

Teenage Girls Who Work as Volunteers Are Less Likely to Get Pregnant, Study Finds

By Jay Mathews
Washington Post Staff Writer

Teenage girls are less likely to become pregnant if they are involved in community service projects, and the amount of sex education they receive is not as important a factor, according to a new study.

The study, published yesterday in the August issue of the journal *Child Development*, found a pregnancy rate of 4.2 percent among 263 girls who participated in the national Teen Outreach Program throughout high school instead of enrolling in sex education classes. The program consisted mostly of community service and provided little or no information about birth control.

In contrast, a group of 287 girls who took regular health and sex education classes instead of doing the volunteer work had a pregnancy rate of 9.8 percent.

The study by Joseph Allen, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, and other researchers concluded that teenage girls are less likely to become pregnant when their work on behalf of others helps them realize they are "autonomous, capable individuals."

Specialists who were not involved in the research said the results stand out because the study was one of the most carefully controlled of its kind. Both groups of girls were taken from the same 25 schools in 13 states. About half of the students in the Teen Outreach group volunteered to participate, and the other half were assigned. Similarly, half of the students in the control group had wanted to participate in Teen Outreach but had not been accepted because there was not enough room. Both groups consisted of girls and boys.

"It is the strongest evidence we have that social programs can reduce teen pregnancy,"

said Douglas Kirby, a California sociologist who has spent 20 years studying teenage behavior.

Allen said the study takes neither side in the heated debate over how much and what kind of sex education should be taught in schools. Some groups call for more birth control information, while others prefer lessons on abstinence.

The study results come at a time when an increasing number of schools are requiring their students to perform community service.

Educators and health officials have argued for years that teenagers engaged in community service gain the self-respect that helps them avoid bad choices. The Teen Outreach Program study, funded by grants from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund, provides the clearest evidence of that link, several specialists said.

"It gave me a sense of 'Hey, I'm important. I'm somebody,'" said Noemi Medina, 20, who participated in the program two years ago at a school in

California's San Fernando Valley. She said she worked at shelters for the homeless and in elementary schools during the program.

The program, which enrolls about 6,000 students a year, was started in 1978 by Brenda Hostetler, a St. Louis school administrator, and is now run by the Cornerstone Consulting Group, of Houston. It operates at 120 sites, mostly in schools as part of health education programs.

The ninth- to 12th-grade students are placed in volunteer activities that match their interests and needs. Some work as aides in hospitals and nursing homes, some tutor other students, and others engage in events such as walkathons.

In the study by Allen and co-authors Susan Philliber, Scott Herring and Gabriel P. Kuperminc, the Teen Outreach participants averaged about 45.8 hours of community service a year and also had at least one class a week in coping skills. The amount of sex education they received varied because of differing local guidelines. But

no school spent more than 15 percent of Teen Outreach Program time on sex education, and many participants got no sex education at all.

The study also said that 27 percent of the Teen Outreach group, both girls and boys, failed courses during the five-year study period, compared with 47 percent of the control group.

Activists on both sides of the sex education issue said yesterday that the study of the Teen Outreach Program has not changed their views.

"I think that is a good program, but I don't think it has a direct link to abstinence-only education," said Robin DeJarnette, government relations director for the Richmond-based Family Foundation, which supports abstinence lessons.

Debra W. Haffner, president of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, said that she was impressed by the results but that she still supports education about contraception. "There is not a single magic bullet in preventing teen pregnancy," she said.