

# Reducing Youth Violence: The Role of Afterschool Programs Policy Brief

By: Cordero Tanner, MPH

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Youth violence is a significant public health problem that exists in the United States

All young people are at risk of being affected by violence whether they are perpetrators, victims, or witnesses

After school programs are a viable option for reducing youth violence, but barriers exist that limit access to these programs

## The Problem

Youth violence is a significant public health problem that exists in the United States. All young people are at risk of being affected by violence whether they are perpetrators, victims, or witnesses.

In 2014, about 13 youth in the United States were victims of homicide each and every day and an additional 1,642 youth needed medical care because of physical assault-related injuries<sup>1</sup>. In the same year, 1 in 4 high school students reported being in at least one physical fight and 1 in 5 students reported being bullied<sup>2</sup>. Exposure to violence puts victims at higher risk for other physical and mental health problems, including increased chances of smoking, obesity, high-risk sexual behavior, asthma, depression, academic problems, and suicide<sup>3</sup>. Contributing to the increase health care costs for all, decreasing property values, and interfering with connectedness of communities<sup>4</sup>.

Youth violence refers to harmful behaviors that start early and continues into young adulthood. Youth violence varies in form, some acts such as bullying, slapping, or punching not only cause physical harm but often times causes emotional harm as well. Other assaults with or without weapons or risky behaviors can lead to serious injury and even death. Because of the impact on the health and well-being of youth, violence is a public health issue.

Young people in every community are involved in violence, whether the community is a small town or a large urban city, a neatly groomed suburb, or an isolated rural area with miles of land separating homes.



In 2012, youth ages 10 to 24 years accounted for 40% of all arrests for violent crimes. Each year youth homicides and violence related injuries resulted in over \$17.5 billion in medical care and lost work costs. In the year 2012, over 600,000 young people were treated for physical assault injuries. This large number means that an average of 1,642 young were treated for injuries each day during that year.

As of today, youth violence costs over \$17.5 billion in medical care and out of work time<sup>1</sup>

Homicide is the 3<sup>rd</sup> leading cause of death for young people between the ages of 15 and 24<sup>1</sup>

In 2012, over 600,000 young people were treated for physical assault injuries<sup>1</sup>

Youth ages 10 to 24 years accounted for 40% of all arrests for violent crimes in the United States<sup>1</sup>



Most social-cognitive models of youth violence focus heavily on cognitive information-processing theory, emphasizing both social information-processing skills and wealth of knowledge that individuals learn over time.

#### The Source of Youth Violence

Youth violence is not a result of one factor, but it is influenced by numerous factors to that come together to influence young people's behaviors. These contributing factors are individual, relationship, community, and societal risk and protective factors. When combined, all of these factors can either increase or decrease the likelihood that youth will be exposed to violence. Risk factors are characteristics that can contribute to an individual being violent or victimized. They are complex because being exposed does not mean that the individual will be violent. Protective factors act as a buffer, to decrease the likelihood that a person will become violent or a victim of violence. Both risk and protective factors need to be closer examined to understand their potential impact in reducing youth violence<sup>5</sup>. Being that some communities and subgroups of youth are faced with more risks and fewer protective influences, disparities in youth violence occur<sup>3</sup>. The disparity is significant, because research shows that individuals with more protective factors and less risk factors are less likely to engage in violence<sup>6</sup>. The positive aspect of these factors is that many of them can be changed to reduce youth violence.

#### Social-cognitive Theory

Social-cognitive theory, introduced by psychologist Albert Bandura in 1986, theorizes that individuals

learn social skills by interacting with parents, adults, peers, and others in their environment<sup>7</sup>. Bandura argues that behavior is caused by personal, behavioral, and environmental influences<sup>7</sup>. If people are faced with situations that they are unprepared emotionally and cognitively, it can cause them to react violently. Experts believe that a child's ability to avoid violent situations and solve problems non-violently improve when their social relationships with peers and conflict-resolution skills are developed<sup>8</sup>. Teaching children how to read behavioral cues and improving their conflict-resolution skills may also improve their ability to react more positively to situations<sup>8</sup>.

Most social-cognitive models of youth violence focus heavily on cognitive information-processing theory, emphasizing both social information-processing skills and wealth of knowledge that individuals learn over time. In other words, these models are developing skills so that when youth are placed in social situations they will be able to process the following: What happened and what does this mean? What do I want? What are my options? What should I do? What are the consequences? And the actual actions they take in that situation<sup>9</sup>. Typically, the model addressed the beliefs and attitudes that support violent behavior and teach the following skills: negotiation, critical thinking, and decision making, identifying, managing, and coping with feelings, anticipating the consequences of one's aggressive behaviors, finding non-violent alternatives to conflict, and moral reasoning<sup>10</sup>.

## After school programs

After school programs that focus on social-cognitive skill development have been shown to promote positive outcomes<sup>11</sup>. The University of Chicago along with the organizations Youth Guidance and World Sport Chicago developed the program “Becoming a Man- Sports Edition” (BAM) that targeted disadvantaged male youth in the local school system. Over 2,000 at-risk male students were exposed to the program that focused on helping the youth develop social-cognitive skills<sup>11</sup>. Some of the skills developed were learning to regulate emotions, controlling responses to stressful events, processing social information, conflict resolution, goal setting, and integrity<sup>11</sup>. Students that participated in the program saw an increase in school engagement and performance, results also shows a 44% decrease in violent crimes arrests and a 36% decrease in crimes such as vandalism among the participants<sup>11</sup>.

## Recommendations

While using the social-cognitive theory to address individual and relationships factors that youth violence is important, that only addresses a portion of the issue. The upstream environmental factors have to be addressed as well, in particularly policies that shape the communities in which youth live. After the literature review, it is understood that there is a need to reduce youth violence and after school programs are a viable option. This brief identifies two recommendations **1) implementing policy interventions for increased funding for after school programs** and **2) state-ran after school systems**.

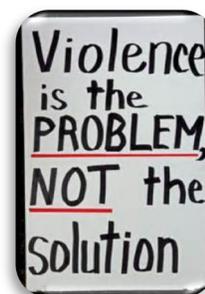
These recommendations will make after school programs more available to all youth in United States and reduce youth violence. Reducing youth violence is well worth the cost in the long run.

## Conclusion

Youth violence is a significant public health problem. The problem impacts the health not only of youth but the entire community is impacted, including adults, businesses, and the community connectedness. All young people regards of the community they live in are impacted by violence whether they are perpetrators, victims, or witnesses - this is not just a problem for disadvantaged communities.

## Further Reading

This policy brief is drawn from the full capstone, “*Reducing Youth Violence: The Role of After School Programs*,” by Cordero Tanner, which can be found at [http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/iph\\_theses/](http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/iph_theses/)



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