

# Sociocultural Issues and Youth Violence

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## Abstract

In recent years, American communities have witnessed an increase in school violence. While violence in schools is not a new phenomenon the extremity of acts committed by youths is. Researchers from various disciplines have attempted to find the root cause of youth violence in general. Several factors ranging from individual to cultural have been suggested as being strong predictors of youth violence. Still, there is paucity in research documenting the variable differences between diverse ethnic groups. This paper evaluated whether differences in school violence predictors exist among different adolescent ethnic groups. We decided to focus on adolescents/youths due to the recent school crimes committed by individuals belonging to such groups. Through an extensive literature search, the authors present the reader with a vignette of school violence today. Lastly, we provide policy recommendations for combating this social ill.

## Introduction

### *Violence in the United States*

Each year, more than 50,000 people die in the United States as a result of violent acts (Rosenberg & Mercy, 1991). Homicide is the fourth leading cause of death for children between the ages of 1 and 14, and it ranks second for youths between the ages of 15 to 24 (Baker et al., 1992). Among African-Americans 15 to 34 years of age, it is the leading cause of death (Baker et al., 1992). In contrast, among white youth in this age group, the leading cause of death are motor vehicle accidents (National Center for Health Statistics, 1994). The majority of homicides, with estimates ranging from 40 to 60 percent, occur between people who know each other (Rosenberg & Mercy, 1991; Weiss, 1994).

Other factors, such as alcohol and other drugs are believed to be contributing factors in escalating anger and homicide (Reiss & Roth, 1993). The role of firearms, particularly handguns, in these deaths is significant. Increasing homicide rates parallel the increasing availability of firearms (Wintemute, 1994). Rates of homicide are higher in underserved, impoverished communities (Weiss, 1993). One study that examined injury rates by race, ethnicity and poverty found that when the racial and ethnic groups were held constant, the same communities remained at risk for violence, suggesting that poverty may play an important role (Chang, Weiss,

& Yuan, 1992).

### *Firearm Violence in the United States*

On an average day in the United States, one child dies from an unintentional shooting. Accidental shootings are the third leading cause of death for 10 to 29-yr-olds and the fifth leading cause of death for children from 1 to 15 years of age. Some 50% of all unintentional child shootings occur in the victims' homes, and an additional 40% occur in the homes of friends and relatives (Smith & Larman, 1988; Wintemute et al. 1987). In many parts of the United States, suicide rates exceed homicide rates. In 1991, 48% of the total 38,317 firearms-related deaths nationwide were classified as suicides; that proportion was found again in 1992 (Fingerhut, 1994). However, in many urban areas such as Los Angeles, deaths caused by interpersonal violence exceed those caused by self-inflicted wounds (Cervantes, Padilla & Salgado de Snyder, 1991; Hamburg, 1998). The common element in both these types of violence is the availability of firearms: In the case of suicide, a gun can escalate ideation into fatal reality; in the case of homicide, a gun can escalate an argument into a fatal outcome.

### *Relationship between Drug use and Criminality and Violence*

Recent research indicate that the high rate of violent criminal behavior found in inner-city African-American (Sickmund, Snyder & Poe-Yamagata, 1997) and Hispanic communities (Mata & Valdez 1996)

is either directly related to alcohol and illicit drug use and the illicit drug distribution networks, or due to drug-related gang activities. A recent study of serious delinquent youths (youths 14 to 17 who committed a minimum of 10 felonies or 100 misdemeanor crimes over past 12 months) found that Hispanic males were much more likely than all others in the sample to prefer using cocaine and marijuana to other drugs (Sickmund et al. 1997).

#### *Prevalence of School Violence*

In a report conducted by the Center for Disease Control (1993), it was concluded that rates of youth homicide and suicide have doubled over the past decade. The U.S. Department of Justice has reported that during 1993 and 1998 violent crime rates fell 27%, from 50 to 37 per 1,000 persons age 12 or older and that in 1998, males were victimized at significantly higher rates than females, and blacks were victimized at somewhat higher rates than whites. Non-Hispanics and Hispanics were victimized at about the same rate. While this information is not school specific, it gives us an inclination to the social conditions of the general population. More importantly it points out an interesting juxtaposition: If violent crimes are decreasing in the general populous why have we witnessed an increase in violent crimes in our schools (Cantelon & LeBoeuf, 1997)?

Findings from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) suggest that in 1994, U.S. residents age 12 or older experienced more than 42 million crimes: about 11 million violent victimizations and 31 million property crimes. Violent crimes (as defined by the NCVS) include rape and sexual assault, robbery, and both aggravated and simple assault and homicide (from crimes reported to the police). More recent data indicate that black and white students have similar chances of being victimized in or around their school (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). Although the rates of victimization are similar across ethnic lines, it is important to note, however, that when asked about "[Being] threatened with a weapon", black and white students reported incidence rates of 23.5% and 13.8%, respectively. From these statistics it is clear that black stu-

dents are more prone to experience and/or witness violence in their schools and communities. Interestingly, this is despite the fact that 78% of the same schools in this study reported having some sort of violence prevention or violence reduction programs.

A similar survey (CDC, 1993) suggested that African-American high school aged youth had the highest one-month incidence rate of physical fighting (31 per 100,000) followed by Latino (22) and Non-Hispanic white youth. The higher rates of school violence have been reported in public schools--where a majority of the students are of a lower socioeconomic status--rather than in private and parochial schools. It is interesting to note that while the authors of a similar study (APA, 1991) concluded that students of all races were victimized about the same amount at their schools, the data in the survey reveal a number of cultural factors that may help to better understand school violence. Having reviewed general trends associated with community and school violence, we will now review the available research on our four areas of focus: Family, Individual, Cultural, and School influences. First, however, we provide the reader with a brief background on two national school studies aimed at detecting and eliminating violence in schools.

#### *Review of School Violence Literature*

Even with the negative impact that violence in schools causes on the psyche and well being of a person--especially school aged children--there is still a lack of major research studies focusing on this epidemic. For instance, the last legislatively-mandated study on school violence was conducted over two decades ago. Congress, as a response to the violence in American schools, mandated the Safe Schools Study (1978) conducted by the National Institute of Education (NIE). The study conducted by the NIE included three phases of data collection. Phase I included 31,373 students, 23,890 teachers, and 15,894 principals. In this phase, each participant completed a mailed-out questionnaire. Phase II consisted of on-site data collection (field surveys and interviews) completed by a total sample of 642 junior

and senior high school students. In Phase III, ten schools were selected as focus groups to examine the reduction of violence and disruption *vis-à-vis* school personnel.

As summarized by Bybee and Gee in Violence, Values, and Justice in the Schools the three major findings were as follows: 1) there was a clear indication that violence in schools had escalated over the past thirty years, 2) the risk of violence to youth is greater in schools than elsewhere when the amount of time spent in schools is taken into account, and 3) eight percent of school principals reported that violence and disruption were a serious problem in American schools. While this was a major study on school violence, it lacked a focus on differentiating between minority groups as perpetrators and victims as well as including contributors to school violence.

Scholars differ on the root cause of school violence. Some argue that school violence should be examined through a community context because school violence is an indicator of the problems experienced by the larger social group (Menacker et al., 1990). Increases in the rates of violent and aggressive acts by youth generally are likely to be reflected in and around the school yard since this is where most youths spend a large percentage of their day. If this were true then how could we explain the drop and increase of violent crimes in general and those in school, respectively.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

While the country has been conscious of violence present in our nation's inner city schools, the recent school based tragedies in California, Oregon, Colorado, Kentucky, Mississippi and Oklahoma has expanded this concern and calls for measured responses and responsive action. For school age parents and their families, these events have challenged them to view these settings as danger zones (Singer, Anglin, Song & Lunghofer, 1995; Gargarino, Dubrow, Kostelny & Pardo, 1992; Hamburg, 1998). As school violence incidents arise, spread and escalate, teachers and students alike become wary of schools, if not fear for their safety and well being

(Sickmund et al., 1997; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1995; Samples & Aber, 1998).

This paper will attempt to shed some light on the social and cultural issues associated with school violence. It is our hope that this review will propagate further inquiry, and debate regarding this matter toward the ultimate goal of preventing school violence. In our ever more culturally diverse society, it is imperative that those involved in working toward prevention of school violence understand the cultural implications associated with such an issue.

For the purpose of the following research, we operationally define school violence as acts including, but not limited to, assault, battery, bullying, threats of force, hazing, gang activity, and murder. While various factors have been correlated with youth engaged in violent acts, there has been little or no research on the differences and/or similarities that such factors have on different groups of youths. Of particular interest to the authors are the following questions: "Are there specific predispositions for particular ethnic groups?" "What role does culture play in violent actions by youth?" We will focus on four predictors of school violence: the individual, the family, school, and culture.

## **Factors Contributing to Violence**

### *An Overview*

The American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth (1991) summarized the existing literature on risk factors for youth violence. Included among its developmental antecedents were biological factors, child rearing conditions, ineffective parenting, emotional and cognitive development, child temperament, gender differences, and relations with peers. Some of the environmental factors include poverty, unemployment, discrimination, substance abuse, availability of guns, and the media. Again, however, there is a lack of comparison on the degree of influence that these risk factors have on the violent action itself and on the perpetrator based on his/her ethnic membership.

### *Individual Influences*

The American Psychological Association in 1991 conducted one of the major studies on violence and youth. *Psychology's Response* was the first volume of a summary report to focus on violence and youth. While extensive in its research and documentation of youth violence it did not take a multi-disciplinary approach on the causes and effects of youth violence. Instead, it focused on psychology. Cognitive and emotional development are by far guiding forces in the field of psychology. This study described youth violence as a possible result of cognitive deficits. For instance, it was argued that children with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) are predisposed to violent behaviors when the disorder is accompanied by other factors. This study also discussed the higher propensity rate that students with mental or physical handicaps have for being victims of violence.

With regard to physical and/or mental disabilities, such children were classified as part of vulnerable populations (others including gay and lesbian youth as well as girls and young women). According to the American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth, youth with mental and/or physical capabilities are vulnerable because of the characteristics involving their particular living situation.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, from 1991-1997, risk behaviors involving drug use increased from 23.3% in 1991 to 37.5% in 1997. Again, this is critical information in serving our young adults, however, there is paucity in data, which explains the relationship between ATODA use and engaging in violence. The connection that can be made is that feelings of inadequacy may lead to increased drug use.

The research on individual risk factors (specifically genetic, cognitive, and emotional) must expand in order to address multicultural needs and assessment of services if we seek to put an end to youth violence. This is most timely considering the documented emotional problems that several youths involved in recent school tragedies presented to mental health, school

or court officials. A first step towards this would also include the dynamic needs of diverse populations.

Psychosocial variables have been studied to disengage from what Dembo and colleagues (1998) describe as "linear type" representations of complex relationships among multiple factors. Using data on approximately 4000 Anglo, Hispanic, and African-American male youths processed in a Florida state Juvenile Assessment Center, Dembo and colleagues (1998) conducted a study on psychosocial, delinquency, and substance abuse patterns among these youths. The authors sought to provide a more holistic approach to explaining the interaction of multiple variables. A combination of emotional/psychosocial (*dys*)function and environmental settings were combined in their analysis of the 4000 youths. Relative deviance, the dynamics of social and behavioral responses to different settings, was used as the prime theory generating this empirical study on three groups of youths.

The data for this sample were collected from the processing facility, Juvenile Assessment Center (JAC), in Tampa, Florida. The facility's task is to process truant and arrested youths. In regard to assessments conducted in the center, youths undergo a preliminary screening to detect potential problems ranging from drug use/abuse, mental health status, and physical health status. The Problem Oriented Screening Instrument for Teenagers (POSIT) is used as an indicator of potential problem areas (Dembo et. al. 1998). The sample for this study consisted of 1,670 Anglo, 568 Hispanic, and 1,861 African American males between 12 and 19 years of age. While the study focused on several demographic items (e.g. educational characteristics, arrest charges, referral history, etc.) for the purpose of this paper, not all findings from the discriminant analysis were presented.

When examining the youth's dependency history, a strong relationship was found with subsequent involvement in delinquent behavior. In other words, drug use/abuse for this sample predicted engagement in delinquent or criminal behavior. Ethnic differences also arose in the

analysis of data. For instance, the authors report that compared to other youths, Hispanics reported lower mental health and substance misuse rates, had fewer arrest charges for drug felonies, and had higher average age than Anglo youth, had lower rates of detention for property, violence, to name a few findings.

In sum, this study replicates others focused on relative deviance. For instance results showed that African-American males tended to live in more economically distressed environments and have higher rates than the other delinquent youth thus placing these youths at higher risk of participating in illegal and deviant activity. Echoing past research, findings for Anglo youths indicated that they suffer more behavioral problems than African-American youth in this study

When analyzing educational levels and placement, Hispanic youths exhibited the highest rate of academic difficulties. Most Hispanic youths were held back one or more grades in school. What is important to note here is that these findings have implications for the treatment and service of these youths. This is especially true in light of the recent school violence trends. Effective services must identify each youth's problem area, regardless of ethnicity, in order to provide an appropriate delivery of services. If environmental conditions are high predictors of criminal activity and violent acts, then policy must change adverse conditions in many of America's neighborhoods.

Another aspect of youth violence that has gained much attention in recent studies has been that of predisposed intrinsic pathology. While the norm has been to look at family patterns and rules as well as external variables (e.g. poverty, discrimination, SES), some scholars believe that some individuals are predisposed to become delinquent and criminal as a result of intrinsic disorders (e.g. mood disorders, post traumatic stress disorder, etc.)

Steiner et al. (1999) examined the relationship between personality traits and criminal behavior in a sample of 481 incarcerated males. A sub sample of 148 youths was tracked for approximately 4.5 years after release. Examination of this

sample focused on follow-up data consisting of rearrests rates and time out of prison from last incarceration date. The results of this study showed that individuals' personality traits, for this sample, predicted not only past criminal activity but also the potential for future criminal activity. Predictive patterns were significant even when controlled for highly reliable variables such as age at incarceration and previous arrests. It was found that juveniles who display low levels of restraint are more likely to have committed more prior offenses, and they also receive more intrainstitutional punishments than other groups. Those juveniles who displayed lower levels of restraint and distress are also more likely to be rearrested after release compared to other individuals displaying different levels of distress and restraint. Finally, the subgroup with high restraint was more likely to report distress but be less involved in serious crimes than others in the sub sample. While the sample and subsample were diverse in composition, it is quite interesting that ethnic differences were not found in diagnostic status, previous offense, or committing offenses.

Steiner and colleagues suggest that if personality traits predispose some to engage in criminal activity, both restraint and distress are high predictors of such behavior (Steiner et. al., 1999). In regard to policy, it is quite clear that delinquents are a homogeneous group deserving of needs that are significantly diverse. The approach to delinquent youth, from this perspective, should be one consisting of a typology match. The authors suggest that when referring a juvenile to a program or when assessing him/her for release, distress and restraint levels should be used as predictors of reoffense potential as well as degree of crime. Unfortunately, the data were only based on male juveniles in the CYA system.

#### *School Influences*

Bybee and Gee (1982) identified numerous aspects of the schools that can place students at risk of violence. Grades, reward structure, relevance of the curriculum, decision-making, size and impersonality (e.g., alienation of students), and

teacher's belief system and behavior were some of the factors that were described in their article.

A teacher's perception of a student or group of students can greatly impact student school attachment as well as their academic performance. Teacher expectations and perceptions can elicit, from the person, behaviors that confirm the perceivers' original beliefs. In essence, there is a sense of disrespect or devaluing of the students' culture in the school setting. Students whose patterns of behavior do not match those of the educational institution are often erroneously classified as deficient and incompetent. Students are often placed according to their performance on standardized tests--this could become problematic. Unfortunately, these students are rarely retested and continue their education in either remedial courses or courses that do not interest them.

#### *Curriculum*

A minority student who is from a *different* culture may be placed at risk for various difficulties (behavioral problems) if the curriculum in his or her school is not culturally relevant. One clear example is when American Indian children are taught in school that Christopher Columbus "discovered" America. A study by the National Institute of Education (1978) confirmed that in those schools where the students felt they were being taught what they did not want to learn a higher incidence of violence occurred. While efforts are being made to detrack school systems there is no doubt that students are cognizant of their role in school. Minority students are often disenfranchised and placed in lower level courses. Being cognizant of such inequity, students may feel that school is useless, irrelevant and discriminatory towards them, so a way to counter this is by disobeying school rules and authority.

#### *Gangs in Schools*

The previously described School Crime Report (APA, 1991) added to what was known in recent times about the connection between school crime and gangs. Approximately 15% of students surveyed reported the presence of gangs in their

schools. Not surprising, these same 15% of students are more likely to be victims of school violence than those who did not report existence of gangs in their schools. Additionally, students that reported existence of gangs in their schools were twice as likely to be afraid of attacks both at, to, and from school.

Here too, racial and cultural issues are relevant. The same School Crime report indicated that a higher percentage of black students (20%) reported gangs in their schools than white students (14%). Also, Hispanic students than non-Hispanics (32% versus 14%) reported higher percentages of gangs in schools. The number of Asian and Pacific Islander gangs have also grown quite rapidly in recent years. Noticing that gangs tend to be formed around racial and ethnic lines we should be weary of the racial tension that may intensify violence in schools.

The presence of hate crimes in schools has taken many by surprise. More surprising have been the rates of such crimes in some of America's most diverse cities. In 1989 the Los Angeles public schools reported having had incidences of hate crimes (Curcio & First, 1993). Such crimes included racial slurs, graffiti, and physical confrontations. In a Midwest high school shooting it was reported the perpetrators intentionally shot and killed a classmate because of his ethnicity. These incidents occur across the country in any neighborhood.

It is very important to recognize that violence occurring on the school yard must be understood and addressed within the context of multiple systems, including local and national political institutions, law enforcement, schools, the faith community, and the family. Prevention efforts that involve multiple community institutions have typically been found to have the strongest positive outcomes (Centers for Disease Control, 1993; Pentz, 1983). School violence like other types of community-wide violence cannot be treated in isolation and must be understood as a manifestation of the frustration and hopelessness confronting many urban youth today. Excessive unemployment or under

employment, few available educational opportunities, racial and ethnic tension, as well as institutionalized racism are cumulative stressors that confront many inner-city residents and which result in violence and other high-risk behaviors. Violence among school age children and adolescents in many instances must also be understood in the context of learned behavior, which is adaptive. Given the numerous survival stressors and demands facing inner city and urban youth (Cervantes, 1992) the need to link and understand background, social worlds, networks and dynamics of these youth social lives to school violence is essential.

#### *Cultural Influences*

Aside from previously addressed societal and individual stressors such as restraint, poverty and discrimination, there are a number of other stressors that are experienced by ethnic minority students in the schools that may place them at risk of violence.

While it is true that in general, immigrant youth and their parents have high educational aspirations, the process of acculturation may pose a barrier to the academic performance of immigrant and other minority students. In addition, these youths can experience significant distress when their cultural beliefs, customs, and mores are at odds with the mainstream culture. An example of such discrepancy is evidenced in many immigrant families where the children are raised in the mainstream culture. Family conflicts and disruptions arise as the child's level of acculturation to the host culture is in conflict with the parents' level of acculturation. Even if the child does not experience child abuse, the distress of such *intergenerational* and cultural conflict can be overwhelming to put such a child at risk of problematic behaviors including violence.

#### *The Family*

The family, the main socializing agent in a person's life, has often been blamed for the dysfunction of individuals. Though family violence research has focused on domestic violence between parents, it would be erroneous to dismiss the fact that adolescent-to-parent violence exists in

American households. Brezina (1999) analyzed data from a previous longitudinal study that focused on the aggression exhibited by male youths as an instrumental function--a response to experienced abuse. Two theories, strain theory and social learning theory, were the driving forces in the longitudinal study. The first theory contends that delinquency represents a means by which youths attempt to cope with various sources of environmental adversity (Brezina, 1999). The latter focuses on the process of learning and reinforcement that are said to shape and sustain aggressive behavior, especially in the context of certain family dynamics (Brezina, 1999). In sum the results from this study indicate that physical aggression from parent-to-adolescent is more prone to generate an aggressive reaction by the youth according to this study. One of the major reasons why adolescents hit their parents is as a means of averting parental abuse. In other words, while parental aggression leads to aggression by the child, child aggression toward the parent averts parental abuse (Pinto, Ramos & Mata, 1997).

In regard to schools, violent youth actions--regardless of extreme--may in fact be a response to continued abuse on the part of teachers, administrators, or fellow students. Teri Randall also studied youth violence as a learned behavior. Statistics from the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect indicate that adolescents have disproportionately high rates of child abuse. Randall discovered that interfamily violence (e.g. parent-to-parent and sibling-to-sibling) is not only rampant but also widely accepted. Randall noted that violence against peers was accepted at higher percentages than violence between married couples. The use of force against a peer was approved for reasons ranging from embarrassment caused by the victim to the perpetrator, for wrecking a car, to defend ones "turf" or clique, and if a slur had been made against the perpetrator's parents.

Another study focusing on family abuse as an indicator of youth violence is that of Darby and colleagues (1998). In their study of 112 juveniles they tested the hy-

pothesis that states that there is a strong relationship between parental dysfunction/abuse and juvenile homicide. Researchers have suggested that violent adolescents are people with violent, aggressive, inconsistent, and abusive environments and probably have been victims of parental violence (Truscott, 1992).

Results from this study parallel previous studies on what Cormier (1978) coined as the "lockage" phenomenon. This theory postulates that adolescents in extremely dysfunctional and chaotic families may react to intense pressure via homicide or suicide. If suicide, for instance, is not achieved, the aggression and/or stress may be relieved through homicidal acts. Such extreme acts are a means of detaching him/herself from the family or dysfunctional entity. Often times, the "main" abuser may be the juveniles' target. For instance 9.8% of the victims were the assailant's family members. In some, however, the adolescent may retreat to a safer target such as a classmate, a stranger, or another family member. In this study it is important to note that a high percentage of these juveniles (99%) exhibited mental health problems ranging from learning disabilities to suicidal ideation. Again we see a pattern of youth reacting to their abuser. What is quite interesting about these findings is the fact that the aggression that these adolescents carried *had* to be released through indiscriminate violence where anyone became a potential target.

#### *Culturally Relevant Prevention Strategies*

As mentioned previously, and emphasized in a recent report published by the Centers for Disease Control, prevention of youth violence must involve multiple strategies that engage the child, his/her family, the schools and the community. Prevention services must always be developed and provided in a fashion that meets the cultural and linguistic characteristics of targeted youth, families and communities. Prevention activities that are aimed to include multiple sectors of the community have been found to have the strongest effects. The Centers for Disease Control recently provided a list of violence prevention recommendations that were based upon successful community projects

(Centers for Disease Control, 1993). These activities include 1) education strategies (e.g. adult mentoring, conflict resolution, social skills training), 2) legal and/or regulatory strategies (e.g. regulation of use and access to weapons, regulation of alcohol use and access) and 3) environmental modifications (e.g. home visitation, pre-school programs, recreational activities, work/academic experience,).

Traditionally, education strategies have focused on the individual and utilized traditional educational approaches aimed at changing knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors about factors which increase one's risk of being exposed to, or involved in, violence. Conventional violence prevention curricula include sessions on conflict resolution, dispute mediation, enhancement of male self-esteem, and public education interventions (Prothrow-Stith, 1991). This approach utilizes a combination of didactic instruction and skills development techniques through role-playing or simulation and most frequently is implemented in a school setting.

One of the most cited education prevention programs of this type is the *Boston Youth Program* instituted in four Boston high schools, (Prothrow-Stith, 1991). This program included an evaluation component utilizing both a control group (no curriculum) and an experimental group (curriculum participants). Evaluation results revealed a significant change in the attitudes of the participants (experimental group) around the issues of anger and violence. This 10-session anger and violence curriculum was targeted for ethnic minority students and provided the following: (a) information on adolescent violence and homicide; (b) discussions of anger as a normal, potentially constructive emotion; (c) knowledge in developing alternatives to fighting, (d) role playing and videotapes; and (e) fostering of non-violent behavior. Dispute mediation skills training, also commonly used in school-based programs, helps students develop the skills needed to mediate disputes. This often includes extensive skill development training in the areas of communication, leadership, problem solving, assertiveness, and dispute mediation.



The *Community Youth and Gang Services Program* (CYGS) in Los Angeles is an example of a comprehensive community-based approach that relies heavily on inter-agency communication and coordination with strong community participation. The program has three components: 1) Basic Education and Assessment, 2) Mobilization and Action Campaign, and 3) Community Youth Gang Services.

The basic education and assessment component targets the entire community including parents, local business owners, youth, educators, and religious leaders. This part aims at increasing the awareness and the level of knowledge about gangs, crime and graffiti. Important to note is the attention that this component gives the role that gangs play in the life of participating youth. This educational component addresses the sense of belonging, fraternity, ego enhancement and status issues related to youth involved in gangs.

The second component focuses on the mobilization of the community through the development of Target Area Coordinating Committees (TACC). School officials must be willing to work as partners with the community at large in order to effectively reduce and prevent school violence. Broad based community involvement is critical to the success of this effort with school administrators, teachers and other support staff working in collaboration with local community leaders, law enforcement and other community residents willing to address the problems of school violence.

The third component involves the implementation of various strategies aimed at negating the various levels of gang activity within a specific target area. The prevention effort employs the *Career Paths Program*, a 15-week curriculum for elementary school-aged children. This curriculum teaches youth about the negative aspects of gangs, drugs and crime involvement and promotes positive alternatives. This component is often combined with existing parent education and teacher training programs at the targeted schools. Additionally, this component employs a mental health-counseling program for identified families.

*The Public Health Approach to Violence*

### *Prevention*

The reduction of violent injuries requires a comprehensive public health approach. This approach is built on a three-tiered model of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. Primary prevention would seek to reduce the incidence of new cases of violence, or first-time violent behavior. Secondary prevention would intervene early in the sequence of violent acts to arrest violent behavior. Tertiary prevention would happen after a violent act has occurred to restore as much functioning as possible to the individual or community. According to a public health model, violent behavior is assumed to follow a pattern similar to patterns of other public health epidemics. That is, its occurrence can be measured and monitored, and groups at risk can be identified. If these assumptions are correct, then the adverse outcomes associated with violent behavior can be predicted or prevented. (Weiss 1994).

Of the three tiers of prevention, primary prevention holds the greatest promise for programs aimed at preventing violence, even though primary prevention requires a long-term commitment and proactive approach. It requires a comprehensive effort from all segments of the community, beginning with the individual and involving education, community action, social support, and competency building.

### *Community Coalition Building for Violence Prevention*

The coalition calls attention to the problem of violence, promotes and implements prevention and intervention programs, and evaluates program effectiveness. In addition, it provides a forum for influencing public policy regarding violence prevention. The Los Angeles Violence Prevention coalition is an example of one such coalition. Its three goals include reducing the availability and accessibility of firearms, changing community norms so that violence is not acceptable, and creating and promoting alternatives to violence.

In order to reduce the accessibility of firearms in Los Angeles, the coalition is working on developing a baseline estimate of the number of federally licensed firearm dealers in Los Angeles County. It is

also trying to develop strategies for reducing the access and availability of firearms in the Greater Los Angeles region. Finally, they plan to implement a policy designed to reduce the availability and accessibility of firearms through a coordinated public health campaign.

As mentioned, successful programs are comprehensive in nature, targeting several groups and involving various facets of the community. School officials are encouraged to participate in local coalitions and other community efforts addressing the problem of violence in the community. Additionally, educators should involve representatives from the community in the development of strategies to prevent violence. This enables schools to be flexible and responsive to the changing cultural, social, demographic and economic conditions in their community through continual updating and modification of prevention curricula and coordination with other service providers.

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