



FACT SHEET

Developmental Assets[®] and Suicide Prevention

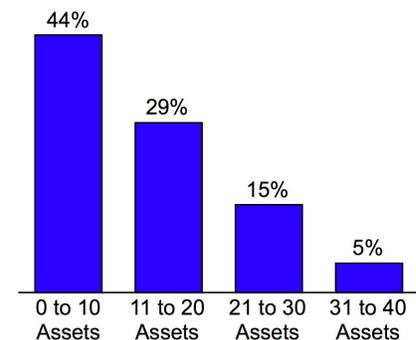
The recent announcement from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that rates of suicide among 10- to 24-year-olds increased 8 percent between 2003 and 2004—the largest single-year increase in 15 years—has drawn new attention to the third leading cause of death among young people.¹ What can be done to promote strengths or protective factors that help to reduce levels of suicide?

Many factors play roles in young people's depression and suicide. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) identifies a wide range of risk factors, including depression and other mental disorders, substance-abuse disorders (the two most common risk factors), stressful life events, and a family history of suicide or violence.²

Serious mental disorders and substance-abuse disorders require professional intervention. In addition, however, research from Search Institute shows that promoting healthy development can also play an early and important role in cultivating protective factors. This approach is captured in the framework of Developmental Assets (40 experiences, relationships, opportunities, and personal qualities that young people need to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible). It emphasizes the positive, proactive ways that parents, other caring adults, and youth themselves can contribute to young people being resilient in the face of life's challenges.

- ❑ *A powerful approach*—The more Developmental Assets young people experience, the less likely they are to frequently be depressed and/or to have attempted suicide. Search Institute studies of almost 3 million young people consistently show a connection between levels of Developmental Assets and depression or attempted suicide (Figure 1). This relationship holds true for young people from all racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- ❑ *Powerful assets*—No single asset makes all the difference in depression or attempted suicide. In fact, the power of assets comes when young people experience many Developmental Assets in many places at many times. However, some categories of Developmental Assets do have a particularly strong relationship to lower levels of depression and/or attempted suicide among teenagers. They are Positive Identity, Support, and Empowerment.
- ❑ *The centrality of relationships*—At the core of asset building is a focus on building relationships. This approach is consistent with research showing that positive peer and family relationships are critical to youth development. Nurturing young people in a web of positive relationships cultivates the strengths they need to avoid some risk factors and increases the protective factors that help them overcome the stresses they face.
- ❑ *A complementary strategy*—An asset-building approach does not replace but instead complements other medical, policy, and environmental strategies aimed at reducing teenage suicide. It addresses some of the environmental factors that can exacerbate or mitigate the biochemical or genetic factors that underlie depression and suicide. It also helps ensure that young people have other people to support and encourage them—and to help them seek the professional services they need if they become clinically depressed or suicidal.

Figure 1: Percentages of youth who frequently experience depression or have attempted suicide, by levels of Developmental Assets³



¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2007, September 9-15). Suicide trends among youths and young adults aged 10–24 years. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 56 (35), 905–908.

² National Institute of Mental Health (2008). Suicide in the U.S.: Statistics and Prevention [Web site]. NIH Publication No. 06-4594. Available at <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/suicide-in-the-us-statistics-and-prevention.shtml>

³ Based on Search Institute surveys of 150,000 students in grades 6 to 12. See Benson, P. L. (2006). *All kids are our kids: What communities must do to raise caring and responsible children and adolescents* (2nd ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.