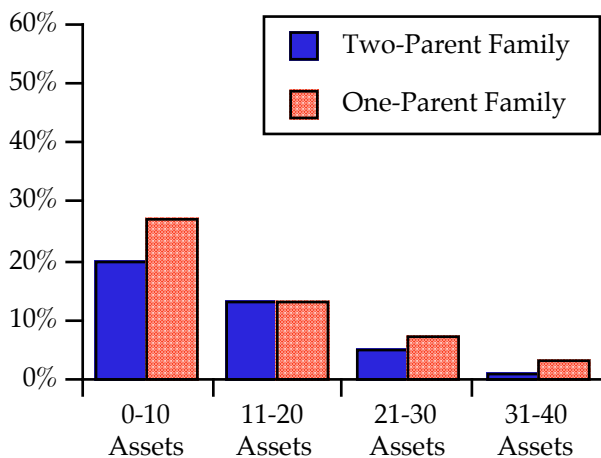
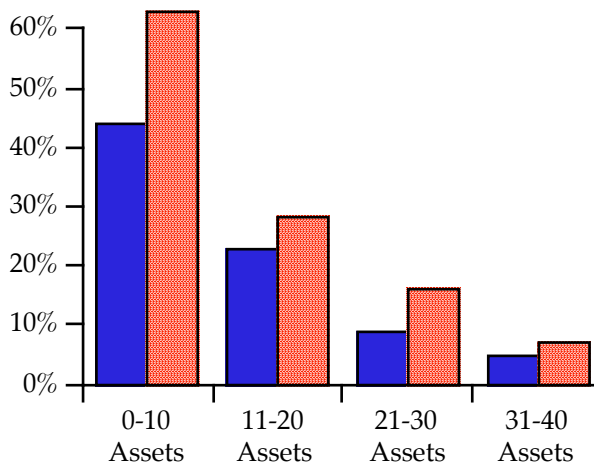


Figure 15
The Power of Assets to Protect and Promote, by Family Composition

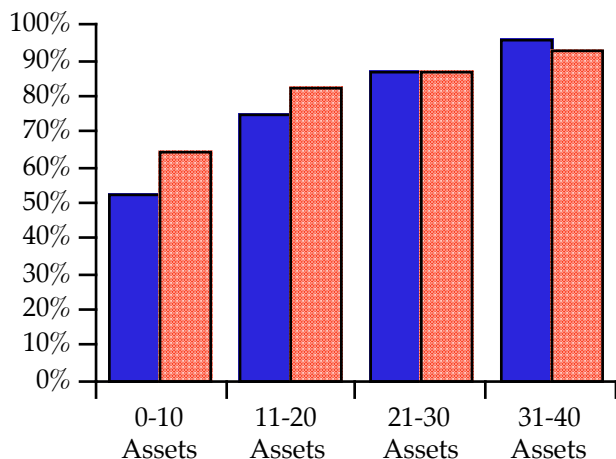
Youth from one- and two-parent families are less likely to abuse alcohol if they have more assets.



Youth from one- and two-parent families are less likely to be violent if they have more assets.



Youth from one- and two-parent families are more likely to help others if they have more assets.



Youth from one- and two-parent families are more likely to maintain good health if they have more assets.

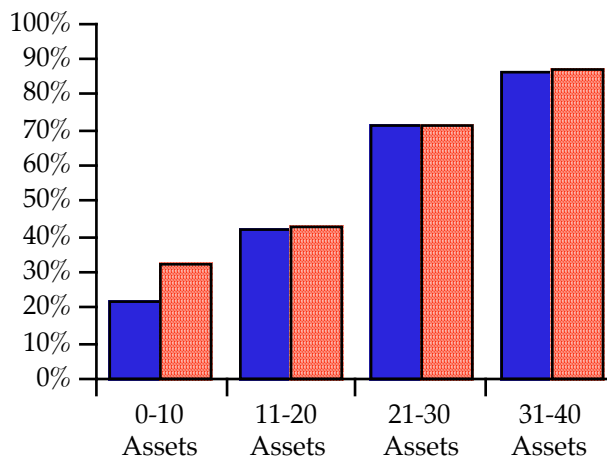
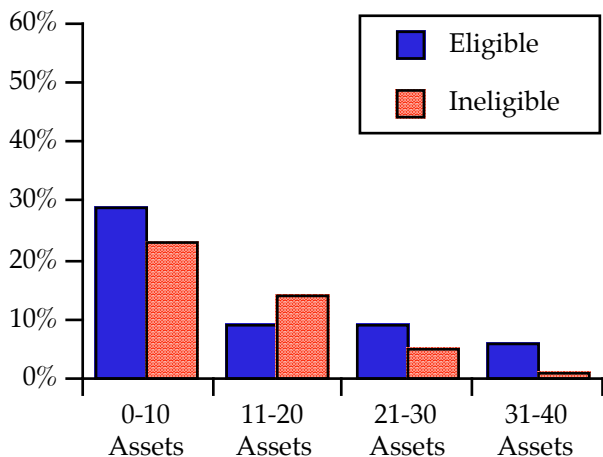
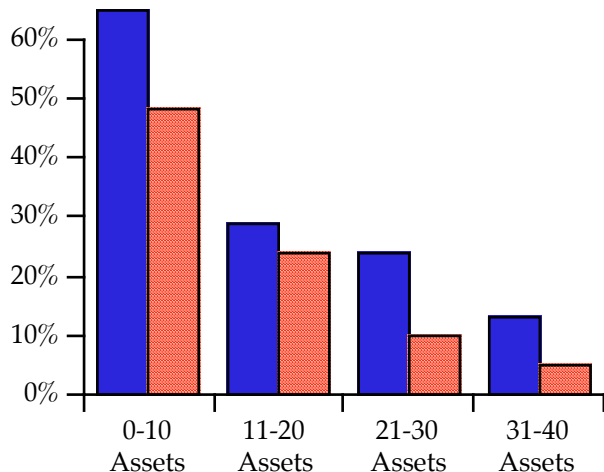


Figure 16
The Power of Assets to Protect and Promote, by Family Economic Status*

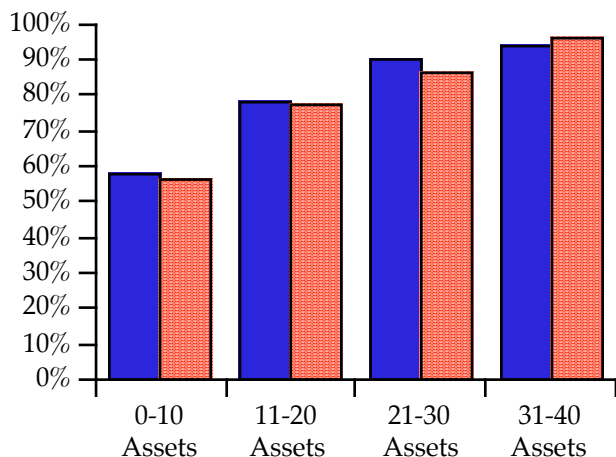
Both youth who qualify for free and reduced-price school lunches and those who are not eligible are less likely to abuse alcohol if they have more assets.



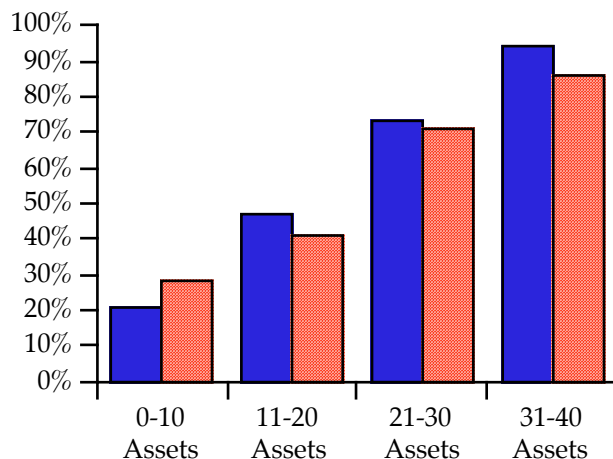
Both youth who qualify for free and reduced-price school lunches and those who are not eligible are less likely to be violent if they have more assets.



Both youth who qualify for free and reduced-price school lunches and those who are not eligible are more likely to help others if they have more assets.



Both youth who qualify for free and reduced-price school lunches and those who are not eligible are more likely to maintain good health if they have more assets.



* Eligibility for free and reduced-price lunches in school is widely used to approximate whether youth are from low-income families. Those who are eligible are considered to have a low family income. Those who are ineligible are considered to have a higher family income. More accurate data on family income are not available to link to the asset survey data.

Different Asset Categories Associated with Different Outcomes

To this point in this chapter, we have emphasized that the more assets young people experience, the more likely they are to make positive choices and avoid negative choices. However, many people ask which assets are most important. That is, are there some assets that are more closely associated with particular outcomes?

There are two answers to this question. First, yes, some types of assets are more strongly associated with some outcomes than others. Second, it depends on what outcome you seek to address. Using the results from 700 high school students in the 2001 survey sample, we analyzed the relationships between each of the eight categories of assets and a range of positive and negative outcomes. The diagrams on the following page illustrate what we learned.

Figure 17 shows that three categories of assets—boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, and commitment to learning—are most strongly associated with reductions in several high-risk behaviors. Thus, if the only goal of asset building were to reduce these specific problems, one might emphasize assets in these categories. It is important to note that other assets and asset categories also contribute to reductions in these risky behaviors, though their association with these particular outcomes is not as strong.

In addition, we also find that other categories of assets play important roles in achieving other outcomes. As shown in Figure 18, the most relevant asset categories are somewhat different when we focus on selected thriving indicators. For these outcomes, four categories of assets are most strongly associated with maintaining good health, and two internal asset categories are most strongly related to valuing diversity. Other high-risk behaviors and thriving outcomes would show stronger associations with other categories of assets.

The point is that there are specific linkages between asset categories and certain outcomes, and these linkages often cut across adult and peer influences; home, school, and neighborhood influences; and parent and teacher influence. Moreover, all asset categories play a significant role in reducing certain kinds of risk behaviors and/or fostering positive development and thriving.

These analyses illustrate both the opportunity and the challenge of focusing asset-building efforts. The opportunity lies in identifying specific strategies that have most potential for addressing a specific outcome. The challenge, though, is that, at a community level, the goals are broad and include a wide range of outcomes—both positive and negative. If the vision is for overall healthy development, it is important to develop strategies and approaches that strengthen assets in all categories, with the understanding that, taken as a whole, the assets provide a solid foundation for many areas of healthy development.

Figure 17
Asset Categories Most Associated with Reductions in Selected High-Risk Behaviors

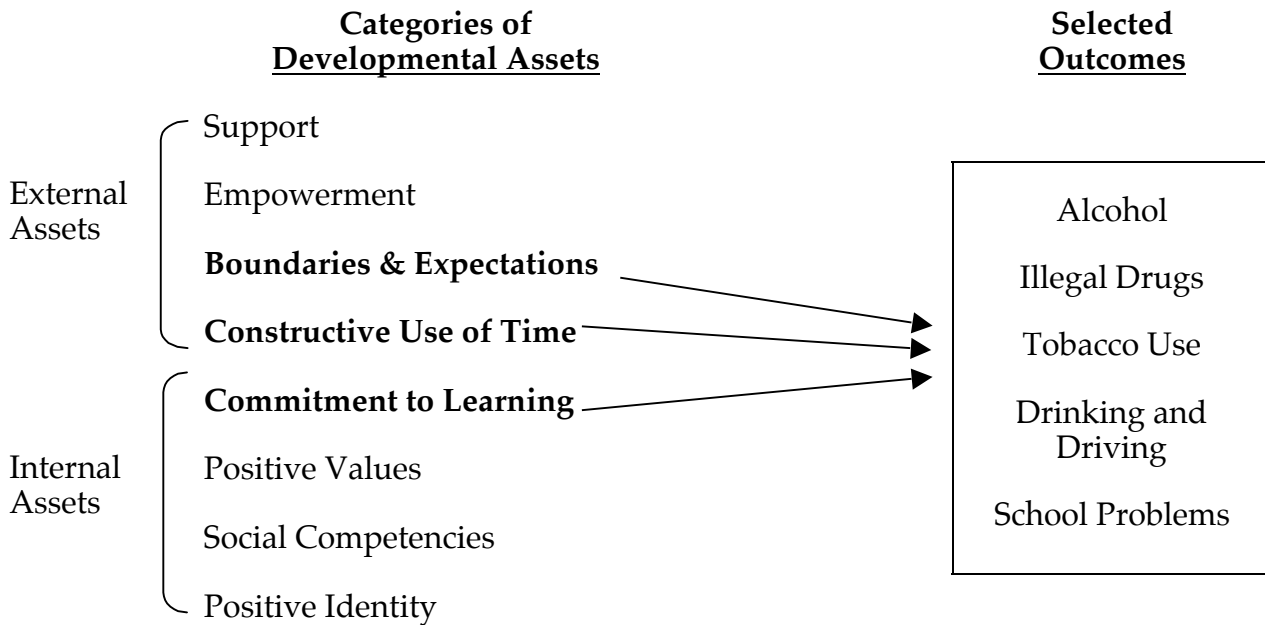
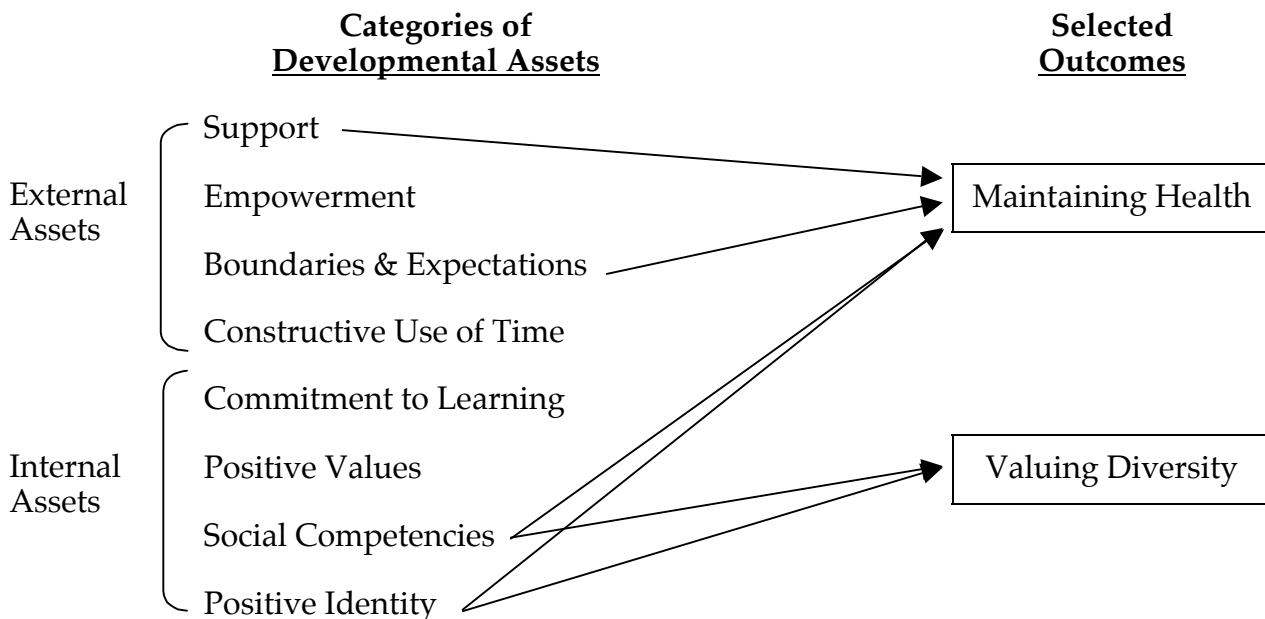


Figure 18
Asset Categories Most Associated with Increases in Selected Thriving Behaviors



Based on 2001 data from students in grades 9 through 12 in St. Louis Park.

The Power of Assets among Struggling Youth

Another way to test the power of assets is to look at youth who report low levels of assets. Are youth who report 10 or fewer of the 40 assets in their lives (approximately one in ten St. Louis Park youth) generally at greater risk for negative behaviors than young people with more assets? And, if so, how strong of a signal would their level of assets be for gauging their vulnerability?

We compared those young people in St. Louis Park who reported low levels of assets (0-10) with those who reported 11 or more assets, then compared their relative risk for various negative behaviors. As shown in Figure 19, youth with few assets are many times more at risk of engaging in all of the negative behaviors than those with more assets. This relationship holds true for both females and males. For example, females reporting few assets are six times as likely as other females to report school problems (including lower grades and skipping school). Males with few assets are five times as likely as other males to be at risk for using drugs.

In other words, youth who report few of the 40 assets at work in their lives are much more likely than their peers to engage in negative and destructive behaviors. Moreover, low levels of developmental assets appear to be a better predictor of such destructive behaviors than any of the sociodemographic risk factors typically used in research, such as living in poverty, being from a single-parent family, and dropping out of school.

For comparison purposes, we also analyzed the relationship between high-risk behaviors and a more traditional risk measure: poverty (which, in this case, is measured by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunches). We found that, overall, experiencing fewer than 10 assets is two to five times as powerful in predicting risk as poverty. For example, young people (regardless of their levels of assets) who live in low-income families are twice as likely as other youth to engage in antisocial behavior. In contrast, low-asset girls (regardless of their family economic status) are *nine* times as likely as other girls to engage in antisocial behavior as other girls, and low-asset boys are four times as likely as other boys to engage in antisocial behavior.

This finding has important implications for policy makers and for asset-building efforts. Too often, activities and programs are designed to address a particular subgroup of young people based on traditional sociodemographic risk factors (such as youth from single-parent families). These findings suggest that identifying young people with low levels of assets may actually be a more accurate strategy than typical approaches for addressing the needs of young people who are most likely to be struggling.¹¹

¹¹ The survey used to measure developmental assets in this study, *Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes & Behaviors*, measures developmental assets at a school or community level, not to create asset profiles of individual youth. Some communities use interviews or other informal methods to get a sense of the asset profiles of their youth. Search Institute is currently developing an instrument that will be appropriate for individual assessment.

Figure 19

Increased Risks for Low-Asset Youth* in St. Louis Park

Compared to other females (those experiencing 11 or more assets),

low-asset females are . . .

- 9 times** as likely to . . . engage in **antisocial behavior**.
- 8 times** as likely to . . . engage in **violence**.
- 7 times** as likely to . . . experience **depression** or attempt **suicide**.
. . . use **illegal drugs**.
. . . use **tobacco**.
- 6 times** as likely to . . . abuse **alcohol**.
. . . experience **school problems**.
- 5 times** as likely to . . . **drink and drive**.
- 4 times** as likely to . . . have trouble with **gambling**.
. . . engage in **sexual activity**.

Compared to other males (those experiencing 11 or more assets),

low-asset males are . . .

- 7 times** as likely to . . . use **tobacco**.
- 5 times** as likely to . . . experience **school problems**.
. . . use **illegal drugs**.
. . . **drink and drive**.
- 4 times** as likely to . . . engage in **antisocial behavior**.
. . . engage in **violence**.
- 3 times** as likely to . . . abuse **alcohol**.
. . . experience **depression** or attempt **suicide**.
- twice** as likely to . . . have trouble with **gambling**.
. . . engage in **sexual activity**.

* Low-asset youth are those who report 10 or fewer of the 40 developmental assets.

Chapter 4

HAVE ASSET LEVELS CHANGED IN ST. LOUIS PARK?

Have all the asset-building efforts by individuals, organizations, and systems in St. Louis Park across the past decade made any difference? When you talk with people who have been involved in or directly touched by the Children First initiative, they can tell stories and give examples of how asset building has made a difference for the community and its young people. In some cases, such as the 9th Grade Program at St. Louis Park High School (see Chapter 5), they can even point to measurable impact because they carefully identified and measured specific strategies and outcomes that focused their efforts.

Beyond these focused efforts that touch a few young people, however, have the various, often unrecognized, efforts made any difference? After all, Children First is an approach that invites each person and each institution in the community to be part of the asset-building team. Further, all these seemingly random efforts are not focused on changing just one behavior or problem (such as violence); instead, they seek to develop the opportunities, relationships, and climate where developmental assets can grow. From a scientific perspective, it is almost impossible to document the effects of those efforts— particularly if you don't know everything that was done by every person for every young person across all years! However, this study does offer good, promising news.

Key Findings

Overall, the study points to three significant, positive changes in St. Louis Park:

- ❑ Assets have increased on average, and risk behaviors have decreased.
- ❑ Some young people show substantial gains in assets that persist over time.
- ❑ And some groups of youth have shown dramatic reversals of negative developmental trajectories and have achieved good high school outcomes.

Are these changes attributable to asset-building efforts in St. Louis Park? Because of limitations in this study,¹² we cannot prove that these changes are solely the result of community asset-building efforts (or other factors). Nonetheless, the signs are encouraging, and it is reasonable to assert that St. Louis Park's children and youth have already benefited a great deal from the community's innovative efforts.

¹² Showing strong cause-and-effect relationships would require a much more complex and expensive study design that would include, for example, a control community and careful measures of young people's exposure to intentional asset-building efforts.

Increases in Asset Levels between 1997 and 2001

The first way to look at change is to compare the overall findings in the most recent survey (fall 2001) to the results from the first survey (fall 1997). As shown in Figure 20, we see two historical changes in assets:

- ❑ For all grades 6 through 12, students report significantly higher average levels of assets in 2001 compared to 1997. Thus, on the whole, youth in St. Louis Park reported having about two more assets in 2001 than the youth reported in 1997.
- ❑ In 2001, it appears that young people were experiencing, on average, less of a decline in assets in early adolescence, were bottoming out earlier, and were showing a more substantial rebound in assets by grade 12. All of these changes are factors related to a more successful transition to adulthood.

Decreases in High-Risk Behaviors between 1997 and 2001

We see similar positive signs when examining changes in high-risk behavior patterns. As indicated in Figure 21, youth in St. Louis Park reported significantly fewer risk behavior patterns in 2001 when compared to 1997.

The Context

The historical trend toward higher levels of assets and lower risk behaviors is broadly based: the improvements are evident across all grades 6-12; for both females and males; across a wide range of asset categories; and across diverse population subgroups, including race/ethnicity, family composition, and family economic status.

These effects have also occurred despite changes in the city, such as a changing, mobile population, that have not necessarily favored increasing assets and reducing risk behaviors overall.

Figure 20
Changes in Levels of Assets, 1997-2001

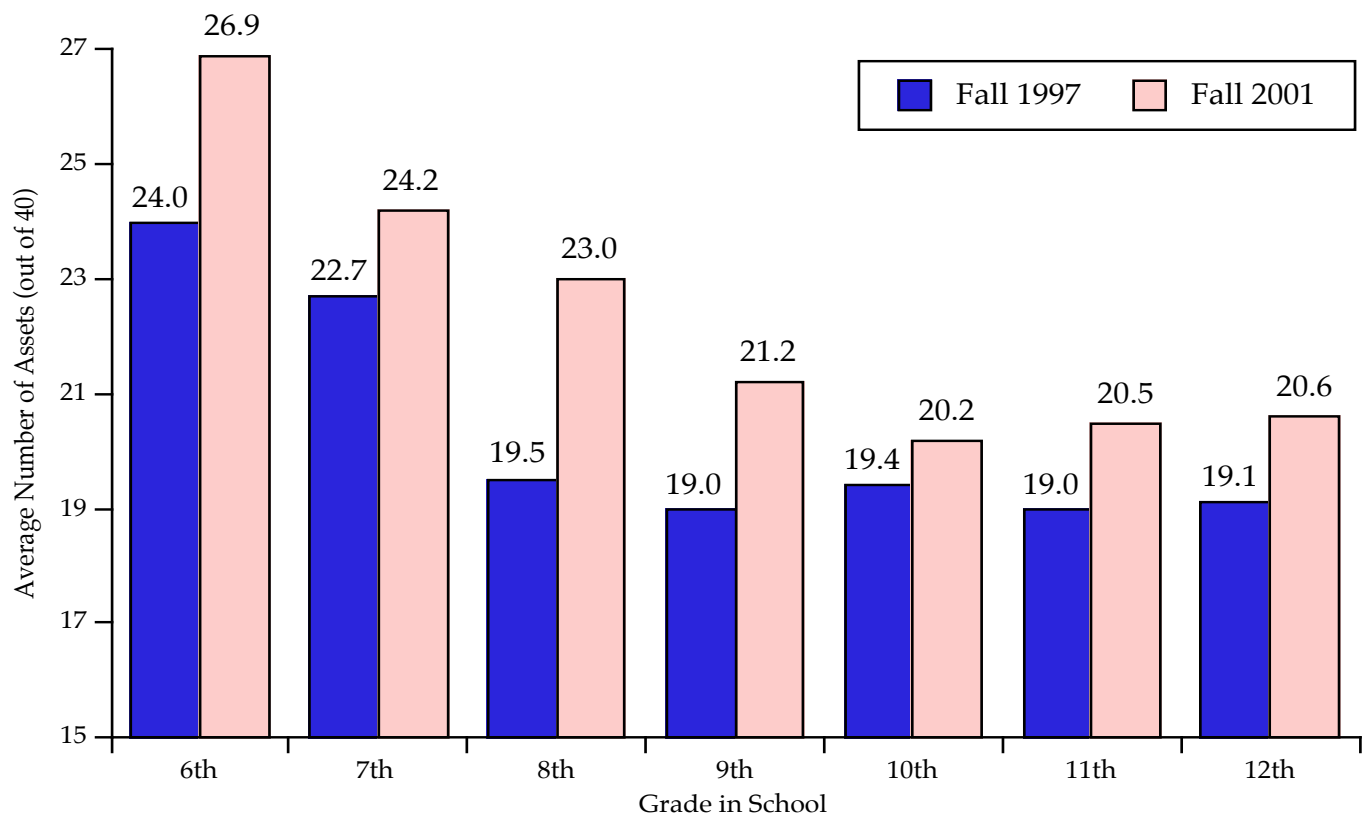
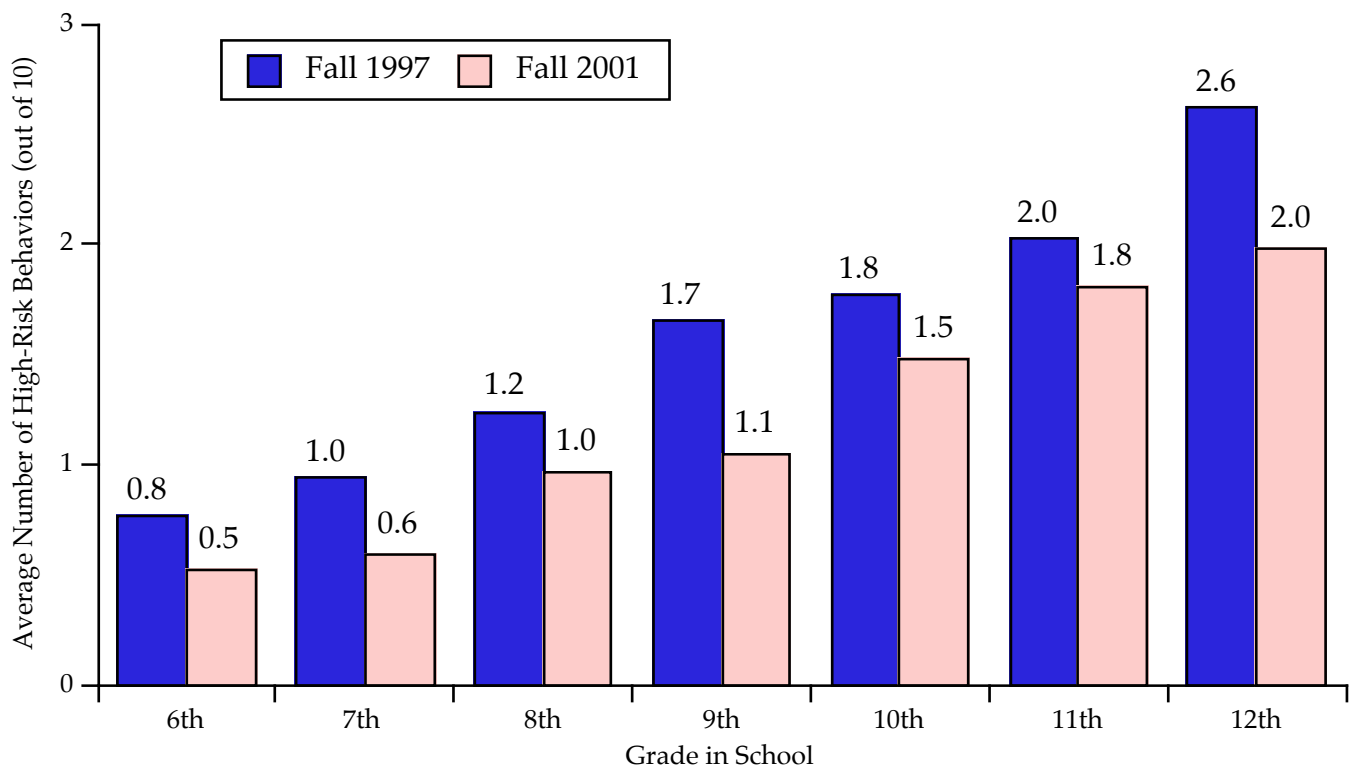


Figure 21
Changes in Levels of High-Risk Behaviors, 1997-2001



Greater Gains in Assets among Some Youth

The average increase in assets since 1997 is promising, as it suggests that, overall, young people in St. Louis Park have stronger foundations today than in the past. Another important question is whether individual youth experience changes in assets and, if so, whether those changes “stick.” Put another way, if a young person experiences a significant increase in assets, is that change temporary, or does it hold?

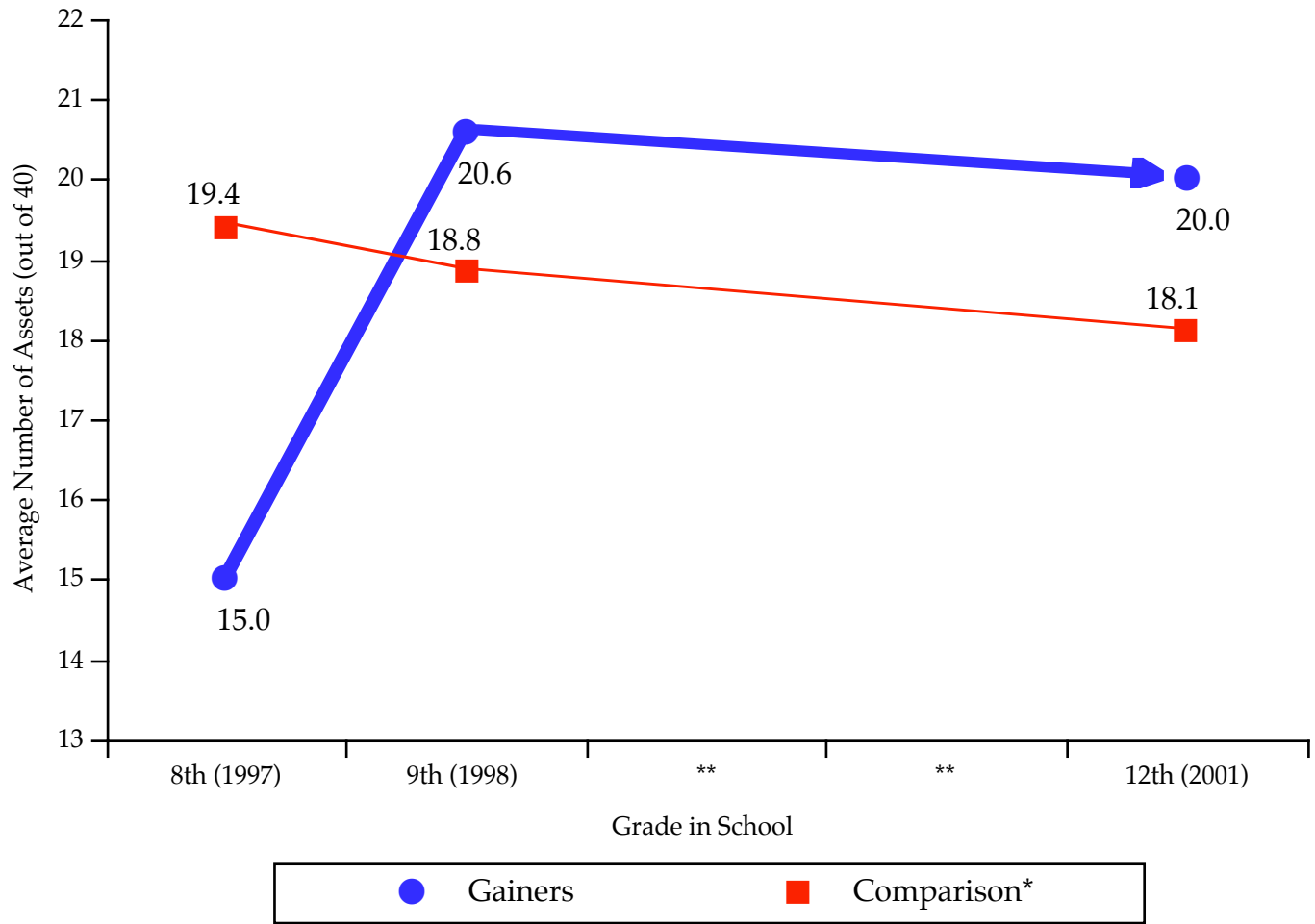
The longitudinal part of the St. Louis Park study shows that some individual young people have experienced large gains in assets in early adolescence. Furthermore, those increases persist throughout their high school years.

We can identify a subset of young people who showed a dramatic increase in assets between 8th and 9th grade (1997 to 1998) and determine if they held on to those gains to 12th grade (2001). As shown in Figure 22, in the 1997 and 1998 longitudinal sample, about one in six young people (16%) experienced a major increase in assets between 8th and 9th grades. Importantly, this group tended to hold on to those gains in assets throughout high school and reported relatively high levels of assets in 12th grade in 2001.

The increase in assets for this group of young people between 8th and 9th grades bucks the normative trend (as suggested by the comparison group in the chart). That is, they experienced increases in assets at a time when, developmentally, we would anticipate a decline in assets (Chapter 2). It is also important to learn whether these changes “stick.” And it appears that these young people strengthened their asset base, and then maintained those improvements through high school.

Thus, while we cannot determine what caused these increases, they do suggest that asset patterns are changeable, and that intentional efforts to build assets have the potential to bring about lasting, positive changes.

Figure 22
Selected Youth with Major Gains in Developmental Assets



* The comparison group consists of the cross-sectional data of all youth in each grade during each survey administration.

** No data collected during these two years (1999 and 2000).

Chapter 5

AN INNOVATION WITH IMPACT

The 9th Grade Program¹³

St. Louis Park's commitment to put children first calls everyone in the community to find ways they can build assets with and for children and youth. Across St. Louis Park, hundreds of youth and adults have found ways to be asset builders in their daily lives. Many organizations and systems have launched strategies, plans, and programs to build assets with children and youth.¹⁴

One initiative stands out as a major innovation that has been shown to have made a big difference in the lives of young people: The 9th Grade Program at St. Louis Park High School. Although not integrally linked to the longitudinal study of St. Louis Park youth, the findings from the evaluation of this program begin to document how asset-building efforts in St. Louis Park are making a difference. Therefore, we have included in this report a brief summary of this program and its impact.

Background to the Program

The 9th Grade Program was conceived when Angela Jerabek, a high school counselor, sought to address a wide range of ongoing concerns in the 9th grade. In working with other staff to identify appropriate responses, she developed a comprehensive strategy for addressing the issues in grade 9 that built the community's commitment to asset building and Children First. In fall 1999, the school district received a Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) State Incentive Grant from the Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning to implement the full new program through spring 2003.

The program has the following goals for 9th-grade students:

- ❑ Decrease alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use;
- ❑ Reduce academic failure;
- ❑ Improve attendance; and
- ❑ Decrease number of discipline referrals.

At first glance, these goals and concerns may not appear to have much relationship to asset building. After all, they focus primarily on reducing a wide range of problems. Yet the program itself was developed based on asset-building research, principles, and practices. This paradigm suggests that caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for participation are

¹³ Major portions of this chapter are adapted from the Summative Evaluation Report on the St. Louis Park 9th Grade Program by Anu Sharma, Ph.D., L. P., and Thomas Griffin, Ph.D., M.S.W., of the Minnesota Institute of Public Health. Submitted on March 31, 2003 to the Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning. Special thanks to Angela Jerabek, the program's coordinator, who provided extensive information for this chapter.

¹⁴ Many stories of how people in St. Louis Park build assets are retold in the Children First newsletter. Residents of St. Louis Park who would like to be added to the mailing list or to share how you, someone you know, or an organization builds assets, send your address to Karen Atkinson, Children First coordinator, at atkinson.karen@slpschools.org. Or call (952) 928-6075.

critical elements for healthy systems that encourage learning and development. This hypothesis is consistent with the survey research that shows that youth with more assets tend to engage in fewer high-risk behaviors. (See Chapter 3.) Thus, all program elements were selected based on their connection to specific developmental assets that had been previously shown to be associated with reductions in the specific problems that were raising concerns regarding 9th-grade students.

Asset-Building Elements of the 9th Grade

The 9th Grade Program puts into practice a wide range of asset-building approaches. Below are some important asset-building principles and how they are integrated into the relationships, climate, and curriculum of the 9th grade.

Focus on strengths and positives—It is true the program emphasizes reducing negative outcomes, but the strategies used also build strengths. While the positive approach is part of everything in the program, two specific examples illustrate this focus:

- ❑ The program's "I Time" component is a 30-minute time each week to concentrate on icebreakers, team-building activities, and education in communication and social competencies. The curriculum is designed to create a positive school climate by engaging students and staff in shared activities.
- ❑ The parent orientation at the beginning of the year has been shifted from the nuts and bolts of high school to a strong focus on adolescent development, asset building, and prevention. The goal is to develop a positive partnership with parents before any student issues emerge during the school year.

Emphasize the whole—The asset-building approach recognizes that all young people need the kinds of positive opportunities, experiences, relationships, and personal strengths that are identified in the framework of developmental assets. As demonstrated in preceding chapters of this report, assets are important for young people from all backgrounds and family situations. The 9th Grade Program applies this basic principle by emphasizing the "healthy whole" in the many specific elements of the process.

- ❑ The teachers who work together in a "block" meet weekly with a social worker and talk about how each student in their block is doing. Every student is discussed so that no one is overlooked.
- ❑ The counselor holds individual meetings with every student in the grade. Again, no one is overlooked. Each student has the opportunity to identify her or his own needs.

Pay attention to each student's situation—The program recognizes that each student enters the 9th grade with unique strengths, challenges, and histories. To learn about each student's needs, strengths, and challenges, the program developed several proactive strategies, rather than waiting for something to go wrong. Specific program components were designed to identify each student's realities and then to offer extra supports to those students who were struggling the most:

- ❑ The program coordinator and support staff work with the junior high school to learn about students who will likely need extra support and guidance when they enter 9th grade. Staff connect with those students during the first two weeks of school.
- ❑ During the first week of school, each student completes a questionnaire in which they indicate their needs so that meaningful opportunities can be developed.

- ❑ Ninth-grade staff members meet weekly to coordinate support for students with the highest needs. This meeting ensures that people are clear about who is responsible for seeing that each student's needs are addressed.

Coordinate efforts—Asset building encourages everyone to see her- or himself as part of the same team. That's easier when efforts are consistently coordinated and connected. So the staff in the program regularly coordinate efforts, ensuring that students' needs are being addressed and that resources are being well used. Furthermore, the program gives teachers the opportunity to meet regularly and "form an identity" as a group. Here are some examples:

- ❑ Weekly staff meetings are held that include all key staff members who work with the 9th grade. They focus on the whole program and the class as a whole.
- ❑ In addition, staff members meet monthly for training and team building.

Build staff-student relationships—A core asset-building principle is that relationships are key. Thus, the 9th-grade curriculum was restructured to make it more likely that teachers and other staff would be able to build meaningful relationships with students. The following strategies were implemented:

- ❑ A significant portion of the State Incentive Grant that helped launch this project focused on reducing the number of students in each English, social studies, and science class to fewer than 30. This allows teachers to give more individual attention and to more easily build these relationships.
- ❑ The 9th-grade teachers have been restructured into "blocks." Each block consists of three core teachers (English, social studies, and science) who all work with one group of approximately 80 students. The approach seems to make a difference. "We reach kids on the whole much better through the blocks," one staff member reported. "Fewer get lost."

Build peer relationships—Positive relationships with peers are also important in an asset-building approach. Thus, the program includes a number of elements (including I Time, discussed above) that help build positive relationships among students. One time that focuses on student relationships is the annual Respect Retreat led by Youth Frontiers (www.youthfrontiers.org). The two-day retreat, which is held in December, involves all 9th-grade students and staff in relationship- and character-building activities aimed at strengthening relationships and improving school climate.

Engage all stakeholders—Many people in the school and community contribute to the success of the program, which uses a wide range of strategies to create a shared commitment to the program in the school and the broader community:

- ❑ Providing student orientation before students enter the 9th grade that includes sample I Time activities, opportunities to connect with other students, and an activity fair to introduce students to available cocurricular activities;
- ❑ Coordinating a parent advisory council for the 9th grade that provides an ongoing mechanism for parents to communicate with the school; and
- ❑ Working with community agencies and businesses that can meet student and family needs.

Cultivate an asset-rich environment—The asset-building approach shifts the focus from individual students toward the creation and maintenance of healthy systems and an overall healthy climate in the school. In addition to the curriculum, relationships, and structure of the 9th grade, the program also seeks to create a climate in which boundaries are consistently

enforced, attendance and learning are expected, and students interact respectfully with each other and with staff. Some of the changes that have been implemented include:

- ❑ Shifting the focus of the staff person responsible for monitoring truancy from a focus only on enforcement to more of a relationship-based approach; and
- ❑ Continuously monitoring and strengthening school attendance policies so that they are as effective as possible.

How the Program Has Made a Difference

The independent evaluation of the 9th Grade Program by the Minnesota Institute of Public Health (MIPH) concluded that “this multi-faceted program has promise to reduce the likelihood that illegal substance abuse and other risk behaviors interfere with students’ ability to be successful in school. . . . Initial findings are promising, and it appears that the 9th grade program has successfully met program developers’ expectations to decrease illegal alcohol, tobacco and other drug use, decrease academic failure, and increase commitment to school as demonstrated by improved attendance of 9th-grade students.”

It is important to note that this positive impact was evident in the evaluation despite several challenges in the school district, including construction that interrupted learning, budget cuts, and staff transitions. Indeed, students and staff indicated that the program provides a system whereby the teachers, staff, and administrators could deal effectively with crises and challenges.

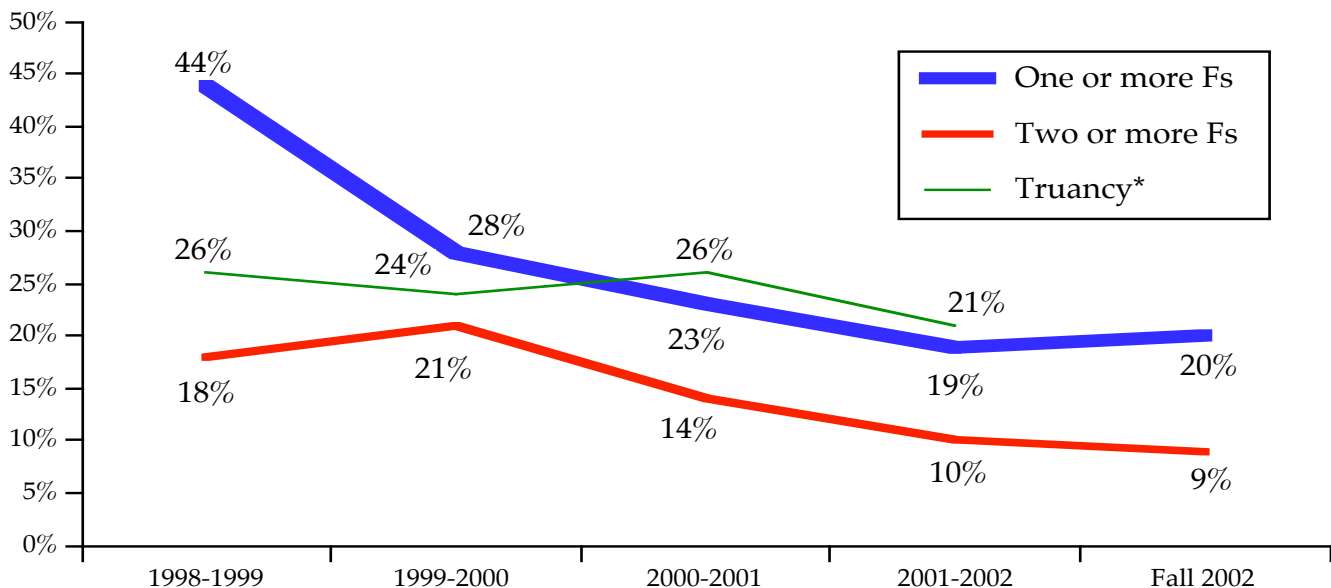
Changes in School Problems and Chemical Use

The program’s impact on school problems and chemical use is indicated in Figure 12 and Table 3. Here are several highlights:

- ❑ Academic failure rates have noticeably declined over the course of this project. The percentage of students receiving either one or two (or more) Fs decreased to half by the measurement in fall 2002 (Figure 23).
- ❑ Truancy rates show a less dramatic, but nonetheless, downward trend as well.
- ❑ Use rates of alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana declined from 1998 to 2001. Use rates are lower compared to overall Minnesota rates, and rates for males are lower than males in a neighboring district (Table 3).

The reduced failures are viewed by many school staff as the most important outcome. When asked about the project’s most significant outcomes to date, one staff person replied: “Reduction of failures. That in and of itself plays such a dramatic part in the climate of the class. It helps to set high expectations for the other students and tells them it is not okay to fail.” Another teacher said: “The failure thing is huge. I felt so awful failing kids. And of course, many of them felt hopeless. Turning this around and helping kids make a comeback has really been a great thing.”

Figure 23
Changes in Student Failure and Truancy among St. Louis Park 9th Graders
during the Implementation of the 9th Grade Program



* 10 or more class periods unexcused or unverified absences.

Table 3
Changes in Chemical Use among St. Louis Park 9th Graders Compared to a Neighboring
District and Statewide Data (Minnesota Student Survey)

Risk Factor	Gender	1998	2001		
			St. Louis Park	Similar Neighboring District	Minnesota Statewide
Cigarette use	Female	26%	10%	12%	20%
	Male	19%	11%	16%	19%
Alcohol use	Female	24%	21%	20%	30%
	Male	32%	19%	24%	30%
Marijuana use	Female	17%	12%	10%	13%
	Male	21%	11%	16%	16%
Binge drinking	Female	12%	11%	10%	15%
	Male	17%	9%	16%	27%

Changes in Developmental Assets

The longitudinal study of St. Louis Park youth was not designed to test for the specific impact of the 9th Grade Program on young people's levels of developmental assets.¹⁵ However, we conducted several analyses and found suggestive results of change in assets that could be related to participation in the program. Conducting these analyses required creating two groups of students in the data set: one that participated in the program and one group that did not.

1. *Program-cohort group*—As shown in Table 4, only one cohort (group) of youth in this study fully experienced the program. This group was in 6th grade in 1997, 7th grade in 1998, and 10th grade in 2001 (having participated in the program the previous year). The program-cohort group can be identified in the table as those in the heavily outlined boxes.

2. *Control group*—Next, we identified an appropriate comparison group by combining the scores for the groups of students who were in the same grades at the time they were surveyed but did not participate in the program. Thus (as indicated by the underlined grades in the table), the 6th-grade classes in 1998 and 2001 were combined to form a control group of 6th graders. Similar groups were formed for grades 7 and 10.

These quasi-experimental groups allowed us to investigate differences in asset scores between the 10th-grade program group and the 10th-grade control group. By comparing these two groups across grades, the following scenarios would indicate possible program effects:

- If there are no initial differences between the two cohorts in grades 6 and 7, but a significant positive difference in the 10th grade (i.e., after experiencing the program); or
- If there are significant *negative* differences between 6th- and/or 7th-grade scores (i.e., the program-cohort group looked worse than the control group), and either no difference or positive differences in the 10th grade.

The following two charts illustrate some of the possible areas of impact that could be detected through the data in this study. Additional potential effects were also found with several other asset categories.

Figure 24 shows that the program-cohort group was reporting significantly higher risk behavior scores in 7th grade than was the control group (indicated by the asterisk). However, this difference had disappeared by 10th grade. Thus, while the program did not reverse the normal developmental reality of increasing risk behaviors during adolescence, it may have slowed the increase in these risks. This difference is striking because we know that young people who engage in risk behaviors early (which appears to be the case for the program-cohort group) are typically headed for a trajectory of greater and more dangerous risk behaviors. However, in this case, the level of involvement in high-risk behaviors was lower for the program group in 10th grade than for the control group.

Figure 25 shows no differences in overall reports of the empowerment assets among males between the program and control groups in the 6th and 7th grades. Indeed, the normal developmental decline in empowerment assets is evident between these two grades.

¹⁵ Among other analytic challenges, the survey administration did not coincide well with the implementation of the program. In addition, surveys were conducted in the fall of each year, so the reports of 9th graders would be early in their experience in the program, and self-reported assets of 10th graders would also reflect their experiences in 10th grade, not just 9th grade.

Table 4
The Sample Used in these Analyses

	6th-Grade Cohort	7th-Grade Cohort			10th-Grade Cohort		
1997	6	<u>7</u>	8	9	<u>10</u>	11	12
1998	<u>6</u>	7	8	9	<u>10</u>	11	12
1999	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
2000	6	7	8	9**	10	11	12
2001	<u>6</u>	<u>7</u>	8	9	10	11	12

Shaded rows denote years of data collection.

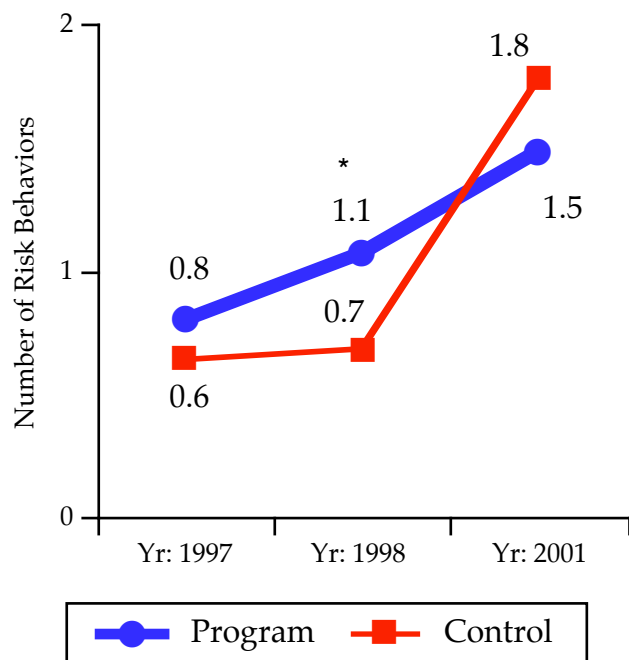
Bolded, italicized numbers (grades 6, 7, and 8 in 1997, etc.) represent the longitudinal cohort of students.

Underlined numbers make up the control group.

Completely boxed-in grades (6th in 1997, 7th in 1998, etc.) represent the cohort of students who received the full 9th-grade curriculum in 2000.

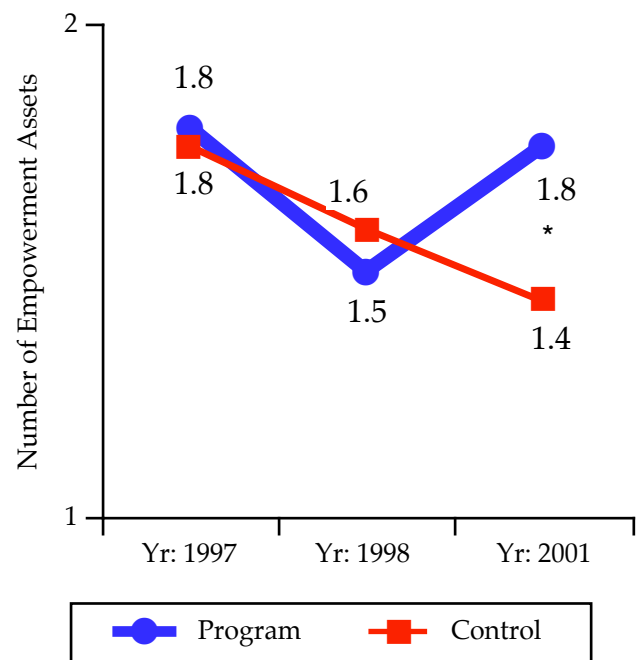
**Program was fully implemented in the 9th grade in 2000.

Figure 24
Risk Behavior Sum Score



* These differences are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Figure 25
Empowerment Assets (Males Only)



However, the program-cohort males actually increased their empowerment assets between 7th and 10th grades; the control group's empowerment assets declined across all three survey administrations. This finding suggests that the 9th Grade Program may have contributed to reducing the normal developmental decline in assets, allowing for an earlier "bounce back" in high school.

Although these results look to be promising, they should be taken only as suggestive indications of positive program effects. Several methodological and analytical factors limit any strong scientific conclusions regarding the effects of this program on the level of assets experienced by these students. Nonetheless, these results, coupled with the findings in the MIPH evaluation, provide promising evidence that the 9th Grade Program altered the behaviors and experiences of the students who participated.

Summary and Conclusions

The 9th Grade Program is an important innovation for St. Louis Park and the broader asset-building movement. It provides some of the first evidence from an independent evaluation that an asset-building approach can have a measurable impact in the lives of young people (particularly in reducing risks, as evidenced in the MIPH evaluation). It also shows the energy and sense of team that can emerge in an organization or community when people share a positive vision of their work with youth.

The program also illustrates both the opportunities and challenges of reframing programs and institutions in communities to become asset-rich resources for children and youth. The challenges lie in recognizing that asset building calls for rethinking all aspects of school and community life and investing time, energy, and resources in transforming the programs, relationships, and climate to be consistent with asset building. It requires asking tough questions about what's working and what's not. And it requires the courage and vision to try something different and new—and letting go of things that may no longer be effective.

The opportunity lies in seeing a real impact in the lives of students and the overall climate of the school. As one administrator put it: "I've been at this school a long time, and we've struggled with these issues for what seems like forever. We've had task forces and all kinds of things. We never had anything that worked until now. . . . This thing works. It really works."

Chapter 6

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

It has been a decade since St. Louis Park launched the Children First initiative. This study points to encouraging signs of progress, while reminding us that the work is not complete. It also points to some new areas for potential dialogue and action.

Celebrate Progress and Commitment

This report affirms the asset-building efforts in St. Louis Park. All the available analyses suggest positive changes in developmental assets among young people in the community. And, if these trends continue, the future will continue to be strong. Each individual, family, and organization that has worked to build assets in the lives of young people deserves recognition and affirmation for their efforts.

Examples of asset building are evident throughout the community. Individual youth, parents, neighbors, teachers, business people, child-care workers, religious leaders, and others have found ways to build assets. Major initiatives such as the 9th Grade Program and the Meadowbrook Collaborative¹⁶ have been effective in using asset-building approaches to address complex challenges and issues. Each of these efforts, large and small, merits recognition—not only to encourage those involved, but also to show others concrete ways they can make a difference.

It is also significant that Children First has been a force and a vision in the community for at least a decade—and it is still going strong. At a time when priorities can easily shift and attention be diverted to other issues, it is a tribute to leaders throughout the city that Children First has been an ongoing presence and resource, continuing to invite everyone in St. Louis Park to join the asset-building team.

Reach Out to Those Not Yet on the Team

Although Children First has been effective in introducing developmental assets to many people in the community, a majority of residents remain unaware of the initiative and disconnected from the asset-building vision. According to the city's survey of St. Louis Park residents in 2000, 42% of residents are aware of Children First. Among those who are aware, 53% know about the 40 developmental assets. Among those familiar with the assets, 55% report being actively involved in building assets.

This new report provides a fresh opportunity to reintroduce St. Louis Park residents to the asset-building approach and the many ways they can be asset builders with and for children and adolescents. Since many people want to be part of efforts that have already shown success, the evidence of progress may encourage broader and deeper involvement.

¹⁶ For more information on the 9th Grade Program, see Chapter 5. For more information on the Meadowbrook Collaborative, see Chapter 11 of Ramsey, R. D. (1999). *The Children First story: How one community partnership is learning to put its children and families first*. St. Louis Park, MN: Children First.

Trends and Realities That May Shape the Future of Asset Building in St. Louis Park

Many dynamic forces are at work in St. Louis Park that have shaped developmental assets for young people and that influence the role and priorities of Children First in the community. Consider the following trends and realities in the city that potentially impact asset building:*

- ❑ The median age for residents in St. Louis Park has risen from 28.6 in 1970 to 35.7 in 2000. Only one in five households (19%) include school-age children, and 9% include preschoolers.
- ❑ One-third of current residents (34%) have moved to the community in the past five years. Most residents expect that they will stay in the community for the next 20 years, though 27% expect to move in the next five years.
- ❑ About 43% of residents are involved in volunteer activities in the community.
- ❑ Relatively few adults have any connections with the St. Louis Park schools. Only 17% of residents have had contact with school district administration or staff, and only 27% report being familiar with the work of the school board.
- ❑ A growing proportion of St. Louis Park's households are renters, not homeowners. In 2000, 37% of housing was renter occupied, compared to only 16% in 1960.
- ❑ The vast majority of residents (87%) believe the city is moving in the right direction. Ninety-five percent of residents say they would recommend the community to others as a good place to live.
- ❑ Four out of five residents (79%) believe that the growing diversity of St. Louis Park's population is "a good thing."
- ❑ Nine out of 10 residents believe their neighborhood is "a good place to raise children."

* This information is from various sources from the City of St. Louis Park, including the 2000 Residential Survey. Available at www.stlouispark.org/ReportsForms/ReportsForms.html.

In doing so, it is important to engage residents who do not have children in the home and who do not regularly connect with the public schools. (See the above box on trends and realities.) These individuals and families (single adults, empty nesters, retirees, and others) have a great deal to offer as asset builders (many are active in the community and volunteer regularly, for example), but they may not immediately see their role in an initiative focused on children and youth. Further, they likely do not receive regular communications from the school district, which has historically been a key channel for sharing news and information from Children First.

Examine Who Is Being Left Behind

While the overall level of developmental assets rose between 1997 and 2001, only 10% of St. Louis Park youth still experience 10 or fewer of the 40 assets. In the community's efforts to build assets with all young people, particular attention may be warranted in ensuring that the asset-building efforts are reaching broadly in the community to those young people who are not already connected to asset-building relationships or opportunities.

To say that all young people need a solid foundation of developmental assets in their lives is not to say that "one size fits all." Each young person faces specific challenges and can access unique

resources. The experiences of the 9th Grade Program and the Meadowbrook Collaborative (which made dramatic changes in the Meadowbrook housing complex through asset-building approaches) show the value of developing asset-building strategies to address the specific realities of young people facing particular challenges.

The partners in Children First may now have new opportunities to expand asset-building efforts so that they continue to engage with young people broadly while also responding to the needs, interests, and capacities of the diverse population of children and youth in the city. Those efforts have greatest potential for ensuring that *all* young people have access to the resources and supports they need to thrive.

Continue Creative Innovations

One of the hallmarks of Children First has been the community's willingness to invest time, energy, and resources in promising new ideas. Indeed, that's how Children First itself was birthed! Since that time, there have been dozens of innovations, large and small, have engaged new people, developed new approaches, and deepened the efforts to nurture children, youth, and families. Not all innovations will be successful. Some may never take root. Yet the strong, independent evaluation of the 9th Grade Program reminds us of the importance of these innovations. Continuing to imagine—and bring to life—new possibilities will be an important part of keeping the vision alive and seeing real transformation in the lives of children, youth, families, and neighborhoods—and, indeed, the whole community.

Continue to Monitor and Learn

For the past decade years, St. Louis Park has been an important “laboratory” for the asset-building movement nationally and for strengthening the city's own efforts. That learning has been a key part of keeping the momentum going in the community and in identifying future directions.

We anticipate that the commitment to learning will continue in St. Louis Park. As evidence, we point to the follow-up survey of young people in spring 2003 (not included in this report), which will extend the learning from this report. Furthermore, Children First is part of Search Institute's National Asset-Building Case Study Project, which is examining the dynamics of community change. These and other learning efforts have great potential for continuing to strengthen and refine asset-building efforts in the community—and to strengthen St. Louis Park's reputation as an innovator in the asset-building movement nationally.

Postscript

MAKING ASSET BUILDING A WAY OF LIFE

When Search Institute first began working with St. Louis Park in the early 1990s, it was the first community that sought to bring the asset-building vision to life. We were all learning together what it would take to build developmental assets for and with young people in this community. In the decade since then, we have become more and more convinced that what we're about is broad and deep social transformation:

- ❑ Transformation toward every adult—whether or not they have children in their family—seeing building assets with young people as part of her or his responsibility as a resident of the community.
- ❑ Transformation toward every young person recognizing and acting upon her or his own capacity to build assets and to participate in strengthening community.
- ❑ Transformation of every sector—education, business, city government, faith communities, health care, and others—embedding asset building into its core mission and operations so that young people are valued, cared for, and guided wherever they spend time.
- ❑ Transformation of programs in the community—from child care to after-school and summer activities—so that they are actively contributing to young people's growth.
- ❑ Transformation of civic decisions, so that policies, media, and other broad influences in community life are contributing to the vision of an asset-rich community.

St. Louis Park has made progress in each of these areas. But it would be unrealistic to expect deep and lasting change to occur overnight—or even in the first decade of effort.

Search Institute has also come to see change as a gradual process of moving people and systems toward lasting change. Initially, efforts focus on creating receptivity (openness to new ideas) and awareness (helping people see the possibility of change). Then people and systems move to mobilization (getting organized) and taking action (trying some things). Although the task is not complete, this report—and the stories gathered by Children First—indicates that St. Louis Park has made remarkable progress in these first four phases of change. Many people are taking action on their own. A solid partnership is in place for the community. Organizations and systems have launched bold and creative strategies.

However, transformation doesn't stop with action. The final phase is continuity: making asset building a way of life. How do these commitments become a core component of community life? What will it take for asset building to become ingrained in the identity, the "DNA," of this community?

In the same way that we were not sure about where asset building was leading when Children First was launched, we're not sure of everything it will take to make asset building a sustained way of life for the people and institutions of St. Louis Park. Nevertheless, given the history and the evidence to date, we are confident that this community will learn about and teach us what it takes in the next decade.

In the process, St. Louis Park will add another first to its efforts to give kids the care and support they need to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible.



Children First is a call to individuals, families, and organizations in St. Louis Park to reclaim their responsibility for young people and to provide the guidance, support, and attention children and teenagers need to be successful. Children First is a philosophy, not a program. This philosophy was first adopted by five partners in St. Louis Park—business, city government, education, health, and faith communities—and has rapidly spread to other individuals and organizations. Launched in 1993, Children First was the first community-wide initiative to use Search Institute’s groundbreaking research on developmental assets as a foundation for community action. For more information, visit www.children-first.org.



Search Institute’s mission is to provide leadership, knowledge, and resources to promote the healthy development of children, youth, and communities. It works nationally in advancing a vision of a world where all young people are valued and thrive. The organization created the framework of developmental assets and the principles of asset-building communities that guide the Children First initiative in St. Louis Park. Search Institute worked closely with St. Louis Park community leaders in developing and launching the Children First initiative. For more information, visit www.search-institute.org.