

Experts call for community mobilization to curb youth violence

March 10 2008

Homicide is the second leading cause of death for all 15-24 year-olds, and the leading cause for African-American youth. In an important special supplement to the March 2008 issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14 contributions from a diverse group of researchers and an article by U.S. Senator Arlen Specter address the need to reduce and prevent youth violence and explore some of the community-based approaches that have proven successful.

Rodney Hammond, from the Division of Violence Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, writes, “We have much to understand and learn about ways to incorporate community mobilization into youth violence prevention research and programs and to evaluate the effectiveness of these program components.

This supplement to the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* represents an important step forward in filling this gap. The rich narratives provided by the authors are crucial first steps in illustrating the challenges and varying potential processes for doing this cutting-edge, essential work. Additionally, the available data demonstrate this investment of time and resources has a beneficial impact.”

In an introductory article, “Community Mobilization and Its Application to Youth Violence Prevention,” Greg Kim-Ju (California State University, Sacramento), Senior Guest Editor Gregory Y. Mark (Asian/Pacific Islander Youth Violence Prevention Center, University of

Hawaii at Manoa) and co-investigators observe that, “Community mobilization is the first step in engaging individuals and organizations to address community social and health issues collectively and to direct action toward changing adverse social conditions affecting individuals, communities, and public health. Successful use of community mobilization relies on several underlying factors, especially in terms of collaborative partnership: (1) The goal cannot be reached by any one individual or group working alone; (2) Participants include a diversity of individuals and groups who represent the concern and/or geographic area or population; and (3) Shared interests make consensus among the prospective partners possible. For these reasons, the community mobilization approach facilitates cultural appropriateness, wide reach, and a great sense of community ownership of the intervention in the process of addressing immediate social and health concerns and creating safer social conditions. It should be noted that community mobilization is time-intensive, process-oriented, and complicated, in part, by the number of individuals and organizations involved. Some researchers and practitioners may be reluctant to work with individuals and organizations in communities. However, community mobilization is an important tool that can be used by Violence Prevention Centers such as those described in this supplement to show a new generation of young individuals the importance of research and education in bringing about social change. Ultimately, individuals who blend community and research may lead the “new health promotion” field that attempts to integrate the strengths of community and research, and rely less on medical models that attempt to identify the root cause of behavior by focusing on and treating the individual in isolation from the community.”

Collectively, the articles in this supplement describe a variety of approaches to mobilizing communities to prevent or reduce youth violence. Studies range from discussions of small cities such as Richmond, Virginia to programs in New York City that help youths traumatized by 9/11. An article explains how a small community of

about 10,000 native Hawaiians was able to mobilize against youth violence and substance abuse using traditional Hawaiian values. Programs that concentrate on neighborhood involvement rather than the more traditional targeting of “high-risk” youths are shown to be successful in San Diego and Riverside, California, while in Sacramento, an ethnic studies program has attracted significant numbers of students and helped the community mobilize against youth violence. Another contribution describes a community-based program in San Juan, PR for high-risk youths.

On the organizational side, a Kansas City, MO program identified 12 key processes that can mobilize communities to combat violence, while community leaders in Flint, MI, developed a framework for organizing violence prevention programs that empowered the participants to make significant progress.

Two articles address training of community and medical personnel to deal with youth violence. Harvard University has set up satellite centers to help communities, while a program in San Diego enlists the help of adolescents who have been the victims of traumatic injuries.

Another article describes programs for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. These groups have been neglected in many studies due to perception that these groups do not have a violence problem.

US Senator Arlen Specter, in an article entitled “Making Youth Violence Prevention a National Priority,” discusses the programs he is encouraging in his home state of Pennsylvania, and how he is supporting further efforts at the national level. He writes, “Youth violence has finally been recognized as the public health issue that it is, underscored by the publication of the papers in this supplement on community mobilization to prevent youth violence...As a country, we are working to understand the causes and effects of youth violence. We know from

experts how to identify many of the factors that put children at risk of becoming involved in crime and violence.” Senator Specter concludes, “With the reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act this coming year, Congress has the opportunity to focus the nation’s attention on the issues of juvenile delinquency and youth violence. In doing so, we must encourage a collaborative approach to youth violence that relies on proven methods such as mentoring. Prioritizing youth violence prevention is prioritizing our future.”

The articles appear in a special supplement to the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, Volume 34, Issue 3 (March 2008) published by Elsevier.

Source: Elsevier

Citation: Experts call for community mobilization to curb youth violence (2008, March 10) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

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