

Summertime Experiences and Child and Adolescent Education, Health, and Safety Study

Background and Need

Many Americans have an image of summer as a time of high activity when children and their families engage in swimming, hiking, and vacations. This image may include young people participating in summer camps and other forms of organized summer programming as well as enjoying more free time for recreation within the safety of their own neighborhoods. The idea that summer represents a time when young people have heightened access to healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables is also common. Unfortunately, this image is not a reality for many young people in America. Instead, summer appears to be "season of risk" with respect to children's learning, risk for obesity, and involvement in delinquent activities.

America's global competitiveness depends on students graduating from high school ready to begin college and careers. Although we were once leaders in academic achievement many countries have now surpassed the United States in areas such as mathematics and science. The evidence shows that summer contributes to the achievement gap and that many of our students experience a "summer slide" in achievement (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2001; Entwisle, Alexander, Olson, 1997; Cooper, et al., 1996). In fact, our children lose about two months of grade level equivalency in mathematical computation skills. Children from low-income families also lose more than two months in reading achievement, despite the fact that their middle-class peers make slight gains. This disparity has enduring consequences for disadvantaged young people. Two-thirds of the ninth-grade academic achievement gap between disadvantaged youngsters and their more advantaged peers can be explained by what happened over the summer during the elementary school years, and those differences in a child's summer learning experiences influence whether that child will earn a high school diploma or continue on to college. Therefore, understanding how summertime can be organized to increase, rather than decrease, the achievement of all American students is critical.

Child obesity is a global epidemic and represents one of the most significant health problems confronting children and adolescents today, costing the nation an estimated \$14.3 billion annually. Despite popular notions of summer as a highly active time for youth, the risk for obesity is actually higher during the summer than the school year. For many children, summer is passive time spent indoors with heightened opportunities for unhealthy eating. A recent national study of American

children found that weight gain during summer was more than double the rate during the school year (von Hippel, Powell, Downey, & Rowland, 2007). In addition, the heightened rates of obesity for African American or Hispanic children compared to their white counterparts seem to be driven by the summertime weight gain. Although children and adolescents who participate in organized summer programs and activities such as sports seem less apt to experience the summer weight gain, 75% of American youth do not have access to summer programming.

Juvenile crime and violence have considerable economic consequences for the United States. The total annual cost of crime in America is over \$500 billion, with about \$150 billion of that amount attributable to juvenile crime. The monetary value of "saving" a high risk youth from a life of crime is estimated to be \$2.6 to \$5.3 million. The summer months contribute significantly to the problem of juvenile crime and violence. Young people are most likely to engage in risky behaviors when they are in unstructured situations with their peers in the absence of authority figures. This circumstance is common in the out-of-school hours and increases the likelihood for at-risk behaviors such as crime, heavy alcohol use, illicit drug use, and dangerous driving. In fact, the hours following school dismissal are the peak time for juvenile crime and violence. Like child obesity, organized summer programs and activities have been shown to decrease the risk for engaging in activities unsafe for oneself or others because they provide structure, adult-supervision, and opportunities to learn and build skills. Unfortunately, these activities are not available to most American young people in the summer.