
25 Years of Developmental Assets

Personal Reflections (and a Little Data)

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Twenty-five years ago, in December 1990, I received a just-published report from my soon-to-be mentor and colleague, Peter Benson. (I started at Search Institute the following April.) Titled *The Troubled Journey*, the report introduced Search Institute’s groundbreaking framework of [Developmental Assets](#). The assets were described as “a good starting point for naming the ingredients necessary for positive youth development” (Benson, 1990, p. 7).

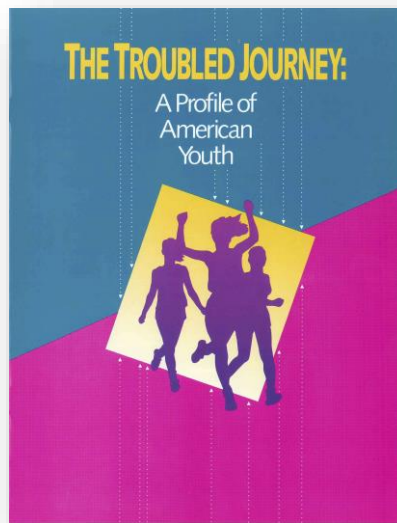
That study (based on surveys of 46,799 students in 111 communities across 25 states), and the work that followed, helped to frame the field of community-based positive youth development and to catalyze collaborative action with young people in thousands of families, schools, organizations, and communities across North America and around the world. This 25th anniversary offers an opportunity to reflect on where we’ve come and how it set the stage for where we need to go.

Breakthrough Ideas

When first introduced in 1990, the Developmental Assets framework brought together disparate

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insights from fields of prevention, resilience, and youth development into an integrated view of the relationships, opportunities, and character strengths young people need to thrive. Ideas that were novel when introduced then have become widely assumed (though not consistently operationalized) in youth development and related fields. For example:



1. An emphasis on understanding and building strengths. When *The Troubled Journey* was released, most survey-based studies and reports (such as [Kids Count](#), [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System](#), and [Monitoring the Future](#)) focused on risks and deficits. Together with other pioneering efforts¹, the Developmental Assets framework recast the conversation to emphasize young people’s strengths, even when they were facing important challenges, as building a strong

foundation for growing up well.

2. The cumulative power of assets. Since the first study, we have consistently found that the more assets young people experience, the better off they are. Young people with more Developmental Assets report lower levels of high-risk behaviors (such as alcohol use and violence) and higher levels of thriving attitudes and behaviors (such as doing well in school, leadership, and valuing diversity). This association has been shown to be true across every population studied, from major cities in the United States to rural villages in Uganda.

No single asset (or skill or support or attitude), by itself, is sufficient to ensure healthy development and thriving. Furthermore, the framework intentionally balanced internal and external assets, recognizing both community supports and youths' personal strengths and agency as essential and interactive in shaping who young people are and how they engage with the world. Building such a holistic constellation of strengths around and within young people equips them to make good choices and be, and become, their best selves, even in the face of daunting challenges or injustice.

3. Alignment around a shared vision. From the beginning, the assets framework implicated all parts of communities. Benson explicitly included many different parts of the community in the framework. As he wrote in *The Troubled Journey*: “One sector alone (e.g., family or school) cannot by itself provide all the ingredients necessary for positive youth development” (Benson, 1990, p. 72). Thus, “positive change will require extraordinary commitment to children and adolescents by multiple sectors, including government, business, schools, parents, service organizations, law enforcement, youth-serving organizations, and religious institutions” (p. 79).

The current wave of interest in “collective impact” echoes those words, albeit with different emphases. Whereas collective impact focuses primarily on aligning formal systems, policies, programs, and data around specific targets, *The Troubled Journey* (and the Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth initiative that we organized in 1995) emphasized mobilizing whole communities to build public will and engagement. At their best, community-wide youth development efforts do both.

A Changing World

Neither the world nor Search Institute has remained where it was in 1990. For context, 1990 was the same year that English scientist Tim Berners-Lee first tested the World Wide Web with the [first web](#)

[page](#). In the quarter-century that followed, our work on Developmental Assets grew and changed:

- The asset framework evolved to 40 assets in 1996, rather than the original 30.
- Up to 600 community coalitions adopted the assets as an organizing framework, particularly in the 1990s. Many have continued their efforts across two decades, growing and changing over time.
- Assets have been measured in more than 5 million young people. We have been able to examine assets with different cultural groups, urban and rural youth, young people from grades 4 through college, and, in analyses currently underway, LGBT youth.
- Like so many other parts of society, the Developmental Assets have globalized. Surveys have been conducted in more than 30 countries around the world, in 30 languages other than English, involving more than 25,000 youth outside the United States.

Of course, many other changes have shaped the worlds of education and youth development. “Big data” is everywhere, along with omnipresent technology. No Child Left Behind has come and gone, with Common Core and other accountability systems emerging. Our understanding of human development has exploded with new insights from neuroscience, the burgeoning field of positive psychology, and the entrance of economists into the youth development and education discussions.

Amid all the changes we've seen across this quarter-century are new generations of youth workers, educators, and researchers who were infants when the assets were introduced. (Some of them grew up in families and communities that focused on assets.) The language of collective impact, character strengths, non-cognitive skills, and social-emotional learning have gained prominence in education and youth development—in some cases, adding to a

plethora of terms and measures trying to describe similar things.

Ongoing Questions

These new emphases, new research, and newer forms of accountability press us toward more consistent and robust measurement, more rigorous connections with behavioral outcomes data, and more precise articulation of the connections between actions, outputs, and impact. In addition, many of the vexing questions continue to challenge the field. For example:

- How do we most effectively measure the intangibles (e.g., how youth are challenged) that we know are important, even foundational for development, but are hard to quantify?
- How do we focus on personal strengths and resources while also addressing the systemic, institutional, and social barriers and prejudices that undermine development for disadvantaged and marginalized youth, including youth of color, low-income youth, immigrant youth, and LGBT youth?
- How do we hold onto a broad, systemic understanding of youth development (as articulated in the assets framework) while also finding ways to focus on transforming specific, high-leverage parts of the developmental system that can trigger cascading change?
- How do we maintain a holistic perspective while focusing our actions, knowing that if we do not move beyond “everything matters,” little actually gets done that improves the lives of young people?

Each of these and other questions reminds us that the breakthroughs we made 25 years ago were not the end of the story. They left some questions unanswered and opened up new ones.

What about the Young People?

We now have a U.S. youth population that’s larger and much more diverse than it was in 1990. Today’s

young people have grown up in the shadows of 9/11 and a global war on terrorism, too-frequent mass shootings (starting with Columbine), and more recent outrage over police-involved shootings. They are digital natives who are more likely to embrace diversity than past generations.

Since we and others have been collecting data from youth across this quarter century, what has changed or not changed? Are young people themselves doing better or worse than they were in 1990? Unsurprisingly, the answer is: It depends.

Writing for the 25th anniversary of [2014 Kids Count](#), researchers at the Annie E. Casey Foundation wrote: “During the past quarter century, numerous demographic, social and economic changes as well as major policy developments have affected the life chances of low-income children. Some have been positive; some, negative; and some, decidedly complex and ambiguous” (AECF, 2014).

We see this mixed bag when we compare several indicators from various sources about child and youth well-being, as shown in Figure 1. There are clearly many positive comparisons that are often lost when we talk about “kids these days.” Many risk behaviors have declined. Some have increased. Overall, educational attainment is higher, though intransigent gaps in opportunities remain based on race, ethnicity, and income. Furthermore, these overall comparisons mask challenges for particular subgroups of youth.

Though the samples are not similar (making comparisons problematic), we’re able to compare a few assets that are measured today in the same way we measured them in 1990 (also in Figure 1).

Among these few assets, we see at least modest increases across the 25 years. Those differences may or may not reflect national trends; they certainly do not suggest seismic shifts up or down in young people’s well-being.

It would be easy to cherry-pick specific indicators as signs that our asset-building and other positive youth development efforts been successful—or that we’ve

failed, depending on our vantage point or rhetorical goals. But we have to admit that the transformation called for in *The Troubled Journey* remains elusive. This quote from 1990 still resonates today:

It is not clear whether growing up now is riskier business than it once was, or whether we are simply doing a better job of naming and counting problems that existed before. It does not really matter. What matters is that there are too many casualties, too many wounded, too many close calls (Benson, 1990, p. 1).

Moving Forward

Our question as we begin the New Year: How do we both learn from the transformative work of the past while constantly integrating fresh perspectives based on new learning and new (or previously overlooked) realities in the world around us?

At Search Institute, we continue to support use of the [Developmental Assets](#) through focused partnerships with communities and organizations nationally and internationally. At the same time, we are introducing new frameworks, tools, and approaches that not only build on the prior assets work, but also integrate new insights and emphases in response to what we've learned and what has happened in the world around us.

For example, our emerging work on [developmental relationships](#) echoes many of the themes in the external assets, but it zeroes in on what happens *within* a web of positive relationships with parenting adults, peers, teachers, youth workers, and mentors that enhance development and thriving. Where the external assets provide a broad view of developmental resources in communities, developmental relationships focus on the one-to-one interactions that, we hypothesize, are catalysts for growth and thriving.

Similarly, our emerging work on character strengths—which we've emphasized in [workshops on perseverance](#) (and will articulate more fully in

2016 in a process called REACH)—builds on the internal assets. This work integrates new insights from a growing body of research and practice grounded in education, neuroscience, and cognitive psychology. (The assets were grounded more heavily in prevention and social psychology.) Thus these new efforts refresh, complement, and extend the work that was introduced 25 years ago.

Finally, we increasingly understand the complexity of how change and transformation happen—not merely through the adoption of proven programs or embracing the latest rhetorical approaches. Rather, transformative, measurable change requires disciplined improvement and behavior change processes. Those efforts at the individual, organizational, and community levels can, we believe, yield improvements at scale in the lives of young people.

That change will not come quickly or easily. The next 25 years will likely see even more change than we saw in the past quarter century. Those changes will call us to adapt, learn, and innovate in what we do and how we do it. But the task is too important for our future to shirk. Peter Benson's call to action in 1990 remains our challenge today:

Our highest national priority should be to mobilize our collective energy, commitment, and ingenuity to ensure a bright future for each and every child (Benson, 1990, p. 1).

Note

¹ Other frameworks include the [5 \(or 6\) Cs of youth development](#), first articulated by Karen Pittman, and later examined by Richard Lerner and his colleagues, and the [social development model](#) of J. David Hawkins and his colleagues. (For more history, see [Positive youth development so far](#), which summarizes a chapter in the *Handbook of Child Psychology*.)

References

Benson, P. L. (1990). *The troubled journey: A portrait of 6th-12th grade youth*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute and Lutheran Brotherhood.

Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014). *2014 Kids Count data book: State trends in child well-being*. Baltimore, MD: Author.

Figure 1 Then and Now: Assets, Risks, and Well-Being

How are young people doing today compared to 1990 when *The Troubled Journey* was published? A scan (not definitive) of several data sources illustrates a mix of positive and negative changes.¹

		Then	Now	Years
Population²				
Number of children in U.S., birth to 18.	↑	64M	74M	1991, 2012
Percent of population that is children of color.	↑	31%	47%	
Samples for the asset data in 1990 and 2015 are not equivalent. Any conclusions about trends are tentative.				
External Assets (Grades 6 to 12)³				
<i>Family support</i> —Family life provides high levels of love and support.	↑	56%	73%	1990, 2015
<i>Caring school climate</i> —School provides a caring, encouraging environment.	↑	30%	37%	
<i>Parent involvement in schooling</i> —Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.	↑	26%	32%	
Internal Assets (Grades 6 to 12)³				
<i>Achievement motivation</i> —Young person is motivated to do well in school.	↔	72%	74%	1990, 2015
<i>Caring</i> —Young person places high value on helping others.	↑	48%	58%	
<i>Positive view of personal future</i> —Young person is optimistic about her or his future.	↑	68%	73%	
Data below are collected from consistent samples, so we can have more confidence in the trend comparisons.				
Prosocial Activity (High school seniors)⁴				
Volunteer at least once per month.	↑	24%	37%	1991, 2012
Educational Attainment (25- to 29-year olds)⁵				
Graduated from high school.	↑	86%	90%	1990, 2013
Substance Use (High school seniors)⁶				
Ever used illicit drugs other than marijuana.	↓	27%	23%	1991, 2014
Ever used marijuana.	↑	37%	44%	
Ever used alcohol.	↓	88%	66%	
Ever used cigarettes.	↓	63%	34%	
Births to Teenagers²				
Births per 1,000 teens, ages 15 to 19.	↓	60	29	

Sources for Figure 1

¹ Among the comparisons shown here are percentages of youth reporting several Developmental Assets that Search Institute has consistently measured since 1990. (Most of the assets and measures changed when the framework was updated in 1996.) The data from “Then” is from *The Troubled Journey*. The “Now” data are from an unreleased dataset of 122,269 youth who were surveyed during the 2014-2015 school year. The samples on surveys of developmental assets are not equivalent, so the comparisons are shown for illustrative purposes only. Additional data from the 2014-2015 dataset will be released in 2016.

² Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2014). [2014 Kids Count data book: State trends in child well-being](#). Baltimore, MD: Author.

³ Benson, P. L. (1990). [The troubled journey: A portrait of 6th-12th grade youth](#). Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute and Lutheran Brotherhood; and unpublished Search Institute data from student surveys during the 2014-2015 school year.

⁴ Child Trends (2014). [Volunteering](#). Child Trends Databank.

⁵ Child Trends (2014). [Educational attainment](#). Child Trends Databank.

⁶ Miech, R. A., Johnston, L. D., O’Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G., & Schulenberg, J. E. (2015). [Monitoring the Future national survey results on drug use, 1975-2014](#). Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.

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