

Public Health, Youth, and Law Enforcement: Reducing Violence Together

Question

Can public health and law enforcement officials and young people work together as partners to create a safer, more peaceful, and more just community?

Challenge

Community members, public health, and law enforcement all share a common interest in preventing youth violence. However, mutual distrust and fear often exist between public agencies, especially the police, and communities. This mistrust can hinder authentic dialogue about the serious issue of youth violence. In Portland, Oregon, beliefs about excessive use of force and racial profiling by the police have affected attitudes toward police, particularly among youth.

Solution

In 2006, community organizers from the Community Capacitation Center (CCC) of the Multnomah County Health Department (MCHD) initiated the Youth Violence Prevention Partnership (YVPP). This is a community-driven collaboration between law enforcement agencies, community-based organizations, and youth that is facilitated by the MCHD. YVPP builds relationships between law enforcement officials and young people with the goal of preventing violence affecting youth. In the YVPP model, community youth come together with law enforcement officials at youth-serving organizations on a regular basis and engage in activities like brainstorming, small group work, role play, and dinámicas (social learning games) that educate, empower, and encourage critical thinking. This style of educating and organizing engages youth and law enforcement officials as equal partners in identifying the problems in their communities, discussing the root causes, and exploring and carrying out solutions. Topics chosen by participants in YVPP have included youth's legal rights, gangs, racial profiling, and careers. YVPP reaches over 200 young people a month at 8 community-based sites in Multnomah County that serve low-income youth and youth of color. These sites include Self Enhancement Incorporated (SEI), the Native American Youth and Family Center, Blazers Boys and Girls Club, Helensview School, De la Salle North Catholic High School, Rosemary Anderson High School, and two sites in the community of Wood Village.

Results

YVPP is evaluated using surveys and individual interviews; evaluation results are used to learn how to improve outcomes. In 2010-2011, survey results showed that youth's participation in YVPP was associated with changes in their attitudes toward the police. Young people in YVPP reported greater willingness to talk to a police officer if they see or hear about something they know is wrong and less likely to believe all police officers abuse their authority. Interviews with

law enforcement officials revealed that their participation in YVPP resulted in positive outcomes for their police work. Being part of YVPP helped police to address underlying causes of youth violence and to approach their work with youth and communities more positively. Interviews with community partners suggested that YVPP was effective in increasing understanding, building trust, and establishing relationships among officers and young people. Community partners also described a change in attitudes among the youth in their organizations. At each YVPP site, organizations have come to the partnership willing to commit to the process and contribute whatever resources they could. In this way, YVPP has largely been sustained with a shared, in-kind budget. MCHD remains committed to its role as the driving force and coordinator of YVPP. Portland's experience is evidence that a history of distrust can be overcome and that public health agencies can be an impartial convener and facilitator between communities and law enforcement.

Highlights

Community organizers from the Multnomah County Health Department (MCHD) initiated the Youth Violence Prevention Partnership (YVPP), a collaboration that engages community-based organizations, youth, and law enforcement agencies to prevent violence that affects youth. YVPP uses the popular education approach, where youth and officers are equal partners in identifying problems in their communities, discussing the root causes, and exploring and carrying out solutions. YVPP recognizes that all people have a role to play in creating safer communities and building positive relationships can help to achieve this goal.

Quote

"This is an incredibly valuable program, and I think it is truly one of the major ways to create change in terms of the kids and the police." YVPP Community Partner

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