

# Developing a Statewide Model of Youth Activism in Violence Prevention

## *A Tale of Program Development and Evaluation*

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*The YouthPeace®/SisterNet® model was developed by the Illinois Center for Violence Prevention, a statewide nonprofit organization, to build a movement of young people who want to be educated, active leaders in violence prevention and peacemaking in their families, schools, and communities. This article presents the program model and lessons author learned about developing youth activists in violence prevention.*

### **A Positive Youth Development Approach to Preventing Violence**

Experts in the field of youth violence have advocated that programs emphasize factors that promote positive youth development—such as leadership and community involvement—in addition to focusing on problem prevention (Catalano et. al, 1998). Indeed, the practice of positive youth development is crucial to the effectiveness of violence prevention programming for a variety of reasons:

- By adopting a positive youth development approach, we recognize young people as experts on the needs of their communities; empower them to become change agents; and give them the opportunity to engage in non-violent activities.
- By exposing youth to leadership roles, protective factors that promote non-violent behavior increase and risk factors for violent behavior decrease.

- The practice of positive youth development helps youth to develop their strengths, which serve as a protective factor in violence prevention.
- Positive youth development is especially developmentally appropriate during adolescence—a life stage in which the peer group has a greater influence than adults, and in which youth are more likely to engage in collaborative decision making and action if their peers are involved (Zeldin et al., 2000). Adolescents are more likely to develop and implement interventions when working with and for their peers to create a violence prevention movement.

The following section describes the YouthPeace and SisterNet programs, which model the Illinois Center for Violence Prevention (ICVP) framework that combines positive youth development with violence prevention.

### **The YouthPeace and SisterNet Program Model**

YouthPeace, ICVP's statewide youth initiative, has provided opportunities for young men and women to be actively involved in developing and implementing violence prevention strategies since 1995. SisterNet, the girls' component, was created in 1998 as a response to gender-based violence, particularly around the need for girls to have a safe space. Both programs reach 12- to 21-year-olds across Illinois, and reflect the region's ethnic, socio-economic, and geographic diversity.

YouthPeace and SisterNet follow a similar program model (see Figure 1 on page 56), in which ICVP builds partnerships with adult sponsors and community organizations to develop local youth chapters. Their goal is to implement “actions” designed and implemented by young people to prevent violence within their communities. Actions have included one-time events such as conferences, peer-led trainings, community beautification events, and community rallies; and ongoing programs such as mentoring younger children and opening a store for teen parents. SisterNet incorporates gender-specific training that addresses violence by and against women.

These programs give a voice to the large group of young people who are ordinarily excluded or marginalized—including persons of color, immigrants, and impoverished communities. Some chapters help teen mothers, while others focus on adolescents involved with the juvenile justice system and/or youth who have been directly impacted by violence.

ICVP provides ongoing trainings and technical assistance around violence prevention to youth members and their adult sponsors. After the training, youth participants and their local chapters must follow four steps:

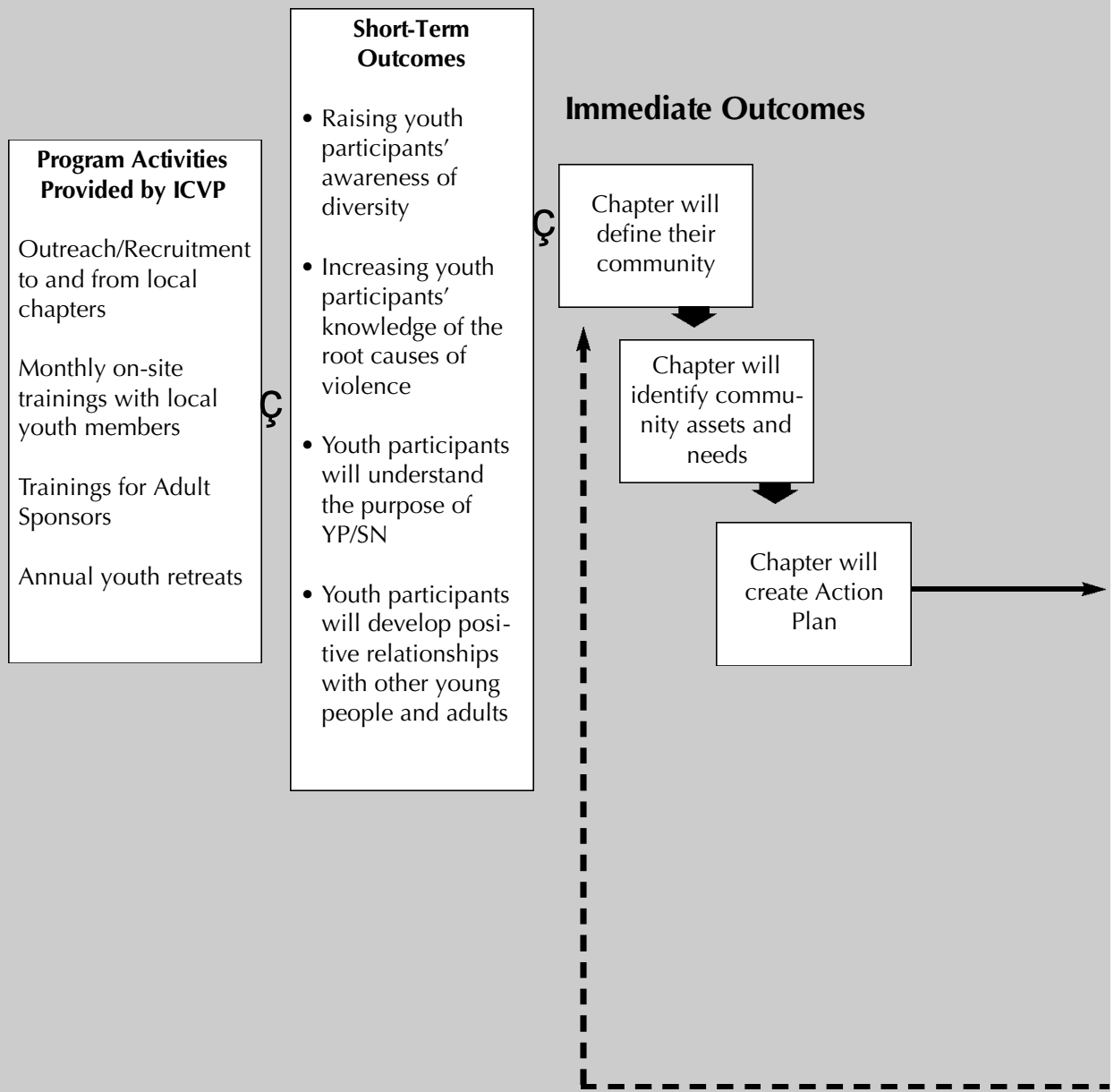
1. *Define the community.* In this first critical step, youth decide whom their subsequent actions will target.
2. *Conduct an assessment of the community's assets and needs related to violence.* This assessment allows youth to better understand how issues of violence are experienced locally. As part of the assessment, youth members are expected to approach parents, friends, neighbors, and representatives from community organizations, thus developing collaborative relationships with community members and agencies as well as collecting information.

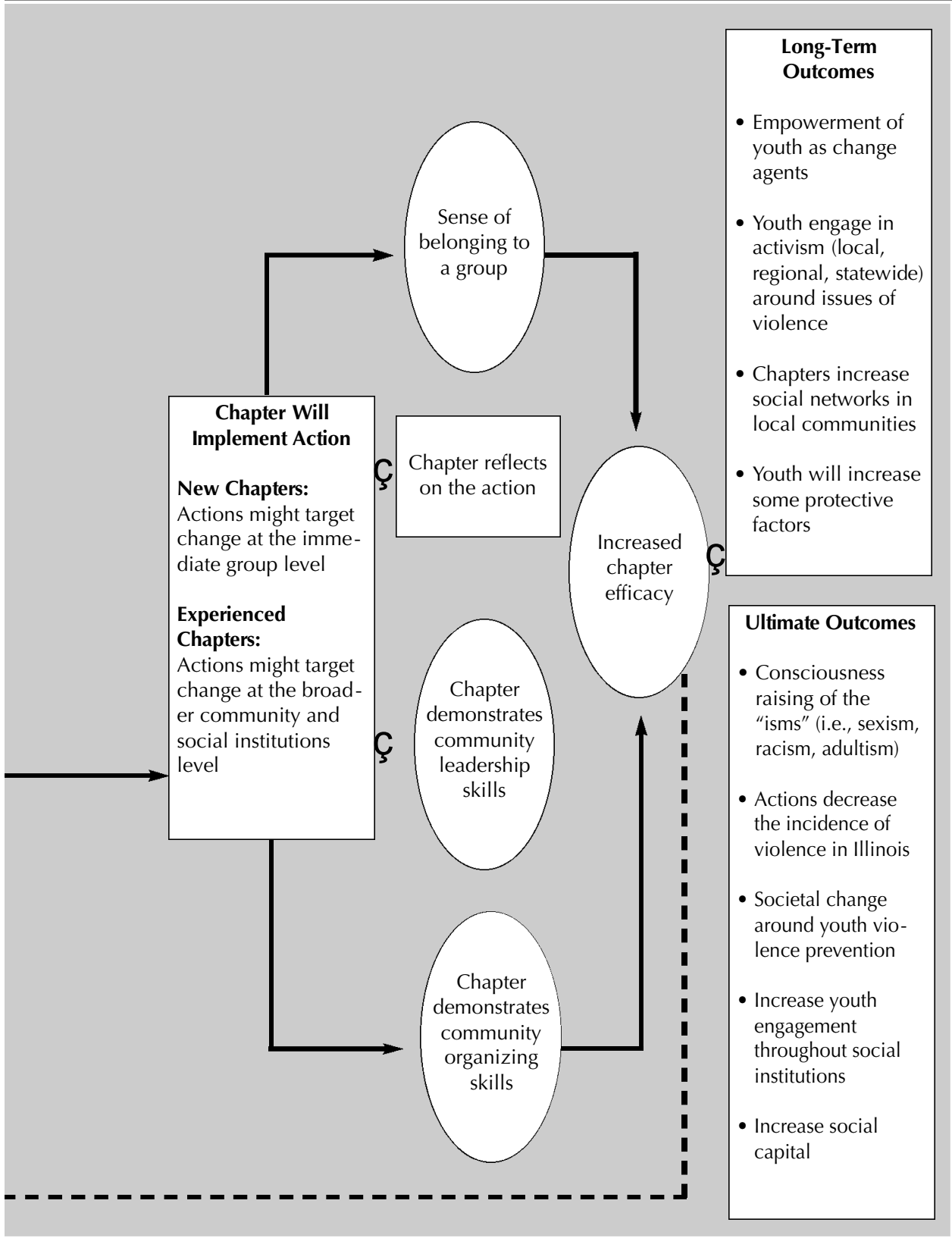
[The YouthPeace and SisterNet programs] give a voice to the large group of young people who are ordinarily excluded or marginalized—including persons of color, immigrants, and impoverished communities.
3. *Plan an action.* Based on what youth learn from their assessment in Step 2, the chapter collaborates with other community groups to implement a local approach dedicated to preventing violence. Chapters have targeted issues such as racism, gang violence, teen dating violence, child abuse/child safety, and the effects of poverty on communities. Actions include presenting plays on relevant themes, peer-mentoring, and establishing “PeaceZones” to reclaim neighborhood areas from drug dealers. Each chapter conducts at least one action per year.
4. *Reflect on activism experience and think about future actions.* In this final phase, adult sponsors help youth members to reflect on and apply what they have learned from their actions. For instance, in their first year, a new chapter might implement an action focusing solely on their own group members. Through reflective learning about this initial activism experience, youth are encouraged to individually and collectively address the deeper, underlying causes of violence, such as discrimination or poverty, through implementing new actions.

### **The Role of Evaluation in Program Development**

A participatory evaluation helps to ensure that stakeholders are invested in the evaluation process from the beginning and that the evaluation process and results will help to refine the program model. Such an approach was developed for YouthPeace and SisterNet. Program staff, organization administrators, youth chapter members, and adult sponsors were included

**FIGURE 1. YOUTHPEACE/SISTERNET PROGRAM LOGIC MODEL**





in the process. This approach provided an opportunity for program staff to utilize the evaluation process and results, including raising relevant questions that helped members identify how to engage young people in community mobilization and activism. The section “Lessons Learned Thus Far” highlights these questions and explores how the YouthPeace/SisterNet staff modified the program in response.

### **Evaluation Methodology**

The YouthPeace/SisterNet program evaluation was designed as a three-year project. The first year (2002–2003) was an in-depth process evaluation, which examined the program’s capacity-building model of chapter development and whether the program was meeting intended benchmarks. The second year (2003–2004) focused on assessing the short-term and intermediate program outcomes, to determine to what degree chapters were moving through each of the program phases to complete an action (see Figure 1). The final year (2004–2005) is focused on assessing the intermediate and long-term program outcomes. Since each evaluation phase had a different purpose, slightly different methodologies were implemented, as described below.

**Year One.** During the first year, the evaluation staff worked closely with the YouthPeace/SisterNet staff to develop a logic model and identify key program benchmarks. Once we established benchmarks, we developed a program-monitoring database and conducted case studies with four sample chapters. The case study component included observing chapter meetings and actions as well as interviewing both adult sponsors and youth members.

**Year Two.** Monitoring program benchmarks continued in the second evaluation year. We conducted interviews with a youth representative and the adult sponsor from each chapter at the beginning and end of the program year to better understand how their chapter moved through each of the program phases. To assess changes in knowledge (the short-term program outcomes), we administered a pre/post survey with youth participants. We also incorporated the program’s youth empowerment philosophy into the evaluation by establishing a youth evaluation team. Five YouthPeace/SisterNet members collaborated to design and implement a program evaluation that complemented the work of adult evaluators.

**Year Three.** This year, we continue to monitor program benchmarks while building the capacity of program staff to maintain the database for program and evaluation purposes. In addition, we are reviewing program documents

collected by the program staff and observing chapter meetings. At a sample of chapters, youth remain involved by evaluating the impact of their actions on their identified communities.

### Lessons Learned Thus Far

Based on our participatory evaluation process to date, the program staff and evaluators have learned several key lessons about developing youth activists in violence prevention. This section outlines these lessons and highlights questions raised by members.

**Creating social change.** Addressing complex social issues in communities, such as preventing violence, is inherently challenging—even for adult human service professionals. Thus, for youth engaging in violence prevention efforts, we should acknowledge that this is a complex and long-term learning process. It is unrealistic to expect that young people will fully comprehend how to create social change in a short-term, annual timeframe. It may take several community action experiences to raise youth’s consciousness and deepen their understanding of social change.

The program model has evolved to address this long-term reality. During the first year of the evaluation, the benchmarks revealed that several chapters had not progressed through the four-step program process (defining their community; assessing needs and resources; implementing an action; reflecting on the action) in the course of a year. For instance, some chapters tried to implement such a highly complex, time-consuming assessment in the first phase that it prevented them from moving to the action-planning phase. Other chapters skipped the assessment phase altogether, and went right into planning actions without deeper consideration of their community’s needs. To address this challenge, program staff is encouraged to:

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- Discuss the program model with youth members, so they more fully understand how each program phase contributes to the next step of the process.

- Develop guidelines to help youth members move through the program phases in a feasible and timely way, striking a balance between structure and flexibility. For example, we redesigned the community assessment phase with more structured tasks to guide youth through the steps to completion. While youth still determine what community issues to focus on in the assessment (e.g., teen dating violence, family relationships, gang violence), they now can follow a feasible method to gather pertinent information.
- Increase the amount of training opportunities for both youth members and adult sponsors. Sufficient time needs to be allotted for youth and adults to learn about the complex topics of creating social change and preventing violence and to build relevant skills. In addition to onsite monthly trainings for chapters, the program staff provides more in-depth quarterly trainings for adult sponsors.
- View the YouthPeace/SisterNet program as a multi-year model. As noted, young people typically need multiple activism experiences to make the connection between what their chapter is doing and how it relates to social change. One youth commented:

*Since we've received training, we're more like patient with it and we actually look at what we're doing . . . when we first started out, we were really talking about stuff we wanted to do or stuff we thought the community would like. But now, we take our time and go through all the processes, see surveys, have a little meeting, and see what the community really wants, and see what they really need and stuff.*

**How can we make activism developmentally appropriate for youth?** During the first year of evaluation, we recognized that activism and community development concepts were not always clear to young people, nor did youth readily see such concepts as relevant to their chapter. For example, evaluators asked youth what the term “activism” meant to them. Many interpreted it as an extra-curricular activity such as sports, hobbies, or clubs. In interviews, youth also struggled to define the word “community.” Whereas adults might describe community as a geographic area, some youth defined it as their immediate friends or local chapter. With these different interpretations, we realized that the concept of community has to be an explicit program component to help youth understand their target audience.

To address this challenge, we restructured the community assessment component. Now, before chapters work on community assessments, individual youth must create a personal asset map, which is a helpful lead-in activity to the more abstract community-level assessment. In addition, to build a sense of collective and individual efficacy, the program staff and adult sponsors encourage a “small wins” approach: Newer chapters select smaller-scale, manageable projects that motivate them to pursue future activism efforts.

**How do we prepare youth to address challenges in community mobilization?** Several chapters planned actions that met with opposition. In one example, a chapter in a school setting wanted to assess teachers’ and students’ violence prevention needs and use the results to facilitate discussions between students and administration about realistic changes. However, the school administration did not support these efforts and would not allow students to survey the teachers—a frustrating setback for the youth.

In another example, a chapter was working with their sponsoring organization to open a community teen center. At first, the city gave the group positive feedback about purchasing land in the neighborhood. Several months later, however, the chapter learned that the city had promised the land to another organization. Despite an initial sense of defeat, the adult sponsors and youth developed an advocacy campaign. The young people created more than 2,000 postcards that community members mailed to city officials. Eventually, the chapter was able to purchase the land and continues to work on a plan for opening a teen center.

**How do we get young people to move from doing service projects to understanding community change?** While successfully planning and implementing a community service project may provide valuable experiential learning, reflection is needed to allow participants to see how that project connects to social change at a deeper level. The evaluation results showed that youth members did not always see their action in a broader context of violence prevention. Some actions were either indirectly or not specifically designed to prevent violence. For example, one action involved visiting a women’s domestic violence shelter. When asked what they did at the center, a youth representative said,

*We listened to a 911 tape that a little girl made. We helped fold some clothes up, then we talked with some of the women and we watched a movie. The movie was about the women who were getting abused and the men who were abusing them.*

Although this was a valuable learning experience, the chapter did not take this information to the next level of using it to prevent violence in their community.

During the first two years of the evaluation, program staff struggled to balance two factors—ensuring that the program was “youth-driven” while ensuring that actions were focused on community violence prevention and not just fun service projects. Consequently, ICVP staff empowered a panel of experienced YouthPeace/SisterNet members, known as PeaceLeaders, to help chapters connect their actions to community change. They developed pre-action criteria to guide the actions in the right direction, and required chapters to submit a pre-action evaluation form to the PeaceLeader panel for review. This process of receiving feedback from their peers about their planned action helped chapter members keep the focus on preventing violence. Program staff also redesigned the reflection piece of the curriculum, allowing structured time for chapter members to evaluate the success of their action by asking, for instance, what they might have done differently or whether their action addressed the assessed community need.

**What role do adult allies have in Community Youth Development?** Even as young people become more directly involved in community mobilization, adult allies play a critical role. Since the YouthPeace/SisterNet program relies on local adult sponsors to guide and support youth, the sponsor’s skills and style impacts that chapter’s ability to navigate the program model. The case studies conducted in our first year revealed that adult sponsors have a range of approaches to working with young people—we called it a “youth-driven continuum.” At one extreme of the continuum were sponsors who provided minimal support and guidance and let the young people be in charge. At the other extreme were sponsors whose approach was adult-rather than youth-driven: They developed meeting agendas, facilitated the meetings, and developed the action idea. We found that chapters with adult sponsors at either extreme of this continuum had a difficult time navigating the program, while those in which adult sponsors were around the middle were most successful in completing their actions and having a positive experience.

To better define the adult sponsor role, the program was modified in two ways. First, we provided more direct training for adult sponsors in core content areas such as “violence prevention 101” and “youth as activists.” Second, adult sponsors received training on how to *support* rather than *direct* young people through the phases of the program model, with program staff modeling appropriate ways to achieve this during on-site trainings.

## Conclusion

The YouthPeace/SisterNet program evaluation provided us with an opportunity to look critically at what it means to develop youth activists in the violence prevention movement. The participatory evaluation approach allowed the process to be used for program improvements. Over the course of the evaluation, the data raised several key questions, as articulated in the proceeding section.

The participatory evaluation process was invaluable in helping program staff and participants reflect upon these challenges as we work toward towards guiding youth to become activists in community violence prevention.

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*The YouthPeace and SisterNet program evaluation was made possible through major funding support from the Michael Reese Health Trust and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.*

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