

Youth Engagement Makes a Difference in Addressing Community Violence

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Concerns about the increasing involvement of many adolescents in high-risk behaviors have prompted a search for strategies and approaches that can guide youth away from unhealthy and unsafe practices and engage them in becoming productive members of society. This search has revealed many uncertainties in understanding how teenagers negotiate critical transitions, such as from school to work and from child to parent, the formation of self-identity, and the selection of life options. In situations in which communities must struggle with the problems of poverty, crime, drugs and other negative influences, some youth are able to connect with social and economic networks that can help them become successful and productive adults. Others never gain access to or turn away from such networks.

—Youth Development and Neighborhood Influences: Challenges & Opportunities¹

Violent injury and homicide are critical and rising public health issues affecting not only the physical and emotional health of our nation's young people but also the quality of life in communities across the country. It is important to identify and implement effective strategies to save lives, prevent injuries, and improve community life.

Our approach to community and youth development views youth as resources and agents of change, rather than as a collection of problems in

need of prevention. This issue of *CYD Journal* builds on current efforts that mobilize and engage youth, as well as other promising initiatives in the community violence prevention and Community Youth Development fields.

We define youth participation as a process of engaging young people in developing knowledge and transferring it to others. This process includes efforts by young people to organize their own research and community mobilization projects, by adults to involve youth in evaluating institutions and agencies, and by youth and adults in intergenerational partnerships to prevent all types of violence by and against youth. These initiatives are increasing in communities nationwide, but remain relatively undeveloped as a field of practice or subject of study; hence, more knowledge will contribute to their scope and quality.

As we planned this issue of the Journal, we generated several questions to guide our search for knowledge and practice to shape this emerging field:

- Why is youth engagement in community youth violence prevention important, and for whom? What are the benefits to young people and to the communities of which they are part? How do we know this?
- What are some specific examples of youth participation in participatory research and evaluation regarding community violence prevention? What are the lessons learned and future directions? How do we know this?
- What are the particular perspectives of youth development, violence prevention, community mobilization, and participatory research including evaluation, and what is the common vision among them?
- What specific strategies will strengthen youth participation in community youth violence prevention research and practice?

The youth violence phenomenon, as Becker notes (see the article on Project BRAVE, page 39), contains many social determinants, including “relationships among individuals and between groups (e.g., adults and youth) in the community; the physical environment in the community (e.g., abandoned housing and vacant lots, street lighting); and policy at the local, state, and national level (e.g., curfew laws, education policy, and gun control).” Further, it is critical to mention that the juvenile crime rate increases three-fold between the hours of 3:00 and 6:00 p.m. on school days.

Other experts believe that decreased funding for anti-gang initiatives,

due to recent declines in the overall crime rate, provided the right conditions for gang activity to rise again. Other factors contributing to the recent spike in gang violence include more “at-risk” youth, gang members from the early 1990s being released from prison back into communities, reduced police resources for preventing neighborhood crime, and many young people not being able to find jobs.

The reality is that a new generation of teenagers appears every five years. Consequently, when communities stop paying attention to young people, crime rebounds. Perhaps more importantly, for so many young people, the human context is about the need to survive. As Lateefah Simon puts it (see the interview on page 29):

There’s an increase in handguns and larger arms—semi-automatics—but young people are not necessarily killing because of drugs and money. There is desperation, anxiety among a lot of the young men of color who find themselves still on the streets. Hopelessness thrusts you towards centering your life about “my respect, my respect,” because you have very little of it . . . When that respect is challenged, you don’t fight. If you try to fight somebody the old-fashioned way they may kill you. They may have a handgun. It’s not just “I’m gonna take this young man out because he disrespected me.” You have to be the aggressor. Get them before they can get you . . .

At the same time, law enforcement and public policy makers are taking action to prevent youth violence. Examples follow:

- The FBI has made combating street gangs its top criminal priority.
- Efforts have been made to increase the severity of the consequences for initial gang activity and actions taken to silence witnesses.
- Massachusetts is considering legislation to create a witness protection program and establish partnerships between law enforcement agencies and anti-violence organizations.
- Boston is trying to prevent youth violence by closing the city parks at 11 p.m., expanding youth programs, and using a camera surveillance system to monitor activity in the city’s “hot spots.”
- In Durham, NC, the gang resistance unit increased its number of officers from seven to twenty in the past year, and in late 2004

Durham introduced an anti-gun effort aimed at thwarting gang violence.

- Northern Virginia, which includes many of the suburbs surrounding the Washington, D.C. area, created the Northern Virginia Regional Task Force in June 2004 to address youth violence.
- In his 2005 State of the Union Address, President Bush unveiled a three-year, \$150 million program to fund faith-based organizations to offer mentoring services to gang members.

These efforts range from reactive band-aids to more sustained interventions—but none deliberately focus on the need to engage young people and address developmental issues and fundamental community conditions. Clearly, there is much cause for concern and a need for effective strategies to address community violence. Our approach explores youth engagement and science-based youth development strategies to address violence.

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In working on this issue of CYD Journal we delved deeper into what is and is not known about youth participation in community violence prevention. We have been impressed by the contributors' insights and their work—in difficult, often life-threatening situations. It is worth noting that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have provided exceptional leadership in advancing the art of practice in this area by linking research centers with community efforts across the country through their Academic Centers on Excellence in Youth Violence Prevention. We salute this commitment to creating safe, just, and prosperous communities and valuing young people as agents of change.

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1. Chalk, R., Phillips, Deborah A., and the National Research Council (eds.) (1996). *Youth Development & Neighborhood Influences: Challenges & Opportunities*, National Academies Press.