

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Developing Social Capital Through Participation in Organized Youth Programs: Qualitative Insights from Three Programs

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SUMMARY: An exploration of how youth may become connected to adult leaders in their community through a social capital lens was conducted. Furthermore the study examined the process that youth engaged in when forming relationships with adult leaders. Qualitative interviews were conducted with adolescents in three youth programs. Findings suggest that relationships between youth and resource-bearing adults do happen over time and provide youth with support for both short and long-term goals.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Youth's relationships with adult leaders were found to develop in three stages. First, youth noted suspicion and distrust of the adult leaders, then caution in their interactions, and finally developing meaningful connections with them.
- Youth's relationship with adults provided youth support with career and college decision making.
- The youth programs facilitated this process of social capital development by linking youth to adults, structuring activities around common goals, and coaching youth on these interactions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Encourage military-connected youth to participate in youth programming that facilitates relationship building with adults in the community
- Provide military-connected youth and their families resources on available youth programs in the community

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide meaningful opportunities (e.g., internships, job shadowing) for military-connected youth to develop meaningful relationships with adults in the community
- Encourage military-connected youth to reach out to adults within the community that share interests (e.g., career, leadership focused) as a means to developing social capital

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Support military-connected youth programming around career development and mentorship
- Encourage collaboration between military-connected youth programs and local businesses creating ways for youth to bridge the divide with the adult world and build social capital.

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METHODS

- Three programs were the focus of this study and were selected based upon three criteria (a) were wellregarded by professionals (b) youth centered and (c) engaged youth in working toward some goal or set of goals over a cycle of activity.
- Thirty-four youth were interviewed several times over a sixteen week period on their social capital formation. More specifically, they were asked about their relationships with adults, the impact they had on the youth, and tangible benefits of the interactions and relationship.
- All authors coded and analyzed the youth's descriptions of relationships with community adults.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included a sample of 10 to 13 youth from the three participating programs.
- The study does not provide descriptive data about the youth participants other than gender.
- Programs included the Future Farmers of America (FFA), Art-First, and Youth Action. Art-First and Youth Action were located in an urban context; whereas, FFA was a rural based program.

LIMITATIONS

- This study only included youth participating in programs known for their high quality work and engagement with youth; therefore, results should be interpreted within these parameters.
- There were no demographics provided about the participants beyond gender; therefore, how relationship building with adults differed or were the same among these participants by race or socioeconomic status is not known.
- The perspectives of the resource-bearing adults were not included in this study; which limits the application of the findings for other youth programs.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Investigate what programs explicitly do to engage and support relationship building between resourcebearing adults and military-connected youth
- Broaden the scope through a representative sample of military-connected youth, which would help to evaluate the generality of the findings described in this research
- Conduct a longitudinal study that followed youth participants to see if and how they continued to use the social capital they gained as they moved into adulthood

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