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Youth violence prevention: Are we there yet?

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Abstract

This article summarizes the current state of efforts to develop programs to reduce youth violence. It begins with an overview of research related to the causes and consequences of youth violence, and describes the variety of prevention strategies that have been developed to reduce youth violence within the context of a grid model that classifies prevention strategies according to four dimensions: (a) the level of social system they attempt to change, (b) the extent to which they focus on individuals at different levels of risk, (c) the developmental stage of the participants, and (d) the goals of the program. The grid model provides a context for describing three programs that have been systematically evaluated and found to have some degree of effectiveness. The article concludes with a discussion of lessons learned and areas in need of further study.

Keywords: Youth violence; Prevention strategies; Grid model

Contents

Growing concern about youth violence has led to increased efforts to understand its causes and consequences, and to identify effective methods to reduce its occurrence. These efforts have been described in recent reports by federal agencies (e.g., U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2001), books (e.g., Elliot, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998; Flannery & Huff, 1999; Gottfredson, 2001; Loeber & Farrington, 1998), and special issues of journals (e.g., Pettit & Dodge, 2003; Powell & Hawkins, 1996; Weist & Cooley-Quille, 2001). The present article

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summarizes the current state of these efforts. It begins with an overview of research related to the causes of youth violence. This is followed by a description of the variety of different approaches that have been taken to prevent youth violence. Several promising programs are then highlighted. We conclude with a discussion of some of the key lessons learned and remaining questions.

1. Nature and causes of youth violence

A clear understanding of the nature and causes of youth violence is critical to the development of effective programs for its prevention (Elliott & Tolan, 1999; Farrell, Meyer, Kung, & Sullivan, 2001; Flannery & Williams, 1999). Several recent reports have synthesized the volume of work that has been conducted in this area and identified consistent patterns of findings across studies. Examples include the U.S. Surgeon General's report on youth violence (USDHHS, 2001), a meta-analysis by Lipsey and Derzon (1998), a review of predictors of youth violence by Hawkins et al. (1998), and a review of developmental pathways to youth violence by Dahlberg & Potter (2001). This section provides an overview of this work and discusses some of the key findings of these reviews, with a particular focus on issues relevant to the development of effective prevention programs.

Although the term *violence* has been defined in multiple ways, most research definitions involve the actual or implied use of physical force to cause harm. For example, Elliot et al. (1998, p. 13) defined violence as "the threat or use of physical force with the intention of causing physical injury, damage, or intimidation of another person". This differentiates violence from other forms of delinquent behavior and from less severe forms of aggression. It also covers a variety of behaviors ranging from shoving and throwing objects to more serious acts such as homicide and assault. This broad definition includes multiple forms of violence that may require different approaches to prevention. Tolan and Guerra (1994) differentiated among four types of youth violence that differ in their causes, the segment of the population most at risk, and the types of intervention strategies most likely to be effective. They identified situational violence as a form of violence that is primarily influenced by sociological factors such as poverty, alcohol and drug use, community norms, and easy access to handguns. In contrast, relationship or interpersonal violence arises from disputes between individuals with an ongoing relationship, and is the product of a combination of developmental, psychological, and environmental factors. Predatory violence is perpetrated for gain or as a part of an existing pattern of criminal or antisocial behavior, and is determined by psychological factors that develop early in life. Finally, psychopathological violence tends to be more extreme and repetitive than other types of violence and is attributed to biological factors such as neural system deficits or severe psychological trauma. Fagan and Wilkinson (1998) proposed a different approach to classifying forms of violence that focuses on their goals and functions, and described four examples including childhood aggression, gang violence, robbery, and dating violence. These distinctions underscore the need for developers of prevention programs to understand the nature of what they are attempting to prevent.

Researchers have identified a variety of risk factors associated with youth violence. For example, the U.S. Surgeon General's report (USDHHS, 2001) examined risk factors related to the development of violent behavior among 15-to-18 year olds. These risk factors encompassed multiple domains of influence including those related to the individual (e.g., psychological conditions, involvement in other problem behaviors, anti-social attitudes and beliefs), the family (e.g., low socioeconomic status, antisocial parents, poor parent–child relations), school (e.g., poor attitude and performance), peer group (e.g., weak social ties, antisocial peers), and community (neighborhood crime, neighborhood disorganization). Reviews of the literature on risk factors have concluded that there are multiple pathways associated with violence. Risk factors do not operate in isolation in that the more risk factors a child is exposed to, the greater the likelihood that he or she will become violent. Nonetheless no single risk factor, pathway, or combination of factors can predict with complete accuracy who will become violent. Risk factors are not solely within the individual, but within situations as well. This is reflected in social–ecological theories of youth violence that view violence as a joint product of the individual and situational context (e.g., Elliott et al., 1998).

Although researchers have attempted to identify protective factors associated with violent behavior, this effort has not progressed as far as research on risk factors (USDHHS, 2001). One factor that has impeded progress has been a fundamental disagreement on the nature of protective factors. In some studies, protective factors have simply been viewed as the opposite of risk factors. Such a definition leads to a fairly arbitrary distinction between what constitutes a risk factor and what constitutes a protective factor (Sullivan & Farrell, 2002). For example, poor parental monitoring could be viewed as a risk factor, or high parental monitoring viewed as a protective factor. There is growing support for an alternative approach to defining protective factors that focuses on their ability to moderate or reduce the