

Study finds nearly a third of Pittsburgh homicides might have been prevented

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(Medical Xpress)—More than 30 percent of the homicides in Pittsburgh last year were likely related to peer violence, not gang activity, and are the type of crime most readily prevented by early intervention, according to a first-of-its-kind report by the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health's [Community Violence Prevention Project](#).

The group's research indicates that 19 percent of the 42 homicides in the city last year were due to peer [violence](#) and not gang-related; another 12 percent were identified as possibly related to peer violence.

Peer violence is defined as a purposeful, self-motivated conflict stemming from drugs, money or perceived disrespect between two individuals who know each other.

Gang activity involves leadership and internal organization, and often is associated with conflicts over neighborhoods, or "turfs."

"Casual observers often confuse gang violence and peer violence," says Steven Albert, Ph.D., chairman of the Department of Behavioral and Community Health Sciences at Pitt Public Health. "Peer violence may have different contributing factors and requires different interventions."

"Peer violence could involve a disagreement over a girl, or money or even a pair of shoes," says Richard Garland, M.S.W., visiting instructor in the Department of Behavioral and Community Health Sciences and co-author of the report. "The Pittsburgh gangs of the 1990s barely exist

anymore. The leaders are in jail—or dead."

The Community Violence Prevention Project began within Pitt Public Health in August 2012. Using data from the [Pittsburgh Initiative to Reduce Crime](#) (PIRC), Allegheny Jail, Allegheny County Department of Human Services, Allegheny County Adult and Juvenile Probation and the Allegheny County Medical Examiner's Office, researchers studied all 42 homicides that occurred within the city of Pittsburgh in 2012 to identify the root cause of the homicides and homicide patterns. In 95 percent of the homicides, the cause of death was a gunshot wound.

In addition to the homicides where [peer violence](#) was a possible motive, researchers found the following:

- 28 percent of all homicide victims were killed during illegal transactions (for example, a drug deal gone "bad," or a home invasion)
- In another 23 percent of the homicides, the victim was an unintended target
- 7 percent occurred due to gang violence
- 3 percent were related to child abuse
- 7 percent could not be determined due to incomplete information

Researchers also found homicides disproportionately affected certain groups and areas:

- 93 percent of all homicide victims were male
- 83 percent were African-American
- 36 percent were ages 18 to 25
- 43 percent of the homicides took place in Pittsburgh Police Zone 5—the neighborhoods of East Liberty, Garfield, Lincoln-Lemington, Larimer and Homewood

Information beyond a victim's gender, race, age and location from these reports was very limited, so researchers gathered additional information by attending community and coalition meetings, conducting informal interviews and engaging in community outreach. Researchers sought to understand the victim's relationship with the suspect, evidence of previous conflicts, potential motives, family history of violence, the victim's occupation and length of stay at his current residence.

In addition, researchers facilitated eight "homicide review group" meetings from January to June 2013. The review groups comprised community members in the neighborhoods where homicides occurred the previous year. Researchers wanted to focus on the unique characteristics and dynamics of these neighborhoods, generate additional information about the homicides and brainstorm interventions.

"We need programs that will get these young men safely through the 'killing years,'" says Mr. Garland. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the risk of becoming a victim of [gun violence](#) is highest from ages 15 to 24.

The Prevention Project researchers recommend engaging individuals and families at risk for violence in non-traditional settings, including emergency room trauma departments.

"This is the best time for a 'teachable moment,'" says Dr. Albert. "A specialized team of trained peer mentors can meet with family members in the waiting room. It's a way to drive home the potential outcomes of gun violence."

The Prevention Project's recommendation is modeled after a program developed by the National Network of Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Programs. All four hospitals providing Level 1 trauma services in Allegheny County have agreed to host the program.

Researchers also propose enhancing the [homicide](#) review process with community partners to examine missed opportunities for prevention and intervention.

Provided by University of Pittsburgh

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