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## SPECIAL FEATURE: HEALTH PROMOTION IN THE URBAN ELDERLY

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### Experience Corps Commentary

John W. Rowe and Robert Kahn

Linda Fried and her colleagues have given us an important set of articles in this issue of the *Journal of Urban Health* that address with considerable success a pressing problem: how best to utilize the productive capacities of the rapidly growing, long-lived population of older men and women. Several gerontologists have focused on the topic. Riley and Riley<sup>1</sup> emphasized structural lag, the failure of “the role structures of society to keep pace with the changes in the way people grow up and grow old.” Baltes<sup>2</sup> spoke of the age-related increase in the needs of individuals for “culture,” a term that he used to include all the resources that a society can provide to enable sustained productive activity. Rowe and Khan<sup>3</sup> cited examples of voluntary programs and urged greater flexibility in part-time work.

The four Experience Corps<sup>®</sup> articles in this issue are based on a field experiment in the recruitment, training, and performance of older women and men as volunteer teaching assistants in Baltimore, Maryland, elementary schools.<sup>4-7</sup> Although such voluntary groups have been organized in 18 cities by the Experience Corps, Baltimore is the only one in which a randomized controlled experiment has been conducted to assess the program’s effects.

The authors of the four articles point to Erik Erikson as the ideological ancestor of the Experience Corps. Erikson is best known for his theory about the seven stages of life, the characteristic conflicts of each, and the mark of successful resolution at each stage. He defined adulthood as the long period between young adulthood and old age and saw its conflict as between self-absorption and generativity. Generativity is the mark of a person who not only is “at home in this life,” but also is committed “to make it a home for following generations.”<sup>8(p50)</sup> In this issue, Glass and his Experience Corp’s colleagues<sup>7</sup> called generativity “the cornerstone of our conceptual model.” Erikson in fact did not propose generativity as the mark of success in old age; it belonged to the previous stage, adulthood. Rather, he saw old age as involving a conflict between integrity (of the self) and despair.<sup>8</sup> The present authors perhaps considered that Erikson may have underestimated the persistence of generativity-based motivation.

The Experience Corps Baltimore study is well designed and executed. The preliminary results, reported in detail in this issue’s articles by Fried et al., Rebok et al., and Frick et al., show substantial success for the program over 4 to 8 months, including physical and cognitive gains for the volunteers themselves. Even in areas in

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which there was no apparent gain—walking speed, for example—those in the experimental group showed less reduction than those in the control group. In addition, there were positive effects on students and teachers, and the program was cost-effective.

Extension of this work will be informed by greater specificity on the nature of the intervention. Although the papers seem to present the intervention as a mix of enhanced self-esteem, self-worth, physical exercise, and psychological engagement from working with the students, other possible mechanisms are embedded in their design. For instance, there may have been a significant financial incentive in the intervention. The volunteers' reported average income of less than \$15,000 puts them at or below the poverty line, depending on household composition. Thus, the \$200 monthly "reimbursement for the expense of volunteering" may be a very significant motivator for this low-income group. Second, the possibility of a significant socialization effect among the volunteers independent of their interactions with the students deserves consideration. A separate control group that meets frequently but is not involved in a school would help clarify this question. Third, as discussed by the authors, the cognitive gains reported may have resulted from the cognitive training—a total of 30 hours over 2 weeks—rather than from ongoing participation in the program, especially in light of the short follow-up period reported. This should be clarified in future work.

Another question, which will await longer follow-up, is the sustainability of the effect that has been observed in these early studies. The authors pointed to previous work with exercise programs, for which positive initial results were not sustained over time. The finding that most volunteers were interested in continuing for a second year is very promising in this regard.

If a broader experiment were to be mounted, which additional attributes would we hope to see?

*Scale:* The numbers are admittedly small—three experimental and three control schools, 70 experimental volunteers, and 58 controls. A significant sample of schools should be drawn, in a number of diverse communities and neighborhoods. Something approaching a national sample would be ideal, but the number of communities should be large enough to make plausible inferences to the national level.

*Diversity:* The volunteers were almost all African American, as were the students. No racial data for the teaching staff were given, but the likelihood is that most were white. To the extent volunteers served as important racial role models for the students, there may be a source of influence that would not persist in other school settings. Almost one third of the volunteers reported their previous occupation as professional/technical; to the extent that they had been teachers, they would have brought a degree of expertise to the classroom assistance that other volunteers would be unlikely to provide.

*Age range of volunteers:* The age range of the volunteers is very broad, with most between 60 and 75 years old. It would be useful for the larger trial to find whether age is a significant determinant of volunteers' involvement and performance.

*Mechanisms:* Given the specific pathways by which the authors hypothesize their intervention may be modulated, the larger project, if it materializes, should include measures of blood pressure, blood glucose, and insulin as well as self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Our observations reflect the almost insatiable appetite of researchers for more data, but do not reflect lack of appreciation for the excellent work already accomplished. Fried and her colleagues have conducted a highly successful field experiment on a topic of importance for both science and social policy.

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