



Beyond Safe Havens:

A Synthesis of 20 Years of Research on the Boys & Girls Clubs



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Executive Summary





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Public/Private Ventures is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the effectiveness of social policies and programs. P/PV designs, tests and studies initiatives that increase supports, skills and opportunities of residents of low-income communities; works with policymakers to see that the lessons and evidence produced are reflected in policy; and provides training, technical assistance and learning opportunities to practitioners based on documented effective practices.

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Over the past two decades, Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) has used a variety of programmatic strategies that reflect shifting ideas about what young people need to be successful and which young people should be targeted for services. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the focus of these programs was on delinquency prevention to discourage such behaviors as substance use or gang involvement. From the late 1990s to the present, BGCA has prioritized the integration of career preparation activities, academic support and technology into its Clubs. Importantly, throughout its history and despite shifts in the policy and funding world, the BGCA mission has emphasized providing all its programs within a safe, fun and supportive environment.

To better understand the potential benefits of these programs, more than 20 evaluations have been commissioned over the past 20 years. Although yielding promising findings, the vast majority of these studies have been limited to documenting only the specific outcomes the programs were designed to influence (e.g., increased academic achievement, reduced levels of drug abuse, etc.), rather than considering that these programs are part of the larger fabric of the Clubs' opportunities for leadership, decision-making and positive peer and adult-youth relationships—experiences likely to affect broader outcomes for youth. Even the few evaluations that have looked at club experiences more broadly—while finding support for some broader outcomes—have been limited in the outcomes they explored, and none have looked longitudinally at the Clubs' effects on youth.

At the request of BGCA's national office, Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) has undertaken a multiyear study to understand the benefits that the Clubs may have for the lives and outcomes of early adolescents. As a prelude to this larger study and to help hone its methodological focus, P/PV has reviewed the range of studies that have been conducted on Boys & Girls Clubs over the past 20 years, all of which are covered in more detail in the full report.¹ The report covers three key areas:

- It reviews the research conducted to date on discrete BGCA programs to identify the potential benefits of those programs for youth and discusses three additional studies that examined the broader club experience;
- It outlines the strategies that contribute to the Clubs' successes, as well as any challenges that may have impeded more positive results; and
- It identifies aspects of these evaluations that, together, suggest ways in which the overall "Club experience" may influence young people's health and well-being—dimensions that have not been fully explored in these studies.

The report concludes with a brief description of a planned longitudinal evaluation of Club members as they transition to high school—an evaluation meant to provide documentation of the effectiveness of teens' broad Club experiences on a wide range of outcomes.

Twenty Years of Research on BGCA: Findings

The standard operation of Clubs has made it difficult for evaluators to carry out the most rigorous kind of impact studies, in which youth are randomly assigned to treatment or control groups. Traditionally, Boys & Girls Clubs welcome everyone through their doors and give youth great leeway in determining the extent to which they will participate. The willingness to accept all comers, which is part of the BGCA mission, makes random assignment impossible. Doing so would change the very nature of the Club experience. Given this challenge, the evaluations examined for this report used different strategies to learn about program effectiveness, none of which are without flaws. With this caveat in mind, however, it is possible to ascribe important conclusions to the existing literature, based on the numerous studies of discrete programs, the few studies that examine general Club participatory experiences, and the implementation lessons that emerge when all the studies are examined in sum.

Moreover, the studies' findings lend insight into what additional, broader outcomes—as yet unexplored—are likely affected by Club participation more generally and deserve attention.

Detailed more fully in the report, the evaluations found several outcomes linked to participation in discrete BGCA programs, including:

- **Reduction in delinquent behaviors.** Both prevention classes geared toward all Club members (e.g., SMART Moves, BGCA's signature alcohol, drug and pregnancy prevention program) and targeted outreach models of delinquency prevention that involve recruiting youth with specific risk characteristics to engage in broader Club activities (e.g., Gang Prevention through Targeted Outreach) show evidence of reducing youth's participation in delinquent behaviors.
- **Increased academic achievement.** Studies of educational programs designed to integrate high-yield learning activities throughout the Club and to offer homework help (such as Project Learn and its pilot, the Educational Enhancement project) document increased levels of homework completion, involvement in discussions about books and other discussions with adults, and achievement in several academic areas.
- **Increased access to and safe utilization of technology.** Operation Connect was designed to provide technology centers in Clubs to increase youth access to computers and the Internet. Findings indicate that children increased their level of computer use and technology skills and began to use the computers for homework. A related program, NetSmartz, helped youngsters become more aware of safety issues on the Internet.
- **Increased career goals and improved attitudes toward school.** Two career-oriented initiatives, Broader Horizons and Career Prep, reached and retained a large number of youth in their early teen years. Youth reported that the program helped them set career goals and improved their attitudes toward school.

Although none of the three more broad-based studies reviewed for the report followed youth over time, the evaluation findings suggest a range of positive experiences:

- **Positive relationships and safe places to belong, participate and contribute.** Club members who responded to a one-time survey and respondents in two alumni studies overwhelmingly reported having positive relationships with Club staff. They also reported other benefits from Club participation, including getting along with others, having a safe place to interact with others, feeling a sense of belonging and being afforded opportunities for decision-making, leadership and community service.

The studies suggest correlates of these positive experiences:

- **Participation, tenure at the Clubs and connections with staff.** The extent to which youth and alumni reported positive experiences and benefits from the Clubs was associated with both tenure at the Club and how well they felt they knew or connected with staff. The variety of informal and formal programs and opportunities the Clubs offered, as well as the efforts to provide a rewarding and youth-centered environment, were similarly found to be related to teens' positive experiences, participation and retention in these studies.

In reviewing the numerous evaluations of discrete BGCA programs, the full P/PV report identifies and describes implementation practices that appear to promote the success of those programs:

- **Investment in developing caring relationships between youth and staff.** First and foremost, across all the studies reviewed, caring relationships between youth and staff were identified by youth, parents, Club staff and partner-agency staff as crucial to the success of the program—they were why the youth came and why they stayed in the program. This is in keeping with numerous studies that identify supportive relationships in youth's lives as a key factor in promoting resilience and healthy development. Clubs most successful at facilitating these supportive relationships gave staff sufficient time for working

one-on-one with youth and ensured that enough staff were devoted to the program to provide sufficient support for youth.

- **Targeted recruitment strategies.** A primary goal of many of the evaluated programs was to recruit youth—particularly high-risk youth—to participate. Three strategies for recruitment and retention were particularly effective: street outreach, referral from schools and families, and partnerships with community agencies.
- **Interesting and exciting programming.** Creating programs that youth found interesting and enjoyable was key to retention. Successful strategies employed by Club staff included flexibility in tailoring the program to the needs and schedules of youth, creating “fun” activities and providing rewards and incentives for participation.
- **Partnerships with other organizations, such as schools, the police and justice agencies.** Although Clubs found partnerships with community institutions challenging to build and maintain, when successful, they provided significant benefits for referral and information sharing. Successful partnerships typically emerged when Clubs clarified and emphasized the value of their program(s) and devoted staff time to developing and maintaining relationships.

Finally, P/PV’s review identifies significant implementation challenges that traversed the study findings, primary among them:

- **Staff turnover.** This was a particularly troublesome area for many of the programs, as high levels of staff turnover often diminished a Club’s capacity to provide quality programming and forge lasting relationships. Because of the crucial role of staff-youth relationships, strategies for staff retention were also critical. Clubs increased program effectiveness by recruiting staff with specific skills (e.g., with educational backgrounds or technological savvy), promoting staff from within the club and taking steps to ensure staff buy-in for any new programming.

Taking A Broader View of the Role of Clubs

Though the majority of the studies reviewed for this report looked at specific outcomes, such as changes in drug use, academic achievement and career goals, Club members appeared to derive additional benefits from the Club experience beyond what was measured by the studies’ discrete outcomes. Several of these benefits were touched on in the three broad-based studies. Young people were having fun, interacting positively and constructively with adults, engaging in activities that were building their competencies and confidences and interacting with peers in positive ways. By looking more closely at these findings and examining the implementation lessons that traversed them, the P/PV report reveals a host of other areas where Clubs seek to impact members’ lives, including a positive view of the future, commitment to school and learning, integrity and self-efficacy.

The broader potential of Clubs to provide these types of experiences and positive outcomes for members—those that cut across several domains—has not been explored fully in any of the studies conducted to date but is critical to test in order to gain a solid understanding of the role that Clubs play in the lives of the youth they serve. This must include a longitudinal investigation to examine how these Club experiences support youth at critical junctures in their lives.

As the full report describes in more detail, a longitudinal study that broadens outcomes to match the Club’s mission and strategies and that builds on the findings from the past 20 years will appropriately test the role of the Clubs “as a whole experience” in the lives of the adolescents they serve. A study of this nature, designed to learn about the relationship of these Club experiences to the teens’ emotional, behavioral and academic health, will also have implications for other organizations that strive to support positive developmental trajectories for youth.

Endnotes

- 1 A copy of the full report is available online at www.bgca.org or www.ppv.org.

