

## **Facts for Teens: Community Violence Prevention Initiatives**

### **Introduction**

Communities across the United States are beginning to mobilize to confront the problem of youth violence. Some are developing new violence prevention programs and finding ways to bring funding into their communities. Others are learning to better coordinate existing efforts and use their resources more effectively. Teens often play an important leadership role in these efforts. They bring energy, initiative, commitment, and a unique perspective that too often has been ignored in the past.

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### **What are the key ingredients for a successful community violence prevention effort?**

**Successful violence prevention efforts try to involve as diverse a group of community members as possible in planning and implementation.**<sup>1-3</sup>

All members of a community can contribute to the health and well-being of children. When community members from all walks of life work together and pool their energy, resources, and expertise, prevention efforts can be much more effective.

In some communities, prevention planning groups include: teens, parents, business leaders, community groups, the media, city and school officials, police, probation and parole officers, clergy, and social service, health care, and mental health providers.

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**Successful prevention efforts are designed and implemented by people with a deep understanding of the community, its history, and its strengths and resources.**<sup>4</sup>

Although youth violence is a serious problem throughout the United States, the face of youth violence can vary considerably across communities. Gang violence may be a serious problem in one area; in another, bullying or dating violence may be of greater concern.

To be effective, youth violence prevention efforts must be tailored to a given community and its needs. Programs designed for inner-city youth may not be effective for teens in a farm community. No "one-size-fits-all" program will work everywhere.

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**Successful prevention efforts take into consideration the community's readiness for change.**<sup>5</sup>

Violence prevention programs are most effective when all members of the community embrace and support the effort. It is important to assess community leaders' and residents' beliefs and attitudes about the problem of violence. In some places, residents may not acknowledge that youth violence is a problem. In others, they may recognize that it is a serious problem, but may not believe that prevention efforts will make a difference, or they may believe in and support only one particular

*Stop youth violence before it starts*

approach to address the problem of youth violence. For example, community members are less likely to support efforts to increase after-school programs if they believe that harsher sentencing for juvenile offenders is the key to reducing youth violence in their area. Hence, it is essential that planners collect and review data from the community to determine how to raise awareness, educate community members, strengthen prevention strategies, and focus efforts in a way that will gain community support.

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**Effective prevention efforts seek to identify and reduce the risk factors for violence in the lives of children and teens, and put protective factors in place.<sup>6-9</sup>**

Researchers have identified important risk factors at the community, family, school, and individual/peer levels that increase risk for young people to become involved in violence and related problem behaviors:

- At the **community level**, factors that can increase the likelihood that children and teens will become involved in violence and related problem behaviors include the availability of drugs, alcohol, and firearms; extreme poverty; neighborhood disintegration (e.g., vacant lots, graffiti, crime, drug-dealing, and boarded-up houses); and resident views that are tolerant of misbehavior and violence.
- At the **family level**, factors that can increase the risk that children and teens will become involved in violence include lack of parental supervision or monitoring of children's activities; severe, harsh, or inconsistent punishment; ongoing conflict between family members; and parental involvement in violent behavior.
- At the **school level**, factors that can increase the likelihood that a child or youth will become involved in violent behavior include early aggressive behavior in school; lack of attachment to school; and school failure.
- At the **individual/peer level**, the factors include friendships with other youth who engage in violent or antisocial behavior, and individual factors such as tendencies toward sensation seeking, impulsiveness, anxiety, and even sadness or depressed mood.<sup>10</sup>

When children and teens are exposed to such risk factors, they are more likely to become involved in violent behavior. Normally, the more risk factors present, the greater the likelihood a teen will become involved in violence.

However, if several protective factors are also in place, teens that are exposed to a number of risk factors are less likely to become involved in violence. The goals of a community violence prevention program should be to reduce risk factors for violence in the community and increase protective factors.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most effective ways to protect young people from risk exposure is to encourage them to develop strong, supportive relationships with positive, prosocial adult role models. These adults might include family members, teachers, coaches, and youth leaders. Another effective way is to encourage families, schools, and communities to develop and communicate clear standards and expectations for behavior.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, the risk and protective factors that need to be addressed will vary with the community. In one community, school failure may be a risk factor putting many teens at risk; while in another, a lack of community norms against some types of violence (e.g., bullying or dating violence) may be a more serious concern. At an early stage in the process of developing a violence prevention plan, individuals need to collect data to identify and assess risk factors in their communities and determine which are the greatest priorities. They also must inventory their resources (protective factors) and use the information gathered to guide their efforts.

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**Communities are encouraged to select and implement programs and strategies that have been demonstrated to be effective, or at least promising, in previous evaluations.<sup>13</sup>**

Once a community has identified the risk factors to address, it needs to develop strategies to reduce the factors. In recent years, researchers have carefully evaluated the effectiveness of a number of violence prevention programs and strategies that have been implemented around the country.

Unfortunately, many widely used approaches to youth violence have been shown to be ineffective—a few even appear to harm teens that participate. Before developing or supporting a program to reduce youth violence, it is important to determine whether there is evidence for its effectiveness.

The good news is that a number of programs have proven to be effective at preventing violence, even with teens that are already violent or in trouble with the law.

The Web sites listed at the end of this document can provide information about the effectiveness of specific programs and strategies. Some of the types of programs that might be included in community-based violence prevention efforts include:

- **Positive youth development programs, including after-school programs that give a child or teen the opportunity to learn new skills** and build relationships with caring adults, and mentoring programs that pair a teen with a supportive, nonjudgmental role model.<sup>14-16</sup>
- **Family strengthening and support services**, including programs that provide home visiting for new parents, help parents improve their parenting skills, or offer support groups.<sup>17-19</sup>
- **Skills training programs** in schools, daycare centers, and the community. These try to give children and youth the social, emotional, and problem-solving skills they need to deal with difficult social situations.<sup>20-22</sup>
- **School-based programs**, including those to: reduce the risk of academic failure, truancy, and dropping out; increase academic motivation; and reduce disciplinary problems and drug and alcohol abuse.<sup>23-24</sup>
- **Counseling and intervention services for youth involved in violence, and for their families.** Individual counseling generally has been found to be ineffective with delinquent youth. Some programs that provide family therapy have proven effective, however. Intensive treatment programs that look at the many influences on the youth, including the family, school, peer, and neighborhood environments, also have been shown to have a positive impact.<sup>25-26</sup>

## What You Can Do

Teens around the country are playing an important role in community-based violence prevention efforts. Some teens join existing efforts or volunteer with organizations in their schools and communities. Others play an important role in the violence prevention process in their communities, serving on local planning boards. Some youth see a gap in their community and launch their own programs and violence prevention efforts.

### How can you get started?

Check out the [Department of Justice's Justice for Kids and Youth Web site](http://www.usdoj.gov/kidspage/getinvolved/index.htm) ([www.usdoj.gov/kidspage/getinvolved/index.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/kidspage/getinvolved/index.htm)) to learn what other teens are doing around the nation and how you can get involved in violence prevention activities in your community.

If you are interested in launching your own efforts, read the practical and easy-to-follow [Youth in Action publications](http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/pubs/youthinactions.html) (<http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/pubs/youthinactions.html>) developed by teens for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP).

Some of these brief bulletins provide information about different types of delinquency and violence prevention programs that youth have implemented around the country. Others provide important guidance on how to plan and start programs, make presentations, work with the news media, and evaluate the effectiveness of your efforts.

Finally, visit the [OJJDP's National Youth Network Web site](http://www.usdoj.gov/kidspage/getinvolved) ([www.usdoj.gov/kidspage/getinvolved](http://www.usdoj.gov/kidspage/getinvolved)), which is made up of youth (ages 12-20) representing local nonprofit, community-based, school, or juvenile-justice organizations. The network provides young people with a unique opportunity to share perspectives with other teens on issues related to violence and delinquency prevention and juvenile justice.

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## Helpful Links

### [Afterschool.gov](http://www.afterschool.gov)

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After-school programs are a key component of many communities' violence prevention initiatives. This Web site connects users to federal resources that support children and teens during out-of-school hours. The site includes a section specifically for teens, [America's Teens.Gov](http://www.afterschool.gov/kidsnteens2.html) ([www.afterschool.gov/kidsnteens2.html](http://www.afterschool.gov/kidsnteens2.html)).

### [Best Practices of Youth Violence Prevention: A Sourcebook for Community Action](http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/bestpractices.htm)

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Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Do you want to learn to implement effective violence prevention programs? This sourcebook looks at the effectiveness of specific violence prevention practices in four key areas: parents and families, home visiting, social and conflict resolution skills, and mentoring. The sourcebook offers advice for communities wishing to implement these strategies on topics such as building support in the community, selecting and training staff, recruiting participants, implementing the program, and monitoring the program's progress. It also offers a comprehensive directory of resources for more information about programs that have used these practices.

### **Combating Violence and Delinquency: The National Juvenile Justice Action Plan**

[www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org/action/index.htm](http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org/action/index.htm)

Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

The action plan describes how communities can generate solutions, and how individuals and groups can prevent or reduce violence in their own block, public housing unit, or neighborhood. Cooperative partnerships among justice, health, child welfare, education, and social service systems can lay the foundation for measurable successes. Working together, individuals, groups, and communities can make real and sustained changes. The action plan also provides important information about federal training, technical assistance, grants, research, evaluation, and other resources that support these efforts.

### **Guide for Implementing the Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders**

[www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles/guide.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles/guide.pdf)

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)

This guide provides detailed information about risk and protective factors for youth violence, and describes effective and promising prevention programs to address these risk and protective factors, along with guidance in implementing a prevention strategy.

### **Mobilizing Communities to Prevent Juvenile Crime**

[www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/165928.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/165928.pdf)

Juvenile Justice Bulletin, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)

This bulletin provides promising prevention approaches; summarizes the risk factors challenging youth; features effective prevention programs supported by OJJDP; and describes planning, training, and technical assistance opportunities available through OJJDP's Community Prevention grants.

### **School and Community Interventions To Prevent Serious and Violent Offending**

[www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/jjbul9910-1/contents.html](http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/jjbul9910-1/contents.html)

Juvenile Justice Bulletin, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)

The bulletin concludes that comprehensive school- and community-based interventions hold the greatest potential for preventing youth violence. According to the bulletin, programs involving a juvenile's family, school, and community are most effective in minimizing factors that contribute to serious, violent juvenile offending and maximizing those that prevent delinquency. A number of such interventions are described.

### **Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General**

[www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence/default.htm](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence/default.htm)

Department of Health and Human Services

This 2001 report summarizes the newest research on youth violence, discussing the extent of the problem and its causes. The report also describes the types of programs that have been shown to be effective in preventing youth violence.

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