



Brief report on a systematic review of youth violence prevention through media campaigns: Does the limited yield of strong evidence imply methodological challenges or absence of effect?



Tali Cassidy ^{a,*}, Brett Bowman ^b, Chloe McGrath ^c, Richard Matzopoulos ^{a,d}

^a School of Public Health and Family Medicine, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

^b School of Human and Community Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

^c Gender Health and Justice Research Unit, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

^d Burden of Disease Research Unit, Medical Research Council, Cape Town, South Africa

A B S T R A C T

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Background: We present a brief report on a systematic review which identified, assessed and synthesized the existing evidence of the effectiveness of media campaigns in reducing youth violence.

Methods: Search strategies made use of terms for youth, violence and a range of terms relating to the intervention. An array of academic databases and websites were searched.

Results: Although media campaigns to reduce violence are widespread, only six studies met the inclusion criteria. There is little strong evidence to support a direct link between media campaigns and a reduction in youth violence. Several studies measure proxies for violence such as empathy or opinions related to violence, but the link between these measures and violence perpetration is unclear. Nonetheless, some evidence suggests that a targeted and context-specific campaign, especially when combined with other measures, can reduce violence. However, such campaigns are less cost-effective to replicate over large populations than generalised campaigns.

Conclusions: It is unclear whether the paucity of evidence represents a null effect or methodological challenges with evaluating media campaigns. Future studies need to be carefully planned to accommodate for methodological difficulties as well as to identify the specific elements of campaigns that work, especially in lower and middle income countries.

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Introduction

In 2013 approximately 405,000 people were killed by interpersonal violence and violence was estimated to be responsible for over 21.4 million disability adjusted life years lost, with youth disproportionately affected ([Haagsma et al., 2015](#)).

* Corresponding author. Level 4, Falmouth Building, University of Cape Town Health Sciences Campus, Anzio Road, Observatory, 7700, South Africa.
Fax: +27 21 406 6163.

E-mail address: talicassidy@gmail.com (T. Cassidy).

Interventions for youth violence are diverse, targeting both the distal and proximal risks factors. Limbos et al. (Limbos et al., 2007) found that effectiveness is more often demonstrated in tertiary-level prevention such as behavioural interventions with specific populations of youth offenders. This could be ascribed in part to such programmes being more amenable to systematic and robust evaluation, potentially creating a bias in the literature. This translates into greater political investments in tertiary or proximal interventions because decision makers are able to show immediate results using solid measures of change (Dahlberg & Butchart, 2005). The effectiveness of interventions such as media campaigns, that try to shift societal norms and individual attitudes are difficult to demonstrate (Randolph & Viswanath, 2004), and have therefore been secured very limited attention by policy-makers.

Nonetheless, media campaigns have been used extensively as public health interventions (Wakefield, Loken, & Hornik, 2010). Systematic reviews have suggested that media campaigns have some positive effect on HIV testing (Vidanapathirana, Abramson, Forbes, & Fairley, 2005), health service utilization (Grilli, Ramsay, & Minozzi, 2002), smoking cessation in adults (Bala, Strzeszynski, Topor-Madry, & Cahill, 2013) and smoking prevention among young people (Brinn, Carson, Esterman, Chang, & Smith, 2010). Other successful targets of campaigns include seatbelts, oral health, alcohol abuse and, especially when coupled with other programmes, antismoking campaigns directed at non-addicted smokers (Noar, 2006; Randolph & Viswanath, 2004). Less conclusive evidence was found for campaigns targeting the prevention of substance abuse in young people (Ferri, Allara, Bo, Gasparrini, & Faggiano, 2013) and the reduction of mental health-related stigma (Clement et al., 2013).

Mass media campaigns as violence prevention interventions

Several mass media campaigns in the United States and Britain that explicitly aimed to prevent various forms of violence were implemented in the early 1990s. Key examples attempted in the US include the *Stop the violence campaign* driven by Jive Records in 1989, the *Walk away from violence* campaign organised by Wayne County in 1991 and the *Family violence: Breaking the chains* campaign rolled out through television in Boston in 1992 (DeJong, 1994). These programmes highlighted the need for changing social norms through shifting individual attitudes. The first major British mass media campaign explicitly aimed at changing social norms about violence was the Zero Tolerance Campaign against the sexual abuse of girls and women, which made use of billboards, posters and newspaper advertisements for its prevention messaging. In South Africa the annual *Sixteen Days of Activism Against Violence Against Women and Children* campaign is reminiscent of the campaigns co-ordinated by women's groups in Nicaragua during the 1990s (Ellsberg, Liljestrand, & Winkvist, 1997) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women's regional campaigns against gender violence (Mehrotra, Burde, Banerjee, & Pardiwala, 2000). The effects of such campaigns in actually reducing violence are unclear, as demonstrated by a recent review of universal campaigns to prevent the physical abuse of children (Poole, Seal, & Taylor, 2014). Their review identified several promising campaigns but noted that evaluations frequently failed to measure change in key outcomes. As a response to the relatively weak evidence, we conducted a systematic review to assess the strength of the prevention effect for media campaigns on youth violence prevention.

Methods

Search strategy and inclusion criteria

Youths were defined as being between 10 and 29 years old (Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002). Violence was defined as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (Flannery, Vazsonyi, & Waldman, 2007). Mass media campaigns were defined, following previous studies and reviews, as information or messages aimed at large numbers of people, through media such as audio and audio-visual recordings or broadcasts; print; mobile devices; and the Internet (Bala et al., 2013). Any media campaigns addressing violence or direct causes of violence such as aggression or anger management were considered. A full description of methods, including detailed search strategy and inclusion criteria can be found in [Appendix 1](#).

Results

Only six studies have shown any strong evidence for the effectiveness of media campaign on violence. Key features of the six included studies are detailed in [Table 1](#). Evidence for media intervention campaigns affecting violent behaviour is weak, and evidence demonstrating that media can affect knowledge and attitudes to behaviour is unconvincing. Although most studies demonstrate some significant results, these need to be individually considered in light of design issues and how outcomes relate to actual measurements of violence. More detail on results can also be found in the full write-up in [Appendix 1](#).

Discussion

The results are limited to school or college settings in the United States and the Netherlands. There is little indication that any substantial proportion of low-income participants or areas were sampled in these studies and only the [Bosworth](#),

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