

# Expert panel calls for new research approach to prevent youth violence

July 17 2012

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Most research into youth violence has sought to understand the risk factors that increase the likelihood of violence. Now, a federal panel has called for a new research approach to identify the protective factors that would reduce the likelihood that violence will happen. Grounded in the tools and insights of public health, the approach calls for studies that can guide the development of prevention strategies to reduce or eliminate risk factors, and add or enhance protective factors. The findings of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Expert Panel on Protective Factors for Youth Violence are published in a supplement to the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

Homicide continues to be the second leading cause of death for youth ages 15-24, and the leading cause of death for African American youth. More than 700,000 young people ages 10 to 24 were treated in emergency departments in 2010 for injuries sustained due to violence. But responding to violence after it happens is only part of the solution. Youth violence must be prevented before it begins. In addition, most youth, even those living in high risk situations, are not violent and more must be learned about the factors that are helping youth, protecting them from engaging in [violent behavior](#) so that others can benefit. One critical step is a better understanding of the factors that protect youth from engaging in violence.

"We can prevent youth violence and have specific ways to address the current challenges that youth violence creates," said Jeff Hall, PhD, MSPH, guest editor and a behavioral scientist in the Division of

[Violence Prevention](#), which is housed in CDC's National Injury Center. "Our hope is this work will inform the ability of prevention efforts to reduce risk and enhance strengths within youth, their [peer groups](#), families, schools, and communities to prevent violence."

This special supplement, which is the first publication developed from the panel's work, is designed to increase understanding of protective factors for youth violence perpetration by clarifying methods for conceptualizing, measuring, and distinguishing risk and protective effects.

Highlights from the supplement include:

- Protective factors can potentially work by directly reducing the likelihood of violence or by buffering against other [risk factors](#).
- Some factors display both risk and protective effects. For example, at least one study showed that low academic achievement was associated with increased risk for violence while high academic achievement was protective.
- For other factors, the strength of their effects on youth violence depends on their level and may be greater at some levels than others.
  - For example, high levels of school attachment (e.g., looking forward to going to school, liking school, liking the teacher, and liking a class) decreased the odds of violent behavior but low school attachment was not associated with violence / did not increase the odds of violent behavior.
  - Some factors may thus have a protective effect without any corresponding risk effect and vice versa.

- The influence of protective factors and the form of their relationship with violence perpetration may vary across settings, forms of violence (e.g., physical fighting, verbal aggression), and by age. Prevention strategies should be designed to enhance the influences that are most critical among the intended recipients.
- Direct protective effects were least likely to occur alone, and more likely to occur in combination with risk effects. Risk effects were most likely to occur without an accompanying protective effect.

Youth violence is a complex problem that is influenced by a range of modifiable risk and protective factors. High-quality partnerships among community collaborators, practitioners, and prevention researchers are necessary to understand local needs, select effective prevention strategies, and effectively implement and sustain those strategies.

**More information:** The supplement is freely available at [www.ajpmonline.org/supplements](http://www.ajpmonline.org/supplements)

Provided by Elsevier

Citation: Expert panel calls for new research approach to prevent youth violence (2012, July 17) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-07-expert-panel-approach-youth-violence.html>

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