

YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Training and Technical Assistance Center



The Public Health Approach to Youth Violence Prevention

A Tip Sheet for Local Health Departments

Local health departments (LHDs) are uniquely positioned to provide leadership and support in preventing youth violence. They can play a critical role by increasing the capacity of local communities to address the problem effectively; supporting and building partnerships across sectors in a community; collecting high-quality data about the problem; implementing comprehensive evidence-based prevention strategies; and raising public awareness of the issue.ⁱ

This tip sheet describes how LHDs can lead youth violence prevention (YVP) efforts in their communities by implementing a comprehensive public health approach.

The Public Health Approach

The public health approach focuses on preventing health problems and extending better care and safety to entire populations. This approach is based on research and practice, and it encourages practitioners from diverse disciplines—health, education, social services, justice, and policy—to work together to find solutions to complex issues.ⁱⁱ

A public health approach to YVP is proactive, meaning it can prevent violence before it occurs.ⁱⁱⁱ Because no single factor explains why some youth behave violently toward others or why youth violence is more common in some communities, this approach tells us that improving the health and safety of youth requires addressing the many individual, relationship, community, and societal factors that contribute to the problem.^{iv}

Examples of Risk and Protective Factors for Youth Violence^v

Level	Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exposure to violence Substance abuse (alcohol and other drugs) Access to a firearm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly developed social skills Positive social orientation High academic achievement
Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involvement in gangs Harsh or inconsistent discipline Parental substance abuse and criminality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong, prosocial peer relationships Positive, nurturing relationships with adults Stable connections to school and school personnel
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High levels of unemployment Residential instability and crowded housing Density of alcohol-related businesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low alcohol and other drug accessibility Social networks and support systems within the community Physical environments that promote positive interactions
Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social norms about the acceptability of youth violence Poverty and social disadvantage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policies that promote health, education, and economic opportunities



The Role of Local Health Departments

LHDs play a key role in implementing a public health approach to YVP. They can provide leadership, infrastructure, and capacity to implement evidence-based strategies. This section provides you with a systematic, goal-oriented process for implementing a public health approach to YVP based on the best available evidence.^{iii,v}

There are four strategic steps in the public health approach (discussed below).^v Remember, because this approach emphasizes collective action, you should work collaboratively with your YVP coalition during each step, drawing on members' diverse experiences and knowledge.

1. Define the problem. Look to local data—police reports, hospital records, school surveys—to determine *who* in your community is experiencing youth violence, *what types* of violence are being perpetrated, *how many* people are affected, and *when* and *where* incidents are occurring. For instance, you may notice that a specific neighborhood in your community has high rates of youth gang-related violence.

The information and data you compile will provide a clear picture of what is going on in your community and help you decide which approaches are most appropriate later in this process.

Also refer to national data available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other government agencies to learn more about youth violence on a broad

scale and to understand where your rates fall in comparison to national averages.

2. Identify risk and protective factors.

Rates and types of violence vary across communities and different populations of youth. Similarly, some people or neighborhoods have high levels of risk factors and low levels of protective factors. In addition, people who are exposed to or victims of violence are at higher risk for experiencing or perpetrating violent acts in the future.

In this step, you will determine *why* certain individuals or neighborhoods experience higher rates of youth violence than others.

Ask partners and key leaders to share their knowledge of and data about youth violence and associated risk and protective factors in your community. Consult the literature to help make the connection between *what* is happening (Step 1 in the public health approach) and *why* (the presence of risk factors and absence of protective factors). YVP efforts are most effective when they reduce risk factors and increase protective factors. For instance, to discover *why* gang-related violence is a problem in a particular neighborhood, review the research literature for risk and protective factors related to youth gang violence.

On the basis of what your partners and a review of the literature tell you, you can set goals for reducing the *youth violence risk factors and enhancing the protective factors specific to your community*.

Definition of Youth Violence

Youth violence is when young people aged 10–24 years intentionally use physical force or power to threaten or harm others.

Importance of Goals

It is crucial to develop goals *before* selecting strategies and activities. You need to know where you are going before you decide how to get there.

3. Select, implement, and evaluate

strategies. Analyze all the information you have gathered and decide which evidence-based programs, practices, and policies (EBPs) will help you reach your YVP goals. Compare these with EBPs that your partners are already implementing to see how you can complement their efforts and ensure that you are not duplicating programs.

Ideally you will identify a range of EBPs to address risk and protective factors at various levels.^{iv,v} In keeping with our example, to prevent gang violence you would select EBPs that have proven to be successful in comparable communities with similar risk factors in populations similar to those on which you will focus.

Implementing EBPs that have been evaluated and found to be successful in communities similar to yours can increase your chances of success.

Once you have selected EBPs, pilot test them in your community. Evaluate all activities to determine what is working and whether any aspect of the EBPs should be

adapted to better meet the needs of your population or community. (Try to adapt EBPs in consultation with EBP developers to ensure that you are not changing core components and affecting their chances of success.)

4. Ensure broader adoption. After you determine what works in your community, promote broader adoption of the EBPs. Enlist community partners and your YVP coalition to support widespread implementation.

Continue to evaluate the effectiveness of your EBPs. Think of partners who can help you monitor your activities on an ongoing basis.

The public health approach is iterative. Revisit steps as needed.

To track changes in indicators over time, regularly reexamine the data you used to define the problem initially. You may decide to target additional risk and protective factors as part of an evolving, comprehensive approach to YVP. You also may need to add EBPs or adapt existing ones on the basis of your evaluation findings and as needs in your community change.

Resources

Preventing Violence: Roles for Public Health Agencies

Developed by a roundtable of 24 experts and stakeholders in April 2010, this publication identifies the important roles that national, state, and local public health agencies can play in preventing violence, and it provides guidance for the public health community to prevent violence before it occurs.

How to Use What You Learn From Steps 1 and 2 to Set Goals: An Example

To prevent gang-associated youth violence, community goals could include:

- Strengthen healthy family functioning.
- Increase educational opportunities for youth.
- Increase employment training and opportunities.
- Change social norms and attitudes to decrease the acceptability of violence and gang involvement among youth, families, and other community members.

Notice that each of these goals focuses on increasing a protective factor (e.g., supportive family relationships) or decreasing a risk factor (e.g., social norms that make violence acceptable).

Goals help you select appropriate strategies and establish specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound objectives.

Consider broad prevention strategies that help everyone regardless of their level of risk

A comprehensive approach to youth violence prevention includes:

- *Universal interventions* that positively affect all youth, their relationships, and the environments in which they grow and learn
- *Selected interventions* that focus on those at heightened risk of violence due to risk factors
- *Indicated interventions* that focus on those who have already demonstrated violent behavior

http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.safestates.org/resource/resmgr/imported/Report_Violence%20Prevention_Roles%20For%20Public%20Health%20Agencies.pdf

Preventing Youth Violence: Opportunities for Action

Research and experience in communities show it is possible to prevent youth violence. Everyone has an important role in stopping youth violence before it starts. This publication provides information and action steps.

<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/pdf/opportunities-for-action.pdf>

Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development

This registry of family, school, and community-based programs is designed to promote the health and well-being of children and teens. Blueprints programs target all levels of need—from broad prevention programs that promote positive behaviors while decreasing negative behaviors, to highly-targeted programs for children at risk and troubled teens that get them back on track.

<http://www.blueprintsprograms.com/about.php>

Connecting the Dots: An Overview of the Links Among Multiple Forms of Violence

The CDC and Prevention Institute developed “Connecting the Dots” to clarify

the relationships among different forms of violence. This publication builds a case for practitioners to coordinate their efforts, increase their impact, and work toward preventing multiple forms of violence.

http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/connecting_the_dots-a.pdf

Youth.gov Evidence and Innovation

This section of the youth.gov website presents resources to help build knowledge, tools, and supports for implementing youth-focused, evidence-based interventions and initiatives to improve the quality and outcomes of interventions funded by federal investments.

<http://youth.gov/evidence-innovation>

The Striving to Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere (STRYVE) Initiative

STRYVE is a national initiative, led by the CDC, to prevent youth violence before it starts among young people aged 10–24 using a public health approach. STRYVE online is an ever-evolving resource that community members, organizations, and leaders can use to develop, implement, and evaluate YVP approaches. It is a place to learn from subject experts and find information and resources.

<https://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/apps/stryve/home.html>

ⁱ National Association of County & City Health Officials. (Nov. 2014). *Prevention of youth violence* [Statement of Policy]. Retrieved from <http://www.naccho.org/advocacy/positions/upload/14-08-Youth-Violence-Prevention.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Krug, E. G., Dahlberg, L. L., Mercy, J. A., Zwi, A. B., & Lozano, R. (2002). *World report on violence and health*. Retrieved from http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2002/9241545615_eng.pdf?ua=1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *The STRYVE online training*. Available at <http://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/apps/stryve/training.html>.

^{iv} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *The social-ecological model: A framework for violence prevention*. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/sem_framework-a.pdf

^v David-Ferdon, C., & Simon, T. R. (2014). *Preventing youth violence: Opportunities for action*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

