

**I** This chapter, which documents lessons from a collaborative project involving researchers, youth service organizations, and a private grant-making foundation, notes the challenge of changing deeply rooted attitudes and behaviors.

## Qualitative Lessons from a Community-Based Violence Prevention Project with Null Findings

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The Youth Handgun Violence Prevention Project (YHVPP) was conducted in the Denver Metropolitan Area from July 1999 to June 2002. Several factors associated with youth attitudes and behaviors regarding handguns were identified and verified empirically (Williams and Arredondo Mattson, 2002). Interventions were designed to modify these factors and to evaluate their effectiveness in changing youth knowledge of the legal consequences of carrying and using handguns, attitudes reflecting excitement and power associated with handguns, and self-reported carrying and use of these weapons.

The evaluation showed that while the YHVPP achieved its general objectives, the effectiveness of the interventions implemented was not empirically demonstrated. The evaluation found no intervention effects indicating an increase in anti-handgun attitudes, knowledge of legal

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consequences, or a decrease in handgun carrying. Regardless, this research provided important findings on youth's access to handguns. Perceived accessibility to handguns was associated with an increase in pro-handgun attitudes and handgun carrying at post-test. Moreover, perceiving handguns as safely locked was associated with a reduction in the perceived access to these potentially deadly weapons. These empirical relations suggest an important implication for policy: all things being equal, removing handguns from homes could decrease their perceived accessibility, the endorsement of the symbolic power of handguns, and the frequency of handgun carrying. If handguns are not removed from the home, locking them may reduce their perceived accessibility, which in turn might also reduce pro-handgun attitudes and handgun carrying (Williams and Arredondo Mattson, 2003).

A summary of the lessons learned requires discussing the insights of the program staff working directly with the youth, the program officer from the grant-making foundation funding the project, and the researchers. These insights provide a more qualitative window into the project and are important for two reasons. First, they assist in the interpretation of evaluation results. For example, input from the service providers weaves an understanding of why interventions did not have statistically significant effects on designated outcomes. Issues about maintaining the fidelity of the intervention design or administering the intervention can be addressed. In short, if the program results are contrary to expectations, lessons learned from the project team may help to explain why. Second, an important goal was to learn from the experience of building a team of researchers, program providers, and foundation staff working collaboratively to improve programming and research to reduce youth handgun violence. The following insights provide a more in-depth look at some of the challenges of such a collaborative effort. Even though the results of the previous analysis found little evidence of intervention effects, the following insights feature "success stories" not detected by the quantitative evaluation data but potentially useful for improving programs.

The YHVPP project unfolded in three phases. The first phase began with a six-month planning period that provided an opportunity to review the handgun violence and prevention literature. The project team collaboratively crafted the interventions that were infused in services already provided by three youth service agencies and also agreed upon the quasi-experimental evaluation to assess intervention effectiveness. This collaborative planning process included constructing the questionnaire for pre-testing and post-testing participating youth, which was informative although challenging. It was informative in that service providers drew from their experience with youth to ensure that the content and wording of items was compatible with their clientele. It was challenging in that items were dropped to abbreviate the questionnaire, making it suitable for administration in the normal work routines of these agencies and realistic in terms of the attention span

and comprehension level of the youth served. Compromises were reached that balanced the responsibilities of the agencies, the nature of their youth, and the research objectives of the evaluation project.

The second phase, during which interventions and data collection protocol were piloted, began January 1, 2000. This phase ended in summer of 2000 and resulted in modifications of all aspects of the project, from the services offered to youth to the questionnaire itself. After needed adjustments were completed, the implementation phase commenced in the fall of 2001. Once the project received full clearances for the protection of human subjects, including a certificate of confidentiality, youth assent and parental consent were obtained. Youth were then pre-tested and post-tested on a rolling basis from that point until December 31, 2002.

Participating youth were drawn from the normal operations of three youth service agencies located in the Denver Metropolitan Area. These agencies provide services primarily in the inner city. Two of the agencies provide counseling and educational, recreational, and life skills training for wellness to their clientele. Youth typically are referred to courts for weapon violations, violent behavior, or other criminal activities. However, some youth are also referred by parents or other adult guardians for similar behavioral problems. These two agencies implemented their interventions in their counseling and life skills training groups (hence, group-based interventions), usually held at their organizational sites. The third agency provides conflict resolution training for children, adolescents, and adults by teaching nonviolent methods for dealing with conflict and anger in schools, organizations, and the larger community. The training emphasizes both individual change and cultural change. For the purposes of the YHVPP, this agency worked in schools, focusing on those in the inner city likely to experience high rates of youth handgun violence.

The insights and lessons learned from this project are grouped into the following topic areas: the characteristics of the youth who seemed to be more receptive to the interventions, aspects of program implementation that seemed to help gain cooperation of the youth, and challenges and accomplishments. Four sources of information were used to capture these insights: exit focus groups, meeting notes, progress reports, and observations from the program officer and the researchers. A facilitator conducted focus groups with the collaborating agencies, including first-line staff working with youth (n = 7), program coordinators (n = 3), project directors (n = 3), the foundation program officer, and researchers (n = 2). The focus groups were tape recorded and then transcribed. The coded transcriptions served as the main source of data for the discussion that follows. The focus group data were augmented with relevant information from the project meetings held monthly during the planning and pilot phases, then bimonthly during the implementation phase. Each meeting began with project updates provided by a representative from each program, the researchers, and the foundation program officer.

Everyone was encouraged to discuss challenges and accomplishments that were puzzling or gratifying. Relevant meeting notes were coded into the four topic areas and incorporated into the lessons learned from the project. The third source of data came from the six-month progress reports. Two sections of the progress reports provided particularly useful information on the lessons learned from the project: (1) the program delivery questions referring to implementation challenges and accomplishments and (2) the narrative section documenting important experiences from the director, staff, and youth in the project. Finally, the foundation program officer and the researchers added other observations for those who might pursue such an endeavor.

### **Characteristics of Youth**

Five characteristics seemed to distinguish youth who were more cooperative during the interventions from those who were not: (1) age, (2) continued enrollment in school, (3) personal experience with the more serious consequences of handgun use, (4) a lack of alternative sanctions in school or the criminal justice system, and (5) parental involvement. With regard to age, younger rather than older program participants seemed to be more open and receptive to the interventions. This was true of high school freshman among the youth in the school-based program. Program staff suggested that freshman may be more open minded and not yet highly influenced by the older youth.

Second, for youth in the community-based programs, those still in school seemed to be more open and receptive than youth who were not. Mixing youth who were still attending school with youth who were out of school made it difficult to engage any of the youth. As one service provider described the matter, "Youth who were not in school were not comfortable with a classroom setting or even group discussions. They were often distracting to the rest of the group." Youth who were not in school were more resistant to change and had behavioral issues such as having a tendency to act out and not listen, making it difficult to have a group discussion or cover the curriculum. In contrast, youth in school were accustomed to a learning environment and were more likely to attend the handgun curriculum classes and participate in the discussions and lessons.

Youth with a lack of alternative sanctions within the schools or the juvenile justice system had exhausted all other options and needed to complete the program or they would no longer be able to return to school or would find themselves deeper into the juvenile justice system. One counselor noted, "Youth who were on their last strike and really had no other options really stepped out, meaning, they really needed this group to go well, for court, to get back in school, and to get back in the community." Some of the participating youth tended to continue on a path of resisting change until no other alternatives were available. It was evident to the counselors which youth still had options: "They had two more steps they

could take before that was it [their last strike]. . . . They did not have a sense of urgency.” Youth at the extremes, the younger ones, or those on their “last strike” seemed to be the best candidates for potential change.

Having more serious handgun experiences was another characteristic of youth who seemed to be more open and cooperative. Youth with more serious experiences with handguns were more likely to participate in the lessons. They seemed to understand some of the devastating consequences of carrying or using a handgun. Youth with direct involvement or family involvement in more serious handgun altercations were able to relate to the lessons that counselors were teaching. These youth were able to have a positive influence on others. Their leadership was often enough to turn a group of youth unwilling to listen or participate into a more productive class. In contrast, there were others in the groups who influenced more impressionable youth in a negative manner, disrupting class, and denying responsibility for their behavior.

Finally, parental involvement seemed to be associated with greater openness and cooperation of youth participating in the project. Parental support and reinforcement of the handgun curricula seemed to play an important role for these youth.

### **Intervention Implementation**

Five aspects of the implementation facilitated cooperation from youth. First, speakers who were slightly older and had serious handgun experience seemed to capture the attention of youth. Such speakers were brought in as part of the curriculum to talk about their experiences with handguns. Youth seemed to relate personally to these speakers and appeared more open to learn from them because they understood the youths’ life circumstances, their challenges, how to change, and where their lives were going if they did not. In contrast, the textbook scenarios were not as captivating. Agency staff indicated that “youth are not interested in make-believe scenarios; instead, accounts of real statistics, facts, and testimonials grabbed their attention and participation.”

Second, discussing the consequences of handgun behavior seemed to engage youth. Understanding the potentially devastating consequences for youth, parents, and victims seemed to sensitize them to the consequences of their actions. These discussions were particularly important because youth engaged in a difficult situation involving handguns tend to focus on their anger, revenge, and threats to their status rather than on the legal consequences of their actions or consequences for others. Further, the general education on the legal consequences of youth carrying and using a handgun reinforced the importance of stopping to think about the consequences. That is, many of the youth knew they should not be carrying or using a handgun, but they were unaware of the specific legal consequences that would result if they were caught.

Third, although an empirical question, service providers felt that a longer intervention period was necessary to promote the desired changes in the youth participating in this project. The curriculum for the school-based program was twenty-five weeks in length, compared to six weeks for the group-based programs. The youth in the school-based program were taught conflict resolution skills, practiced them during class, used them outside of class, and then shared their experiences with the rest of the class. The tell-show-try or modeling technique is an important intervention principle (Gendreau, Bonta, and Cullen, 1994; Sarason and Ganzer, 1980). The length of the program was intended to allow youth time to develop the skills needed for some of the social contexts they would return to every day. However, the quantitative results indicated that the school-based intervention did no better than the group-based interventions. Counselors in the group-based agencies indicated that a six-week curriculum was not long enough. They needed more time to develop rapport with the youth to have an influence on them. A longer time span in terms of weeks, but a shorter class time, was more appropriate for the youth and developing the relationship counselors needed to have with them. As one program provider mentioned, "Two-hour sessions were too long for youth with a forty-five minute attention span." The staff found they needed to "mix up the program a lot during the lessons, using some multimedia, some discussions, and some activities."

Fourth, teachers played an important role in the implementation of the programs, particularly in building trust and rapport. Implementing the curriculum in a class with no known chance of teacher turnover was important. Classes without a consistent teacher did not gain as much active participation. To the extent possible, teachers as well as program staff should commit to participating in the study for the duration of the project or should not be allowed to participate. Emergencies would, of course, be exempt. Not surprisingly, teacher buy-in was also important for program implementation. Teachers who understood the importance of the conflict resolution curriculum seemed to have fewer implementation issues than those who did not. These teachers were also very supportive of the research and were extremely helpful to the researchers or staff when administering questionnaires. Cultural competency on the part of teachers was also important. Having bilingual instructors was crucial when working with predominantly Spanish-speaking youth. Some of the inner-city schools have a large population of Mexican immigrants where English is a second language. Bilingual instructors help to reduce the cultural gap by teaching appropriate conflict resolution and anger management skills in Spanish. Teaching predominantly Spanish-speaking youth in English, again, not surprisingly, was not particularly productive. The intended effect of the interventions was undoubtedly diluted because youth were struggling with the English language while trying to learn new skills.

The fifth aspect of the interventions that helped to facilitate the implementation was the manner in which youth were incorporated into the

broader violence prevention services the agencies offered. The handgun violence curriculum reinforced the anger management and conflict resolution concepts taught as part of existing practices. Staff members were well versed in the original violence prevention components and only had the handgun component of the curriculum to learn. Further, the violence prevention interventions had well-established relationships with the referral agencies, schools, and juvenile justice agencies that helped staff build a clientele for this program.

Four aspects of the interventions did not work well. First, counselors in the group-based agencies were often in contact with the youth's probation officer to discuss various issues from compliance to the general status of the case. This contact made the youth apprehensive and increased their resistance. Second, at the beginning of the project, the younger adolescents (aged ten to fourteen) in the group-based agencies were in the same group as older adolescents (aged fifteen to seventeen) because of the small number of referrals. The wide age range was problematic for learning due to differences in levels of risk. Third, increasing the probability of attendance was important; those who did not attend classes for whatever reason clearly would not receive the intended benefits of the interventions. Providing bus tokens, food, and any other incentives for attending class was helpful, but these incentives were not used consistently throughout the project. Finally, agency staff believed the curriculum would be better received by youth if it had less of a handgun violence focus and more of a focus on general violence prevention. Some of the youth, particularly those in the school-based prevention setting, were discouraged by the handgun focus and the lack of variety of the types of violence discussed.

## Challenges and Accomplishments

Researchers, program directors, and staff faced programmatic, evaluation, and project challenges. The programmatic challenges included staff turnover and working with youth having violence as a common experience of their everyday lives. These agencies are not adequately funded, even though they are staffed by people with an intrinsic motivation to help. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that skilled staff went back to school or moved on to other positions for slightly higher pay. Much time was spent on behalf of the agencies and researchers training new staff on programmatic and research protocols. For agencies where most of the staff and the director changed within a short amount of time, there was an overwhelming amount to read, learn, and implement. New staff did the best they could to become oriented and keep progressing. Not a single person in either the school or group-based agencies who started the project—including the agency directors—finished it.

According to the service providers, high-risk youth seemed particularly resistant to change and inattentive unless they were on their “last strike.”

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They also tended to be more disruptive to the group and more likely to avoid attending classes. Many of the youth were resistant to change, either because of low motivation or because their environment was not conducive to change. Agency staff suggested that the neighborhoods in which many youth live severely impede motivation to change. Their places of residence were not conducive to nonviolent means of settling disputes or affirming themselves among peers. Agency staff brought in presenters raised in similar neighborhoods with whom youth could identify, and they provided situation-specific, adaptive alternatives to handgun carrying that enhance a positive sense of self. However, agency staff reported that the territorial and transactional limits on youth either stifled the internalization of alternative values or provided no opportunities for using learned skills so that self-affirmation and personal safety could be achieved through means other than violence and handgun carrying. Clearly, changing the neighborhood circumstances of youth is vital to the prevention of youth handgun violence, although such an effort would require considerable community resources, mobilization, and political will.

Low motivation to adopt nonviolent methods of managing day-to-day life may reflect the stage of change for many youth in this sample (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph, 2002; Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente, 1992). Some youth may not be ready to modify their attitudes and behavior because they find them appropriate or adaptive to their situation. Handgun attitudes and behaviors may be integral in achieving status and respect among peers. The identity verified from handgun carrying can be deeply rooted, far outweighing the experience of a six-, twelve-, or twenty-five-week handgun violence intervention. Assessing readiness to change and using motivational interviewing techniques that have been promising for other types of behavioral change might be effective in confronting the difficult challenge of changing youth handgun attitudes and behaviors (Miller and Rollnick, 2002).

Additionally, the two agencies using group settings for counseling or life skills training might have inadvertently become training grounds for delinquency and violence. For example, Dishion, McCord, and Poulin (1999) reported evidence suggesting “iatrogenic effects” in peer-group interventions, where high-risk youth often support one another’s criminal or delinquent behavior. The point is consistent with the counter-intuitive findings in this study concerning handgun carrying as well as the qualitative accounts of challenges faced by agency staff in managing such groups. Dishion and others (1999, p. 11) claim “youth being actively reinforced through laughter, social attention, and interest for deviant behavior are likely to increase such behavior.” Such reinforcement processes are consistent with the challenges described by agency staff where high-risk youth were often disruptive to the group and challenging to manage. These findings imply that caution should be exercised when contemplating peer group-based

interventions with high-risk youth, with group composition being an important consideration.

To the extent that neighborhoods marked by disadvantaged circumstances for the healthy development of youth persist, interventions designed to reduce the incentive for youth to arm themselves are likely to have limited if any effect. This is particularly the case if handguns become symbols of power and control, fostering a positive identity in youth having limited access to conventional means for achieving that developmental milestone. Once identity is rooted in violence and firearms, the deep roots become difficult to extricate.

The lack of motivation resulted in low attendance and a lack of interest and participation. These youth were still in a pre-contemplative or contemplative stage of change, as opposed to the preparation, action, or maintenance stages (Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente, 1995). That is, they were not motivated to learn conflict resolution and anger management skills because they believed nothing was wrong with their current method of solving conflict and they were achieving the goals and status they needed in their environment. No other ways to solve conflicts seemed realistic. Stopping to think about the consequences of their behavior or taking deep breaths to calm down in a dangerous neighborhood could result in severe unintended consequences. Returning to the context of their lives was the problem, an issue agencies could not directly address. In cases where the context was not so dangerous, implementing new skills could be supplemented by solutions offered by speakers who were once in the youths' situation and could talk them through approaches that might work in their neighborhoods.

These programmatic challenges were compounded by simultaneous challenges with evaluation protocols. Several evaluation challenges resulted from the program staff's lack of experience with evaluation protocols and the difficult nature of obtaining six-month post-tests from youth. First, obtaining parental consent was a challenge for both the school-based and group-based agencies. For school-based agencies, parental consent forms needed to be sent home well in advance, two to three weeks generally, and with many reminders to bring them back. The group-based agencies found the best time to obtain consent for the research project was at intake rather than at a subsequent meeting, despite initial intentions to wait. Agency staff initially believed that introducing the study and completing the pre-test questionnaire was inappropriate at intake. However, it became evident that youth and parents were not likely to return forms that were sent home, and there was no other time more conducive to achieving the task more efficiently. Second, staff members from both the school-based and group-based programs were challenged by using identification numbers rather than names to keep information confidential. Many meetings between agency staff and the researchers were held to make sure that the youth and parent

pre-tests matched the post-tests. Patience, understanding, and humor from both the researchers and the agency staff were important to keep the evaluation moving along, particularly during times of staff turnover.

Third, the evaluation tasks were also time consuming for the agency staff who were not paid for the additional tasks and were often overworked due to a lack of funding in general for violence prevention programming. Locating youth six months after they started their participation for the post-test proved to be quite difficult, requiring more time than expected. Finding accurate or current phone numbers and addresses for this transient population was the most difficult aspect of this task. Once accurate contact information was found, repeated telephone and personal contacts were required to obtain the post-tests needed. As a result, some agencies assigned two staff members to evaluation tasks in order to complete the data collection. Researchers helped to alleviate the evaluation challenges by offering and encouraging agency staff to ask for additional help when needed. Despite the challenges, staff made every effort to follow research protocols and complete the post-testing needed for the project. More intense training could have helped decrease some of the evaluation challenges as well as some of the overall project challenges.

Agency staff recommended longer training sessions or workshops on the evaluation protocols to enhance their understanding and the skills needed to complete the evaluation tasks as designed. A few hours of training and written instructions were insufficient for the staff to gain a full understanding of the project and the evaluation protocols. Hands-on evaluation training involving an introduction to evaluation, practice completing the information on the evaluation forms, using the corresponding parent forms, and completing the Excel spreadsheets would have also been helpful in alleviating some of the evaluation challenges.

There were also several overall project challenges. First, new agency staff requested an official orientation to the project. A meeting with new staff, describing the project history and providing reading materials, was insufficient. Rather, a longer, structured orientation with a presentation of the literature review on youth handgun violence, the project history, and a project manual was needed. Such training was difficult to accomplish in a short project period and in a situation where the interventions and evaluations were not specified prior to the beginning of the project. That is, the interventions and evaluation protocols were developed as part of the project. Although the evolving nature of the project had its advantages, such as a greater tendency to bridge research and practice rather than impose research on practice, there were other disadvantages. Setbacks in starting the interventions occurred due to a delay in the human subject approval of the research protocols. This was particularly difficult for the school-based program, as it is restricted to a school calendar, making it difficult to delay a twenty-five-week curriculum. For school-based programs, a six-month planning phase starting in January is more practical than starting the planning

phase in July. That is, the project's six-month planning phase started in July and ended in December with only a short period between the time the human subjects proposal could be written and submitted and the time schools would preferably have liked to start the curriculum. Having the summer break instead of the winter break to obtain human subject clearance would have made for a better transition from the planning phase to the pilot or implementation phase. A longer project time overall may alleviate some of these challenges. Three years was not enough time to develop, pilot, implement, and evaluate a handgun violence prevention effort.

Second, the pilot phase of the project was challenging but important for the agencies as well as for the researchers. Agencies were allowed to make changes to their interventions, modifying aspects that did not appear to be working well. For example, some of the materials disseminated to the youth from the speakers in the group-based programs on the current handgun laws were especially difficult for the youth or parents to understand. It was important to modify the information from formal statutes on handgun behavior to a document with a more accessible level of reading and comprehension. These adjustments were easy compared to finding schools to participate in a handgun violence prevention project. Despite assurance of confidentiality, schools were reluctant to engage in a project that was handgun related or that might suggest they had a handgun violence issue, particularly after the tragic events at Columbine High School. Schools were also challenged by a state requirement to achieve adequate testing scores for the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP). Schools were more inclined to spend time ensuring youth did well on the CSAP than including a curriculum on conflict resolution or handgun violence prevention. One principal noted that "it is too much to ask for a school to give up twenty-five class periods for anything other than academics." In contrast, schools with youth caught for weapon violations were happy to refer them to an outside agency such as the group-based agencies to receive a handgun violence intervention. Youth completing such an intervention could be reintegrated into school after being expelled.

The pilot phase was also important to researchers for assessments of test instruments and for discovering the importance of incentives. Families and youth preferred one type of incentive over others, such as pizza parties for youth or gift certificates at local markets. This phase also served to facilitate communication between the researchers and the agency staff, assisting in the integration of the evaluation activities and the intervention activities.

After the implementation phase, agency staff and directors could cite many accomplishments. They were proud of being able to reach a group of youth they would not have otherwise reached. After the completion of the group-based interventions, youth who were expelled for a weapon violation were able to go back to school. Additionally, an intuitive sense of accomplishing intervention goals among the agency staff was realized when certain youth "turned their lives around." One youth wrote the following

journal entry: "In today's class I realized that I am at risk of being shot with every step that I take. My brother's friend was shot in the chest and is barely recovering after a year and a half. I am now more open to the possibilities that can happen to me everyday. I used to have a gun, but now I don't, and I am happy that I got rid of it." Another youth reported making the choice to stop attending parties where there might be gangs, handguns, or violence. Additionally, over the course of the project, many students reported to staff that they had successfully used nonviolent skills with parents, teachers, friends, and siblings. In some cases, youth who were successful in changing their lives would serve as speakers for subsequent handgun violence groups.

Working relationships were also developed among staff from the agencies, schools, and other youth service agencies as a result of the project. These relationships were evident in the project meetings and were particularly helpful to the different agencies because of the communication and collaboration that occurred. The project meeting often served as a forum for discussing challenges and exchanging solutions. The communication between the agency staff facilitated project progress as they helped each other get through each stage of the project.

Despite the challenges, agency staff learned how to participate in a quasi-experimental design, made every effort to complete the necessary tasks, and were pleased with being able to finish the evaluation. They were often new to evaluation protocols, where consent forms were required, intervention changes during the evaluation were prohibited, and confidential data collection protocols were followed. The learning curve was steep, but agency staff succeeded in the difficult task of completing the evaluation of their interventions.

## Summary and Conclusion

The qualitative observations captured characteristics of youth who seemed to be more open and receptive to the interventions, aspects of implementation that went well, and challenges and accomplishments. Characteristics of youth associated with a greater willingness to participate included younger age groups, those still in school, those motivated to do well because of their lack of alternative options in school or the juvenile justice system, youth experiencing the serious consequences of handgun use, and those where parents were involved. Aspects of program implementation that seemed desirable to the agency staff included using outside speakers to whom youth could relate yet who challenged the youths' thinking patterns, discussing the consequences of handgun behavior, interventions of greater duration, and culturally competent, stable teachers with program buy-in. Staff turnover and engaging youth at highest risk of violence were the main challenges faced during the project. Evaluation challenges resulted from agency staff's lack of experience with evaluation protocols, obtaining

six-month post-tests from youth, and recruiting schools to participate in a handgun violence project. Finally, the staff felt a qualitative sense of accomplishment for working with youth engaging in handgun violence. They were able to see a few youth turn their lives around, collaborative relationships were developed as a result of the project, and they succeeded in the difficult task of completing the evaluation of their programs. Despite the disappointing research findings of the evaluation, the collaboration between the community-based agencies, the private foundation supporting this effort, and the evaluation team was successful and provided a “learning laboratory” for future collaborative prevention and evaluation projects.

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