

**IMPLEMENTING EVIDENCE-BASED YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAMS:
ONE COMMUNITY'S EXPERIENCES**

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Abstract

Many schools and community agencies use evidence-based programs for youth violence prevention, but many more should consider their use, given their effectiveness and funder pressure to use them. Often evidence-based programs don't live up to their promise because they are not implemented well. Inadequate funding and poor planning are common, along with failure to obtain support of people who will be affected by the program (teachers, community agency workers, youth and parents). Attitudes and experiences of providers of youth violence prevention programming in one county were derived from a survey and thought leader interviews, leading to recommendations for improving implementation practice.

Key Words

Youth Violence Prevention

Evidence-Based Programs

Implementation

IMPLEMENTING EVIDENCE-BASED YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAMS: ONE COMMUNITY'S EXPERIENCES*

Throughout the fields of prevention and youth development, there are now evidence-based programs (EBPs) that can be implemented by schools and community agencies. The effectiveness of these programs has been proven by research – much of it with large samples and good, often well-controlled study designs.

But other research shows that these EBPs aren't implemented as often as merited by evidence of their effectiveness. In the substance abuse field, for example, some recent estimates are that only about 1% of the field nationally has been “penetrated” by any one EBP (Jensen, 2003).

Even more troubling, when implementation occurs in new settings it often is done poorly, with predictably poor results in terms of impact on youth, parents and communities (Backer, 2000). Inadequate funding and poor strategic planning for program implementation are among the main reasons for these outcomes. In particular, efforts to promote change in any complex system (such as a school or a community agency) are very likely to fail unless the change effort has the support and active involvement of the people who live in that system (Backer, David & Soucy, 1995). That is, those who'll be implementing the intervention need to feel some sense of *ownership* for it, and a degree of active *participation* in developing the implementation strategy.

These findings seem to hold no matter how good the intervention or the science behind it. Since the 1970s, a good deal of research has been conducted on quality of implementation (Backer, 2004), and increasing interest in the subject has solidified in the work of the National Implementation Research

Network (Fixsen et al, 2005). In this small study, the experiences with implementation of one community (Orange County, California) were analyzed, focused on one type of EBP (programs for youth violence prevention implemented by schools or community-based youth-serving agencies).

Youth Violence Prevention and EBPs

The ongoing problem of youth violence demands effective prevention interventions – particularly in the wake of terrible events such as the Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings. Poverty, disintegrating families and communities, lack of after-school programs, prevalence of gangs and drugs and alcohol, and other factors help account for the high levels of violence inflicted on youth and perpetrated by them (Violence Prevention Coalition of Orange County, 2004). Millions of children and adolescents are exposed to violence in their homes, schools and communities. Psychological distress and risk of physical harm are the likely result, and for some of these youth prolonged exposure can increase the risk that they will become violent themselves (Kracke, 2000).

Evidence-based youth violence prevention programs are now available to support efforts of community youth-serving nonprofits and schools to deal with this challenge (Dodge, 2001). In *Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General* (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001), the public health science on youth violence prevention was reviewed, and results indicate that the most effective youth violence prevention programs are science-based, comprehensive and involve simultaneous action at the school, family, and community levels.

Increasingly, Federal, state and foundation funders require the use of EBPs for youth violence prevention, as they do for many other subjects. Often funders even provide information about the

EBPs they will support. For example, California's Safe and Healthy Kids Program Office has a website presenting prevention programs that show strong, positive effects for reducing violent behavior, and requires that California schools receiving funding under the Safe and Drug Free School provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act choose one of these programs to implement.

Other Federal information resources for youth violence EBPs are available, such as CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration's National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention. The Blueprints for Violence Prevention program at the University of Colorado's Center for the Study of Violence Prevention (supported by Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and other funders), and the Promising Practices Network of the RAND Corporation (supported primarily by foundations) are other sources of EBPs that deal with youth violence prevention and related problems such as substance abuse.

Preventing Youth Violence in Orange County

Orange County, California is a fast-growing, increasingly affluent region of more than three million residents and more than a million children and youth. Both exposure to violence and violent behavior among the County's children and youth are increasing problems. There was a 100% increase in the number of gang-related homicides from 2001 to 2002. And of the 670 Orange County children expelled from public schools in one recent year, 149 expulsions were related to causing or threatening to cause injury to another person, and 220 were related to firearm possession or sales (Violence Prevention Coalition of Orange County, 2004).

In the California Youth Violence Prevention Scorecard (2002), Orange County scored only a C- on the level of safety for youth in the community, and ranked 22nd among counties in California in its rate of juvenile incarceration. And the County scored a D in its availability of choices for youth, such as after-school or mentoring programs.

Preventing youth violence thus has become a priority in Orange County, as it has in many communities across the country. Prevention programs are being implemented by the County's 28 school districts, a number of nonprofits such as local Boys & Girls Clubs, and community leaders through groups such as the Violence Prevention Coalition of Orange County.

Just to give two examples: the Orange County Department of Education helps all school districts in the County in their efforts to provide evidence-based youth violence prevention programming, much of it supported by Federal Safe and Drug Free School funding. These local efforts center on implementing well-known programs such as Life Skills Training (which addresses both substance abuse and youth violence prevention challenges), and Second Step.

Secondly, for more than ten years the Westminster Boys & Girls Club has had a gang prevention and intervention initiative targeting youth ages 6-18, part of a national Boys & Girls Clubs of America Targeted Outreach initiative. The B&G Club works with five carefully selected schools, which in turn select students who are juvenile delinquents or otherwise at-risk to participate in the initiative. They meet with a program coordinator once a week at lunchtime for various prevention activities, some of which involve use of evidence-based programs such as Street Smart. There also are a number of recreational field trips for participating students as part of this program.

This initiative was funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and now is supported by the local United Way. It was evaluated last year by the Orange County Department of Education, which found that participating students had 30-40% fewer fights and expulsions, and their drug use had gone down too.

Study Objective

The objective of this study was to learn more about how schools and youth-serving agencies in Orange County are using evidence-based youth violence prevention programs, and what information or assistance would help them do so more effectively. An electronic survey was conducted of 80 school districts and nonprofit organizations, combined with personal interviews with a dozen thought leaders in the region.

Results from this two-year research study are presented here, along with a discussion of how the research findings might be used to shape current activities, selection and implementation of EBPs in the future, and community and policymaker leadership. Study results also will be used in the ongoing work of its sponsor, the Academic Center for Excellence on Youth Violence Prevention at the University of California, Riverside (which is funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

Study Method

The study began by an Internet search (including a brief literature review) and informal interviews with knowledgeable observers in Orange County, to identify influential leaders in the community. Input from these leaders in turn identified individuals who would be likely to know about youth

violence prevention activities in the 28 County school districts and 50 local youth-serving agencies. A brief survey was sent electronically to each, using the commercial service Survey Monkey.

To increase response rate, several local leaders permitted their names to appear in the covering electronic memo, since the researchers were not known in the community. Both e-mail and telephone follow-ups over a one-month period encouraged a higher level of response.

The same local informants also helped identify thought leaders who could provide a larger perspective on the use of EBPs for youth violence prevention in Orange County. Twelve interviews with thought leaders were conducted by telephone, including several of the local leaders who had already provided guidance to the survey portion of the study. All participants in both the survey and the thought leader interviews were provided with a draft of this report, both to encourage their participation in the study, and to provide an opportunity for them to comment on the accuracy and completeness of its findings.

Results

Out of 80 survey subjects contacted, 10 excluded themselves from the study sample because their organizations do not provide violence prevention services to children and youth. Fifty individuals completed the survey, for a response rate of 71.4%. Respondents included 27 nonprofit organizations and 23 school districts. Most of the responding organizations serve a large number of youth, with 15 organizations reporting that they serve more than 10,000 young people a year. Youth violence prevention is the primary focus of the organization for only 8% of respondents, but 48% indicate that they address this subject “a great deal” in their work.

A total of 56% of all respondents report they use EBPs for youth violence prevention, with an additional 10% planning to do so in the future. The most commonly used program (26% of respondents) is Second Step, a multi-year, school-based social skills curriculum for children in preschool through junior high school. Second Step teaches social skills to reduce impulsive and aggressive behavior, and increases children's level of social competence. Towards No Drug Abuse was used by 12%, and Life Skills Training by 10% of respondents. A total of 26 EBPs in all were reported, most of which were cited by only one respondent.

It is significant that when the EBPs cited by survey respondents were analyzed, only 18 of these 26 actually were recognized evidence-based programs, either because they appear in one of the rosters cited above, or because they were subjected to significant empirical evaluation by a national organization sponsoring the EBP's implementation in a number of local settings. A follow-up inquiry found that several of the respondents had informally thought a program was evidence-based, but when looking at it more closely realized it was not.

Respondents indicated they most often identify EBPs by using a roster of programs such as the ones mentioned earlier (32% of all respondents), input from colleagues (28%), conferences or seminars (24%), and books or journals (14%). When learning about such programs in the future, they would like information and assistance to come through websites, conferences and seminars, print publications, input from colleagues and direct technical assistance.

When asked about the biggest challenges to implementing evidence-based youth violence prevention programs in their organization, 58% of respondents identified funding, 50% mentioned staffing, and

40% cited difficulties in identifying the right EBP for their organization and youth population. Nearly 40% of respondents also mentioned that they need more information about EBPs in general, and about evidence of their effectiveness in particular.

Having such information readily available is crucial to motivating colleagues in a school or community agency setting to participate actively in the hard work of implementing a youth violence EBP, according to respondents. This is true in particular because both time and money resources are so tight. As one respondent put it: “At this time there are extremely high demands on instructional time. There is a lot of resistance to implementing evidence-based programs.”

Twenty-nine per cent of respondents reported that during implementation they had changed an EBP “a little” in order to make it work in their setting. Another 10% reported changing the EBP a “fair amount.” None reported having changed a program “a great deal.” Of those who’ve implemented an EBP, 55% have gathered “a little” evidence on how well it works, and 29% have gathered “a lot.”

In narrative responses to several survey items, respondents also described a number of drawbacks and advantages to using EBPs in their organization’s or community’s efforts to prevent youth violence. Some of these responses will be presented in the discussion section following. Responses on these topics from the 12 thought leader interviews also will be presented in the discussion section.

Discussion and Recommendations

Several themes emerged from both the survey respondents and thought leaders about some major **challenges** ahead for efforts to address youth violence prevention in Orange County using EBPs:

1 - Implementation of youth violence prevention EBPs is challenged by limits in funding, staff time and time available in the curricula of both in-school and after-school programs.

Limited time and funding are of course challenges to any program's successful implementation, but for today's schools and community agencies implementing youth violence prevention EBPs, something like a "perfect storm" has developed. Implementers are pressured to use evidence-based programs that often are quite costly (in both staff time and money), and schools also must cope with challenges of the Federal No Child Left Behind legislation. As one respondent put it: "Across all grades, teachers and administrator feel VERY pressured to keep state testing scores high and are reluctant to take minutes away from instruction for prevention programs. If something is being put into the day, something already here has to go."

But challenges also were evident in Orange County's community agencies. One interviewee reported that her long-time program has lost 75% of its funding in the past four years, and has "barely kept alive as a result." This agency happens to use a homegrown program, but has been amassing more rigorous statistics about process and impact over the last several years. However, now that funding is so tight, efforts to keep up with the latest good practices in youth violence prevention have slowed, and the program serves fewer communities.

Another leader of a youth-serving agency said: “Our after-school program is from 2-6:30 pm. By the time the kids are done with homework, we have little time to work with them on extra programs. Funding and staffing are a constant issue with nonprofits.”

Schools and nonprofit agencies have devised a range of approaches to deal with these resource challenges. Obtaining grants from Federal or foundation sources helps to provide some funding, whether directly for youth violence prevention or for dealing with related issues (e.g., tobacco use prevention, using programs that also address violence; or for gang prevention). However, these grants are rarely made for more than three years, resulting in challenges to long-term sustainability for good programs.

Some programs have had funding cut so much they can only implement programs partially (a threat to program fidelity), or they can only implement them in some parts of their environment and not others. For instance, one school system would like to implement youth violence EBPs across grades K-12, but for now can only afford to do it one grade level a year.

Other programs, such as LaCalle News, which works with gangs on issues of violence prevention, are led by dedicated volunteers and able to provide services despite very small budgets. However, these grassroots efforts seldom use EBPs in youth violence prevention, so they are not eligible for funding from many sources, and don’t usually have the resources to implement the more costly EBPs anyway.

Funding constraints also affect the evaluations done to monitor quality of implementation and an EBP's ultimate outcomes. In some cases, evaluation isn't done at all, and the chances for learning, improvement and program justification to stakeholders are missed entirely. For other EBPs, data gathered are limited to short-term outcomes (how well the program functions shortly after its implementation, whether young people can "name three prevention programs"), rather than zeroing in on more costly data to collect. The latter include data about behavior change (such as police reports filed or school disciplinary actions taken) or about longer-term attitudes (for instance, do children really feel safer at school or in the community).

2 - Implementation is challenged by balancing needs for program fidelity with the above limits, and with the need to adapt programs to meet local circumstances.

Respondents in this study acknowledged the need to ensure that programs will be implemented with fidelity, lest their positive effects be reduced. At the same time, as one respondent observed, "If you find a program that has a great reputation, it still has to be modified to fit your population and community." So program adaptation also is a reality for most of these implementers, a subject of some controversy within the field of evidence-based youth programming (Backer, 2004).

There also is a concern about the complex dynamics introduced by funding policies about these programs. As one interviewee put it: "The list of approved programs is too fluid. Programs originally on the lists are now off. That requires changing directly, and the schools get very upset when they gear up for a program and then it suddenly becomes 'not OK.' We walk an interesting line between encouraging districts to bring in agency mini-curricula (collaboration), but at the same time are the compliance enforcers (fidelity to research-proven, approved programs)."

3 - Implementation is challenged by limited availability of youth violence prevention EBPs that are appropriate for particular populations and communities.

Despite print publications and web-based information systems containing background on a number of these programs, it may be difficult to find the right program for a particular application. As one respondent put it: “The number of evidence-based programs that meets the needs of schools for an entire district is very limited, especially one as large as ours. The selection of a violence prevention program requires buy-in, and a one-size-fits-all program does not allow schools to consider how to best meet the needs of their particular school and community. Some schools have very specific needs that are based on several factors such as community (gangs, poverty, and so forth), language of materials (such as Spanish) and even ethnicity.”

Another respondent said: “We have a very diverse population with varying needs that are constantly changing. It has been difficult to find a program that would work for abused and emotionally disturbed children in a residential setting who have a wide variety of issues to address at the same time, not just their physical aggression.”

Study participants also identified several **advantages** of using youth violence prevention programs that are evidence-based:

1 - EBPs don't require local schools or agencies to “re-invent the wheel” in creating their own program. Increasingly, school and nonprofit agency personnel, as well as parents and public policymakers, really do see the value of EBPs for dealing with problems such as youth violence. Particularly now that EBPs are more common and well-respected, there is a fund of experience in

implementing them, as well as belief in their value. Both make it easier for programs to be put into place. People at all levels understand that creating a “home-grown” program may be tempting, but in fact can be both costly and inefficient, especially in today’s funding environment.

2 - Youth violence prevention EBPs facilitate evaluation and accountability. One respondent said: “We can tell administrators, parents, teachers and others that the program has research behind it that shows it to be effective, so that we can justify the time it takes away from other subjects.” Several spoke of being able to use the measurement “tools” provided with EBPs to promote evaluation of both outcomes and process. And holding schools or community agencies accountable is easier when the use of EBPs makes expected outcomes easier to monitor.

3 - To use the words of one respondent, these programs are needed because “funders require it and the community deserves it.” Respondents were well aware that government and foundation funders increasingly require use of EBPs when supporting a youth violence prevention program. Given the recent increase in awareness about youth violence, and the increased visibility of EBPs, the public also is becoming more sophisticated about the need to use good science in the form of programs that really will have benefit for their children and their community. That the term “scientifically based research” appears no less than 111 times in the No Child Left Behind Act is also evidence of increased public visibility.

The following **recommendations** are made for addressing the challenges and using the advantages of youth violence prevention EBPs, as identified in this research. While these recommendations are stated for Orange County, California, they might be applied in any community or region.

1 - Information about youth violence prevention EBPs and strategies for their implementation can be disseminated using electronic communications.

In Orange County, many organizations well-known to potential implementers have listservs, websites or electronic newsletters that could be used to disseminate information (including a summary of this study). They include Orange County Department of Education, Children and Families Commission, Head Start Children's Bureau, Safe From The Start and Prevent Child Abuse Orange County. The Orangewood Children's Foundation has a number of programs that might share information on youth violence EBPs and on strategies for their implementation, including the CONNECT Partnership for Nonprofit Solutions, which provides capacity building to the Orange County nonprofit community.

At present, there is no one overarching dissemination vehicle for reaching school and youth-serving agency personnel, plus community leaders and policy makers. However, such a centralized dissemination resource would have great value, because it would not only offer easier information access, but also "lift up" the issue of implementing evidence-based programs to greater visibility. The Violence Prevention Coalition of Orange County has been making plans for centralizing meetings and resources on violence prevention on its website, though this has not yet come about.

2 - Presentations about youth violence prevention EBPs and strategies for their implementation can be made to key organizations and conferences.

For instance, in Orange County, the Prevention Network meets once a month and could provide a platform for discussions with community-based organizations (which it has been bringing together

for 20 years). PN also puts on a “Resource Showcase” once a year for parents, school personnel and nonprofit organization staff, which could provide another platform.

Prevent Child Abuse Orange County, the Violence Prevention Coalition of Orange County and the Irvine Prevention Coalition have regular meetings which could be platforms for discussion of the challenges and advantages of EBPs and their careful implementation. And the Coalition has quarterly community awareness forums organized around particular topics. Other possible platforms include the Orange County YMCA’s annual Violence Prevention week, and occasional meetings organized by Orange County’s Safe from the Start program.

3 - Information and technical assistance can be used both to acquire resources and promote effective implementation of youth violence prevention EBPs.

The California Healthy Kids Survey collects data from school districts about children/youth and issues such as violence on an annual basis, and provides county, state and national comparisons. These data can establish specific problems that need intervention, for instance that in many school environments kids simply don’t feel safe.

Having such statistics available can support a funding proposal, target the type of intervention that is needed (such as a particular EBP). They also can help “sell” proper implementation of a program to skeptical policymakers, public and agency staff. Resources also exist to promote overall capacity building for schools and nonprofits, e.g., the CONNECT Partnership for Nonprofit Solutions described above. These resources can be directed towards assistance with effective implementation of youth violence EBPs.

Several important **context points** were raised by the findings from this study, which also apply not only in Orange County but in any region where violence prevention EBPs are being implemented:

1 - EBPs in youth violence prevention have a relatively recent history. Just a few years ago, several interviewees reminded the researchers, there were no EBPs in this field. Communities concerned with youth violence prevention had school assemblies, or offered programs since shown to be ineffective, such as DARE. Even now, one interviewee said, “We see EBPs used as stalking horses. They are the Potemkin Village behind which old, unvalidated programs like DARE operate, and the old programs get the bulk of the resources.” Thus, care must be taken not to support programs that are proven to be ineffective.

2 - There is considerable evidence that both kids and families tend to have multiple problems associated with youth violence. These include, in addition to exposure to violence or propensity to same, substance abuse, mental illness, poverty, and intergenerational conflict. Since these life problems are all woven together, interventions ideally need to address these multiple aspects.

One interviewee asserted that because violence prevention EBPs tend to be “categorical” (though some are used to address, for instance, both substance abuse and violence prevention), they are “rarely sensitive to these multiple issues,” and are less effective as a result. Moreover, in Orange County, no unifying coalition has emerged that brings together professionals and advocates concerned with the entire range of problems affecting at-risk youth, which also could help in shaping community responses to the realities of kids and families with multiple problems.

An interviewee suggested that such an umbrella coalition, which does exist in some other communities, might have an annual conference to bring a wide range of people together. At this meeting they could work to agree on broader measures of the community's status on these complex issues, and debate issues in the context of a "non-categorical report card" about the community's status.

3 - *There is a current increase in gang violence in many communities.* This is true both in Orange County and nationally, and this reality has a significant impact on the visibility and priority assigned to the problem of youth violence. As one interviewee put it, "Before it was bullying, but now there are violent fights and shootings on campuses," and at least some of this change seems to be due to increased gang activity.

These increases are becoming well-publicized, also affecting the likelihood of increased public support. The California legislature, for example, is currently considering several new laws that would increase the strength of the criminal justice system in dealing with gang violence. However, the consensus of opinion is that these approaches must be complemented with prevention efforts, and according to one interviewee, there are only two gang prevention programs currently operating in Orange County.

4 - *There is still widespread denial that there is a youth violence problem.* Again, this is true in Orange County and nationally. According to those interviewed, it is particularly a problem in the southern parts of the County, where many people moved to get their children away from perceived

sources or influences of violence. Recent events, such as the Virginia Tech shootings of April 2007, help to break through that denial, and encourage more open community communication and action.

5 - *New issues in youth violence are emerging.* Cyberbullying is on the increase, and now in addition to e-mails, young people may have to deal with threats and challenges made through social networks (such as MySpace or FaceBook), text messaging on cell phones, and other “cutting edge” media popular with young people, but also subject to intrusion of negative behavior for which authorities and parents (as well as youth) may be unprepared. Developments such as banning laptops or cell phones on school campuses are occurring ever more frequently, but these need to be seen in the larger context of how to deal with the overall challenges of preventing youth violence.

Similarly, there have been large increases in violence perpetrated by girls, in person and in cyberspace, so much so that a whole new cultural phenomenon, “Mean Girls” has emerged. Some schools and community agencies are now offering programs that target girls.

6 - *Prevention of youth violence requires healthy youth.* Effective prevention begins with a good home and good parenting, and with youth who are not living in poverty and who are receiving a good education. Healthy youth, as defined in this way, are by nature less likely to get involved in gangs or violent behavior, either as perpetrator or victim. Such overall prevention activities are required oriented to creating and sustaining a healthy environment for youth. These provide a larger context for effective implementation of the EBPs in youth violence prevention discussed here.

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