Mental Health in Schools
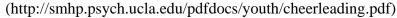**UCLA**
Center
Program and Policy Analysis+

A Series of Information Resources on

Youth Subcultures:
Understanding Subgroups to Better
Address Barriers to Learning
& Improve Schools

As calls for addressing barriers to student learning and improving schools increase, better understanding of youth subculture is essential. This series is intended to stimulate thinking about the implications for policy and practice of the complex, multifaceted subgroups with which youth come to be identified and/or assigned by peers.

Public health and education policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and educators need to know as much as they can about the factors that lead youth to manifest behaviors stemming from group defined values, beliefs, attitudes, and interests. Such understanding is basic to promoting healthy development, preventing problems, intervening as soon as problems arise, and enhancing intervention impact on severe and chronic problems.

To these ends, the Center is producing a series of resources, such as this one, as aids for policy and practice analyses, research, education, and school and community improvement planning.

About the Cheerleading Youth Subculture

Our focus here is on briefly highlighting:

(1) cheerleader subculture and identity

(2) the impact of this subgroup

(3) prevalent policy and practice efforts to address negative impact

(4) data on intervention efforts

(5) proposed new directions

(6) resources for more information.

About the Cheerleading Youth Subculture

Extracurricular school activities provide youth with the opportunity to form identities (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Moreover, major youth subcultures have developed around various extracurricular activities (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). Such subcultures play a significant role in shaping the values and norms to which one is exposed. And the status of these subcultures is an important determiner of the status and performance of the participants both in and out of school. Those subcultures that are perceived as high status raise concerns about creating an elite subgroup of students and perpetuating discrimination in selection for group membership.

In the last half of the 20th century, cheerleading has emerged as one of the most prominent activities for female students. Cheerleading is described as involving organized routines (usually ranging from 1-3 minutes) intended "to direct spectators of events to cheer on sports teams at games and matches and/or compete at cheerleading competitions" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheerleading). Because of the gymnastic elements and the participation of teams in highly organized competitive events, it is deemed a sport by its many support organizations (e.g., the National Cheerleading Association, the World Cheerleading Association, United States All-Star Federation, American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Advisors, Universal Cheerleaders Association, Council for Spirit Safety and Education). Legal support for this view came in 2009 when the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled in settling a case that cheerleading is a full-contact sport.

Grindstaff and West (2006) stress that "forms of popular culture like cheerleading and sport reveal a great deal about social relations, particularly relations of inequality." Furthermore, they argue that "cheerleading, particularly coed college cheerleading, provides a powerful lens through which to examine the relational construction of gender and sexuality in both sport and in society at large."

In schools, cheerleaders are among the subgroups of students at most schools who are perceived as having high status. Indeed, Bettis and Adams (2003) suggest that "cheerleading is often perceived as the highest-status activity for girls in middle school and high school, and girls who cheer often occupy positions of power, prestige, and privilege in their schools." Cheerleader outfits are special status symbols at most schools, and cheerleader fashions are commercially promoted..

At the same time, this youth subculture also has been subject to considerable stereotyping. As Gianoulis (2002) notes:

> "Few archetypes so exemplify every stereotype of women in modern culture as that of the cheerleader. An uneasy juxtaposition of clean-cut athlete, ultra-feminine bubble-headed socialite, skilled dancer..., the cheerleader is at the same time admired and ridiculed, lusted after and legitimized by everyone from junior high school girls to male sports fans."

The history of cheerleading is traced back to a spontaneous fan attending a 1898 football game at the University of Minnesota (Valliant, 2003). It became a formal activity in the early 1900s. However, women didn't become cheerleaders until after World War II. As reported by Gianoulis (2002):

> "In the late 1940s, the president of Kilgore College in Texas had the idea of creating an attractive female dancing and cheering squad as a tactic to keep students from going to the parking lot to drink during half time. He hired a choreographer, commissioned flashy costumes, and the idea of cheerleading as a sort of sexy show-biz entertainment took off. By the 1990s, there were over three million cheerleaders nationwide, almost all of them female."

Over the years, cheerleading has moved in several directions. It has migrated from colleges down to middle and high schools, has generated youth cheerleaders leagues, and has been adopted by professional sports teams (e.g., football, basketball, baseball). It has evolved from pompom and dance routines to athletic performance involving gymnastics (e.g., tumbling, jumps, stunting). In schools, it is a competitive status symbol. Across the country, it is a competitive team event. Estimates indicate that about 97% of cheerleading participants are female, but males make up 50% of cheering squads in college. Outside of schools there is youth league sponsored cheerleading, all star cheerleading, and professional sports team cheerleading. An estimated 1.5 million participate in all-star cheerleading in the U.S. And while cheerleading remains largely an American activity, increased media exposure has spread interest to other countries (e.g., Australia, Canada, China, France, Japan, the United Kingdom).

Merten (1996) provides a somewhat romanticized picture of the activity's development:

> "By perfecting cheers, cheerleaders both highlighted cheering as form and expressed their commitment to something beyond personal gain. That 'something,' the perfection of cheering as form, legitimized the specialness that their peers and adults bestowed on cheerleading and especially on cheerleaders. The perfection of form elevated cheerleaders above being simply ancillary to the basketball game qua competition and made them competitors against the other cheerleading squad."

And as Brady (2002) emphasizes:

> "The world of cheer no longer means sideline squads that exist solely to support other teams. They are teams in their own right these days. ... College and high school cheerleaders compete for national championships. ... They get recruited for college scholarships. And, in some cases, they put in more practice hours than the football team. ... You can argue whether cheerleading is a sport – as many as 20 state high school organizations say it is. ... An estimated half-million cheerleaders attend cheer camps each summer. The past 10 years has seen the rise of All Star programs, in which kids as young as 6 begin intensive cheer programs with an emphasis on gymnastics."

Defining the Cheerleader subculture and identifying subgroup members

In schools, the first distinction with respect to cheerleading is the recognition that comes to those who are selected and the reduction in perceived status for those who apply and are turned away. In effect, the selection process identifies winners and rejects.

Another distinction is between those who primarily are pompom and dance performers and those who are involved in gymnastics. Related to this distinction is whether the emphasis is primarily on cheering and supporting a school team, on entering competitions, or both. These distinctions increase in the progression from middle to high school and on to college. In middle school, whatever the emphasis, no difficult stunts are performed; stunt difficulty increases somewhat by high school, and at this level a further distinction often is whether one is on a varsity or junior varsity team. At the college level, it is commonplace for teams to perform difficult and dangerous stunts (e.g., tumbling, high pyramids, flipping and twisting tosses) and to enter into major competitions.

Within the ranks of cheerleaders, the distinction between those whose performance is mainly dance and those who perform difficult stunts can be a matter of contentiousness. And, as with any activity, qualitative, stylistic, and commitment differences are noted and sometimes used to elevate some and denigrate others.

What is the impact of this subgroup on society and on subgroup members?

Cheerleading is a complex subculture. Those who become and those who aspire to be cheerleaders produce a mixed reaction across society. Some view cheerleaders as making a contribution; others see them as a source of problems. They are admired; they are derided. Cheerleading has been praised for preparing youth for their roles as adults and has been criticized for the image it often conveys of females. It is touted as promoting positive values and criticized for engendering discrimination. And considerable concern has been raised about the increasing number of participants who experience serious injuries.

Status and influence. While attitudes differ, it is clear that, among middle and high school students, cheerleaders have high status and influence. Barnett (2006) reports:

> "Ethnographic studies of cheerleading and female middle school and high school cultures showed that cheerleaders had a direct effect on their peer culture and that they served as the model for physical appearance, fashion, and attractiveness. They were highly visible in the school culture, were considered to be members of the elite school group, and their intragroup values were very different than those represented in other types of activity groups. Participation in this high status activity placed members at the top of the social hierarchy in the school and affected the personal and social identity of the cheerleader."

Discrimination. Over the years, there have been reports that schools have discriminated against selection of racial minority students for cheerleader squads (e.g., see Adams & Bettis, 2003a,b; Bettis & Adams, 2003). More generally, there are complaints that anyone who doesn't fit the prevailing local image of a cheerleader will be turned away.

Mental health. Because of the aura of prestige assigned to cheerleaders, the mental health impact on those who audition and are not selected can be profound. Barnett (2006) reports on research indicating that while those who are chosen showed "significant increases in positive emotions and feelings about themselves and a decline in negative emotions, the opposite was found for those in the unsuccessful group: positive emotions significantly declined while negative emotions increased dramatically [and] the initial affinity they felt for their school was reversed and resulted in active antipathy and aversion to their school." He concludes that "The possible devastating effects on the girls who are unsuccessful in their bid to secure a place on the team should be recognized by counselors and parents, and appropriate strategies designed to assist these girls."

And not surprisingly, those who do become cheerleaders have concerns about gaining weight. Survey data reported by Thompson & Digsby (2004) indicate that 50% of black and 73.5% of white girls in a sample of high school cheerleaders expressed significant body dissatisfaction. Almost half were currently trying to lose weight. The scores for about 13% indicated possible eating problems, and while this was about the same as reported for adolescent girls in general, the matter warrants attention.

Injuries. As cheerleading has moved from pompoms and dance to acrobatics, injuries have increased to the point of making the activity one of the more dangerous ones at a school. Across the U.S. while only about 3% of female high school athletes are cheerleaders, estimates indicate that cheerleading accounts for 65.2% of all major sports injuries among these students. Data at the college level was 70.5% (Mueller & Cantu, 2008).

Reporting one year data on one sample of 9022 cheerleaders, Shields & Smith (2009) found "567 cheerleading injuries were reported: 83% occurred during practice, 52% occurred while the cheerleader was attempting a stunt and 24% occurred while the cheerleader was basing or spotting. Lower extremity injuries (30%) and strains and sprains (53%) were most common." These researchers stress, however, that the injury rates were lower than those reported for other high school and collegiate sports, and many could have been prevented.

Preparation for adulthood and perpetuating negative stereotypes of women. With respect to preparing youth for adulthood, Brady (2002) notes that "corporate America often seeks ex-cheerleaders, especially for sales jobs, where success goes to attractive, energetic and personable people who know how to work a crowd." At the same time, critics worry that the way female cheerleaders dress and perform too often contributes to objectifying and overly sexualizing the image of women. For example, Adams & Bettis (2003) caution:

> "Cheerleading does allow the erotic to enter into school spaces. ... Cheerleaders are allowed to wear short skirts and tight fitting vests, which violate school dress codes, while performing sexually provocative dance moves on the school stage to popular music typically not allowed elsewhere in school."

In considering all this, Boyce (2008) concludes:

> "The sport of cheerleading is here to stay. If it can perhaps be accused of perpetuating stereotypes with its sexualized performance – 'aesthetic' standards, revealing costumes, pom-poms – competitive cheerleading also provides an example of American women turning the tables. Cheerleading was originated by men and handed to women in a sort of afterthought. But once it became women's, it was developed with courage, perseverance, and creativity into something different, competitive cheerleading: women's own sport for which they struggled and which they are establishing in more and more states as well as internationally."

What are the prevalent policy and practice efforts to address negative impact?

Current policy focuses on establishing cheerleading as a sport. Where such policy has been established, the activity is covered by Title IX and the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) protections. Where cheerleading is established as an official sport, it is entitled to equity in resource distribution and equity of opportunity for all to participate. Such a policy is viewed by supporters as enabling the establishment of practices that can help address many of the negative discussed above.

Below are some examples of how resolution is being brought to the ongoing debate about whether or not cheerleading truly is a sport.

In a 2009 court case involving an accidental cheerleading injury, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that cheerleading is a full-contact sport (http://commonlaw.findlaw.com/2009/01/wisconsin-supreme-court-lacks-spirit-cheerleader-injury-lawsuits-restricted.html).

As noted by Boyce (2008), the Women's Sports Foundation (WSF) policy position on this matter is "rather guarded." With respect to whether cheerleading should be covered by Title IX and the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) protections, Boyce notes that the WSF's position seems to be that

> "if a cheerleading squad or drill team has as its overarching mission not presentations at male teams' competitions, but rather compet[ition] against other drill teams or cheerleaders on a regular season and post season qualification basis in much the same structure as basketball or gymnastics and if the team conducted regular practices in preparation for such competition while under the supervision of a coach, [then] these activities could be considered sports. Still, the foundation warns that attempting to relabel girls' existing, funded programs as sports programs when they are not is 'unethical,' and that 'danceline, drill team, cheerleading, baton twirling or the marching band are [in many cases] clearly not fulfilling the definitional requirements of sport.'"

The National Federation of State High School Associations (2007) counts cheerleading as among the top 10 sports in high schools nationwide and views cheerleaders as competitive athletes qualified and recognized by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights under Title IX. How many states recognize cheerleading as a sport is unclear. One indication is that, in the 2006-07 school year, only 26 states were represented in cheerleading competitions. And equity in resource distribution and equity of opportunity remain major concerns. For example, Bettis & Adams (2003) report on a grievance filed by the Office of Civil Rights against the Wichita School District. The claim was that

> "the school district discriminated against African American and Native American students by deliberately excluding them from selection for the cheerleader squad. After a highly contested public battle, the school board adopted a set of recommendations that were intended to ensure that there was 'equal footing' for all students who wanted to be cheerleaders. ... The major facets of the plan included implementation of a cheerleading clinic ... the creation of a noncompetitive cheerleading class ... the recruitment of minority judges and educators; the removal of discriminatory language from literature distributed to parents and students (e.g., references to ponytails, height, and weight; and limitation of the amount of out of pocket expanses to $200 (grades 8-9) and $400 (grades 10-12)."

Boyce (2008) notes that "collegiate cheerleaders operate within their institutions' athletic departments, but are not always deemed to represent a sport. When a squad's central purpose is to support and promote athletes in other sports, then it does not qualify as a sports team. To qualify, a squad must meet the followingg five Office of Civil Rights criteria for varsity sports:

> > Selection of squad members must be based largely on factors related to athletic ability.
> > The squad's activity must have as a primary purpose the preparation for and participation in athletic competition against other, similar teams.
> > The squad must prepare for and participate in competition in the same way other teams in the athletic program do, for example by conducting tryouts, being coached, practicing regularly, and being scheduled regularly for competitions.
> > National-, state-, and conference-level championship competitions must exist for the squad's activity.
> > The squad's activity must be administered by an athletics department."

Other policies related to cheerleading include rules for competition and rules, codes and guidelines to enhance safety and performance (e.g., see National Cheerleaders Association, http://www.nationalspirit.com/ ; Alleman High School Cheerleading Code, http://www.allemanhighschool.org/athletics/athletic_code.shtml).

Any data on intervention impact?

Interventions related to cheerleading focus mainly on ways to prevent or at least minimize injuries. This includes an emphasis on improving cheerleader skills and conditioning, enhancing preparation for practice and performance, providing well prepared coaches, and ensuring settings for practice and performance are designed and equipped with safety in mind. There is ample evidence of increasing attention to these matters (e.g., safety guidelines, use of Title IX to increase resources that can be used to enhance safety), but there are no data on how effective such measures are in reducing injury.

A few interventions have tried to deal with matters relevant to discrimination and mental health concerns. With respect to discrimination, reports periodically appear in the media, and researchers find that cheerleading "is a raced, classed, and gendered symbolic identity and activity that validates the life experiences, values, and skills or a particular group of girls" (Bettis & Adams, 2003). In a follow-up related to the Wichita School District case reported above, Bettis and Adams (2003) reported that five years after the District adopted recommendations "to ensure that there was 'equal footing' for all students who wanted to be cheerleaders," the squads were still predominantly white and middle class. They note that "although cheer preparation classes were created to help prepare all girls for the physical rigors of the competition, nine weeks of one hour a day preparation could not create an equal footing between girls with no background and those who had trained with gymnastic and cheerleader coaches."

With respect to mental health concerns, the one arena that seems to have been targeted by intervention researchers is eating disorders. In one intervention study, cheerleading coaches were trained "to recognize the symptoms of eating disorders and reduce the pressures for thinness among their squads." The result reported by Whisenhunt, Williamson, Drab-Hudson, & Walden (2008) indicate that the intervention produced the intended behavior changes in coaches but there was no long-term change in knowledge about eating disorders. The researchers concluded: "These findings imply that interventions can be implemented by important adult figures (e.g., coaches, teachers) but the overall effectiveness of these interventions must be enhanced in order to have a significant and long term impact."

Proposed new directions

Unlike subgroups that alarm adults, such as emos, goths, and youth gangs, schools tend not to worry about concerns associated with groups such as cheerleaders. The reality is that schools need to understand the impact of all youth subcultural groups. And, where any subgroup is significantly interfering with positive physical, cognitive, social and emotional development, action is warranted. However, the school's stance must be proactive not reactive.

A proactive approach avoids traditional tendencies to wait for problems to arise. It also avoids presuming every problem requires unique intervention strategies by understanding which concerns represent common youth cultural subgroup dynamics and which are associated mostly with one or a few subgroups. Analyses should consider a subgroup's behavior in terms of motivating factors (including efforts intended to enhance feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness to specific others), as well as social, cultural, and gender politics and economies.

From the perspective of our Center's work, development of a full continuum of interventions allows schools to begin with a focus on promoting healthy development and preventing problems for all students. Well designed systems for healthy development and prevention should be foundational features in every school and community. Beyond the benefits they provide directly, they also provide a platform for determining whether the impact of any subgroup is significantly interfering with positive physical, cognitive, social and emotional development and thus warrants special attention. Where it is clear that this is the case, early-after-onset interventions can be introduced based on an analysis of subgroup concerns associated with a particular lifestyle. Finally, if individuals are found to need specialized assistance, steps can be taken to address identified needs.

In sum, rather than waiting for problems, new directions thinking stresses a proactive approach to preventing school and student problems, enhancing personal well-being, and improving academics, and using a continuum of interventions that contributes to enhancing a positive school climate.

Below and in the box that follows, we illustrate approaching policy and practice proactively and with a full continuum of interventions. Embedded are a few examples to illustrate addressing concerns related to cheerleading as an activity, cheerleaders as a subgroup, and those who are rejected from the cheerleading subculture.

- Promoting healthy development and preventing problems

Examples:
> providing information to educate school and key community stakeholders and policy makers about the positive and negative features of youth subculture in general and the cheerleading subculture specifically and about how to counter any negative impact

> establishing dialogues with the cheerleading students, with the intent of engaging them in minimizing identified problems they and others are experiencing in relation to the subgroup and promoting social emotional learning

- *Intervening when problems are noted*

Examples:
> implementing agreed upon promising practices to respond as quickly as feasible

> protecting all students (e.g., from injuries, from negative social and emotional impact, from discrimination and negative images)

> ensuring a student's status as a cheerleader isn't interfering with success at school (e.g., enhancing regular attendance and motivated participation in classroom learning)

> providing medical, mental health, and learning supports
(e.g., related to injury recovery, eating problems, social, emotional, and learning problems)

- *Attending to chronic and severe problems*

For instance:
> identifying and referring for appropriate individual interventions as necessary (e.g., related to physical rehabilitation and to reduce serious and pervasive emotional and cognitive concerns)

> establish a safety net of support (e.g., through school, family, community mental and physical health providers and agencies)

A Perspective on What Schools Should Do Based on the Work of our Center at UCLA

Schools experience many overlapping concerns related to youth subgroups and youth subculture. Of special concern is addressing any negative impact (e.g., criminal acts, bullying, sexual harassment, interracial conflict, vandalism, mental health problems). But, also essential is a focus on promoting healthy development and fostering a positive school climate.

As always, the more we understand about subgroups and individual differences, the more effective our interventions can be. But to keep from the tendency to focus on each concern as if it is discrete, schools need to work in a new way.

Given the complexity of the negative behaviors that arise in relation to youth subgroups, those in the school, district, and community who have responsibility for gangs, safe schools, violence prevention, bullying, interracial conflict, substance abuse, vandalism, truancy, and school climate need to work collaboratively. The *immediate objectives* are to (1) educate others about motivational and behavioral factors associated with a particular subgroup, (2) counter the trend in policy and practice to establish initiatives in terms of separate categories that lead to a host of fragmented and too often ineffective programs and services, and (3) facilitate opportunities on campus for youth subgroups to engage positively in subcultural activity and connect with effective peer supports.

By working collaboratively and differentiating the causes of observed problems, school staff and community stakeholders can integrate fragmented and marginalized initiatives for promoting positive youth development, preventing problems, intervening as soon as problems are identified, and providing effective ways to respond to pervasive, chronic, and serious problems. *Longer-term*, the aim is to help develop a comprehensive system of student and learning supports that (a) addresses a wide range of barriers to learning, teaching, parenting, and development and (b) re-engages disconnected youth. Such a system encompasses a continuum of integrated school-community intervention systems that are fully integrated into the improvement agenda for schools and communities (Adelman & Taylor, 2006a, b).

Toward these ends, schools must reach out to the community and establish a collaborative mechanism where those with specialized knowledge not only bring that knowledge to the table, but also work to build the needed comprehensive system of student and learning supports that addresses a wide range of barriers to learning, teaching, parenting, and development (Adelman & Taylor, 2007). And it is essential to remember that those with specialized knowledge include youth themselves (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2009).

Moving forward requires building a comprehensive and systemic continuum of interventions and fully integrating the system into the improvement agenda for schools and communities. To guide development of a systemic approach, we have suggested using a continuum of integrated school-community intervention systems as a unifying framework. This includes school-community systems for promoting healthy development, preventing problems, intervening early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible, and addressing chronic and severe problems.

Policy that helps schools and communities develop the full continuum of interventions is essential to moving forward in enhancing equity of opportunity. Such policy must effectively establish a *comprehensive intervention framework* that can be used to map, analyze, and set priorities. It must guide fundamental *reworking of operational infrastructure* so that there is leadership and mechanisms for building integrated systems of interventions at schools and for connecting school and community resources. And, it must provide guidance for the difficulties inherent in facilitating major *systemic changes*. By working in this way, we can counter the trend in policy and practice to establish initiatives in terms of separate categories that lead to a host of fragmented and too often ineffective programs and services.

For resource aids related to policy examples, intervention frameworks and related mapping tools, examples of ways to rework the operational infrastructure and develop key mechanisms such as a *Learning Support Resource Team*, guides for facilitating systemic change, and much more, see the Center's Toolkit at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm

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Youth Culture and Subgroups
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/youthculture.htm

The Center's Series of Information Resources on *Youth Subcultures: Understanding Subgroups to Better Address Barriers to Learning & Improve Schools**

Online:

>*What is Youth Culture? A Brief Introduction*
>
>*Glossary of Terms Related to Youth Culture Subgroups*
>
>*Youth Subcultures: Annotated Bibliography and Related References*
>
>*About Youth Gangs*
>
>*About the Goth Youth Subculture*
>
>*About Hip Hop Youth Subculture*
>
>*About "Loners" and "Losers"*
>
>*About "Jocks" as Youth Subculture*
>
>*About Emo Youth Subculture*
>
>*About Surfing and Skateboarding Youth Subcultures*
>
>*About the Cheerleading Youth Subculture*
>
>*About "Mean Girls" as a Youth Culture Subgroup*
>
>*About "Nerds" and "Geeks" as an Identified Subculture*
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>*About "Preppies" as a Youth Culture Subgroup*
>
>*About Sexual Minority (LGBT) Youth Subculture*
>
>*Youth and Socially Interactive Technologies*
>
>*About Raves as a Youth Culture Phenomenon*

Others are in development

>*Many of the terms used by youth in referring to subgroups often are pejorative and offensive. We do not condone such language. We do, however, recognize the need to go beyond adultcentric definitions and descriptions of youth subgroups if we are to understand youth perceptions and perspectives. So the *Information Resource* documents reflect the terms used by youth.