

## What girls need: recommendations for preventing violence among urban girls in the US

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### Abstract

The last decade saw increases in arrests of girls for violent behavior and a corresponding concern that girls' involvement in violence was increasing in the USA. However, there are few empirical studies of the dynamics of violence by girls, leaving providers of violence prevention programs and policy-makers without evidence on which to base gender-appropriate prevention strategies. To address this gap, qualitative interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of 61 urban girls aged 11–17. Findings were compared with quantitative interviews from the prospective cohort of 961 girls from whom these respondents were drawn, from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods. Mixed-method techniques were employed. Qualitative data were analyzed for girls' recommendations for preventing involvement in violence. Data from the larger cohort were used to test these recommendations quantitatively. Due to study design, in the qualitative sample, 36 girls (64%) were involved in recent violence, most often with or against other girls. Pro-social behavior was common among both violent and nonviolent girls. In the overall cohort sample, 24.9% of girls reported violent perpetration and 97% reported pro-social activities. Eight themes regarding staying safe and preventing violence emerged from the qualitative interviews: girls stayed safe by staying home, avoiding dangerous people, staying busy with after-school activities, remaining calm when confronted, using escorts, and fighting back if attacked. Girls' protective influences included: empathic parental involvement, positive relationships with peers and older youth, and involvement in safe and constructive activities. These findings emphasize that safety in community, school, and family settings is critical for girls in avoiding violence and other risky behaviors. Violence prevention programs should focus on enhancing girls' relationships with mothers, older girls, and friends their age.

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## Background

### *Youth violence among girls in the US*

Youth violence is a serious public health issue in the United States, affecting families, peers, and communities, in addition to victims. According to the Surgeon General's report on youth violence, studies consistently indicate that 15–30% of girls in the US have committed a serious violent offense by age 17 (Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). In 2001, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey*, conducted biennially with 9–12 grade students, found that 23.9% of girls reported having been in a physical fight in the past year (Grunbaum et al., 2002). Patterns of girls' violence perpetration differ from boys'. Girls who are violent are more likely to assault a parent, sibling, or other girl; more likely to have been physically or sexually assaulted by family members; and more likely to have the fight at home or school (Margolin & Gordis, 2000; Mollen, Fein, Localio, & Durbin, 2004; Odgers & Moretti, 2002).

### *Preventing violence among girls*

Diverse approaches have been proposed to prevent violent behavior by teenagers, (Mytton, DiGiuseppi, Gough, Taylor, & Logan, 2002) including programs with both primary and secondary prevention aims, and school- and community-sponsored initiatives (Farrington, 2002). Based on the hypothesis that antecedents of violence may begin in infancy, many researchers stress the importance of couching the prevention of teenage violence in a life course perspective (Dahlberg & Potter, 2001; Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill, 1999). Prevention programs have been implemented as early as the prenatal period, using home nurse visitations (Olds et al., 1998).

A recent review of randomized controlled trials of violence prevention programs concluded that, since most youth at risk for violence are boys, the majority of prevention programs are aimed only at boys or at mixed-gender groups (Mytton et al., 2002). This extensive literature review found no discussion of program components geared to risk factors specific to girls. Since most of the theories influencing the development of youth intervention programs are based on studies of boys' violence, they may be missing important factors that are specific to girls' violence.

Although qualitative research methods are effective in exploring new areas of research and can deepen our understanding of human behavior, only two studies were identified that utilized qualitative data to develop violence prevention programs. In the first, Casella (2002) conducted qualitative interviews with students, admin-

istrators, security personnel, teachers, social workers, and dropout prevention staff affiliated with a Pennsylvania high school and incorporated their suggestions into a violence prevention program. Similarly, Hausman, Siddons, and Becker (2000) created a youth firearm prevention program in Philadelphia by involving neighborhood residents (youths and adults), social service providers, and criminal justice and healthcare workers. Neither effort had an explicit focus on girls.

The objectives of the current study were to elicit the girls' perceptions of their own aggression, as well as their suggestions on ways to prevent violence by other girls in their communities. Given the lack of research on violence by girls, it is critical to understand the dynamics of girls' violence and learn from their recommendations for effective prevention.

## Methods

The Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN) provided the data for this study of girls, their immediate environments, and their neighborhoods. The PHDCN is a multi-disciplinary, longitudinal study of the development of criminal behavior, pro-social behavior, and mental health among youth and their primary caregivers, as well as their neighborhoods over time. Detailed methods have been published elsewhere (Earls & Buka, 1997). Neighborhood data for PHDCN participants were obtained in a community design that included: (1) a community survey of 8782 randomly selected Chicago residents; (2) a systematic social observation study of 80 neighborhoods by videotape and live observation; and (3) US Census data. Individual and family-level data were collected during a longitudinal cohort study completed between 1994 and 2001, in which 6226 children overall and a caregiver were interviewed in their homes. Qualitative data were collected in 2001.

The base sample for this study consisted of 961 girls ages 6–12 at PHDCN baseline interviews, who completed a follow-up interview in 2000–2001. The sample is diverse in race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family structure, and neighborhood characteristics (Table 1). A maximum of three waves of in-home quantitative interviews were conducted at approximately 24-month intervals with girls and one primary caregiver, usually the mother.

Subsequent to their Wave 3 interview, 61 girls were recruited for a study called "Important Events in Girls' Lives: A Qualitative Study." Subjects in the base sample who endorsed certain items were eligible for this criterion sample (Sandelowski, 2000). When recruitment began, research assistants conducting Wave 3 interviews were given a checklist of selection criteria. If a subject qualified, she was invited to participate in a qualitative

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