

# Violence, Youth

MICHAEL B. GREENE

A great deal of progress has been made during the past 20 years in our understanding of the etiology and dynamics of youth violence and in creating effective youth violence prevention and intervention programs. (See CHILDREN, PEACE AND AGGRESSION IN.) In this article, violence will be defined, methods of measuring youth violence will be described, key epidemiological data on youth violence in the United States will be highlighted, and four conceptual models that have influenced and shaped efforts to create effective violence prevention and intervention programs will be discussed.

Violence is commonly defined as a learned behavior in which one or more persons intentionally threaten or attempt to physically harm and/or inflict physical harm upon another person or persons (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). That violence is a learned behavior suggests that it can be prevented (not learned in the first place) and reduced in terms of frequency and severity (unlearned). Aggression is a less serious form of violence in which the intended physical harm is minor (e.g., pushing or shoving) or the intended or inflicted harm is psychological in nature (e.g., shaming or ostracizing).

In addition to interpersonal violence, peace researchers and others have argued that structural forms of violence and structural conditions that increase the likelihood of interpersonal violence must be examined and addressed if we are ever to substantially reduce the levels and severity of interpersonal violence (Christie, Wagner, & Winter, 2001). These include but are not limited to: economic deprivations and discrimination,

cultural and religious dictates (e.g., genital mutilation and the demonization of homosexuality), military policies (the recruitment of child soldiers, and the use of rape in conflict areas), and institutional forms of oppression. These structural factors have been largely ignored by youth violence prevention program models, perhaps because they are perceived as relatively immutable.

Two primary measures of youth violence perpetration have been utilized: self-report surveys and arrest rates. Self-report surveys, such as the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, yield significantly higher rates of youth violence than arrest rates, primarily because a large proportion of youth perpetrators are not arrested. Violence, of course, involves victims as well as perpetrators. Non-lethal victimization has been measured through victimization surveys and through hospital records. All of these measures, however, are prone to a variety of errors. On the other hand, homicide rates, because they are unambiguously measured, are generally considered the most accurate index of serious youth violence.

Multiple sources of data suggest that the vast bulk of youth violence occurs among peers. Indeed, rates of violence perpetration and victimization among youth correspond closely. Moreover, despite the differences in the way youth violence is measured or whether youth violence is measured by perpetration or victimization rates, nearly all sources of data reveal that youth violence escalated precipitously during the late 1980s, began to decline in the mid-1990s, and continued to decline through the first five years of the twenty-first century (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). The most compelling explanation for the escalation of youth violence in the late 1980s suggests that it is attributable to two primary factors: turf

wars over shifting crack cocaine markets in major urban areas and increased and easy access to firearms (Blumstein & Wallman, 2000).

The major epidemiological patterns of youth violence are as follows: males perpetrate serious violence at rates ten times greater than females; African American young males are disproportionately murdered (in some years up to 11 times the rate of White males); the juvenile and criminal justice system disproportionately incarcerates African American and Latino youth; youth homicide density is highly concentrated in a small number of urban centers; guns are responsible for the vast majority of youth homicides (at significantly higher rates than for the adult population); and the ratio of youth homicides committed in communities versus in schools is approximately 100 to 1 (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

Two primary conceptual models have shaped efforts to establish evidence-based youth violence prevention programs and two additional conceptual models have shown promise in shaping what is perhaps the next generation of violence prevention program models. The two primary conceptual models are the risk and protective factors approach, established within the field of public health, and the social ecological approach, spearheaded in the field of developmental psychology (McCord, Widom, & Crowell, 2001). The two promising conceptual models are the positive youth development approach established and promoted by youth advocates and progressive social critics (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine (NRC), 2002) and the human rights approach derived from international human rights declarations, conventions, and treaties and promoted by peace activists.

The risk and protective factor approach is undoubtedly the most influential in the prevention sciences field (Krug et al., 2002). A risk factor for violence is a characteristic

of an individual and/or the life spheres in which the individual lives that increases the likelihood that an individual will engage in violent behavior. Well-documented risk factors that increase the likelihood that a young person will engage in violent behavior include: early exposure to lead, impulsivity, involvement in gangs, exposure to violence, inadequate parental monitoring, early and chronic engagement in aggressive behavior, school truancy and school dropout, high teen unemployment rates, and concentrated neighborhood poverty (McCord et al., 2001). Each increase in the number of risk factors has been found to have a multiplicative, rather than additive, effect on the likelihood of the target behavior.

Protective factors are characteristics of an individual and/or the life spheres in which the individual lives that, keeping risk factors constant, lessen the likelihood that an individual will engage in violent behavior. While research on protective factors is less robust than research on risk factors, well-documented protective factors include: attachment to school, family cohesion and support, and exposure and attachment to positive role models.

Perhaps the best illustration of the use of the risk and protective factors research influencing the development of violence prevention programs derives from the robust body of research suggesting that youth violence is profoundly influenced by family risk and protective factors. Not surprisingly then, two of the most effective intervention programs developed to reduce levels of violent behavior among youth – multisystemic therapy and functional family therapy – focus primarily, though not exclusively, on improving family dynamics, including enhanced parental monitoring, explicit agreed-upon rules and predictable positive and negative sanctions, and improved communication between parents and their sons and daughters (McCord et al., 2001). Rather

than being office based, both programs provide family therapy in the young person's home or in neighborhood settings. Moreover, this home-based approach enables the therapists to better see and understand the context within which family dynamics take place.

The social ecological model has served to complement the risk and protective factor approach (NRC, 2002). Behavior is conceptualized as being reciprocally influenced by a series of concentric circles starting from the self, moving outward to family, peer, school, neighborhood, and societal influences. The value of this approach is that it focuses attention beyond individual or even familial therapeutic interventions to consider the full context of a young person's social ecology. In addition, the social ecological model provides a conceptual foundation for focusing on structural factors, such as economic conditions, neighborhood factors (e.g., social control and cohesion), and discriminatory policies and attitudes.

Furthermore, the more spheres of an individual's life that are fraught with violence-related risk factors, the greater likelihood that individual will engage in violent behavior. This suggests, in turn, that the more severe and frequent the violence perpetrated by a young person, the more spheres of life must be addressed in reversing these patterns. Indeed, evaluations of violence prevention programs confirm that for minor forms of violence, or aggression, intervention in one sphere is typically sufficient, e.g., changes in a school's social and academic climate can significantly reduce levels of bullying. In contrast, more serious forms of conduct disorders require interventions at the individual, school, and familial spheres of influence.

The positive youth development (PYD) approach was born out of perceptions by youth workers and activists that the then-dominant approach of focusing primarily on the deficits of young people was flawed

and ineffective (NRC, 2002). The most vulnerable youth and those with a significant number of risk factors had been regularly seen through the lens of their deficits, a perception and response that reinforced their sense of failure and inadequacies. The primary shift in focus of the PYD movement was to identify and build upon a youth's strengths and interests in order to foster a positive sense of self, hope for the future, as a means to motivate youth to master basic literacy and mathematical skills, and to enable youth to understand and master fundamental social skills. For example, if a young person who is beginning to engage in aggressive behavior and whose grades are falling is interested in improvisational acting, the PYD approach would suggest engaging the young person in improvisation classes. Through such classes the young person would come to appreciate that reading and writing skills are needed to pursue acting, cooperation with others is required, and success and admiration from others can be achieved.

A second focus of the PYD movement lies in the recognition that youth thrive best when they participate in and contribute to the programs in which they are engaged. Thus, passive pedagogical methods are replaced by interactive methods, young people actively contribute to the design of the programs in which they participate, including the establishment of rules and the selection of staff, and they become involved in creating solutions to problems in their own neighborhoods (e.g., youth courts, peer mediation, and social action projects). In the most general terms, the PYD approach focuses on what is needed for all youth to become successful and competent: opportunities to pursue their interests and strengths, a sense of belonging, participation and contribution to important areas of their lives, and caring peers and adults to help them fulfill their dreams. Several promising program models, such as Communities that

Care and the Teen Outreach Program, are based on PYD principles and practices (NRC, 2002).

The fourth conceptual model, the human rights approach, is based upon the International Bill of Rights and the Convention for the Rights of Children. The importance of the human rights approach with respect to youth violence is fourfold: it provides the most widely endorsed set of standards guiding human interactions, including specific standards about safety, security, protection, and dignity; it makes visible many forms of violence, such as humiliation and coercion, that are often ignored in the violence prevention field; it requires vigilance by all in identifying human rights violations whenever and wherever they occur; and it dictates participation by all, including children and youth, in actively working to ensure that human rights are upheld, particularly in one's immediate social ecological environment (Greene, 2006).

At this point in time, human rights are recognized as fundamental to addressing some specific areas of violence prevention, for example, bullying and corporal punishment. As importantly, the human rights approach is the most powerful conceptual model for identifying and addressing macrolevel structural factors that fuel interpersonal violence, e.g., oppression, discrimination, and injustice. Peace activists, primarily through non-governmental organizations, have made progress in using international human rights documents and principles to address structural forms of violence. The human rights framework, however, has rarely been utilized in developing interpersonal violence prevention programs. Nonetheless, a rich body of educational materials has been developed under the general rubric of human rights education. These programs, such as Facing History and Ourselves, utilize human rights standards and principles to teach about civic life

and social justice. These programs, however, have not generally been evaluated with respect to violence prevention.

The four conceptual models described above overlap and complement one another. Risk and protective factors must be examined as reciprocal influences at each social ecological level. The PYD approach in a sense is an elaboration of protective factors couched as fundamental opportunities that young people require to ensure healthy development and supportive communities. The human rights framework focuses attention upon international standards to ensure that individuals and groups are provided with the rights and opportunities to thrive and to participate in the processes that ensure social justice. In the future, we are going to need to elaborate and embrace more fully the PYD and human rights frameworks to begin to address neighborhood and community risk and protective factors and also to address the larger structural factors that fuel violence among our youth.

SEE ALSO: Children, Peace and Aggression in.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- <http://www.colorado.edu/> (Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, Boulder, Colorado)
- <http://www.pdhre.org/index.html> (People's Movement for Human Rights Education)
- <http://www.who.int/violenceprevention/en/index.html> (Violence Prevention Alliance)