

## Evaluating Community-based Programs to Prevent Violence

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Although many programs claim to help young people, schools, or communities prevent violence, little empirical evidence exists regarding their effectiveness. Recently, the Centers for Disease Control funded a wide variety of youth violence prevention programs in which the program developers are required to develop strong evaluation strategies. A recent issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (1996) was devoted entirely to the presentation of thirteen school, hospital, and community violence prevention projects and their initial evaluation efforts. In this update, I will highlight some of the lessons learned from conducting evaluation in community settings.

### PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Authors in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* issue strongly recommend building trust between the professionals in each community setting (such as teachers, principals, nurses, social workers, etc.) and community members. Project developers should clearly communicate project goals and strategies. Several of the authors emphasize the need to go further and develop partnerships with community members. For example, in a project involving dating violence, the authors suggest that trusted and respected community members be involved, noting that community members are better able to explain issues to parents and other community members. Authors for another project suggest developing a "community advisory board" to provide regular guidance, input, and review of the project from the community and serve as a liaison to other community members. Some program evaluators also suggest the need to involve program participants.

Program developers also offer ideas for how to establish a program in a community, particularly in establishing rapport. Several of the authors noted the need to learn about the issues and concerns of staff in the community institutions. For example, programs intended for school settings emphasized the important roles of principals and teachers. In addition to explaining project goals and activities and gaining support from staff in community agencies or schools, programmers should question these staff about youth violence issues in the community, attend to any specific issues or needs of these professionals, and provide them with extensive training and support.

## DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

Evaluation studies designed in the field are inherently difficult; program developers must often decide between technical rigor and feasibility. The evaluation researchers who have been studying these violence prevention programs have encountered similar dilemmas, one of which concerns "non-treatment control" groups. Although several of the projects have used this classic design, most evaluators have used "wait-list" control groups (who receive the intervention at a later time) or "comparison" groups (young people eligible for the program, but who did not participate). Some have suggested that a more rigorous test of prevention efforts would be to compare two prevention programs rather than comparing a program to a non-treatment alternative. Rarely are parents or community professionals willing to agree to a non-treatment group, even for the sake of "science."

The investigators offer numerous useful suggestions for types of data to collect and ways to collect data, noting the need to involve community partners in the development or review of questionnaires. This step helps to avoid questions or issues sensitive in any particular community. Evaluators also recommend pilot testing all data collection procedures. Many view collecting data about neighborhoods and communities as a useful way to consider multi-site differences or to consider other intervening factors that might impact outcomes. Monitoring program implementation is both an important step for program developers and important as data to provide to other interested parties. For example, if teachers or other personnel are asked to be part of data collection efforts, they need to see the data and understand the implications of its use.

## SUMMARY

Program developers and evaluators interested in effective prevention efforts will find a wealth of information in these articles. Fortunately, these investigators have been willing to share both the data and procedures and critical "lessons learned" about effective planning and implementation. In the long run, this will help all of us develop more successful projects.

## REFERENCE

Youth violence prevention: Descriptions and baseline data from 13 evaluation projects. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 1996, 12 (5, supplement).

More information about these violence prevention projects can be found at the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control web site (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/ncipchm.htm>).