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## The Promise of National Service

Two potential 1988 Democratic Presidential candidates, Gary Hart and Charles Robb, are on record in favor of it. Polls say two out of three Americans want it. A host of scholars and policy analysts recommend it as one remedy for what ails American youth. The idea is national service.

Enhanced by the success of experiments like New York's City Volunteer Corps and the San Francisco Conservation Corps, the concept is gaining adherents. But where the New York program involves only about 800 young people, most black and Hispanic, a national program could enroll as many as four million and foster the racial and social integration that our school systems find so elusive.

The needs to be addressed are clear. Evidence of youthful alienation abounds. Police in Atlanta, Denver, Tulsa and Jackson, Miss., describe a surge in criminal street gang activity of the sort usually associated with ghettos of larger cities. Unemployment, boredom and disaffection also drive poor minority youths out of school and into teen-age pregnancy. Could not a shrewd service program channel their energies toward personally and socially constructive ends?

Likewise, national service might fill a need for more affluent youth. After accidents, suicide is the leading cause of death among 15-to-19-year-olds. A recent survey of 2,000 high-achieving teen-agers found that 31 percent had contemplated suicide and 4 percent had actually tried it. They cited feelings of personal worthlessness, isolation, loneliness — feelings that feed adolescent drug and alcohol abuse.

In other words, young Americans of all social strata are increasingly beset with purposelessness. The affluent may feel irrelevant; the poor may feel excluded. Perhaps worst of all, because of increasing physical segregation by race or class, neither knows much about the other. That's not just sad; it's dangerous.

Meanwhile, something else is increasing: the need for service by other Americans. Child care and help for the elderly are two important examples. A Ford Foundation study estimates that 3.5 million positions in various fields could be filled by participants in a national service program.

What sort of program? Mr. Robb acknowledges that there are "formidable administrative problems involved." An ambitious national service could include as many as four million young people at a time. There are formidable conceptual problems as well. At what age could service be voluntary? Should it be mandatory? If so, on what basis might exemptions be permitted?

Such questions raise tantalizing issues of equity — but national service also raises tantalizing hopes: for racial and class integration; for giving young people a sense that society needs and wants them; for meeting human needs now unmet.

Mr. Hart proposes a national commission to explore these questions. It's a sensible idea. But in the meantime, there's no reason other cities, counties and states shouldn't follow New York's example and create youth corps of their own.