Youth are in the cross-fire of gun violence, and the highest rate in the nation is in Flint, Michigan. This article highlights six innovative strategies that prepare youth to solve problems at home and in their communities in peaceful ways.
Peace does not mean an absence of conflicts; differences will always be there. Peace means solving these differences through peaceful means; through dialogue, education, knowledge, and through humane ways.

~Dalai Lama XIV

Youth violence in the United States has decreased over the last decade, yet it persists at high levels in communities ravaged by unemployment, population loss, and blighted neighborhoods. As economic hard times continue in such areas, police and fire protection are reduced, home foreclosures multiply, and social programs are cut back. When residents perceive a rise in crime, they change their behavior by avoiding dangerous locations or moving out of neighborhoods, further reducing informal social controls and organization (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Wilson, 1996).

Flint, Michigan, once one of the country’s most prosperous cities, suffers from all of these ills following the departure of the auto industry and the prolonged economic downturn. It has the unfortunate distinction of having the highest rate of violent crime in the nation (FBI, 2013). Despite these challenges, Flint’s citizens are determined to restore the city as a center of education, culture, and commerce. Achieving this vision depends upon creating safe and healthy communities where children and families can thrive. The Michigan Youth Violence Prevention Center (MI-YVPC) is striving to realize this goal in a defined area of the city through a multi-level strategy involving youth, families, neighborhood groups, law enforcement, child-serving organizations, and health care providers. The project is based at the University of Michigan School of Public Health and funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Public Health Approach to Violence Prevention

Many people do not associate violence prevention with public health; however, violence is increasingly recognized as sharing features of other types of epidemics, with identifiable risk and protective factors and predictable patterns (Prothrow-Stith, 1995). Violent deaths and injuries have enormous societal costs—to our health care system, to our legal system, to our communities, and most of all to the families left behind. Economists have a term for one of these costs: “years of productive lives lost.” This concept quantifies the consequences of violence that extend for decades in the form of disability from injuries, lives that are not lived, and the gaps they leave in the fabric of families and neighborhoods. The public health approach to violence prevention focuses on how to change the environment and individual attitudes and behaviors to reduce the likelihood of deaths and injuries from violence and promote positive youth development.

The Michigan Youth Violence Prevention Center (MI-YVPC) employs a comprehensive prevention approach to reducing youth violence based on public health principles. Social ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and social (dis)organization (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 1997) theories provide the conceptual underpinnings that guide our Center. Social ecological theory focuses on environmental influences centered on individual development. Social (dis)organization theory focuses on the influences of the neighborhood context on social interactions. Applied to the issue of youth violence prevention, these theories suggest that approaches to youth development connecting adolescents and young adults to positive social role models and community programs that create opportunities for youth to develop confidence, interact with role models, and address community needs are expected to promote healthy youth outcomes.
engagement activities are critical for any comprehensive effort, and that attention to the creation of safe and inviting neighborhood contexts is also a vital element for such efforts. We apply both theories while utilizing an empowerment approach that focuses on strengthening positive characteristics among youth across developmental periods (Reischl et al., 2011; Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, Stewart, Morrel-Samuels, Franzen, & Reischl, 2011).

An empowerment approach emphasizes the role of contextual factors and the role they can play in helping to create the settings and opportunities for positive youth development (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005). Programs that create opportunities for youth to develop confidence, interact with role models, and address community needs are expected to promote healthy youth outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, decision making) and to reduce negative outcomes such as violent behavior. An empowerment approach also includes engaging youth in the process of solving the violence problem in their communities. Researchers have suggested that organizational engagement provides youth with affirmative social attachments, companionship and support, self-confidence, and perceived control (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). In keeping with this perspective, MI-YVPC focuses its programs on promoting individual assets and community resources, thereby enhancing opportunities for youth to find paths in their developmental trajectory that do not involve violent behaviors.

**MI-YVPC Programs**

MI-YVPC provides experiences for youth that prepare them to solve problems at home and in their communities in peaceful ways. We work to improve the safety of neighborhoods by eliminating blight and neglect and creating clean, attractive, and well-lighted spaces for people to interact. The Center collaborates with law enforcement to identify locations and patterns of violence in order to improve the effectiveness of police intervention. Finally, we assist community groups to strengthen connections among neighbors and address conditions that lead to conflict. The Center supports six programs to strengthen family and peer relationships, increase community cohesion and participation, and improve physical conditions of neighborhoods. Each of these programs involves partnerships with local organizations:

**Clean and Green/Adopt a Lot**

The MI-YVPC partners with the Genesee County Land Bank to provide support to improve vacant properties within the intervention area. The Genesee County Land Bank aims to restore value to the community by acquiring, developing, and selling vacant and abandoned properties. Research has demonstrated that violence is less likely to occur when vacant properties are well maintained (Branas et al., 2011). Clean and Green and Adopt a Lot are two of the Land Bank’s programs that engage neighborhood residents and community organizations in the beautification and maintenance of vacant parcels. Each participating group or organization maintains at least 25 parcels and, in exchange, receives a stipend to support their work. The Land Bank controls over 500 properties in the MI-YVPC intervention neighborhood. Several have been transformed into community gardens or recreation spaces with fencing and raised garden beds.

**Community Mobilization**

In partnership with the Michigan State University School of Criminal Justice, the Community Mobilization program provides support to the Flint Police Department and neighborhood groups. There are three main areas of focus: distributing crime data analyses; convening community discussions; and providing technical support to neighborhood organizations and law enforcement. Neighborhood beautification activities have included tire recycling, graffiti removal, and tree planting. Involvement in these improvement efforts led to the formation of a new block club in the MI-YVPC area.
Fathers and Sons

The MI-YVPC Fathers and Sons Program is a community-based intervention designed to prevent violence and other negative health behaviors among youth ages ten to fourteen by strengthening relationships between African American fathers and their sons. The program aims to enhance fathers’ parenting knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors; father-son communication and connectedness; cultural awareness; sons’ refusal skills; and fathers’ use of community resources. Fathers and sons come together twice a week for six weeks to participate in activities that support positive relationships and provide mutual support (Caldwell, Rafferty, Reischl, De Loney, & Brooks, 2010).

Project Sync

Based at the Hurley Medical Center Emergency Department, Project Sync is a brief intervention program that provides one-on-one counseling to youth ages fourteen to twenty when they present to the emergency department for any reason (Walton et al., 2010). Using principles of motivational interviewing, Project Sync counselors engage with the participants in a non-confrontational and non-judgmental manner to assist them in recognizing risky behaviors and increase their motivation to change. The one-on-one counseling approach emphasizes individual choice and responsibility, supports self-efficacy, and differentiates between current behavior and future goals/values.

Targeted Outreach Mentoring

In partnership with the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Flint, the MI-YVPC provides a mentoring and case management program for youth ages ten to seventeen residing in the MI-YVPC intervention area. Mentors from the Boys and Girls Club staff connect youth to community resources and opportunities for exploring and reaching their individual goals. Youth meet with their mentors regularly to check in and discuss their progress. The mentors establish relationships with the families of their mentees and monitor their school involvement. The mentors serve as role-models, coaches, and allies in helping mentees achieve their self-identified goals.

Youth Empowerment Solutions (YES)

YES is a curriculum-based program to promote positive development and prevent risk behaviors by empowering youth to change their physical and social environments. Over the course of
One-quarter of teenagers and young adults surveyed in the emergency room of a hospital in Flint, Michigan, said they had a firearm at home or carried it in public. The No. 1 reason they had a gun was to protect themselves or feel safer, the youths said.

“There’s definitely a feeling among people that they need some kind of self-protection,” says Susan Morrel-Samuels, managing director of the Michigan Youth Violence Prevention Center at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. “Often that means a firearm.”

Girls and young women accounted for almost one-third of the gun owners, a statistic that Morrel-Samuels says doesn’t surprise her. “There’s been a lot of emphasis among manufacturers of firearms to market to young women,” she says. “It’s become increasingly acceptable for women to carry guns as a means of self-protection.”

Her organization is working with children and teenagers in Flint, with a focus on preventing the kind of violence that resulted in a 13-year-old boy being charged with murders of his brother and the brother’s girlfriend there last month. In the same week, a 13-year-old girl there was charged with attempting to kill her older sister.

The fact that the youths in this study thought “it was OK to hurt someone if they hurt you,” and the fact that they were more likely to drink or use drugs than people who didn’t own guns makes it more likely that someone would be injured or killed with a firearm, the study authors say.

Our hypothesis is that the intervention community will have fewer police incidents (especially those involving youth) and fewer cases of youth violent injury presenting in the emergency department than in the comparison area. We expect to find the greatest effects for violent involving youth, but in the overall rates as well. We also expect that residents in the intervention area will report less fear of crime and more social capital, community activism, and satisfaction than their counterparts in the comparison community. We also expect that property parcels will have greater radiating effects on neighboring properties and more properties that are both more highly developed and maintained over time than in the comparison area.

We have developed an online resource for community members, youth services practitioners, and researchers interested in youth violence prevention in Michigan and around the U.S. (http://yvpc.sph.umich.edu/). The site includes updates of Center activities, blog posts on relevant issues, a crime map library, and youth violence prevention resources. We invite you to visit the site and share your thoughts and comment on our blogs.

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References


