

## spotlight on our students

Experiential Learning With The Schubert Center For Child Studies | College Of Arts And Sciences | Case Western Reserve University

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**MANN CHILD POLICY EXTERN** **Gennifer Gibbs** A senior double majoring in psychology and economics and minoring in childhood studies, Gennifer Gibbs entered college planning to pursue a career in clinical psychology. She learned about the Mann Child Policy Externships through her childhood studies courses, and decided to apply for an externship in order to develop an understanding of the policy issues that she would encounter as a clinical psychologist. Gennifer's experience as a Mann Child Policy Extern was a turning point, though, prompting her to change her career plans to law, through which she plans to pursue a career in policy. Gennifer has continued to take every opportunity to follow her interest in policy in her undergraduate studies, and hopes to continue to positively impact the lives of youth through research and advocacy on child policy issues at both the state and national levels.



Gennifer spent the summer following her junior year working as an extern with The Village Network. As an extern, Gennifer was asked to research the history and gain an understanding of the implications of the *Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act* (Pub. L. 109-248). The Adam Walsh Act was signed into law by President George W. Bush on July 27, 2006. It stipulated that states must comply with the legislation by July 27, 2009, or risk losing 10% of a federal law enforcement grant. The Ohio General Assembly chose to implement the legislation this year and did so by passing Senate Bill 10, on July 1, 2007.

Gennifer's research included tracing the history of this Act through the legislative process, examining variability in its implementation at the state level, summarizing research assessing its impact, and ultimately developing materials that the Village Network can use with the State Legislature to discuss the impact of this policy on children in Ohio.

#### **POLICY RESEARCH: THE ADAM WALSH CHILD PROTECTION AND SAFETY ACT**

Gennifer's first task as a policy extern with the Village Network was summarizing the original intent of the Adam Walsh Act and outlining its primary components. The Act was intended to increase protection for children from sexual and other violent crimes. The legislation was driven in part by high rates of sexual abuse in the United

States—one in four girls and almost one in six boys are sexually abused before age 18; and one in five children are sexually solicited while online.<sup>ii</sup> The Adam Walsh Act sought to decrease children's vulnerability to sexual violence through multiple means, including expanding the national sex offender registry, strengthening federal penalties for crimes against children and increasing funding to combat sexual exploitation of minors on the Internet.

Although this legislation initially appeared to be beneficial, Gennifer's research led to the realization that the bill was controversial for many reasons. A primary controversy focused on the juvenile offenders subject to the provisions of the Adam Walsh Act. The Act greatly expands the requirements for registry and penalties for certain types of sex offenses. Specifically, it requires all minors age 14 and over adjudicated for specific offenses to register with the national sex offender registry. Failure to do so and to update the information is made a felony under the law. Once registered, the offender's name, picture, home address, school and employer name are put on a publicly available website for a period of up to 25 years, he or she is unable to live within 1,000 feet of a school, day-care center or park, and is prohibited from crossing state borders without permission from his or her probation officer.

Gennifer learned that these provisions may have negative consequences for the offenders themselves and for the law enforcement community. For example, having to place their name, picture, and address on an Internet site that is publicly available makes these children easy targets for

adult sexual predators. Additionally, while the goal of residency restrictions is to decrease the likelihood that sex offenders will come in contact with and victimize children, there is a dearth of empirical research to indicate that residency restrictions actually reduce recidivism.<sup>iii</sup> In fact, the majority of research in this area finds unintended consequences on sex offenders, including limiting opportunities for employment, treatment services, pro-social support systems, and housing.<sup>iv</sup> Additionally, the increase in the number of low level offenders registering may strain the capacity of law enforcement by increasing the number of individuals they are required to track.

The Adam Walsh Act also removes incentives that were in place to encourage and motivate youth to seek and take full advantage of treatment. Data suggest that the percentage of youth entering treatment programs has dropped since the implementation of the Adam Walsh Act. For example, in Ohio, 30% fewer sexual offenders have entered the Department of Youth Services since its passage.<sup>v</sup> Also, under the Act, youth may be less likely to disclose prior sexual offenses, which is an important part of the rehabilitation process. This is important because Gennifer's research on juvenile offender treatment programs suggests that unlike adults, children have very high completion rates in these programs, and as many as 96% of those completing programs never re-offend.<sup>vi</sup> Alternately, those youth who do not go through treatment are more likely to re-offend, posing a greater risk to the public.<sup>vii</sup> Additionally, treatment programs, she learned, are up to eight times more cost effective than incarceration.<sup>viii</sup>

**MANN CHILD POLICY EXTERNSHIPS** The Schubert Center for Child Studies and the Childhood Studies Program at Case Western Reserve University collaborate with community policy organizations to offer undergraduate students a practical hands-on experiential learning opportunity. Students work directly with professionals who design and implement policies that impact the lives of children and families, and have the opportunity to apply concepts learned in the classroom to local and national policy work. Students can use their externship to fulfill their *SAGES Capstone* experience in some disciplines. For more information, visit <http://www.case.edu/artsci/schubert/>

## ADVOCATING FOR CHANGE

After extensive research, and in collaboration with her mentors as the Village Network, Gennifer synthesized her findings into a set of materials advocating for changes to Ohio Senate Bill 10. She created a policy brief, presentation, and talking points outlining the problematic aspects of the Act and changes that would address these issues.

Gennifer's materials put forth the position that the Act should be modified to address the differences between child and adult offenders. She argues that requiring young offenders to register on the sex offender registry puts these children at risk for violence and detracts from law enforcement's ability to track individuals who pose a much greater risk to society. Also, she argues, the law fails to recog-

nize the different developmental stage and cognitive capacity of youth and imposes adult penalties on children without giving them the right to due process, including a jury trial. Gennifer concludes that the responsibility for punishing juvenile offenders should be returned to the juvenile courts to allow for careful consideration of the unique needs of youth.

**THE VILLAGE NETWORK** is a non-profit organization promoting responsible living and positive change for troubled children through partnerships with families and communities. The Village Network provides specialized residential and outpatient programs for youth suffering from a range of mental and behavior health challenges. Their programs are designed to assess and meet the unique needs of each child and family and ultimately to transform the lives of troubled youth by ensuring that they have a safe, stable and nurturing living environment. For more information about The Village Network, go to [www.thevillagenetwork.org/](http://www.thevillagenetwork.org/)

Jim Miller, Executive Director of the Village Network, had this to say about working with our Mann Child Policy Extern, "Gennifer's research and policy analysis was exceptional. She was able to address a major issue facing the agency and more importantly the children of the State of Ohio. Without her education, time and energy we would not have the strong foundation for a public information campaign and legislative advocacy event that we are planning with the new Ohio Legislature."

**Gennifer's experience** as a Mann Child Policy Extern with the Village Network illustrates the importance of hands-on experience for students pursuing a career in policy. Gennifer was responsible for systematically and objectively reviewing the history and current status of a policy issue. She worked together with her collaborating organization to develop materials to advocate a specific position based on the organization's needs. This opportunity provided her with important skills that she will draw on throughout her future career in child policy.

Gennifer had this to say about her experience, "there is no substitute for the experiential learning opportunities provided by the Mann Child Policy Externship. While I have had a wonderful classroom experience, there is no better way to learn (and nothing more satisfying!) than personally engaging in advocacy. My externship showed me how my knowledge can be applied to make a difference. I not only learned first-hand about the policy making process, but I also learned how I can develop my skills to make a bigger difference in the future. In fact, the Mann Child Policy Externship has helped to shape my future career goals."

<sup>1</sup> Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) Study, an ongoing collaboration between Co-Principal Investigators Vincent J. Felitti, MD, of Kaiser Permanente, and Robert F. Anda, MD, MS, of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved October 30, 2008 from <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/ace/prevalence.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Finkelhor, D., Mitchell, K., & Wolak, J. (2001). Highlights of the youth internet safety survey. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Retrieved October 30, 2008 from <http://www.ncjrs.gov/internetsafety/children.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003. "5 Percent of Sex Offenders Rearrested for Another Sex Crime Within 3 Years of Prison Release." U.S. Department of Justice, 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction & Ohio Institute on Correctional Best Practices (2007). Best Practices Tool-Kit: Sex Offender Registration and Notification. Retrieved on October 30, 2008 from [http://www.drc.state.oh.us/web/iej\\_files/SO\\_RegistrationNotification.pdf](http://www.drc.state.oh.us/web/iej_files/SO_RegistrationNotification.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Department of Youth Services (personal communication).

<sup>6</sup> Kennedy, WA, & Hume, M.P. (1998). Juvenile sex offender program reduces recidivism. *Brown University Child & Adolescent Behavior Letter*, 14(1):1-4.

<sup>7</sup> "No Easy Answers: Sex Offender Laws in the US (2007). Human Rights Watch, 19(4). Retrieved October 30, 2008 from <http://hrw/reports/2007/us0907/>.

<sup>8</sup> Debelle, G.D., Ward, M.R., Burnham, J.B., Jamieson, R. & Ginty, M. (1993). Evaluation of intervention programs for juvenile sex offenders: Questions and dilemmas. *Child Abuse Review*, 2:75-87.

**THE SCHUBERT CENTER FOR CHILD STUDIES** in the College of Arts and Sciences at Case Western Reserve University strives to bridge research, practice and policy and to promote educational initiatives across disciplines. Our focus is on children and childhood from infancy through adolescence and in local, national, international and global contexts.

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