

Church as a Protective Factor in Urban African American Youth

By Jessica McDonald

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Executive Summary

The research, *Church as a Protective Factor in Urban, African American Youth*, was a collaborative project between the Stairstep Foundation, CURA (Center of Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota) and a graduate student. Based on previous research done by the Center for Spiritual Development at The Search Institute, this research seeks to determine if urban, African American youth who are involved in church report engaging in fewer risky behaviors (such as substance use, sexual intercourse, and violence) and engaging in more prosocial behaviors (such as school) than those who have little to no church involvement.

The *Church as a Protective Factor in Urban, African American Youth* based its findings on two sets of data. The first is a subset of data from the Minnesota Student Survey, which was administered to all 6th, 9th and 12th graders in MN public schools in 2010. This research looks only at the responses from African American youth who attended Minneapolis or St Paul urban schools. A second survey was administered specifically for the purposes of this research, to churches participating in the Stairstep program “There is a Balm.”

The findings were quite conclusive that young people who are involved in church engage in fewer risky behaviors and more prosocial behaviors. The strongest correlations were found in the 12th graders, where the percentage of youth engaging in risky behaviors was also the highest. Church involvement had no impact on risky behaviors amongst the 6th graders; however other research done by The Search Institute shows that church involvement in younger grades has a large and positive impact on behavior later on.

The findings from both the MN Student Survey and the Stairstep Survey show that urban, African American youth who are involved in church are less likely to engage in risky behaviors. The following data is based on the subset of 12th graders from the MN State Survey, and is based on the question of “are you involved in church activities.” Another question (Does a religious leader care about you) was found to be a very significant factor as well.

- Smoke cigarettes (15% of occasional or no church versus 8% of weekly church goers)
- Smoke cigarillos (15% of occasional or no church versus 9% of weekly church goers)
- Use marijuana (33% of no church versus 14% of weekly church goers)
- Drink alcohol (34% of no church versus 11% of weekly church goers)
- Have ever had sexual intercourse (70% of no church versus 31% of weekly church goers)

Similarly, youth who attended church were more likely to report “liking” school and spending more time each week doing homework.

- Like school a lot or quite a bit (72% of church goers versus 55% of no church)
- Spend 6+ hours per week doing homework (34% of church goers versus 12% of no church)

The Stairstep Survey provided further insight into the ways in which church involvement influence behaviors. In general, young people who participated in regular, small group activities, such as youth

groups or bible studies were less likely to engage in the risky behaviors. However, faith and beliefs had stronger correlations on whether or not students liked school and how much time they spent on homework. Furthermore, youth responded very strongly that their faith was important in their day to day decision making; however, when given choices about what influences their decisions to not engage in risky behaviors, faith was not one of the most important.

In conclusion, both church participation and feeling that a religious leader cares have strong correlations with making more positive behavior choices. Youth that report being involved in church activities at least once a week and youth that report having a religious leader who about are less like to use substances such as cigarettes and alcohol and have sexual intercourse. They are also more likely to like school and spend at least 6 hours a week doing homework.

Church as a Protective Factor in Urban African American Youth

This report examines the connection between church involvement and selected behaviors reported by urban African American youth. The research looks specifically at the trends of African American young people with church affiliations related to their engagement in risky behaviors and their feelings towards school. The Search Institute (Kline, 2008) has identified “church involvement” as a key protective factor in young people, suggesting that youth who are involved in church are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, such as smoking, drinking, doing drugs and having sex, and are more likely to engage in constructive or positive behaviors, like performance in school. “Religious and spiritual practices are beginning to be acknowledged as key protective factors that buffer or shield youth and adults from harmful outcomes... In addition, religious and spiritual practices are beginning to be acknowledged as key promotional factors that foster positive developmental outcomes and thriving” (Search Institute, 2010).

The Search Institute website provides the key insights from Authoritative Communities: The Scientific Case for Nurturing the Whole Child (Kline 2008) which includes many chapters from the Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence. Their research identifies many areas that are impacted by religious and spiritual practices, including protection against the following risks: injury, hypertension, depression, suicide, promiscuous sexual behaviors, alcohol and other drug use and delinquency or criminal behavior. It also identifies religious and spiritual practices promoting the following prosocial factors: longevity, civil engagement, well-being, hope, purpose, and meaning in life, self-esteem, and educational attainment.

Inspired by the Search Institute research, the study, *Church as a Protective Factor in Urban, African American Youth*, reported here explores the Church’s role in lives of African American youth relative to the risky behaviors of alcohol and drug use and sexual intercourse as well as the prosocial school engagement behaviors.

The analysis of the *Church as a Protective Factor in Urban, African American Youth* data concludes that African American youth with church affiliations are more engaged in school and less often engaged in risky behaviors than African American youth in the general population. Specifically, the youth who participate in church or feel cared about by a religious leader were more likely to feel positively towards school and to spend time doing homework. They were less likely to smoke cigarettes, do marijuana, drink alcohol, hit or beat-up others, and have sexual intercourse. The Stairstep Survey provides insight into which aspects of church are influential over the different types of behavior. However, due to the limitations of this survey analysis, it is important to note that it is *not* possible to determine if church affiliations are the cause of these data trends. Simply, the data shows us that youth who are participants in church or who feel that a religious leader cares about them are statistically less likely to do certain risky behaviors and more likely to engage in positive behaviors.

The *Church as a Protective Factor in Urban African American Youth* study draws upon data from two different surveys:

- The 2010 Minnesota Student Survey provided a data subset of African-American youth from Minneapolis and St Paul schools (n=2300). The MN Student Survey is given to all 6th, 9th, and

12th graders every three years. The subset of this data includes youth who do and who do not participate in religious activities.

- The Stairstep Survey was administered to youth with church affiliation by virtue of their participation at ten Minneapolis and St. Paul churches that take part in the Stairstep Foundation program “There is a Balm.” (n=123).

This report has three sections. The first section looks at the trends of urban African American youth. This section draws exclusively from the MN Student Survey data and establishes a baseline for each of the behaviors discussed in the report.

The second section looks at each of the behaviors in turn (both risky behaviors and school engagement behaviors). It uses the MN Student Survey data to show the differences between those who attend church weekly, those who attend church occasionally (monthly or less) and those who never attend church. Then, also using the MN Student Survey data, it compares the youth who feel that a religious leader cares about them with those who do not and how that affects the percentages of youth who engage in the risky and prosocial behaviors. Finally, data from the Stairstep Survey is presented as it relates to each behavior.

The third section presents further analysis and data from the Stairstep Survey. This section explores insights into which aspects of church provide the best results for positive behaviors and the youth’s perceptions of these influences. It also includes additional data from the Stairstep Survey.

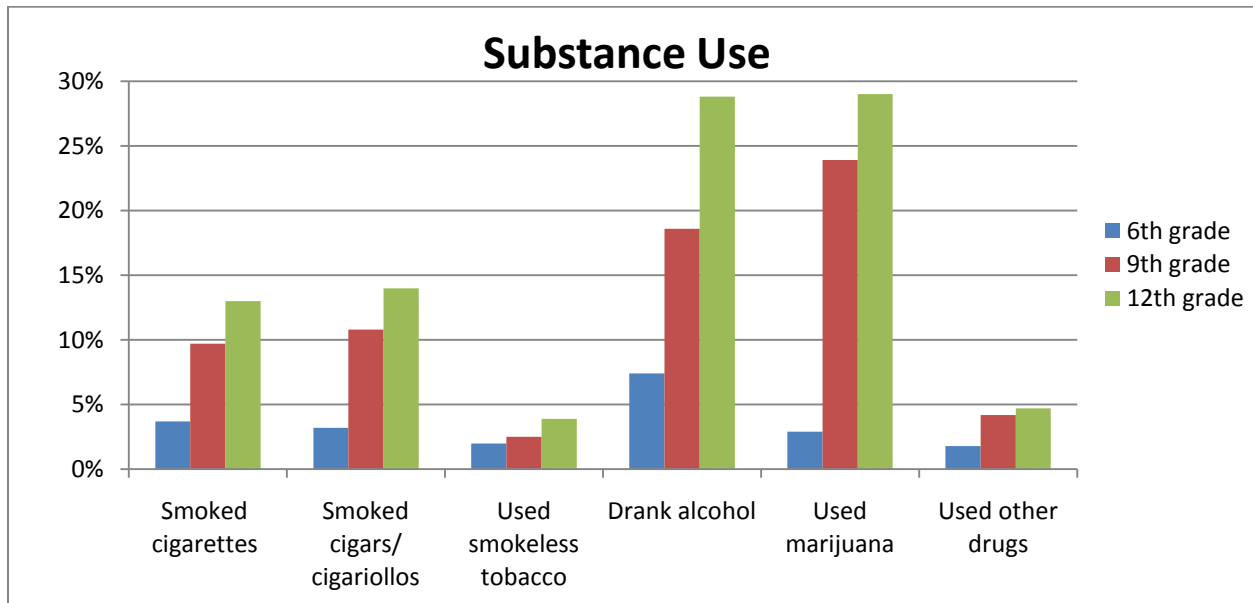
The report concludes with recommendations for church programming and recommendations for future research. A copy of the Stairstep Survey is in the appendix. The data presented in the graphs and charts of this report represent the percentage of youth who reported that they DID engage in that particular activity.

Part I: GENERAL TRENDS AMONG URBAN AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH

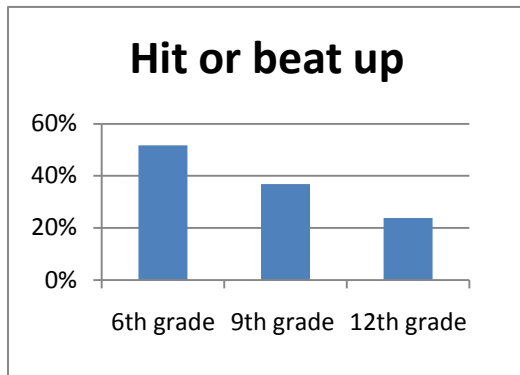
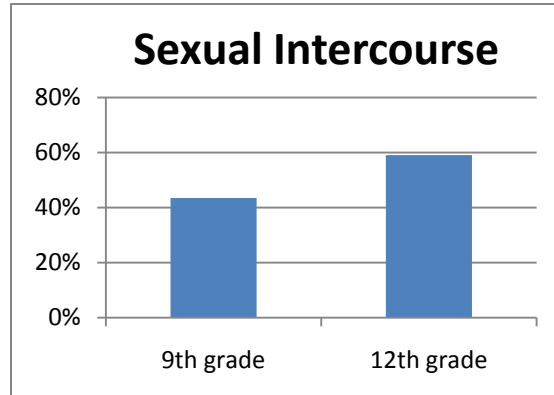
Before comparing the trends of youth who attend church and those who do not, it is important to understand the prevalence of the risky and prosocial behaviors in the population as a whole. This section looks at the MN Student Survey data from the African American student population in 6th, 9th, and 12th grades in Minneapolis and St Paul schools, totaling approximately 2300 students.

Risk Behaviors

Substance use is a very common high risk behavior for youth. Drinking alcohol and doing marijuana are the two most predominant high risk behaviors that young people engage in, with 29% of African American high school seniors having engaged in each of these in the last month. Even in 6th grade, 7% of these students drank alcohol in the last 30 days, the most prevalent risk behavior in the 6th grade, by far. In fact, in all other behavior categories, less than 3.5% of 6th graders had engaged in each particular behavior. Smoking is also quite popular, with 13% of seniors smoking cigarettes and 14% smoking cigars or cigarillos. The use of “other drugs” is one of the lowest categories, with less than 5% of any age group having reported doing these drugs in the last 30 days. However, it is interesting that even though the percentages of youth doing drugs is quite low, the difference between the 9th and 12th graders is small at only a ½ of 1% difference between the two grades. The graph below shows the frequencies of these risky behaviors, in each grade group.



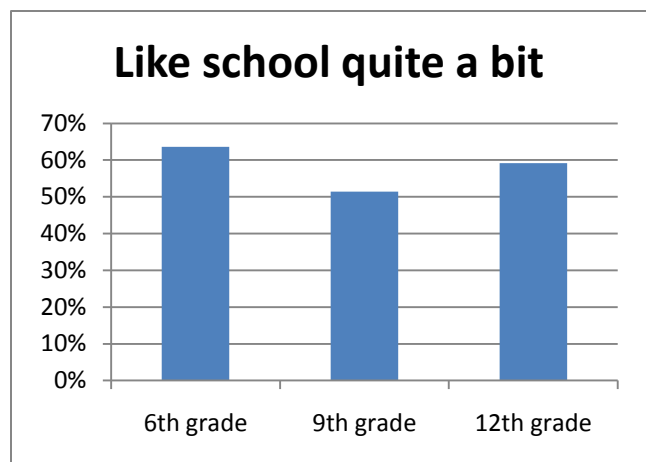
Another risk behavior analyzed in this study is sexual intercourse. On the MN Student Survey 59% of African American seniors in Minneapolis and St Paul and 44% of 9th graders report that they have had sex at least once in their lifetime. (Sixth graders were not asked this question on the MN Student Survey). Where these numbers are significantly higher than the substance abuse findings, it is important to realize that the questions about sexual intercourse asked “Have you ever” where the substance abuse questions asked “Have you... in the last 30 days.” Because of this it is impossible to determine if having sex is more or less prevalent in this population than any of the substance abuses.

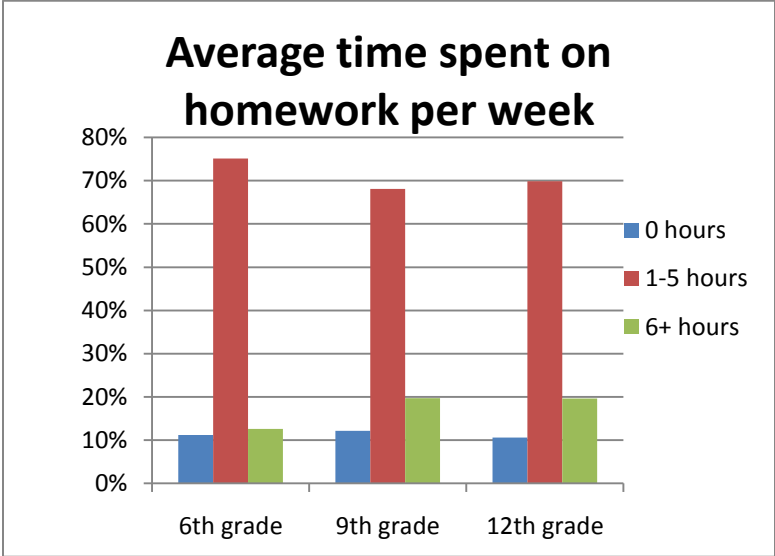


Another risk behavior studied is the use of violent behavior toward others. Students were asked if they had hit or beat-up another person in the last 12 months. This data shows a very different trend than both substance abuse behaviors and sexual intercourse. This is the only risky behavior studied where the 6th graders engaged at the highest rate, and the behavior declines as the students age. More than half (52%) of 6th graders reported hitting or beating someone up in the last 12 months, followed by 37% of 9th graders and 24% of 12th graders.

School Engagement

In addition to looking at risky behaviors, this study also looks at school performance. To gauge school performance, two questions on the MN Student Survey were analyzed. “How do you feel about school” and “How much time to do spend on homework”. The answers were grouped together into categories. For the first question, the responses were either “Very much or quite a bit” or “A little, do not like, or hate.” The trends here are also different than the risky behaviors. In general, the majority of 6th graders like school. It drops considerably by 9th grade, and then rises back up by 12th grade. It should be noted that by 12th grade, many students who do not like school may have either dropped out or transferred to a charter school where their data would no longer be captured by the MN Student Survey. Regardless of why the trend occurs, it is still important that 60% of the African American Seniors enrolled in a Minneapolis and St Paul high school report that they like school ‘very much or quite a bit’.





Another aspect of school performance analyzed was time spent on homework. For this question, the answers were grouped into three categories: “0 hours” “1-5 hours” and “6 or more hours.” The results to this question show that approximately 10% of students do not do any homework across all three grades. The largest percent in all three groups do between 1-5 hours of homework per week; a much larger percent of 9th and 12th graders do over 6 hours per week, as compared with the 6th graders.

PART II: TRENDS FROM YOUTH WHO PARTICIPATE IN CHURCH

When looking at the data collected from both the MN Student Survey and the Stairstep Survey, the results in some categories show that youth who are involved in churches score much more favorably. The church youth are much more likely to report positive feelings about school and more time spent on homework, and less likely to report smoking, doing marijuana, drinking and having sexual intercourse. The MN Student Survey asked two questions regarding church. First, it asked: "How often do you participate in religious activities." For analysis purposes, the responses were combined into 3 categories: "Never or Not available" "Monthly or less than monthly" and "1-2 times per week." Across all three grades, approximately 60% of the youth reported never attending church activities, 15% reported attending monthly or less, and 25% reported attending church on a weekly basis.

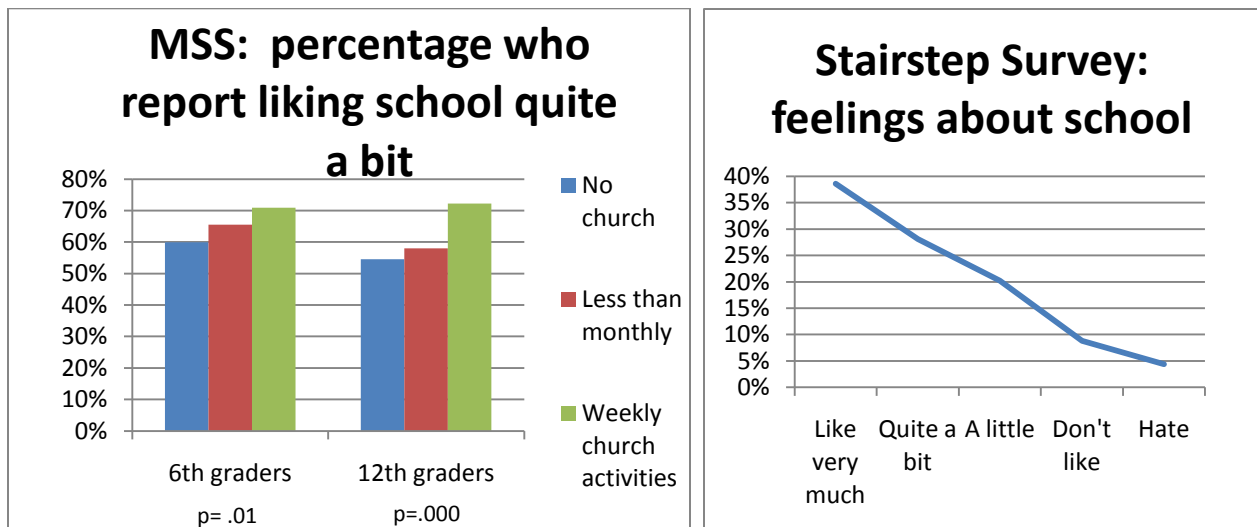
The second question was "Does a religious or spiritual leader care about you?" In this question, both 46% of 9th and 12th graders reported feeling that a spiritual leader cares about them a lot or quite a bit; whereas, 57% of 6th graders felt this way. In most cases, feeling that one has a religious or spiritual leader who cares about one was more significant than simply participating in church activities or programs. This is not surprising because there is substantial research that indicates that relationships with caring adults are very important in healthy youth development. The Search Institute includes relationships with non-family adults in its 40 Developmental Assets (Search Institute, 2010). "Significant relationships become the 'blankies' youth carry with them to mediate their passage from familiar territory of the primary family into the public and sometimes scary world of adulthood" (Dean and Foster, 1998, 27). Pittman, Irby and Ferber (2000) agree that caring adults are one of the five fundamental resources for youth. Finally, Costello, Toles, Spielberg and Wynn (2000) identify relationships as a key piece of youth development. Youth development research is conclusive that caring adults are important to healthy development. A caring youth pastor or religious leader can serve in this role, and when youth feel that a religious leader cares about them, they engage in fewer risk behaviors and more prosocial behaviors.

In most cases, the correlations are strongest in the higher grades, with the smallest percent of 12th graders involved in church engaging in high risk behaviors. In most cases, there is a higher correlation between church involvement and behaviors in the older grades, with 12th graders having the strongest correlations and 9th graders having modest correlations. Most often, there is no correlation at the 6th grade level; however, The Search Institute has discovered that "early spirituality and religious participation are linked to later adolescent well-being" (Search Institute, 2010). In this case, The Search Institute followed students from middle school through high school and found that the students who were involved in church in their middle school years were less likely to engage in risky behaviors and more likely to engage in positive behaviors in high school than their peers. In other words, this research shows that 6th graders involved in church are not statistically less risky and more prosocial than the 6th graders who are not involved in church; however, The Search Institute research would suggest that those same 6th graders who are currently involved in church will be less likely to engage in high risk behaviors and more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors in high school. Therefore church participation, spiritual formation and connectedness to religious leaders are critically important in the younger grades.

School Engagement

Youth involved in church are more likely to like school and spend time doing homework. Both 6th and 12th graders who participate in religious activities responded that they like school more than those who do not participate in religious activities. In fact, as church participation increases, so do the positive feelings about school. Church involvement does not show any correlation with the 9th graders: regardless of church involvement, approximately 50% of all 9th graders like school and approximately 50% of 9th graders do not. This is interesting because when looking at the general population, 9th graders reported the highest percentage of dissatisfaction with school.

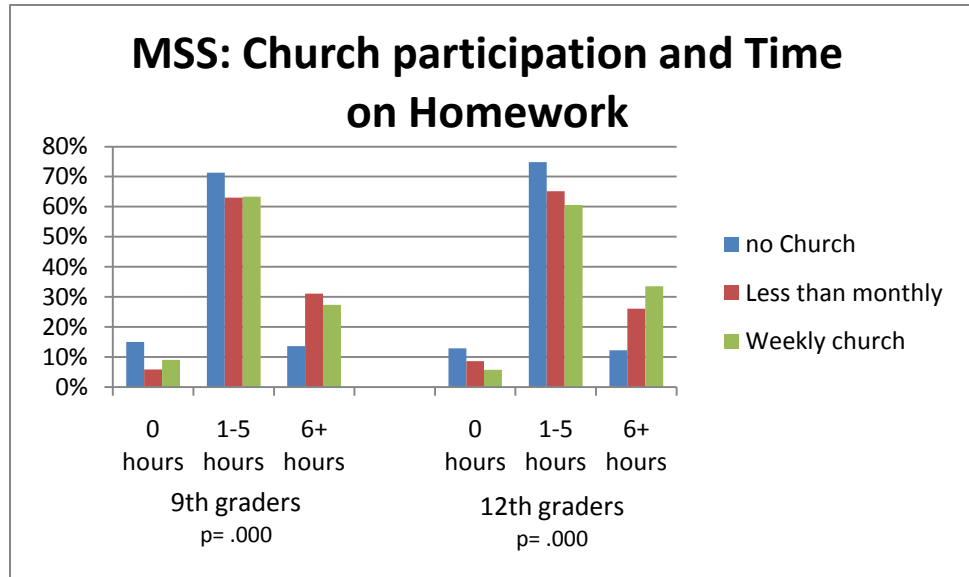
The Stairstep Survey data provides further insight. Although the Stairstep data is not broken down by grade, as the MN Student Survey data is, the responses are compelling. The responses indicate that 38% very much like school. The numbers decline each level of enjoyment, with only 4% saying they hate school. (Please note that the MN Student Survey figures combine the categories “Like very much” and “Like quite a bit.”)



The research also shows that the youth who feel as though a religious leader cares about them are more likely to like school than their peers who do not have a religious leader who cares about them. In this case, there were very strong correlations for all 3 grades in the MN Student Survey. (6th graders, p=.000; 9th graders, p=.006 ; and 12th graders p=.000). In other words, across all grades, African American Students who felt a religious leader cared about them “very much or quite a bit” were more apt to respond that they liked school. On average, 13% more students “liked school” when they felt cared about by a religious leader.

Furthermore, the research confirms that students who are involved in church are much more likely to spend time doing homework. In this case, there is no correlation for the 6th graders; however, the correlations for both church participation and having a religious leader who cares are quite strong in the 9th and 12th graders. The biggest difference in the 9th and 12th graders who participate in church, at any level, is that more students are spending 6 or more hours doing homework per week. In fact, fewer of the youth involved in church spend 1-5 hours per week doing homework than their non-churched peers.

The youth involved in some church tend to spend a significant part of their day doing homework. The same trend holds true for students who believe that a religious leader cares about them. The students who report that a religious leader does care about them are much more likely to spend 6 or more hours a day doing homework.



The data from the Stairstep survey follows these trends. As expected, a low percent (9.7%) report spending 0 hours per week doing homework. The majority of students (69%) report spending 1-5 hours doing homework, and a significant percentage (21.2%) report spending 6 or more hours doing homework. These responses indicate a high number of Stairstep students have future educational goals.

Q17. During the school year, how many hours in a typical week do you spend doing the following	0 hrs	1-2 hrs	3-5 hrs	6-10 hrs	11-20 hrs	21+ hrs
Homework/Study	10%	45%	25%	9%	8%	3%

In addition to asking questions about homework and feelings about school, Stairstep Students also reported their school plans.

Q 15. Which of the best describes your school plans	
I've already dropped out of school and I won't be going back	0
I would like to quit school as soon as I can.	1%
I plan to finish high school but don't think I'll go to college	5%
I'd like to go to some kind of trade school or vocational school after high school	3%
I'd like to go to college after high school	50%
I'd like to go to college and then go on after college to graduate or professional school	41%

Risk Behaviors

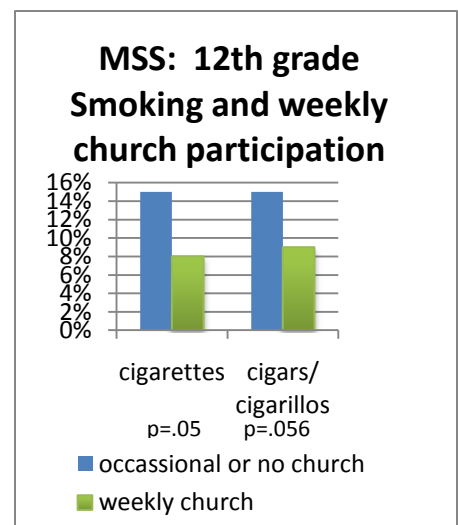
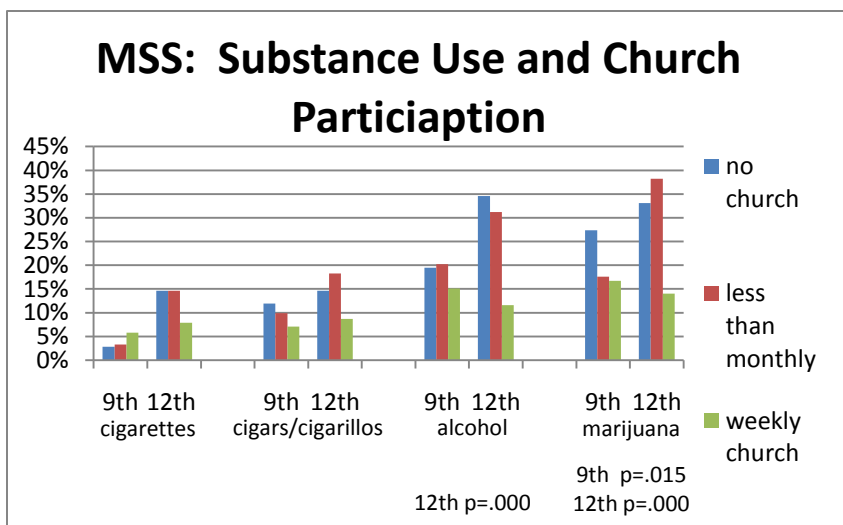
Substance Use

Marijuana, alcohol and smoking are the three most common substances that African American youth use. The data suggests that African American Youth who are involved in church are less likely to engage in these risky behaviors. However, the effect of church involvement does not become statistically significant until the 9th grade, and significantly increases by the 12th grade. There are no correlations between any of the substances and the 6th graders, but it should be noted that a very low percentage of 6th graders were reported to engage in any of these substances. When analyzing the MN Student Survey data, the same two questions were looked at: “Do you participate in church,” and “Does a religious leader care about you?”

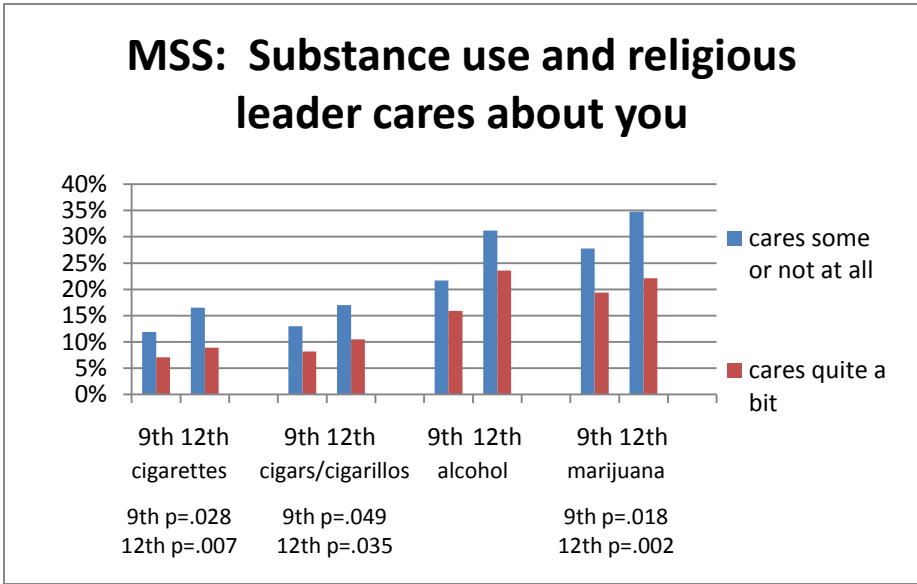
The question on church participation was looked at in two ways.

- First, the data was broken into three categories: weekly participation, monthly to occasional participation and no church participation.
- Then, the data was divided into two categories: at least weekly church participation and less than weekly to no church participation.

The data shows that monthly or occasional participation has absolutely no affect on substance use, in any grade. Weekly participation, on the other hand does correlate with less smoking, drinking and marijuana use. This is especially true for the 12th graders, the only group that had statistically significant results across all areas (when combining the data from both analyses). For the 9th graders, marijuana was the only substance that was used less at a rate that is statistically significant in either analysis. The charts below show the percentages of youth who use each substance, by their involvement in church. The fist chart shows all the data (*both statistically significant and not significant*) from the first analysis, where church involvement was broken into 3 categories. The statistically significant scores are provided on the chart (p=x); those without a p-value are not statistically significant. The 2nd chart shows just the data that became significant when the “low church” and “no church” involvement categories were combined.



Although church participation does not correlate with 9th grade substance use, substance use is significantly lower for both 9th and 12th graders who report having a religious leader who cares about them. The correlations are quite strong in every category, except alcohol consumption.



A trend can be seen with alcohol (p=.08, 9th graders and p= .066, 12th graders), but the correlation is not strong enough to be statistically significant. However, the differences observed between smoking cigarettes or cigars and using marijuana with having a religious leader who cares are quite strong, and have a positive impact on both grade levels.

The Stairstep Suvery data follows the same trend as the MN Student Survey data. Marijuana was the substance with the highest usage. 9% of respondents reported that they had used marijuana in the last 30 days. Alcohol was the second highest, at 8%. Smoking was the third highest, with 4% smoking cigarettes and 4% smoking cigars or cigarillos. Youth also reported use of chewing tobacco and “other” drugs. 1% of the Stairstep respondents reported having used either chewing tobacco or drugs. The full results for the Stairstep Survey are shown below.

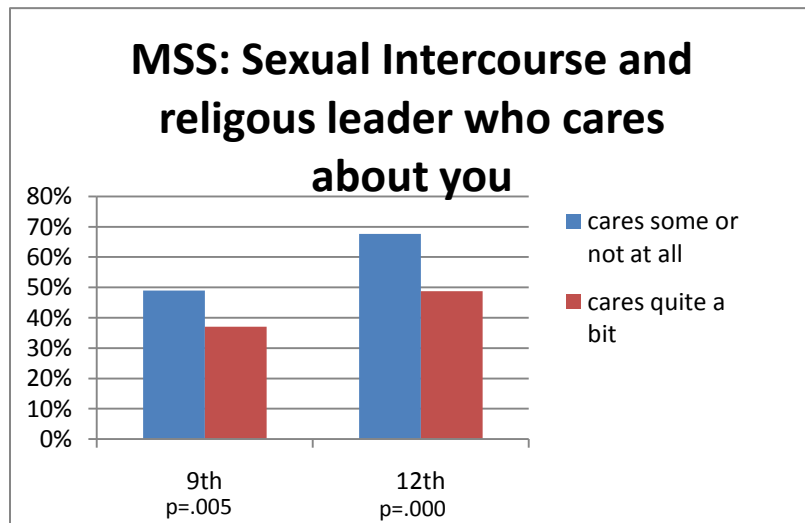
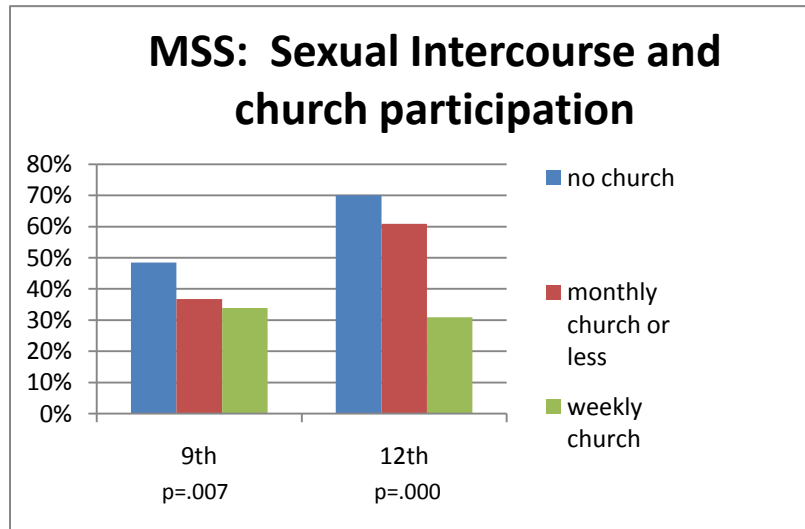
During the last 30 days, on how many days did you:	0 days	1 or 2 days	3-9 days	10-30 days
Q26a. Smoke a cigarette	96%	3%	1%	
Q26b. Smoke cigars, cigarillos or little cigars	96%	2%	2%	
Q28. Drink one or more alcoholic beverages	91%	5%	2%	2%
Q30. Use marijuana, or hashish	91%	5%	2%	2%
Q32. Use “other drugs”	99%	1%		

On the MN Student Survey, no correlations were found between “other drug” use and church participation or having a religious leader who cares. It should be noted that the general usage for these drugs in the last 30 days is very low. Future research should compare “other drug” use over a year or even a lifetime to see if there are correlations between church involvement and occasional drug use.

Sexual Intercourse

African American Youth who are involved in church engage in less sexual intercourse than their peers who do not go to church. Of all the behaviors observed on the MN Student Survey, the correlations between church and sexual intercourse were the most impressive. The correlations were very strong in both the 9th and 12th grades AND when looking at participation or religious leaders who care. Please note, 6th graders were not asked questions regarding sexual intercourse on the MN Student Survey, so there is no data to analyze.

When looking at participation, the percentage of students who had engaged in sexual intercourse was FAR lower amongst the youth who participated in church weekly than those who only participated monthly or occasionally. Remember that by 12th grade, 60% of African American youth report having had sex at least once. When looking only at the youth who do NOT participate in church at all, that jumps to 70%, and of the group who reported attending church on a weekly basis, the percentage that have had sexual intercourse drops to 33. In this case, church participation yields a lower percentage of youth having sexual intercourse, as compared with those who have a relationship with a religious leader. In fact, only 50% of youth who reported that a religious leader cared about them also reported having never had sex.



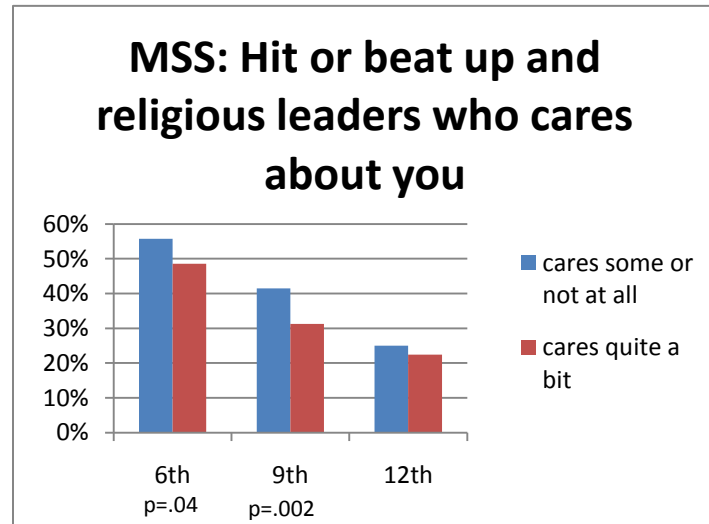
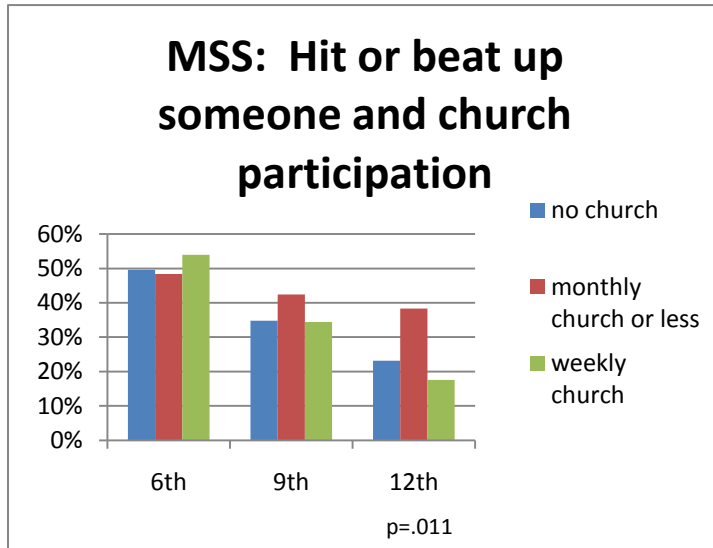
Interestingly, church curriculum often includes messages or lessons about sex. It is far less common for church messages to include topics like smoking, drinking and drugs.

According to the Stairstep Survey, 26% reported that they have had sexual intercourse. This is consistent with the trends found on the MN Student Survey, and is far less than the African American population at large.

Violent Behavior and Fighting

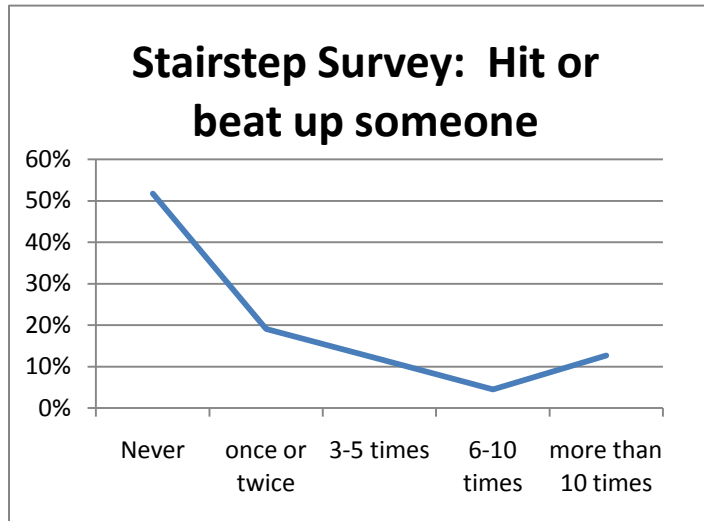
The last risky behavior researched was fighting. The results in this category were somewhat less conclusive, as the trends were not as consistent. However, the correlations that do exist follow the same trend as in other behaviors; namely, that youth with church affiliations are somewhat less likely to engage in this high risk behavior. The question asked on the MN Student Survey was “How many times have you hit or beat up someone in the last year?” 52% of 6th graders hit or beat someone up within the last year. This declines by grade, with only 24% of 12th graders saying they hit or beat someone up.

When looking at youth who attend or don't attend church, the only correlation was that 12th graders who attend church a least once per week are less likely to have hit or beat someone up in the last year. However, the 12th graders who attended church infrequently (once a month or less) reported the most fights, significantly more than the youth who never attend church! In both the 6th and 9th grades, there were no significant statistical differences observed between those who attend church and those who don't.



As with many of the behaviors observed in this report, the correlations are stronger with the youth who report that a religious leader cares about them. The trends observed here are different, though. In the case of hitting or beating someone up, the 6th and 9th graders who have a religious leader who cares quite a bit reported not fighting at all at a rate that is statistically significant as compared to those who do not feel like their religious leader cares about them much or at all. There was no correlation amongst the 12th graders.

The Stairstep Survey data was very similar to the MN Student Survey data. 52% of the youth reported “never” hitting or beating someone up in the last year. For analysis purposes, the data was combined to form a “yes/no” answer. However, the actual question allowed youth to specify how many times they hit someone. These findings are interesting because they decline at each increment, with the exception of the last (or most) fights. There is an increase with the percentage of youth who indicate they fought 10 or more times in the last year.



Finally, the Stairstep Survey asked youth to report if they have ever affiliated with or belonged to a gang. 87% responded no while 13% responded yes.

Conclusions

The MN Student Survey shows that there is a strong connection between positive behaviors and church affiliations. The Stairstep data supported these conclusions. Specifically, youth with church affiliations are less likely to engage in smoking, drinking alcohol, doing marijuana, having sexual intercourse and engaging in violent behavior. Furthermore, they are more likely to like school and spend time doing homework, leading to increased school success. In most cases, having a relationship with a youth leader was more influential than simple church participation, and the correlations grew stronger with age.

PART III: STAIRSTEP DATA

In addition to the data regarding the behaviors reported above, the Stairstep Survey allowed a deeper analysis of the findings between church involvement and risky and positive behaviors. The Stairstep Survey asked many questions about church involvement, faith and beliefs, practices, and influences. The analyses of this data as well as basic findings are presented in this section.

Correlations between Faith, Church Involvement and Behaviors

This research sought to understand which aspects of church were the most important in influencing positive behavior. Youth were asked questions about their involvement (worship, youth group, bible studies, etc) and their faith (how much do you believe what your church teaches, how do your beliefs influence your behaviors, what is important to your beliefs, etc). The responses to these questions were then compared with the responses to questions regarding risky behaviors and school engagement.

There are a few trends that can be reported from this data. First of all, the programs that involve small groups (like youth group and bible study) had the strongest correlations with not engaging in risky behaviors. Small groups are known to be very powerful influences in young people. Small groups involve belonging, membership, and accountability with the members. On the other hand, the faith aspects held more correlations with the positive school engagement questions. Interestingly, faith is the more intellectual side of church engagement, and school success is intellectual in nature.

Behavior Influences

Another aspect of the Stairstep Survey asked youth what influences their decisions and behaviors. In one section of the survey, they were asked specific questions about how their faith influences their actions, and how their actions influence their faith. They were given a list of possible influences, and asked to pick their top three answers. In the first section, the Stairstep youth reported that they perceived their faith to be very important, and that their faith is quite important to their choices and behaviors. However, in the second section, faith ranked quite low in what they reported were the main influences on why they didn't do a certain behavior.

Frequencies of responses for faith related questions:

Q7. How strongly do you agree or disagree with these statements about the strength of your faith and your relationship with God?	Strongly agree or agree	Disagree or Strongly disagree
My Christian faith is very strong	83%	17%
My beliefs or practices provide me with strength, support or guidance	87%	13%
I feel close to God	82%	18%

Q10. Please answer the following questions about your beliefs and church experience.	A great deal or quite a bit	Somewhat or a little	Not at all
How much do you believe what your church teaches?	84%	14%	2%
How much do you practice/live what your church teaches?	52%	40%	8%
How much do your religious beliefs influence your behavior or how you make decisions?	50%	41%	9%
How much does God care about what you do to/with your body?	93%	4%	3%
How much does what you do to/with your body affect your relationship with God?	67%	20%	13%
How much of your spirituality comes from church?	72%	24%	4%
How much of your spirituality comes from places outside of church?	35%	55%	10%
How meaningful are the worship services at your church?	73%	22%	5%
How much fun is it for you to attend worship at your church?	62%	27%	11%
How much can you talk to your youth leader or minister about problems or troubles that you are having?	55%	24%	21%
How much do you hang out with your church friends outside of church?	44%	35%	21%
How religious are your friends?	40%	56%	4%

Q11. Over the last 12 months, how often have you:	1-3 times per week	Monthly or few times/year	Never
Set goals in life based on your beliefs	51%	42%	7%
Been guided in how you think and act in everyday life by your beliefs	52%	39%	9%

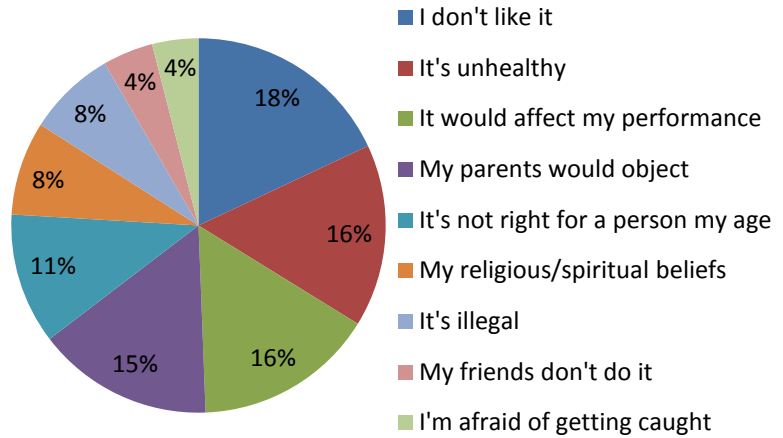
In another section of the Stairstep Survey, youth were asked if they had participated in each of the risky behaviors studied in this research. If they responded that they hadn't engaged in a particular behavior, they were guided to a set of choices and asked, "What three factors influenced your choice not to (engage in that behavior.)" If they responded that they had engaged in a behavior, they were guided to another set of responses and asked to pick the top three factors that influenced them to do that behavior. The positive influences that youth reported that influenced them to not do behaviors followed the same trend across all of the risky behaviors. Similarly, the negative factors that influenced youth to engage in risky behaviors also followed the same pattern across all of the risky behaviors, EXCEPT fighting. Since fighting followed a different trend, and because of the higher percentage of youth reporting that they hit or beat someone up, that data will be presented separately.

This data gives great insight into the factors that youth perceive influence them on a daily basis. At the top of both lists, as the reason why youth do and do not do an activity is whether they like it or not. The other top reasons that youth don't engage in risky behaviors were specifically related to how it affects their body: either it's unhealthy or it would affect their performance. Youth also reported that parental objection was a big influence. In the questions above, youth reported that their faith was a very important factor in the choices they made in their daily life. However, in this section, religious or spiritual beliefs ranked quite low in what they felt were the biggest influences in why they DON'T engage in the risky behaviors.

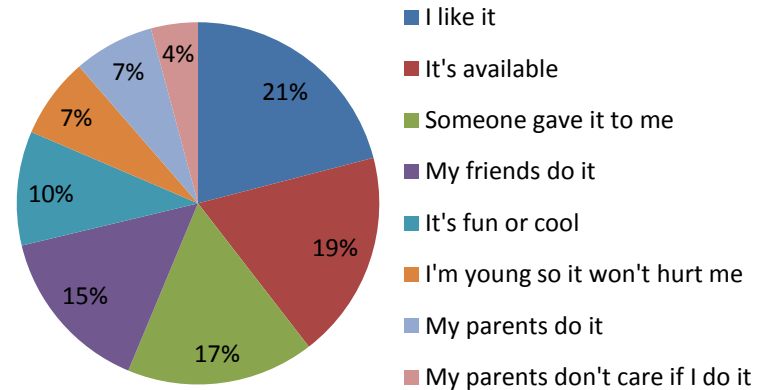
The data that discusses why youth engage in behaviors indicate that (after liking it), availability is the most important. It is also interesting that peer pressure ("My friends do it") ranked quite high for reasons why youth do a risky behavior, but it ranked quite low for reasons why youth DON'T engage in risky behaviors.

There was one major difference in the data regarding fighting. The biggest reason that youth reported that they hit or beat someone up was because someone gave them a reason to. Availability was 2nd, followed by liking to fight.

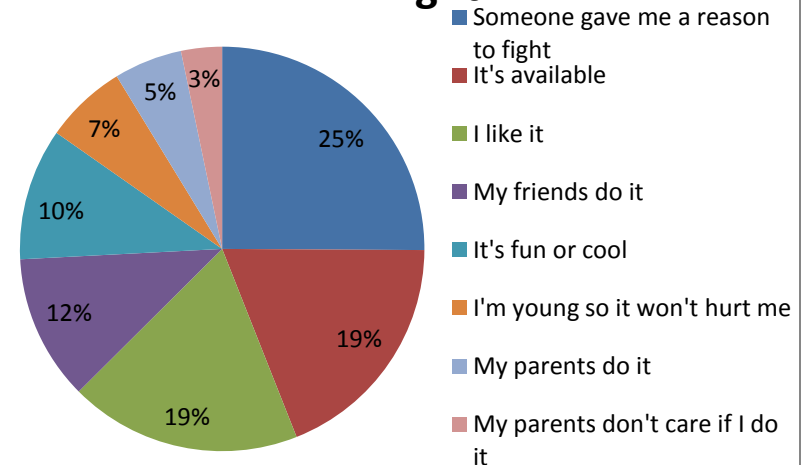
Factors that influence youth to NOT engage in risky behaviors



Factors that influence youth TO engage in risky behaviors



Factors that influence youth to fight



Stairstep Survey Data

There were many other questions on the Stairstep Survey that provide insight into the youth attending these churches. The data from those questions is presented below.

Church Involvement and Connection Questions

	Yes	No	Don't know	N/A
Q1. Does the minister/pastor in your church know you by name?	70%	12%	18%	(N/A)
Q2. Does the youth leader in your church know you by name?	81%	6%	12%	1%
Q3. Do you call yourself a Christian?	89%	11%	(N/A)	(N/A)
Q4. How often do you participate in the following activities	At least once a week	A few times a month	never or almost never	
Worship Services	58%	31%	11%	
Sunday School	37%	33%	30%	
Youth Group	46%	40%	14%	
Church choir	22%	29%	49%	
Bible Study	36%	27%	37%	
Church fun activities	32%	54%	14%	
Volunteering at church	28%	46%	26%	
Wednesday Night Church Night	30%	25%	45%	
Q5. How often do you contribute to your church in the following ways?				
Serve on a committee	24%	31%	25%	
Hold a leadership role	34%	25%	41%	
Sing in the choir	21%	26%	48%	
Help lead worship	15%	29%	46%	
Teach or lead young children	23%	37%	31%	
Other volunteer activities	32%	44%	24%	
Q6. How often do you attend worship services with the following groups of people?				
Friends	35%	45%	20%	
Parent(s)	58%	32%	9.6%	
Grandparent(s)	21%	41%	38%	
Godparent(s)	14%	21%	65%	
Other relative(s)	30%	43%	27%	
By yourself	17%	25%	58%	

Q8. How often do you pray outside of church	
Everyday	26%
Most days	29%
Once a week	10%
When I need help with something	27%
Never or almost never	8%
Q9. How often do you read the Bible (or other religious materials) outside of church?	
Everyday	4%
Most days	14%
Once a week	17%
About once a month	29%
Never or almost never	36%

Q12. How important to your faith are each of the following	Very important	Somewhat important	Not very or not at all important
Caring for others	74%	23%	3%
Believing in God	90%	8%	2%
Knowing Bible Stories	44%	44%	12%
Telling others about God	56%	33%	11%
Having God tell you what to do in your life	67%	22%	11%
Regularly praying, meditating or studying	58%	27%	15%
Applying religious values to your life	60%	29%	11%
Doing things to make the world a better place	60%	31%	9%
Thinking about the big life questions (Why are we here, what happens to us when we die, etc)	64%	25%	11%

	My family	My friends	People at my school	People at my church	People at a youth organization	No one
Q 13. Which of these people support you in your faith? (circle all that apply)	91%	50%	21%	68%	42%	1%

Questions about other activities and health

Q17. During the school year, how many hours in a typical week do you spend doing the following?	0 hours	1-5 hours	6-10 hours	11 or more hours
Band, choir, orchestra, music lessons or practicing voice or an instrument	58%	33%	3%	6%
Clubs or organizations outside of school	34%	44%	12%	10%
Playing sports on a school team	40%	32%	12%	17%
Reading for pleasure	38%	50%	5.4%	6%
Watching TV, DVDs, or videos	3%	50%	19%	29%
Playing computer or video games	17%	48%	16%	19%
Volunteer work or community service	39%	45%	6%	10%
Unpaid chores at home	24%	45%	13%	18%
Work for pay	45%	35%	8%	12%
Hanging out	5%	38%	25%	33%
Q18. On how many of the last 7 days did you exercise or participate in sports or other activities that made you sweat or breathe hard for at least 20 minutes?				
		0 days		9%
		1 day		8%
		2 days		10%
		3 days		18%
		4 days		7%
		5 days		10%
		6 days		11%
		7 days		26%
Q20. In general, how would you rate your health?				
		Excellent		15%
		Very good		23%
		Good		39%
		Fair or poor		22%
Q21. During the last 30 days, how satisfied have you been with your personal life?				
		Very satisfied		31%
		Somewhat satisfied		45%
		Not very satisfied		20%
		Not at all satisfied		4%
Q22. At the present time, do you think you are...				
		Underweight		9%
		About right weight		61%
		Overweight		30%
Q23. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?				
		Strongly agree or agree		Disagree or strongly disagree
I have a lot of energy		94%		6%
I seldom get sick		47%		53%

When I do get sick, I get better quickly	76%	24%
I am physically fit	75%	25%
I am usually in a good mood	81%	19%
I am usually in a bad mood	29%	71%

Q24. During the last 30 days, on how many days did you:	0 days	1-5 days	6-19 days	20 or more days
Eat fast food (taco bell, McDonald's, Subway, etc)	9%	66%	23%	2%
Eat junk food (chips, candy)	7%	41%	35%	17%
Eat deep fried food (fried chicken, French fries, etc)	6%	46%	37%	10%
Drink pop	16%	39%	26%	19%

Demographics

Q40. Are you male or female?	Male	Female
	30%	70%
Q41. What is your grade in school?	6 th	5%
	7 th	9%
	8 th	20%
	9 th	23%
	10 th	21%
	11 th	18%
	12 th	4%
Q 41. Which adults do you live with?		
The woman who gave birth to me (biological mother)		70%
My biological father		22%
Sometimes with my mother, sometimes with my father		5%
The mother or father that adopted me		5%
My stepmother and/or stepfather		6%
My foster parents(s)		4%
My grandparent(s)		10%
Other relative(s)		10%
An adult or adults I'm not related to		1%
None		5%

Demographic questions from separate survey insert

Q1. Which statement best describes your family situation most of the time?	
We have a hard time buying the things we need	14%
We have just enough money for the things we need	41%
We have no problem buying the things we need and we can also buy special things	45%

Q2. What is the highest level of education a parent or guardian in your house has received?

Less than a high school diploma	4%
Completed high school	13%
Some college, trade, or technical school	18%
Completed college	31%
Graduate or professional school after college	15%
Don't know	18%

Q3. How do you describe yourself (circle all that apply):

American Indian	20%
Black/African/African American	92%
Mexican American/Chicano/Chicana	3%
Puerto Rican/other Latin American	4%
Asian American/Pacific Islander	1%
White	4%
Don't know	2%

Conclusions

In conclusion, youth who are involved in church are less likely to engage in risky behaviors and more likely to be successful in school. The MN Student Survey showed that youth who attend church at least once a week and/or feel as though a religious leader cares about them are the most likely to report positive behaviors. Also, the trends often are the strongest, or first noticed, in the 12th grade. The behaviors that are the most affected are: Smoking cigarettes or cigars, drinking alcohol, doing marijuana, and having sexual intercourse, as well as feeling good about school and spending more time doing homework. The Stairstep Survey indicated that small group programs have the highest correlations with not engaging in the negative behaviors, where having a strong faith had the strongest correlations with school performance. The Stairstep Survey also showed that where faith is perceived as being very important in the young people's lives, it was not what they perceived as having a great influence on their actions. Because this analysis was based on correlations, it is impossible to prove that being involved in church is the cause of the behavioral differences between the youth involved in church and those who are not; however, the correlations are strong and it is clear that youth who are involved in church are making better choices by avoiding risky behaviors and having better connections to school than their non-churched friends.

Recommendations for Churches:

Where this research cannot prove that being involved in church is the influencing factor that promotes better choices among teens, the correlations between the two are clear. Therefore, this section will take the findings from the research and make recommendations for church programming, based on the assumption that being involved in church does actually promote more positive behaviors.

Research facts:

- Youth are most likely to be involved in church if their family is involved in church
- Youth must attend church at least once a week to see a reduction in risky behavior
- Church involvement in middle school has a great impact on behavior in later years

Suggestion: Recruit families with young children, and get the families involved on a weekly basis while the children are young.

Research fact:

- Small groups have better results than large groups (worship) in deterring risky behaviors

Suggestion: Get youth and children involved in small group activities, like Sunday School, Bible Study, Youth Group. Start this as young as possible.

Research fact:

- Feeling that a religious leader cares about them is more influential than participation in church activities, especially in the younger grades.

Suggestion: Pastors and youth leaders prioritize forming trusting relationships with the youth.

Research Fact:

- The correlations for having never had sexual intercourse were much stronger than those for substance uses.

Suggestion: Make sure that curriculum and church messages explicitly educate young people about smoking, drugs, and alcohol, and how those things affect their faith and relationship with God.

Recommendations for Future Research

Conducting surveys with young people is quite different from conducting surveys with adults. There are many considerations unique to youth research that are critical to the success of that research.

The most important thing for successful research with young people is creating a team of youth leaders who know and work with the youth. This team will be the ones on the front line, communicating the importance of the survey, recruiting the young people to take the survey, answering questions from parents, helping the youth remember to follow through and show up, and setting a tone of respect and honesty while taking the survey. This team should be established at the beginning of the project, should be in direct contact with the researcher, and should be compensated in some way for the extra work they are being asked to do for the completion of the project. Finally, this team should be involved in making decisions about how the research will be conducted because their insights and knowledge of their youth will help establish a process that will be successful. If the youth leaders do not earnestly and whole heartedly support and believe in the research or do not feel valued as a member of the research team, the project will not be successful.

The researcher has an obligation to make sure that youth are treated fairly, that research protocols are followed, and that the research is done in a consistent manner across all sites. If the researcher works directly with the church youth leaders, the researcher can bring the necessary research components to the table, and the youth leaders can help find ways to work within those requirements to create a successful outcome.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty of youth research is the recruitment and consent. To do research of this nature, parental consent is required. Since youth attendance is sporadic, and parents are often not at church at the same time as their adolescent children, finding ways to obtain this consent is very difficult. That being said, it is imperative that this process is done with care, dignity, and intentionality. One of the greatest responsibilities of the youth workers in a project like this is to inform all families that the research is taking place. Churches need many tools to deliver this message, and they should be given ample time and resources to complete the task. Recruiting should happen well in advance.

Furthermore, to successfully recruit youth to participate, youth need an incentive that is worth the trouble and work of “taking a test” voluntarily. One idea would be to conduct the survey at a “fun” location. Allow the young people to take the survey, eat a “pizza” reward, and then go participate in the fun activity (ie: swimming at a YMCA, Pump it Up, Fly Zone, bowling, etc). This could be quite effective in attracting youth to the survey distributing event. It could also help reduce cognitive dissonance, where youth feel uncomfortable admitting “sinful” behavior while also in a church setting. Another incentive idea is to have a few “big” prizes. At the completion of collecting all the surveys, draw names to win the “big” prizes (i-pod, gift certificate, sports tickets, etc). This would attract youth to take the survey at a more affordable price because only a few prizes would be purchased. Ideally, someone would donate some “big” prizes because they believe the research is important.

Conducting research with youth is a challenging endeavor. The process to coordinate the research is critical and should be approached with care. Resources are needed to both appropriately reward the

youth participants as well as to compensate the adults supporting the research. Without establishing this team, and agreeing upon the process and strategies up front, collecting data will not be successful.

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