



*Vision of  
Strong  
Communities*

*For every child  
and every parent  
to be confident  
that someone will  
notice and  
someone will care  
whenever they  
have reason to  
celebrate, worry  
or grieve.*

# **STRONG COMMUNITIES: COMMUNITY-BASED EFFORTS TO PREVENT CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT**

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**with acknowledgements and thanks to our  
numerous colleagues at**

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[www.clemson.edu/strongcommunities](http://www.clemson.edu/strongcommunities)**

# The Results

## Children Are Safer; Communities Are Stronger



*What we see [when we look at progress in the first 5 or 6 years of the Strong Communities initiative] is that...*

*not only are community efforts to protect children effective, but that communities are enlivened and renewed through their collective efforts to protect their most precious and vulnerable resources, their children.*

DEAN JEANETTE LANCASTER,  
U OF VA SCHOOL OF NURSING, AND EDITOR, *FAMILY & COMMUNITY HEALTH*

# The Conceptual Foundation: The Reports of the U.S. Advisory Board

The Board has concluded that child abuse and neglect in the United States now represents a national emergency....

(ABCAN, 1990)

# Why the Emergency Occurred

- **THE FUNDAMENTAL ERROR:** an initially mistaken assessment of the nature and frequency of child maltreatment
- **COROLLARY MISDIRECTED POLICY:** primary reliance on case-finding when millions of children are identified as possibly maltreated, but their families receive no ‘services’ other than an investigation

# The Nature of the System

The most serious shortcoming of the nation's system of intervention on behalf of children is that it depends upon a reporting and response process that has punitive connotations, and requires massive resources dedicated to the investigation of allegations....

# The Tragic Result

- ...It has become far easier to pick up the telephone to report one's neighbor for child abuse than it is for that neighbor to pick up the telephone to request and receive help before the abuse happens....
- ...Many thousands of American children and families...are waiting for our society, and its governments, to respond to their plight with more than just a report, and more than just an investigation



# The Challenge

(ABCAN, 1993)

...The Nation must strive diligently to overcome the isolation created by the demands of modern life and exacerbated by the ravages of poverty. We must tear down the walls that divide us by race, class, and age, and we must create caring communities that support the families and shelter the children within them. We must take the time to see the need and lend a hand.

# The Call to Action

- ...For now..., the Board is pleading not for the best [for the Nation's children] but instead for the most basic—a society in which children need not live in fear—whether in their homes or elsewhere....
- [The Board] challenges all American adults to resolve to be good neighbors—to know, watch, and support their neighbors' children and to offer help when needed to their neighbors' families.



# The Obstacles

*‘Fulfillment of the Board’s strategy will not be easy’*

- “Requires reversal of powerful social trends”
- Complexity of the task and therefore multiplicity of the elements
- “...The science and technology of neighborhood development are only minimally developed”
- The responsibility for change rests with not just individual clients but also “service providers, the community, and all levels of government—in fact,...society itself”

# STRONG COMMUNITIES

A Public Service Activity of Clemson University



- Based in a diverse urban/suburban/small-town/rural area in Greenville and Anderson counties in northwestern South Carolina
  - total population  $\approx$  126,000 (2000 census)
  - adult population  $\approx$  97,000 (2000 census)
  - expanded service area in 2008; current estimated pop. = 170,000 (total population in Greenville-Spartanburg-Anderson combined metropolitan area exceeds 1 million)
- A decade-long effort (begun in 2002) supported by The Duke Endowment to demonstrate and evaluate the neighborhood-based strategy proposed by the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect in 1993

# Fundamental Principles

- People should be able to get help where they are, when they need it, with ease and without stigma, i.e.,

## PEOPLE SHOULDN'T HAVE TO ASK

Families shouldn't have to become *patients, clients*, or, worst of all, *cases* in order to receive help.

- *To fulfill these principles, informal services are usually more effective than formal services.*

# Ultimate Goal of **Strong Communities**



*Keep Kids Safe*

( Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect)

# The Creation of Social Norms



- Strong Communities is designed to promote *normative change* in perceptions, beliefs, and behavior
  - **Caring**
    - Attentiveness
    - Neighborliness
  - **Inclusion**
    - Universality of access to family support
    - Mutuality of respect and caring

# The Creation of Social Norms



- **Optimism**

- The belief, individually and collectively, that action on behalf of families will be effective, because
  - the community is a welcoming and supportive place
  - positive things do happen for families in the community

- **Action**

- The belief, individually, and collectively, that the possibility of effective action on behalf of families *should* be translated into practical activity (moral norm)
- The belief that such practical activity *will* occur; it is the thing to do, a norm that pervades life in the community (social norm)

# Components



- *Community mobilization* by staff outreach workers
- **Strong Families**
  - Universal assistance to families of young children
  - Generally provided with existing human resources (unpaid volunteer service and donated professional time)
  - In existing community facilities (homes, libraries, churches, fire stations, schools, parks, etc.)

# **Strong Families**

## **A New Part of Everyday Life**



- About 3,000 families enrolled in 2006-07
- Many thousands more have participated
- At least 1,300 activities from mid-2006 to mid-2008 - a number that has been rapidly growing
- Extrapolated estimate of 25,000 instances of participation
- Activities occurred throughout the community
  - More than one-third each in churches and community centers
  - Schools, 9.0%; libraries, 7.7%; other, ~15%



# Leaving No Families Outside

- Strong Families includes new preventive roles for mental health professionals
- Strong Families is incorporating and integrating Safe Families, a Lydia Home Association innovation related to the U.S. Advisory Board's recommendations about foster care
- Support for families of prisoners is a special focus



# Components of Family Activity Centers

1. Play groups
2. Parents' Night Out
3. Parent/child activities
4. Financial and career education, counseling, and mentoring
5. 'Plain-label' professional assistance (Chat with a Family Advocate)

# Family Activity Centers

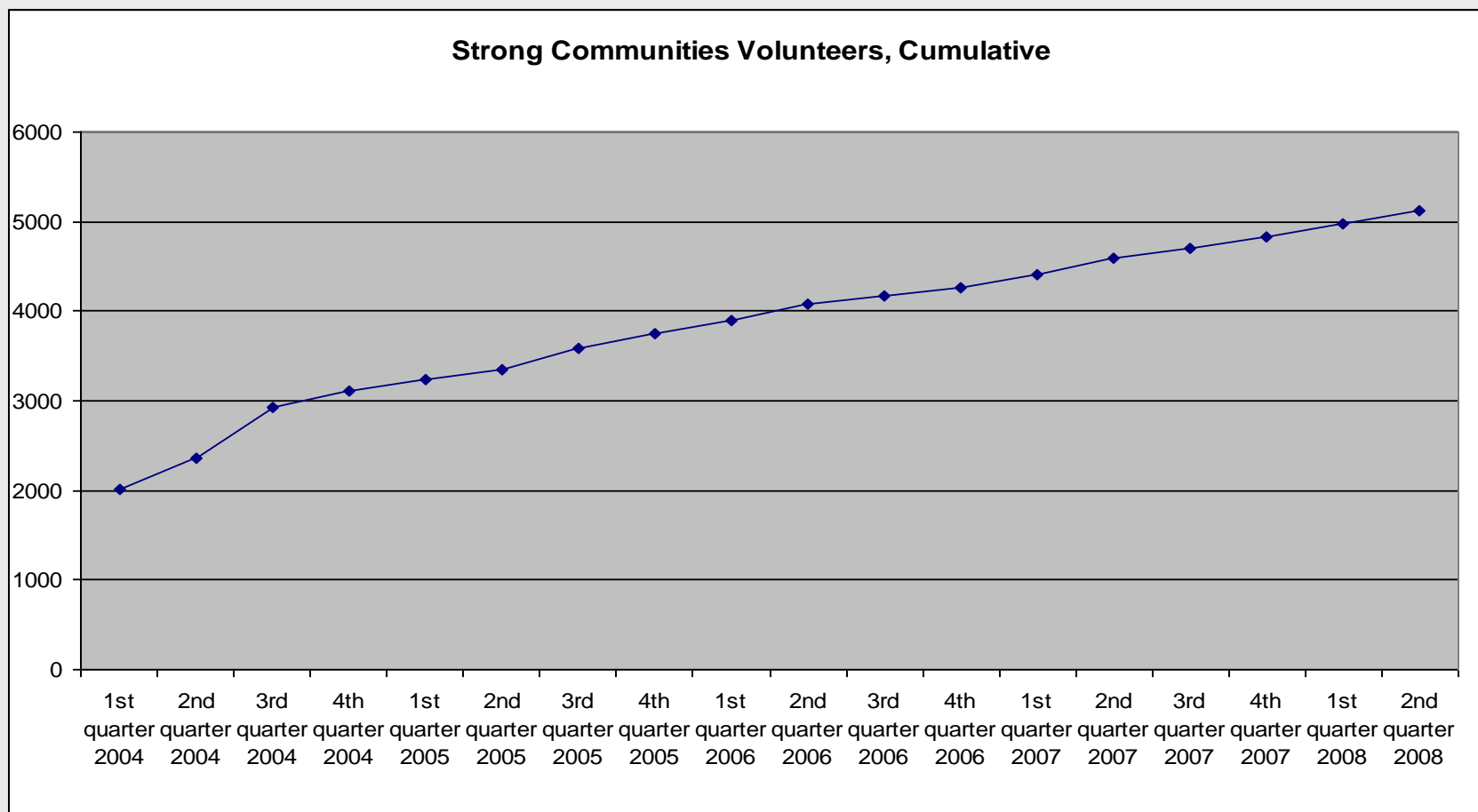
- *Staffed by volunteers*
- *Offer free or low-fee programs and services*
- *Provide opportunities for mutual assistance*  
(e.g., child care provided by volunteers to enable parents of young children to serve as volunteers)



EVERYONE can be a volunteer  
within Strong Communities

# 5,000 Volunteers Have Contributed Their Time and Skills

*Recruitment Has Been Steady*

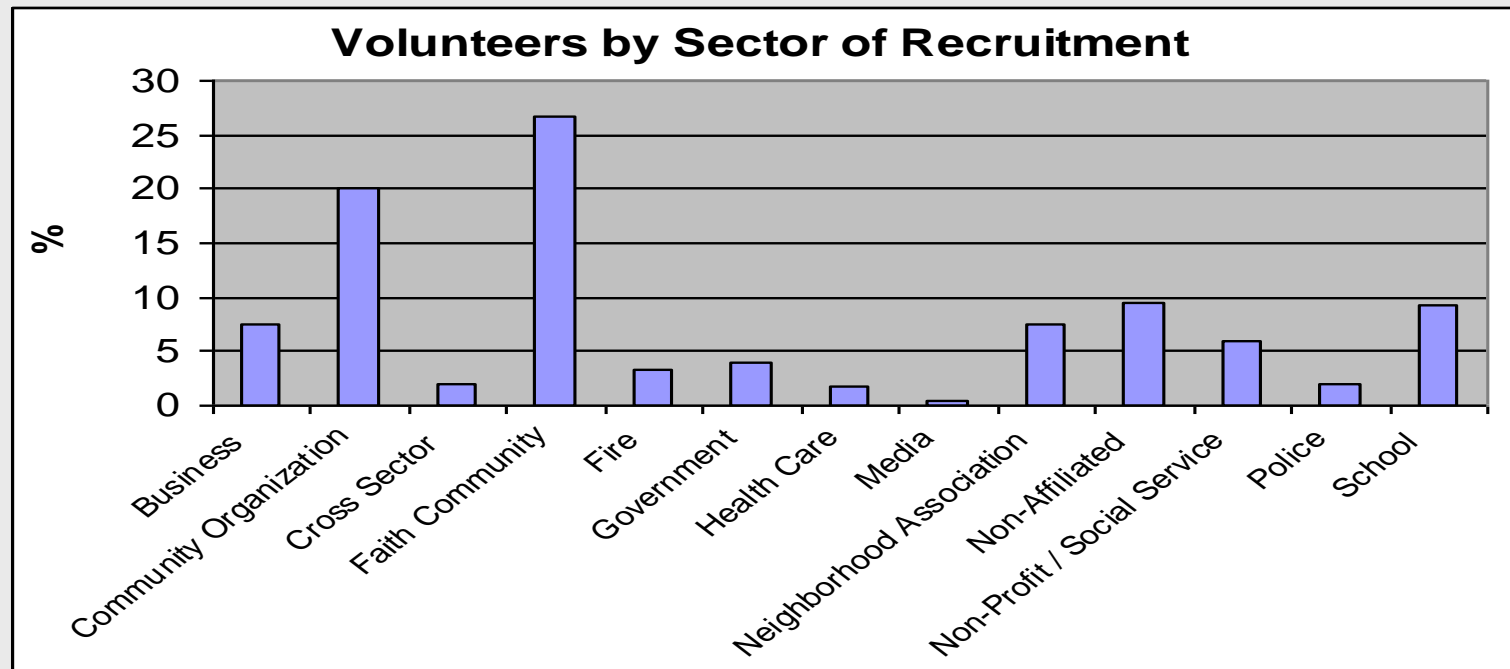


# Volunteers Mirror the Community

- About 40% are male
- Three-fifths of 'super-active' volunteers (those most mentioned in workers' logs) are male
- About 33% are ethnic-minority (compared with 25% of population)
- About 45% are at least 40 years old (almost identical to the population)
- About 12% are under 20 years old (despite the lack of focused effort to involve children and adolescents)
- Except that they are older on average, exceptional volunteers mirror Strong Communities volunteers in general

# Churches Are the Most Important Source of Volunteers

*But the Reach of the Initiative Is Broad*



# Churches as Sources of Volunteers

- Among 'exceptional volunteers' (44 top volunteers, as identified by outreach staff), more than one-fourth are church employees
- Among mentions of sectors in workers' biweekly debriefing sessions (journalistic interviews) through 2005, 28% involved churches (19%, housing developments; 17%, public safety agencies; 16%, businesses; 14%, schools; 7%, civic clubs)
- Retention of volunteers from churches is second only to firefighters



# Challenges: Neighborhood Matters

- Physical indicators of neighborhood identity and well-being are strongly related to young children's safety in their homes
  - Parent survey
  - Hospital injury data
- Neighbors' attempts to isolate themselves through symbolic barriers (e.g., no-trespassing signs; a chained dog in the yard) are strong indicators of risk to children's safety
- These effects are observable even when residents' income and education are statistically controlled

# Isolation in the Suburbs and Small Towns

***In our service area, about one-fifth of families of infant, preschool, and elementary-school-age children report being highly isolated***

- They do not know the names of any children in the neighborhood outside their own family
- They do not know how they would obtain child care in an emergency
- They belong to no organizations other than a church

# Isolation and Quality of Life

- Although more than one-fourth of isolated parents in our service area have a college education, isolated parents are especially likely to be poor, uneducated, and never married
- Isolated parents have relatively low neighborhood satisfaction, sense of social support, and experience in helping and being helped by neighbors
- They report that children in their neighborhood are often unsafe

# Building a Culture of Caring

- ‘Bowling alone’ persists: e.g., indicators of parental engagement in community civic life (e.g., organizational membership) declined significantly between 2004 and 2007
- We have demonstrated that it is possible even in the current age of alienation to enlist communities in care for children—and to sustain and deepen that involvement across several years
- We have done so in diverse communities, with the greatest success (probably contrary to the expectations of most people) in the most disadvantaged communities

# From Community Action to Safer Homes

In surveys conducted in 2004 and 2007, parents in the Strong Communities service area reported

- greater social support
- more frequent help from others
- greater sense of community and personal efficacy
- more frequent positive parental behavior
- more frequent use of household safety devices
- less frequent disengaged (inattentive) parenting
- less frequent neglect
- trend toward less frequent assaultive behavior

*across time and relative to matched communities*

# Safety Across the Community

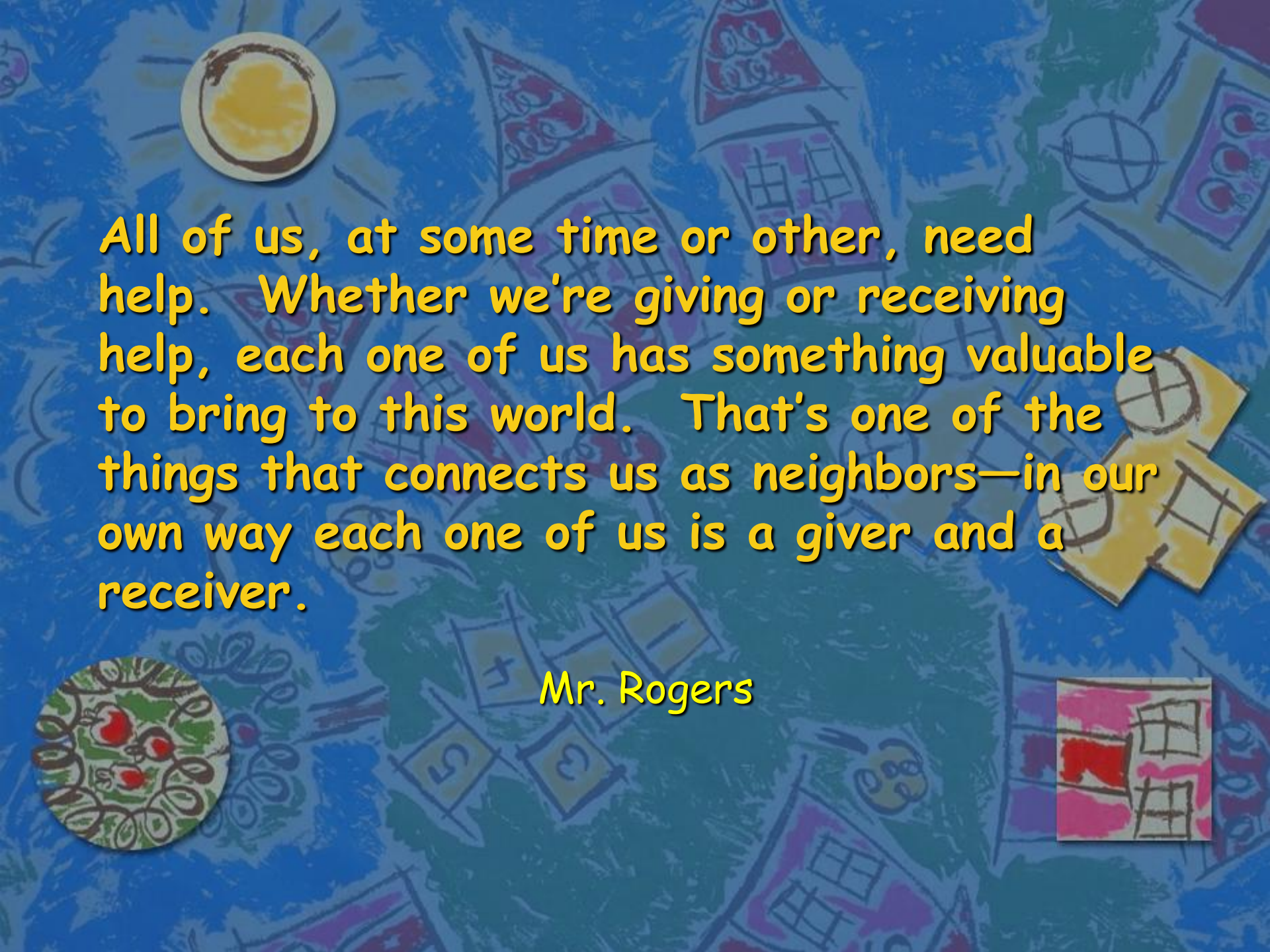
- Significant increases in beliefs of parents, teachers, and especially children
  - that kids are safe at or in transit to school *and*
  - that parents are taken seriously by school personnel
- Such beliefs have become less common in families of children in matched comparison schools

# The Ultimate Lesson

***One person CAN make a difference***

- Outreach workers are linchpins of the effort
- Working in a carefully planned, ethically coherent, and empirically grounded initiative — a social movement
- Optimal ratio is estimated to be 1 outreach worker per 10,000 residents





All of us, at some time or other, need help. Whether we're giving or receiving help, each one of us has something valuable to bring to this world. That's one of the things that connects us as neighbors—in our own way each one of us is a giver and a receiver.

Mr. Rogers



# THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE

*Building...*



*...with no families left outside!*