

Beyond Bars

States are looking to reduce youth violence by addressing its causes in a more comprehensive way.

BY HOLLIE HENDRIKSON

The equivalent of about 10,000 busloads of kids end up in emergency rooms for violence-related injuries every year. The journey ends there for the more than 5,500 children murdered every year.

Law enforcement plays an important role in reducing youth violence, but preventing it before it occurs is even more pressing for states and communities. Violence in young people's lives is a burden to the public health system; understanding this has helped lawmakers, community leaders and public health advocates develop ways to curb it.

Youth violence affects more than just those injured. Every homicide touches 10 to 20 more people. Family, friends and the community must live with the long-term consequences of violent acts. Communities with high numbers of violent kids also have higher health care costs, reduced productivity, decreased property values and disrupted social services, according to the World Health Organization.

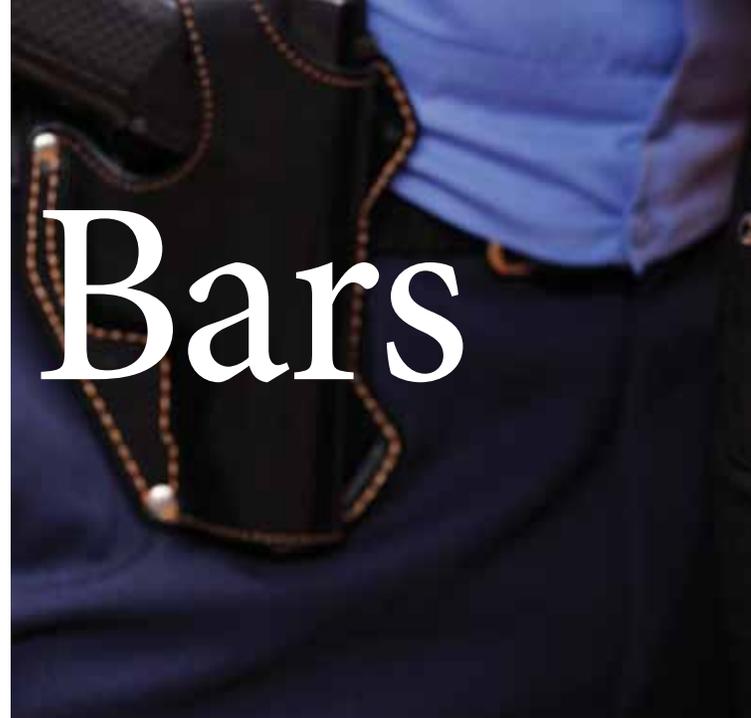
And while violence among young people has decreased since the 1990s, it still costs the United States more than \$10 billion a year in medical expenses and lost work productivity.

The Path to Peace

Homicides among young people, especially among young men, more than doubled in the late '80s and early '90s. Law enforcement responded with zero tolerance policies that addressed the violence, but not its causes. These policies sent young offenders into the adult justice system for usually minor offenses, but failed to focus on how to prevent fighting and other types of violence in the first place.

So the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council, along with Congress and the U.S. surgeon general, shifted their perspective and began to view youth violence as a major public health problem. Beginning in 1992, with money from Congress, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention expanded activities to prevent violence into schools and other areas and measured the effectiveness of

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existing youth violence prevention programs around the country.

After 1993, violence and juvenile arrests began to decrease, suggesting that some of the new programs were working. A 2001 U.S. surgeon general's report found programs that focused on classroom attendance, academic progress and school behavior helped reduce violence and delinquency among kids. But boot camps—residential programs that take place in correctional institutions—and “scared straight” programs that show the brutality of prison life were ineffective.

This was the first wave of effective use of public health approaches to prevent violence among young people and contributed to a decrease in rates in the past 20 years. But those rates have levelled off, spurring policymakers and public health advocates to reassess what really works in order to reduce violence even further.

Taking Action

Community leaders, public health advocates and policymakers began taking a more wholistic approach to curbing violence, looking at solutions that go beyond school.

The 1995 Illinois Violence Prevention Act, for example, called for a comprehensive, collaborative approach to preventing violence. The law created the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority to distribute grants to local and statewide anti-violence programs and coordinate existing prevention initiatives and projects.

The authority received more than \$64.5 million in state general funds from 1999 to 2010, and also received revenue from the sales of special license plates. Evidence of the law's effectiveness is anecdotal, but promising. To help guide future activities, the authority has incorporated a formal evaluation into every community program and has created an online database.

The authority also was charged with coordinating Governor Pat Quinn's Neighborhood Recovery Initiative, aimed at communities hard hit by violence. The initiative invests in counseling and case management for younger students exposed to violence; job opportunities and mentoring for teenagers; reentry programs for youth in juvenile detention centers; and a leadership and job program for parents.

“The goal of this initiative is to build the capacity of communities to provide a wide variety of violence reduction efforts,” says Barbara Shaw, executive director of the authority.

Youth Violence By the Numbers

\$10 billion

Amount lost every year in medical costs and work productivity because of youth homicides (2005).

25

States where homicide is the second leading cause of death among 10- to 24-year-olds.

14

Average number of young people murdered every day.

80%

Percentage of female victims assaulted before age 25.

86%

Percentage of young homicide victims who are males.

84%

Percentage of young male homicide victims killed by a gun.

Sources: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010, and Striving to Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere (STRIVE)

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—BENITA TSAO, A PROGRAM COORDINATOR AT PREVENTION INSTITUTE BASED IN OAKLAND, CALIF.

In Senator Mattie Hunter’s (D) district, the authority has worked to involve young people in the community in positive ways. One community has created after-school programs and community volunteer opportunities that “give children the chance to have input and ownership in their community without having to be part of a gang,” says Hunter. In 2010, its first year, the initiative served more than 18,000 children, youth and parents, and created more than 3,300 jobs.



Senator
Mattie Hunter (D)
Illinois

Since its start, the number of young people picked up by police for curfew or truancy violations decreased from 4,412 a year to about 2,800. Seventy-nine percent of these kids did not return after their initial visit, indicating that the program helps prevent kids from participating in risky behaviors and successfully links those at risk to existing community services.

The success of the program prompted a 2009 Minnesota law requiring the commissioner of health to work in collaboration with local schools, law enforcement agencies, faith communities and community groups to create programs for at-risk youths. Under the law, local communities receive assistance, support and funding for programs to prevent violence.

By supporting anti-violence activities through libraries, the parks department, local businesses, police officers and others, legislatures can play a vital role in decreasing violence. Benita Tsao, a program coordinator at Prevention Institute in Oakland, Calif., believes cities need state support to make these efforts effective and sustainable.

“Preventing violence is everyone’s responsibility, and state legislators can play an important role. We can’t arrest our way out of the problem, and prevention policies must be part of the solution,” she says.

Developing Partnerships

To effectively prevent violence, everyone from police officers to city planners needs to be involved. In 2008, the School of Public Health at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that when cities coordinate activities to prevent youth violence, it decreases.

By creating incentives for partnerships within a community, state policymakers can make better use of existing resources and effectively lower violence rates. Reinventing youth violence prevention efforts in every community is not only expensive, it’s ineffective.

The 2006 Minneapolis Blueprint for Action encouraged partnerships, such as a work team that includes members from the city and county health department, Minneapolis Public Schools, the county attorney and the county corrections department. This group developed ideas to centralize services for at-risk youth and selected the Minneapolis Juvenile Supervision Center to be the pilot for the new initiative.

Kids picked up by the police for breaking curfew, for example, are rerouted from a detention center to the supervision center. There they receive a one-on-one assessment to determine their needs, such as access to mental health services or juvenile court advocates.

SL ONLINE

Read more about state efforts to curb youth violence at www.ncsl.org/magazine.