

## YOUTH WORK OVERVIEW

Most dictionaries contain no definition of youth worker. Such neglect typifies a society that underestimates this important vocation. Youth work is crucial in the lives of many young people, and many youth at risk have found their way through devoted youth workers. To the definitions of social worker and teacher provided by standard dictionaries, youth work should be given clear recognition.

Youth work describes young- or older-adult involvement with youth in the interest of adolescent growth and welfare. Youth workers may be volunteers or part-time or full-time workers. The term is often used broadly in a way that makes it synonymous with youth ministry; as such, it sometimes implies a lower level of training and expertise than "youth leader" or "youth director." As a topic in this Encyclopedia, the term youth work will imply work with young people in the secular domain, and youth ministry will refer to work with young people with religious affiliation or intent.

For some time youth workers have been trained, certified, and paid professionally in some countries. Germany, the United Kingdom, other European countries, and Canada are far ahead of the United States and the rest of the world in developing youth work as a profession. It is not for lack of interest of money that this is so. But most money in the U.S. is going into sophisticated and often redundant studies, instead of the development of youth worker training programs. For youth work to be a profession, it must have some social status, a body of research, scholarly publications, training programs, and some officially recognized criteria for licensing. There are as yet no generally accepted credentials that separate youth work from the fields of therapy or criminal justice. There must be youth and community jobs for those who complete academic training programs. Some of the millions going to universities for research ought to be diverted to communities who need such workers. Research and curriculum ought to proceed from the grass roots if it is to be realistic and effective.

Youth work speaks not only of expertise with young people; it must combine skills in family service and community development. If youth work is to be holistic, it must be concerned with the contexts of young people that dynamically affects their lives and futures.

A National Collaboration for Youth survey found that, in the U.S., a front-line youth worker's average starting salary was \$14,878; supervising youth workers began at \$19,247 a year. In contrast, those with bachelor's degree entered physical education at \$22,768, nursing at \$28,594, and computer sciences at \$31,783. Obviously, the turnover rate for youth workers is high. It is often just as they establish good relationships in the community and expertise with young people that they leave.

An underlying problem is that there is no national goal for youth work. The political system sees youth as a "problem," and resources are primarily going to sustain the institutional life of the university or youth organization. Putting funds into three top quality universities (West and East coasts and mid-country) to develop academic programs in collaboration with networks of community organizations might be a good place to start.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What questions about youth work do you have and how should they be discussed?
2. Do you think youth work ought to be considered a profession? If so, how should it be funded, who should control its standards, what kind of training and certification should be required, how much

should entry youth workers and supervisors be paid, and how should a person continue education and advance professionally?

3. What would it take to attract and keep you in youth work for a good part of your life? What would attract and keep community board members to support such work?

4. How do you see the relationship of youth work to youth ministry and youth workers to youth ministers in a given town or neighborhood of a large city?

## IMPLICATIONS

1. As much as we may talk about the amalgamation of services and mainstreaming youth in the adult world, there will always be a need to reach those whom the social systems, family, schools, community organizations, have missed.

2. The perspective of youth workers adds important insight to any discussion of the welfare of youth and the community.

3. Youth work cannot allow itself to become isolated from other community organizations. They ought to meet periodically with police, educators, parents, religious leaders, and others in the community.

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