

## An Ounce of Prevention

A social program that works. Where's the funding?

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One of the strangest things about social policy in this country is that we know what works and yet don't do more of it. Take high-school dropout rates, which currently stand at roughly 50 percent for Latino and African-American males. The half who don't graduate (about a million kids a year) are often dooming themselves to a Hobbesian life that is "nasty, brutish and short." And the wasted human potential is dooming the United States to second-class status as a global economic power.

We all know that the trouble starts early, with bored, unsupervised kids hanging out after school—the time when most crimes by young people are committed. Nearly 600,000 black males are currently serving time in prison, while only 40,000 will earn a college degree. Murders committed by black male teenagers are up 52 percent since 2002, which doesn't take us back to the bad old days of crack in the 1990s, but is scary all the same.

Thousands of commendable small programs try to address this problem. But only one has achieved the scale to actually dent it. It's an institution you've heard of, but probably know little about—in part because its facilities nowadays are only in the worst neighborhoods, a good hike from affluent areas. Last week I heard Denzel Washington and Cuba Gooding Jr. talk about how it changed their lives; and the same goes for Colin Powell, Wesley Clark, Michael Jordan and Alex Rodriguez.

The 101-year-old Boys and Girls Clubs of America is an astonishing success story, second only to the black church as a source of stability in the inner city. It has more than doubled in size in the last decade, to 3,700 clubs in all 50 states (including 400 clubs in public housing projects and 200 on Native-American reservations), serving 4.4 million young people after school. That's still less than one third of the estimated 15 million at-risk youth, but it's a model that actually holds the potential to end this national shame—if we as a country could only focus on it.

In case you haven't been in one for a while, these clubs are about a lot more than sports. In fact, Shaquille O'Neal recently donated \$1 million dollars with the stipulation that it not go for basketball, since, as he put it, there are only 400 jobs to aspire to in his line of work. The funds will instead be devoted in part to Project Learn, which engages kids 6-18 in academically-beneficial club activities that are also (usually) fun, helps them with their homework and guides them to graduation.

Denzel Washington told a story that stuck with me. He was about eight or nine years old and attending a club in Mount Vernon, New York when a local politician came to visit. The young

Denzel asked the politician a question and afterwards an adult from the club told him, "Hey, you're smart." He was stunned: "This was a totally new concept to me, that I could do something in the world." Washington remembers a few years later looking up at the pennants from all the universities attended by alumni of that club and thinking for the first time that he might actually go to college.

BGCA is a model of a well-run national organization. It relies on local boards that help raise the money and staff the clubs, while working under savvy national supervision (including shutting clubs that fail) from its Atlanta headquarters. The group's latest goal is to maintain 5,000 clubs by 2012, with most operating inside existing school buildings. Already, several states have found that when they contract with BGCA for after-school programs, it costs them much less than it does to pay teachers overtime. (Not surprisingly, the teachers unions are resisting). It also works better than many unproven local programs.

Measuring the results is an inexact science. But according to a recent Harris survey, 28 percent of BGCA alumni said they would have dropped out of high school were it not for the club; more than half said they achieved a higher level of education because of the experience. And three quarters of African-American alumni surveyed agreed with the statement that the club "saved my life." The same cannot be said of your garden-variety "extended day" school program.

So you would think that getting money from the government would be a no-brainer. BGCA receives only \$80 million a year from Washington (under ten percent of its budget); Iraq, by contrast, costs \$9 billion a month. State and local politicians seem to be on board for more funding (though New Jersey Gov. Jon Corzine could do more). But the feds have been slow on the uptake on BGCA's ambitious plans to move most of its new clubs directly into schools—one of the most important social reforms proposed anywhere by anyone in recent years. While the Democratic candidates all have proposals to fund after-school programs (the Republicans by and large do not), they are leery of endorsing one model, even though that's the model that works.

Here's a statistic worth memorizing: It costs \$70,000 a year to incarcerate a prisoner, and \$1,000 a year to take care of a kid at a Boys and Girls Club. Failing to invest in prevention isn't just cruel to the kids, it's cruel to the country. As James Alan Fox, a noted criminologist says, "You can pay for the programs now or pray for the victims later." That category of "victims" keeps growing. It now includes us all.

