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Author(s): Eileen M. Ahlin, Ph.D., Maria João Lobo
Antunes, Ph.D.

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Addressing Youth Violence and Victimization from an Environmental Perspective



A resource guide for practitioners



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Eileen M. Ahlin, Ph.D. and Maria João Lobo Antunes, Ph.D.

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The Project

This resource guide highlights youth violence from an environmental perspective. It incorporates various contextual elements that influence whether a youth engages in violent behaviors. It also acknowledges that youth can experience violence committed by others in their communities.

This combination of violent behaviors and exposure to community violence is often a two-way street: involvement in violent activities can increase violent victimization while being a direct or indirect target of violent victimization sometimes leads youth to engage in violence. We hope the overlap between these two types of community violence becomes clearer by addressing both in tandem.

After an introduction, the resource guide roots violence in structural and environmental, often called ecological, contexts. The structural context of a community shapes whether youth are more or less likely to engage in violence themselves, and their chances of crossing paths with others who commit violent acts. An environmental context is made up of the elements that shape where and how youths live, learn, and play such as neighborhoods, family, schools, peers, and personal characteristics.

The section titled “Ecological Context of Violence” provides an environmental perspective of violence. It offers an overview of the different ways youth experience violence and places these encounters in various environmental aspects of youths’ lives. These different areas of influence – neighborhoods, family, schools, peers, and personal characteristics - can help protect youth from violence at multiple angles; addressing more than one of these aspects allows for a holistic approach by focusing on many risk and protective factors. In this section we provide an overview of the state of science and how research can supplement the work of practitioners. The research highlighted reflects identifiable risk factors that could signal cause for concern and potential intervention as well as opportunities to strengthen protective factors that would serve as either interventions or preventive measures. Current research on each of these aspects is summarized to lay a foundation for the broader goal of outlining a set of best practices derived from current approaches for use by practitioners (e.g., social workers, probation officers, police officers) working with youth who are in danger of violent behavior and victimization.

Youth engagement in violent behaviors and exposure to community violence is a concern across the Nation; and specific attention to certain vulnerable populations is warranted because of structural differences in contexts across communities. All practitioners are facing the issues highlighted in this resource guide though there are vulnerable populations such as minority and immigrant youth who are at increased risk of the types of violence covered in the pages of this guide. To address these specific needs, the practicality of cultural competence and sensitivity for working with youth from different backgrounds is addressed.

The resource guide concludes with a list of current approaches to youth violence and resources available to practitioners who seek to delve more deeply into specific programs and practices to address this public health problem in their community.

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1. Introduction

The focus of this resource guide is on violence that happens in the community, often referred to as street violence, with an emphasis on the current state of knowledge and research. This type of violence can infect healthy communities as well as contribute to the worsening of conditions in neighborhoods crippled by social problems like poverty and drug addiction. This resource guide embraces an environmental perspective that considers various aspects of a broad and holistic-focused framework. Such a broad perspective is essential for working across a variety of risk and protective factors and forging a multipronged approach to addressing violence and victimization.

1.1 Why focus on youth violence?

Violence is one of the leading causes of death for young people between the ages of 5 and 14.¹ It becomes the second leading cause of death for 15- to 24-year olds with African American and Hispanic youth more likely than Whites to experience violence in their communities.²⁻⁴

Youth are impacted by different types of violence and the more pervasive forms of violence are commonly characterized as street violence. Street violence in community settings, outside of the home or school, is responsible for a greater proportion of youth experiences with such expression of aggression, particularly among adolescents and young adults.⁵ The literature also shows that violence occurring in the community is more common in densely populated areas than in rural areas.⁶

Street violence, including homicide, is also primarily perpetrated by youth in this age range.⁷ Though violent crimes among those youth ages 10-17 have declined substantially since 1980,⁸ youth remain more frequently exposed to this type of violence than other acts of violence such as school shootings.⁹

Engagement in violent behavior often serves as an entry point to the criminal justice system seriously altering a youth's trajectory and how their life unfolds. It likely leads to additional

encounters with police or corrections;¹⁰ may contribute to the use of illegal substances or misuse of alcohol;¹¹ and can reduce their chances for future success (e.g., job opportunities).¹²

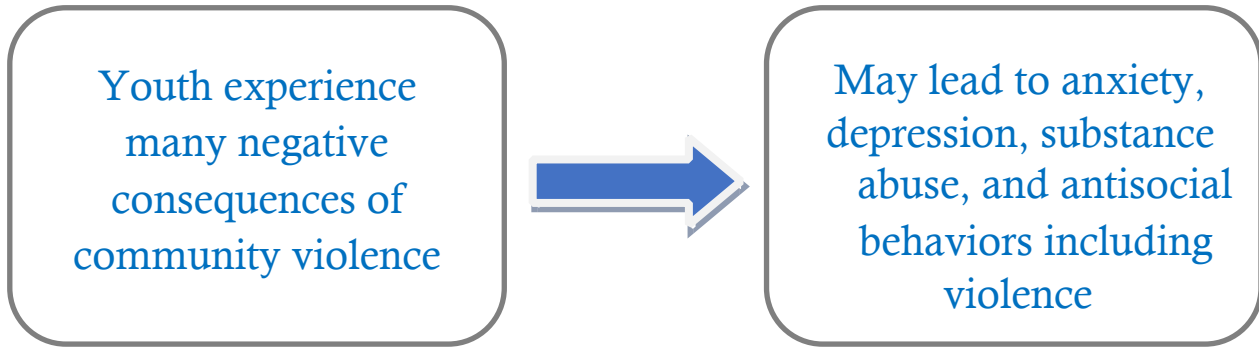
1.2 What is exposure to community violence?

Youth are exposed to violence in their communities in two distinct ways: as the direct victim of a violent act or as witness to the use of violence that may result in the victimization of someone else. By discussing violence broadly, we move the conversation beyond the limited view of personal involvement in violent behavior to include primary or direct, and secondary or indirect, experiences with violence. More specifically, direct exposure to violence includes being the primary victim of a violent behavior while indirect exposure includes witnessing violent acts first-hand and hearing about such violence from other people. Both types of exposure to violence are damaging to youth well-being, potentially leading to further involvement in violence and substance use in addition to a myriad of other maladaptive behaviors.¹³



1.3 What are the consequences of violence?

Youth who experience violence in their community frequently suffer negative consequences related to such exposure and are at risk for a host of destructive and damaging effects. These include violent and other illegal behaviors, mental health concerns, “risky” attitudes, lower school achievement, and poor health.¹⁴



General health

Longer-term impacts of exposure to community violence include lower socioeconomic status in adulthood¹⁵ and health-related concerns including poor self-rated health, particularly by women.¹⁶ Exposure to community violence also increases stress levels,¹⁷ and cortisol reactivity which can lead to chronic disease, weight gain, and other serious health risks.¹⁸

Youth who witness or directly experience violence in their community are more likely to engage in harmful behaviors like substance abuse and excessive drinking,¹⁹ and may even become involved in violent acts themselves.²⁰

The impact of exposure to violence on health-related behaviors may be gendered. For example, girls who witness violence are more likely to engage in risky sexual practices and those who both witness violence and are victimized are at 3 to 6 times greater risk of having suicidal ideations or attempting suicide.²¹

Mental health

The short- and long-term implications for youth who directly experience violence at the hands of others are serious and include impaired mental health.²²⁻²³ Exposure to community violence increases externalizing behaviors such as aggression,²⁴ while also contributing to internalizing behaviors including anxiety²⁵ and depression.²⁶ Moreover, exposure to community violence often leads to higher levels of psychological distress.²⁷ These harmful consequences are particularly prevalent among African American youths, females, and younger children.²⁸⁻²⁹

Internalizing disorders such as anxiety and depression³⁰ and post-traumatic stress disorder are more common among youth who are prone to developing externalizing conduct issues like antisocial behavior,³¹ aggression,³² desensitization to violence,³³ and hostility towards their peers.³⁴ The presence of both internalizing and externalizing disorders amplifies the negative effects of violence.

Education

The damaging effects of exposure to community violence are experienced in various contexts and often create or worsen additional challenges felt by youth. Chronic experiences with community violence and victimization can impact academic competence and attachment to school. Youth exposed to community violence are more likely to drop out of school³⁵ and have lower achievement scores. There are causes for concern even among younger youth as community violence significantly decreases children's IQ as well as their reading ability at early ages.³⁶



1.4 Youth-community dynamic

Community violence can also influence youth perceptions of their environment. Higher rates of community violence are associated with an external locus of control. This suggests that youth who experience community violence perceive themselves to have limited control over their environment and the events that occur there.³⁷ This type of learned helplessness can reduce a person's sense of agency over their future and may consequently increase likelihood of deviant behavior.³⁸

The cascading effects of violence are also seen in youth relationships with law enforcement officers. Experiencing violence in one's neighborhood can also lead to increased distrust of police³⁹ and may contribute to a youths' own involvement in violent and aggressive behaviors.⁴⁰⁻

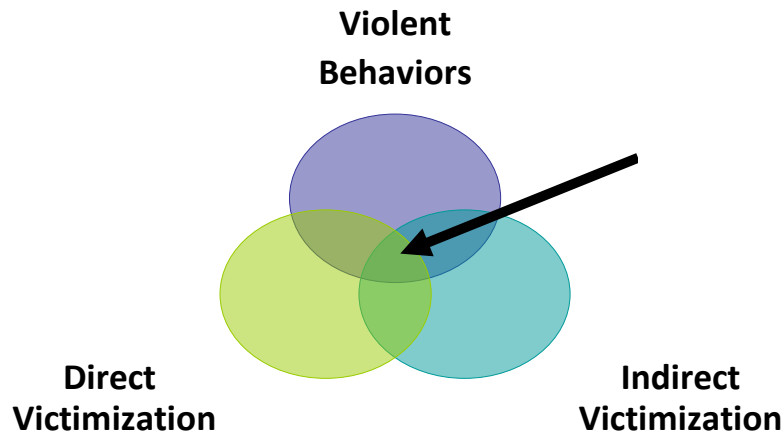
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1.5 Overlap of experiences with violence

These varied types of violence – violent behavior perpetrated by youth, indirect violent victimization, and direct violent victimization – can occur independently. They may also overlap or happen simultaneously in a trifecta of community violence. The nexus of violent activity creates a cumulative risk point for the consequences associated with exposure to such violence. It is here, at these critical junctures, that youth have the greatest need for intervention and prevention. The relationship between victimization and engagement in violence is most harmful as violence begets violence. Exposure to community violence has direct and long-lasting effects on youth delinquency⁴⁴⁻⁴⁵ but has also been shown to affect criminal behavior well into adulthood.⁴⁶ It is important to understand what fuels violence and the different ways it manifests itself.

Nexus of community violence



2. Structural Influences on Violence

Youth have varying levels of risk for the types of violence addressed in this resource book, with respect to both perpetration and victimization. Some are more likely to engage in violent behaviors, while others have more opportunities to experience violence at the hands of others. And a few are involved in both, committing violent acts and becoming victims of violence, frequently because of engagement in violence.

Many of the risks associated with violence are individual based. However, there are also certain characteristics of the community – structural influences – that can amplify risk on a larger scale. Structural influences over individual experiences with violence operate systematically to create disadvantage for certain individuals. These structural influences include conditions such as concentrated poverty, neighborhood disorder, lower levels of home ownership, unemployment, limited access to quality childcare, and criminal justice policies and practices.⁴⁷

Structural influences also include institutional racism defined as “factors such as institutional policies and societal norms” based on race, that reinforce inequitable access to human capital and opportunities such as employment, health care, and safe neighborhoods.⁴⁸ Such institutional racism parallels racializing, or assigning attributes such as involvement in criminal behavior to individuals based on a characteristic such as race or ethnicity.⁴⁹ Racialization has evolved to incorporate immigration status and this new label “cimmigration” contributes to an overcriminalization of immigrants based on their residency status.⁵⁰ The effects of cimmigration on institutional policies are not yet known though the potential for hardship is immeasurable.

Many of these influences are rooted in history⁵¹ and continue in the modern era when Whites and individuals in the majority group occupy most positions of decision-making power. Structured in this way, the dominance of one group over others is sustained. Structural influences over experiences with violence are embedded in society despite improvements in individual-level instances of discrimination.

The structural influences on violence must be addressed. Furthermore, it must be recognized that these effects often impose restrictions and limits on how to successfully tackle the issue of

violence. Such structural influences are beyond the control of youth, parents, and practitioners. There is no one person who should be held responsible for these structural disadvantages. They are economically driven, and they target factors related to social status. They are often invisible though operate to deny opportunities to persons outside of the majority, particularly persons of certain racial and ethnic groups, women, and persons with lower income levels or non-binary sexual orientations. These groups fall through the cracks of traditional efforts to address the needs of youth, as evidenced in social and institutional failings to adequately address violence.

To put this in perspective, envision the burden of existing structural influences as a mountain. The mountain is a hurdle that exists for all. However, if people are prevented from accessing the mountain from the same starting point, or barriers to the top of the mountain exist for some, but not all, then reaching the top is not an option for everyone. Or, it becomes a larger hurdle for some as the structural influences do not operate uniformly across all individuals. This is the case for violence. Opportunities to avoid violent behavior or reduce exposure to community violence are not equally available across individuals, mostly due to structural influences.



Structural influences produced at the neighborhood, school, family, and even individual-level can hinder positive youth development and instead, produce negative outcomes or worsen existing situations. These influences have unique effects or act through each other, amplifying potentially harmful repercussions. Understanding how poverty, unemployment, social and physical disorder, broken homes, for example, shape youth behavior becomes a resourceful tool for practitioners in their pursuit of addressing the negative impact of these conditions for youth.

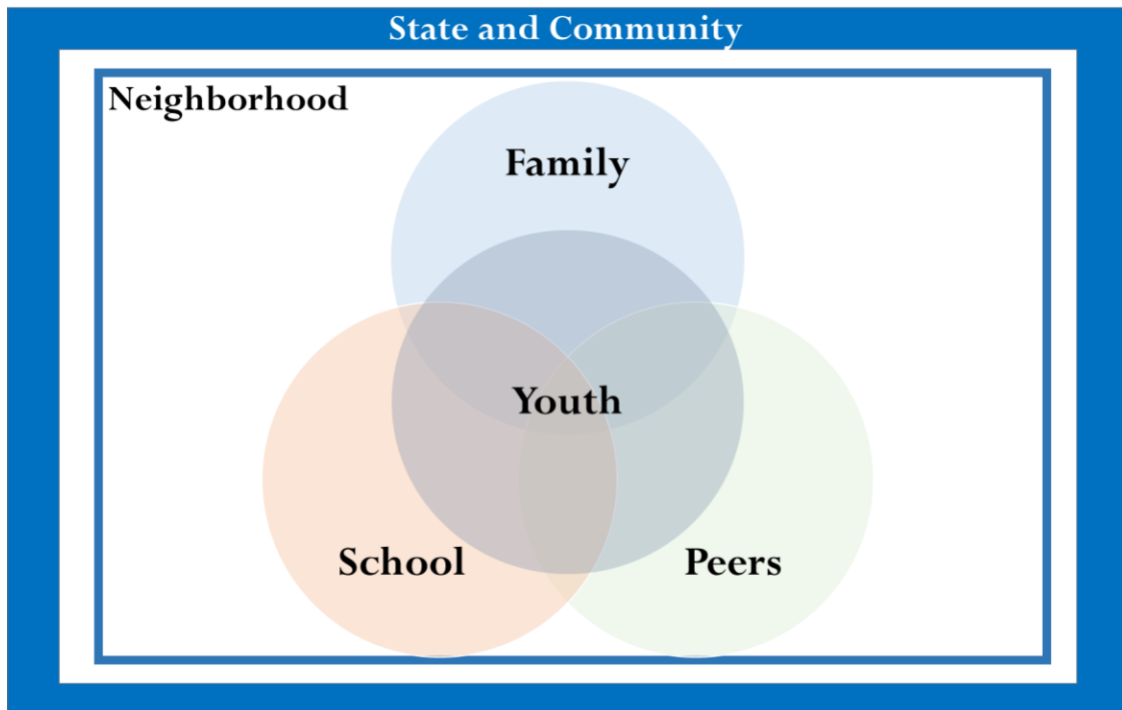
Structural influences on violence inform experiences with the criminal justice system. The way data are collected informs who we see in the victimization data and who is arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced for violent behaviors. Some of the negative impact exerted by structural influences can be traced to criminal justice operations and practices that historically place certain groups at a disadvantage. Understanding these underlying structures provides context to addressing youth violence and offers much needed perspective.





3. Ecological Context of Violence

Though acts of violence are often individual in nature, youth violence and exposure to violence occurs within a greater context. The neighborhood is one environmental influence. Families, schools, peers, and the characteristics of youth themselves can also play a role in determining risk.¹⁴ These various areas of influence are often referred to as the ecological context of violence in the research literature. This model is displayed below; with input from the structural context (state and community) reviewed in the prior section of this resource guide. This represents the core elements of environmental influence over youth violence.



Ecological Context of Violence

Addressing youth violence requires a multipronged approach and each of the elements highlighted in the ecological context play a role shaping risk of youth violence. Different individual and community risk factors that influence youth exposure to and engagement in violence must be understood from an ecological perspective; it is essential to understand the

environmental elements that drive the daily activities of youth.⁵² An ecological approach provides a critical framework for understanding the opportunities youth have for engaging in violence and sources of direct and indirect victimization in the community.

The focus of this resource guide is the environments where youth live, learn, and play; the contexts in which youth experience and are exposed to violence outside of the home. Accurately measuring and assessing both risk and protective factors within a multilayered environment requires including several relevant concepts. Interestingly, much attention has been dedicated to identifying risk factors with less focus on the elements of the environmental, or ecological, context that could reduce the harmful consequences of youth experiences with violence.⁵ Five elements within this ecological context are consistent predictors of increased risk of violence or added protection against violence: neighborhoods, schools, family, peers, and characteristics of youth themselves. The following sections outline the key points of research on measures of each aspect of the ecological context, with a table summarizing the highlighted concepts providing a quick reference for identifying risk and protective factors of violence.

3.1 Neighborhoods

Community-level efforts can reduce opportunities for violence, in addition to bolstering social controls like guardianship that watch over youth experiences.⁵³ **Collective efficacy** is perhaps the strongest neighborhood factor associated with a reduction in violence.⁵⁴ Collective efficacy is achieved when community members work together to reach consensus and agreement regarding the needs, values, and goals for the neighborhood while also actively exercising informal social controls (e.g., supervision) to monitor behavior of people in the community.⁵⁵ Social cohesion and control converge to alert persons in the area that neighbors care about the community and are willing to intervene when necessary to reduce negative activity in the neighborhood (e.g., vandalism, unruly teens).

Concentrated disadvantage is a combination of financial characteristics of a neighborhood or community. These include percent of residents who live in poverty and are under- or unemployed, leaving pockets of disadvantage in neighborhoods related to economic capital.⁵⁶

Concentrated disadvantage can also contribute to reductions in positive role models in communities;⁵⁷ role models that are needed to socialize youth while also enacting guardianship against violence.

Disorder is the physical manifestation of the breakdown in a community's ability to regulate the behaviors of its members. "Visual signs of social and physical disorder in public spaces reflect powerfully on our inferences about urban communities."⁵⁸ Research shows that signs of disorder like drug use, dilapidated buildings, and vandalism signal the deterioration of the neighborhood. There is debate whether disorder directly causes crime, but evidence is clear that disorder negatively affects the housing market and drives away businesses, economically depriving the community.⁵⁹ At the individual-level, studies indicate there are serious and enduring health costs for those living in disordered neighborhoods. Specifically, residents of these communities may experience psychological problems, stress, and depression.⁶⁰⁻⁶² For youth, disorder increases mental health problems and likely increases antisocial behavior and aggression.⁶³⁻⁶⁴ Addressing disorder is one way to help restore the health of communities and protect youth against engagement in and exposure to violence.

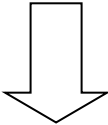
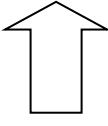
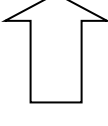
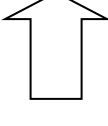
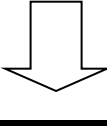


Residential instability, often referred to as population turnover, denotes the movement of community residents in and out of the neighborhood. High instability injures community attachment and cohesion as people divest from community commitments. Such mobility can weaken the cohesion found in neighborhoods high in collective efficacy.⁶⁵ Further, collective

efficacy is depleted as new and leaving community members are less likely to contribute to both social cohesion and informal social control than steadfast residents which leads to an increase in community and youth violence.⁶⁶ Studies also suggest that youth mobility, particularly within urban areas can exacerbate risk of exposure to community violence.⁶⁷

Immigrant concentration refers to the proportion of community residents who are foreign-born. The statistics are clear: immigrants, including immigrant youth, commit less crime including violent crime, compared to native-born Americans. Moreover, highly diverse communities, with respect to immigrants, actually experience less crime and victimization for several reasons, including enhanced informal social control.⁶⁸⁻⁷²

Neighborhoods

Concept	Definition	Effect on youth violence
Collective efficacy	Community’s trust, solidarity, and willingness to come together to oversee youth and their activities in the neighborhood	
Concentrated disadvantage	Percentage of residents who are below poverty line, on public assistance, unemployed, < 18 years of age, and racial/ethnic minority	
Disorder	Criminogenic attributes of the neighborhood that signal lack of care or concern by residents (e.g., litter, graffiti, abandoned buildings)	
Residential instability	Proportion of families that have moved residential location in the past 5+ years	
Immigrant concentration	Proportion of residents in a community who were born abroad and are considered first generation immigrants	

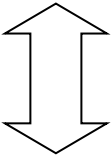
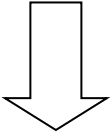
3.2 Schools

Afterschool activities have the dual purpose of increasing extra-curricular engagement in a variety of topics beyond the instruction provided during the traditional school day and to reduce the amount of free time available to youth during the afterschool hours. Involvement in such activities is thought to reduce opportunity for antisocial behaviors, including crime and violence,⁷³ and contribute to positive youth development.⁷⁴ However, despite the best of intentions, afterschool activities may inadvertently contribute to increased opportunities to experience victimization by providing more victims for violent acts⁷⁵ or contribute to a deviance mindset creating an environment conducive to delinquency.⁷⁶ While a structured afterschool activity can reduce violence,⁷³⁻⁷⁴ other activities like involvement in sports may have no discernible effect on delinquent behaviors.⁷⁷

High commitment/attachment to school decreases youth deviance and perpetration of violence.⁹ Youth who are less academically oriented or have weaker connections to their school environment lack social ties that forge a sense of belonging and community. These youth are more likely to be victimized by their peers,⁷⁹ and may seek to create connections elsewhere with other disconnected youth.⁸⁰ Addressing the school community environment and encouraging positive youth attachment to these prosocial institutions can improve student experiences in these atmospheres.⁹ Additionally, positive feelings towards school provide students with the confidence to seek help if they experience violence by their peers.⁸¹



Schools

Concept	Definition	Effect on youth violence
After school activities	Extra-curricular pastimes (e.g., clubs, theatre, organized sports)	
High commitment/attachment to school	Feelings of engagement and sense of belonging	

3.3 Family

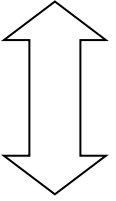
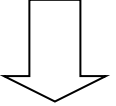
Consensus in the research literature suggests that families are important contributors to youth violence.⁹ The mechanisms parents use to supervise and structure their children's lives not only determines access to the community but also how youth interact with others while out and about in the community. **Parenting strategies** such as harsh or inconsistent discipline contributes to increased exposure to violence and violent acts⁸² while protective parenting strategies including monitoring youth within the home and restricting unsupervised access to the community can reduce risk.⁸³ Much research in this area focuses on parenting practices used during younger ages (e.g., 12 and younger), when youth are more reliant on their parents and interactions with peers are less frequent or more strictly monitored.^{9,53}

Higher household income, or **family socioeconomic status**, reduces exposure to community violence.⁸² The selection of parenting practices can be traced to available discretionary income; many extracurricular activities have participation fees and may require uniforms or equipment. Further, parents who must work long hours, have more than one job, or are single caregiver or head of household, have fewer opportunities to directly monitor their children and may be less able to afford care in the afterschool hours.⁸⁴ Low family socioeconomic status is a risk factor for juvenile delinquency by itself⁸⁵ and it can influence the type of parental monitoring, inquisitive

or controlling, adopted by caregivers. Choice of parental methods of supervision can inadvertently increase a child’s risk of undesirable behaviors, as too lax or too controlling can result in undesirable behaviors.⁸⁶



Family

Concept	Definition	Effect on youth violence
Parenting strategies	Specific practices parents/guardians do within and outside of the home to set expectations and boundaries (e.g., restrictiveness, curfew, supervision)	
Family socioeconomic status	Household income, discretionary income	

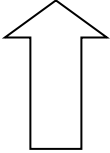
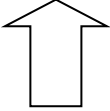
3.4 Peers

Friendship circles are intimately tied to youths' exposure to violence and behavior. Similar to afterschool activities, **structured socializing** – where youth interact with peers in pursuit of a particular goal or objective (e.g., team sports, going to the movies) – functions as a social outlet for young persons. When interactions are unstructured, do not have an end goal, or lack prosocial intent, these meet-ups may lead to situations where youth are at increased risk for experiencing community violence both as a victim and/or offender.⁸⁷ Youth often exert control over their own behavior and choices made about how to spend their free time. Participating in activities like as driving around in cars, hanging out on street corners, magnifies their chances of victimization or being involved in crime and delinquency.⁷⁴⁻⁸⁹

Youth who associate with **deviant peers** are at increased risk of exposure to community violence¹¹⁴ and are also more likely to engage violent behaviors.⁹⁰⁻⁹¹ Though parental knowledge of children's peers may not reduce violence^{53,114} such information informs friendship networks and aids caregivers in determining with whom their children may interact outside of school. Completely managing youths' association with deviant peers is not practical as most parents are not with their children 24-hours a day. However, fostering positive relationships between parents and schools, and even other families, can buffer the negative effects deviant peers have on youth violence. This is just one example of how the elements of the ecological model inform each other and support a holistic approach to youth violence.



Peers

Concept	Definition	Effect on youth violence
Unstructured socializing	Activities with friends/peers that do not have a specific aim (e.g., driving around in cars, standing on street corners)	
Deviant peers	Criminal and delinquent activity of similarly aged youth	

3.5 Youth Characteristics

Youth play an important role in their exposure to or involvement in violence and the elements described in this section, thus far, are those that can, to a certain extent, be changed or altered. Unlike other characteristics within the ecological context like disorder, parenting choices, or peer relationships, youth characteristics are for the most part static and unchangeable. For this reason, a quick reference table is not presented. However, discussing the contribution of youth characteristics to different levels of risk is important from an environmental perspective.

Youth violence can operate in a feedback process for some individuals. For example, exposure to street violence leads to violent behaviors,⁹³ and violent behaviors increase exposure to violent victimization⁹⁴ and the cycle continues. Youth behavior expectations can reduce exposure to community violence⁹⁵ just as having an internal locus of control can limit violent behavior.⁹⁶

It is well established that youth age out of crime.⁹⁷ Preteens and adolescents are much more likely to take part in deviant activities, with older teens more likely to engage in violence.⁹⁸

Another “fact” of violence is that compared to girls, boys engage in more violent behaviors such as homicide⁹⁹ and they also witness more community violence.¹⁰⁰ Further, rates of neighborhood victimization are significantly higher for youth of color² and immigrant youth are exposed to more violence.^{2,3,4}



4. Vulnerable Populations

Youth violence does not discriminate. Anyone could be the target of a violent crime or hear about violent events that occur in their neighborhood, city, state, country, or internationally. Additionally, there is no singular profile of youth who engage in violent behaviors. The risk factors discussed in prior sections of this resource guide provide characteristics or attributes of various environmental contexts namely the neighborhood, school, family, and peers that increase the **likelihood** of indirect and direct experiences with violence. But, this is not a checklist to mark off and categorize youth as violence-prone or exempt from risk. Not all youth who present with these risk factors will encounter violence; just as youth who do not display these attributes are not immune from ever confronting violence.

The elements of the ecological context of violence presented in Section 3 are limited in two respects. First, this list does not include all possible factors related to youth violence and are merely a representation of environmental attributes identified in the scholarly literature using an ecological, or holistic, perspective. Second, individually these elements can place youth at increased risk though probabilities of experiencing violence can be amplified by the structural influences over youth violence presented in Section 2. These structural influences disproportionately increase risk of violence for vulnerable populations such as youth of color and immigrant youth.¹⁰¹⁻¹⁰² Structural influences can relegate certain youth to the outer limits of society. Such marginalization, or limited social inclusion, of youth of color and immigrant youth eventually increases their vulnerability for youth violence and compounds disadvantage. It is important to understand that not all risk and protective factors operate equally across demographic groups.

4.1 Youth of color

When discussing the challenges faced by youth of color, the very idea of race and ethnicity become natural topics of discussion. The notion of race and ethnicity developed from shared assumptions, accurate or flawed, based on cultural heritage or physical characteristics such as skin color.¹⁰³⁻¹⁰⁴ As a group, individuals in society decide what constitutes membership to a particular racial or ethnic group.

The U.S. Census Bureau distinguishes between race and ethnicity based on these groupings.

Race is how an individual identifies with one or more social groups. The five social groups are:

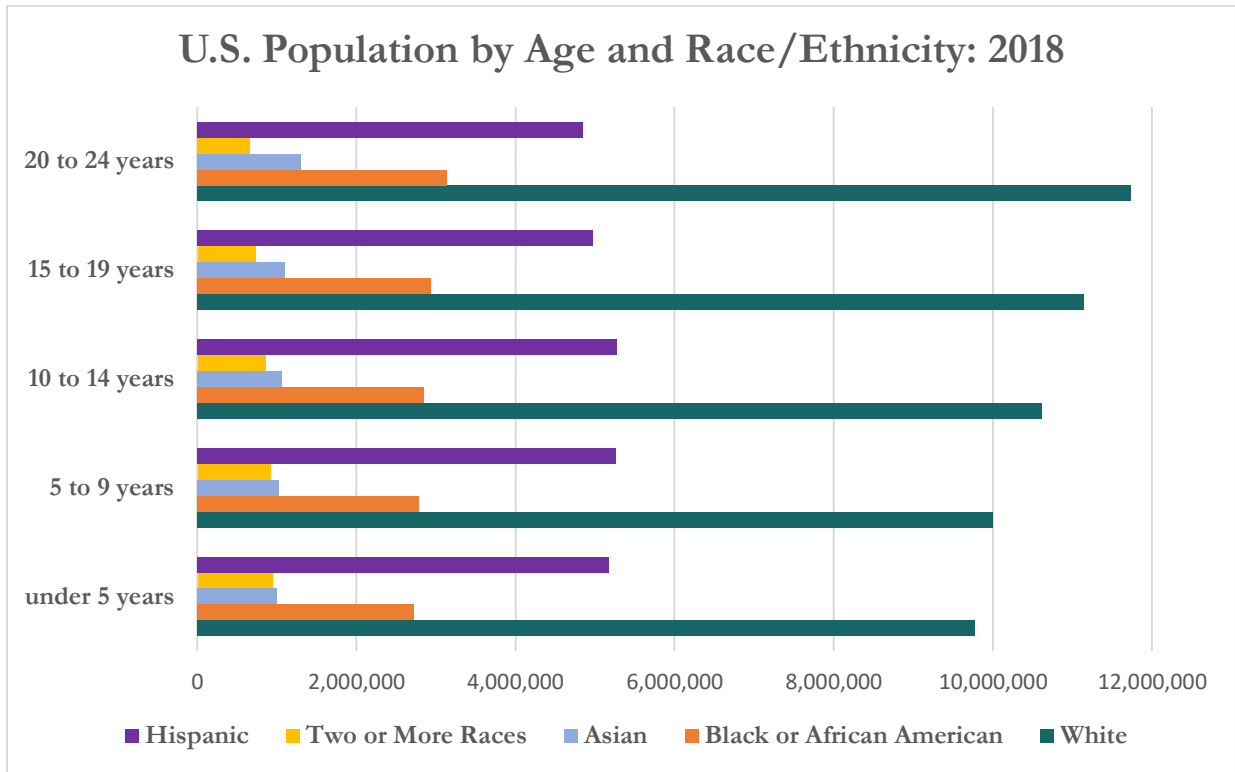
- White
- African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

Youth of color and immigrant youth are at greater risk of violence.

Ethnicity refers to whether a person is of Hispanic origin. Hispanic and Latino are often used interchangeably; though many prefer to use Latino as a geographic description of ethnic origin. Latino or Latina individuals can trace their family lineage to Latin American countries in the Caribbean, South America, and Central America. The distinction is important given that some, like Brazilian Americans, come from Latin America but are not Hispanic and do not speak Spanish as their primary language. The issue of ethnicity can often be further complicated by immigrants from Latin America who come from countries where English, French, and Dutch are spoken, not Spanish.

There are more than 86 million youth in the U.S. Most children under the age of 18 in the U.S. population are White. As of 2016, the number of Latinos in the U.S. climbed to a new high with nearly 58 million people, or 17.6% of the population, identifying as Hispanic.¹⁰⁵ It has been projected that more than 25% of youth will identify as Hispanic in the 2020 Census. The next largest minority group is African Americans who make up about 13% of the U.S. population¹⁰⁶ and 14% of youth under the age of 18.¹⁰⁷

While the growth of the Hispanic immigrant population has slowed,¹⁰⁸ about 34% of immigrants are Latino¹⁰⁹ and America is predicted to continue becoming more diverse. By 2030, it is expected that more than half of U.S. residents will belong to a minority racial or ethnic group.



Risk of Violence

The ecological context of violence does not operate uniformly across racial and ethnic groups. Considering the structural influences on violence, youth of color have a greater risk than other racial/ethnic groups to be exposed to street violence.¹¹⁰

While there is an established relationship between violent behaviors and exposure to violence⁸² it is important to note that this relationship is a probability, not a certainty. There is no guarantee that experiencing violence community violence will lead to violent behaviors; it only becomes statistically more likely, and there are many factors that counteract that likelihood, some known and others unknown. For example, Latino youth experience more exposure to violence in their communities, either as a direct victim or through witnessing or hearing about violence perpetrated against others.^{3-4,44} However, they engage in less violence compared to their White and Black peers.²

The context of violence influences risks differently with some factors having greater influence over violence for persons of color. For example, unrestricted access to the community with minimal supervision by caregivers disproportionately increases exposure to street violence among African American youth.⁶⁹ Neighborhood conditions, on their own, can exert negative effects on youth of color. Residential stability is particularly important for Black youth; Black youth living in residentially unstable neighborhoods experience higher levels of victimization and exposure to violence. However, there is no one singular formula to predict risk.

In addition to the direct and unique influences imparted by neighborhood conditions, these same conditions have indirect effects on youth exposure to community violence.¹¹¹ Neighborhood disadvantage, for instance, increases exposure to violent peers, which in turn increases risk for both victimization and crime perpetration.¹¹² Conditions of disorder affect parenting decisions, especially choices regarding curtailing youth access to the neighborhood. Comparatively Mexican and Puerto Rican youth have more parental supervision over their time in the neighborhood.⁸² Hispanic parents actively restrict their children's unsupervised time in the community, especially in neighborhoods plagued by social problems like disorder. Further, compared to White parents Hispanic and African American parents are less likely to know their children's friends which can increase exposure to violence in the neighborhood.¹¹⁴ With respect to disciplining practices, Black youth are more harshly disciplined than their White counterparts. Research indicated that excessive and inconsistent discipline can have harmful effects on youth development and outcomes, including antisocial behavior and crime.

Interacting with peers who engage in deviant behaviors increases exposure to community violence for all youth.¹¹³ However, African American youth are more likely to have frequent interactions with violent peers and peer influences are more detrimental to youth of color.¹¹⁴⁻¹¹⁵ However, because Mexican and Puerto Rican youth are less likely to engage in extracurricular activities, especially when they live in disadvantaged neighborhoods, it is possible that youth activity involvement outside of school explains the variations in peer influences across racial and ethnic groups.¹¹⁶

4.2 Immigrant youth

The number of foreign-born people in the U.S. reached an all-time high of 43.2 million residents in 2015.¹¹⁷ It is expected that by 2030, 23% of U.S. residents will have been born abroad.¹¹⁸

Immigrants include individuals who were born in another country (first-generation) or whose parents were born in another country (second-generation). It may sometimes be useful to consider differences between individuals who were born in another country but moved to the U.S. at a young age (e.g., before age 6). This group is often referred to as 1.5 generation immigrants and they represented a small percentage (0.3%) of foreign-born immigrants in 2015.¹¹⁹

First-generation immigrants are 13.9% of the U.S. population and second-generation immigrants account for 11.9%.¹²⁰ These percentages are expected to increase by 2050 to 19% first-generation and 18% second generation immigrants.¹²¹

In 2015, only 2.8% of foreign-born residents were younger than 18, while 5.3% were ages 10 to 24.¹¹⁹

By comparison, third or greater generation youth - individuals born in the U.S. whose parents were also born in the U.S. - comprised 12.5% of the population.¹¹⁹



Risk of Violence

Immigrant youth are not more likely to engage in crime than their native born peers¹²²⁻¹²³ and, in fact, immigrant youth engage in less violence than native born youth.⁶⁹ Specifically, research

shows that first-generation immigrant youth engage in less violent behavior than other youth.¹²⁴ Youth from immigrant families do not experience as much community violence as other youth, suggesting immigrant families engage in more protective behaviors to limit their risk.⁸²

Research has shown that differences in exposure to violence are connected to differences in parenting strategies. Parental supervision and monitoring are elevated for native youth, compared to new immigrants. Immigrant youth are also more likely to be restricted by their parents, meaning they are not usually allowed to spend time unsupervised in the neighborhood. Essentially, the time first generation immigrant youth spend in the community is more closely monitored by parents and caregivers compared to third-generation youth.⁸² These parenting practices reduce youth risk of direct and indirect exposure to community violence.

In terms of promotive practices that should reduce risk, like afterschool activities, involvement in church organizations and such, first generation youth participate in fewer, which may help explain why their involvement in violence is lower than other immigrant youth. At the same time, youth who live in neighborhoods with large concentrations of immigrants may experience greater exposure to violence.⁴

The risk of violent victimization in the community is heightened when youth have deviant peers regardless of their immigrant status.¹²⁵ However, the detrimental effects of deviant peers are more likely to lead to violent behaviors among first-generation immigrant youth than other immigrant-status youth.¹²⁶

4.3 Cultural competency

Clearly the U.S. is becoming increasingly diverse, racially, ethnically, and with regards to immigrant status. Cultural competency is a key factor in enabling practitioners to work effectively with their clients. Cultural competency is the ability to successfully interact with people from different backgrounds and all walks of life. It is also the ability to understand within-group differences and celebrating the between-group differences such as cultural beliefs, language, and geographic location.

To be culturally competent, practitioners must be mindful of their own cultural identity and how their views may influence interactions with others.¹²⁷ Professionals in a variety of contexts such as social work and medicine are taking cultural differences seriously in their approaches to treatment and care, as well as facilitation of services. Attention to differences leads to inclusivity by treating violence from a public health perspective;¹²⁸ violence is something that affects everyone though it may impact individuals differently. Responses to violence must also be approached from an individual perspective; one that also takes into account each youth's ecological context.

The need for cultural competency extends across demographic factors. It is important for racial and ethnic minorities as we work to understand experiences with violence by people of all colors. It is also essential to serving immigrant populations whose environment or ecological context may have different components (e.g., parenting styles) than native-born youth. Also, cultural identities of immigrant youth may be disjointed as they try to preserve their heritage while also adapting to a new culture.¹²⁹ These are important concepts that should guide practices that promote protective factors and buffer youth against violence.



Race/ethnicity and immigrant status are only two factors that can contribute to differences in experiences with violence. Other cultural considerations include nationality, customs, social

class, physical or mental ability, military family experience, learning styles, language preferences, English as a second language, sexual orientation, beliefs and perspectives, and religion. Embracing a cultural competency approach can take concerted effort. Some differences, such as race/ethnicity, are more visible than others such as life experiences or family status. There is also not a one-size-fits all approach to working with members of a cultural group. For example, Native American youth living on a federal Indian reservation may have very different needs from Native American youth living in a large city.

What is important is that practitioners aim to understanding the perspectives of others. This allows practitioners to effectively deliver services and programming that address the social, cultural, and linguistic needs of those receiving care. A culturally competent approach acknowledges, accepts, and respects differences in cultures. It aims to improve the effectiveness of interactions with youth by focusing on quality of care that is based on respect.

Programs aimed at reducing risk associated with violence or improving protective factors against the negative effects of violence are often developed and used according to mainstream beliefs and values. Such a focus does not embrace the potential for varied perspectives and approaches to youth violence. Providing programs that are culturally relevant and embrace culture as an important part of risk reduction and prevention may improve their effectiveness and participation.¹³⁰

How can we work with individuals and communities to decrease youth violence among vulnerable populations?

Cultural competency can be achieved through varied approaches and its implementation is specific to the group involved. It may be accomplished by tailoring programs to appeal to cultural differences and values of the group or individual.¹³⁰ It may also be realized through instructor training that provides education and background on the group receiving services; particularly if the practitioner is not a member of the cultural group.

Government agencies such as The Office of Adolescent Health¹³¹ and the Administration for Children and Families¹³² in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services offer guidelines for the development of strategies and services that serve to promote culturally competent programming. Private foundations such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation highlight educational briefs and practical guides that serve as how-to-guides for incorporating racial equity into practitioner work.¹³³ Trainings, webinars, and workshops will continue to flourish as cultural competency gains greater traction and becomes a priority in many disciplines and fields. These surface level adaptations are important though it is also imperative that the structural factors addressed in Section 2 inform expectations for success.



Cultural competence in practice can take a variety of forms when working with youth involved in violence or who experience violent victimization. From an environmental perspective, the structural influences on violence and various elements of the ecological context of violence are key points where cultural competence should be assessed and encouraged. An assessment of structural influences (Section 2) in the community and reflection on ways to address such barriers to success can identify needed services.

The more visible life experiences and cultural elements of youth can be approached at the individual level and service level. At the individual level, practitioners can strive to understand the family, school, peer, and individual characteristics that make each youth unique. Gaining knowledge about youths' attitudes, values, and beliefs can shape the programming that will resonate with participants at the service level. The key is to respect differences and diversity.

The information presented here is a cursory overview of cultural competence. Much work is needed to bring culturally competent interventions to the forefront of the work of practitioners who encounter youth violence and victimization. At a minimum, a culturally competent practitioner and program should aim to embrace:

- Diversity in culture, language, traditions, and family practices.
- Alternative ways for developing goals and defining what it means to be successful.
- Differences in capabilities and abilities.
- Acknowledgement that a goal of working with youth is equity; treating individuals fairly based on needs

The development of a culturally competent awareness that drives interactions with youth and program implementation needs to be approached from the standpoint of being willing and able to make changes, where needed, to attitudes and knowledge as well as service delivery.

In the next section, evidence-based practices to address youth violence are highlighted. These programs were developed and tested with varying groups of youth. These practices are a good starting point for addressing youth violence though they may not apply wholesale to all youth groups, across all ages or racial/ethnic backgrounds, and in varied contexts. Additional steps or changes to a curriculum or practice may be necessary to meet the cultural needs of various groups.



5. Resources

Practitioners can be proactive in addressing risks of community violence. At times a more reactive response is needed to aid the healing process after such acts. Successfully working with youth to address community violence can take a variety of forms. There are several evidence-based programs that have been effective at reducing risk and providing avenues to address violence in its various forms. Another way to reduce risk is to promote protective factors that buffer youth against community violence and its negative consequences. Providing culturally competent programs can increase accessibility and effectiveness among vulnerable youth.

5.1 Evidence-based practices

It is imperative that work with youth incorporates effective practices or programs if reductions in violence are to be realized. What makes a practice or program effective? Often effectiveness is determined by the scientific evidence and result in what are called “evidence-based practices”, or EBPs. Not all programs can be considered EBPs. EBPs are developed through the scientific process using rigorous research designs. The most promising evidence-based approaches will have been previously implemented and tested with different groups. They have been shown to produce desirable outcomes, and they are rooted in scientific evidence.

Programs recognized as evidence-based practices have:

- Demonstrated evidence of effectiveness
- Experience rigorous testing using sound scientific methods
- Significant, desirable outcomes

The use of EBPs can increase the chances of delivering quality services to youth; services that are designed to reduce undesirable conditions and behaviors and increase preventative measures that can buffer against the negative effects of community violence. The use of an EBP will not guarantee success. However, it is essential to ground service efforts in science and the best available research to prevent the use of methods that could harm those in need of protection and

limit failed attempts and false starts. Below we highlight three repositories that catalogue and rate evidence-based programs based on the current scientific literature.

5.2 Evidence-based repositories

The following national repositories provide guidance on a variety of practices and programs based on state-of-the-art scientific evidence. These repositories highlight not only what “works”, or is effective, they also provide information on programs that are not effective and those that require additional scientific information before they can be catalogued as effective or ineffective.

It is essential to note that these repositories are living documents. As new information is obtained, reviewed, and rated, the evidence in support of an EBP may change. A formerly “effective” program may no longer have sufficient scientific evidence to support widespread implementation. Likewise, a formerly “ineffective” or “promising” program may thrive in different conditions and garner scientific support to warrant an “effective” rating. New programs will inevitably emerge. Practitioners are encouraged to visit these resources often to stay abreast of current research and program developments.

REPOSITORY	SPONSOR
CrimeSolutions.gov	National Institute of Justice
Blueprints for Violence Prevention	University of Colorado - Boulder
Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

5.3 Summary of repositories

National Institute of Justice (NIJ). *CrimeSolutions.gov*. Washington, DC.: Author.

CrimeSolutions.gov was established to provide a searchable database on programs and practices across eight topic areas: corrections and reentry; courts; crime and crime prevention; drugs and substance abuse; juveniles; law enforcement; technology and forensics; and victims and victimization. Details on each program and practice include an evidence rating (no effects, promising, or effective); cross-listing of topic areas; and a summary of the program. CrimeSolutions.gov also informs the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Model Programs Guide (<https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/>).

Website: <https://www.crimesolutions.gov/>

Blueprints Programs. *Blueprints for healthy youth development*. Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Boulder.

The Blueprints program was created in 1996 and provides a searchable database of evidence-based programs, including violence prevention. The database includes the following outcomes: problem behavior; education; emotional well-being; physical health; and positive relationships. Details on each program include program information; target population; and funding strategies.

Website: <http://www.blueprintsprograms.com/>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

***Evidence-based practices resource center*. Rockville, MD: Author.**

The Resource Center offers reviews of programs accessible through a searchable database. A program profile describes the specific population and setting where the program was implemented. The Resource Center allows users to narrow their search by topic area: opioid, substance use prevention, substance use treatment and recovery, and serious mental illness and other mental health. Searches can focus on specific populations: adults, children and youth, individuals in the criminal justice system, and women. This site also offers resources specific to target audiences including clinicians, family and caregivers, prevention professionals, and policymakers. The resources include screening instruments, toolkits, and links to evidence-based programs and practices.

Website: <https://www.samhsa.gov/ebp-resource-center>

Very few evidence-based programs are aimed specifically at helping minority or immigrant youth. Most programs are broader, without consideration to race/ethnicity or immigrant generational status and the added challenges that youth in these demographic groups can face. The following list highlights promising or effective evidence-based violence prevention programs to consider when working with youth. Programs rarely can work across all dimensions of the ecological context of violence addressed in Section 3. The primary focal areas are noted.

Evidence-based programs	Neighborhoods	Families	Peers/School	Youth
Strong African American Families (SAAF) Program		●		●
Familias Unidas		●		●
Triple P System		●		●
Metropolitan Family Services Parenting Fundamentals		●		●
Second Step®: A Violence Prevention Curriculum for Elementary School (2002 Edition)			●	●
Adults and Children Together (ACT) Raising Safe Kids Program		●		●
Alternatives for Families: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy		●		●
Child–Parent Psychotherapy		●		●
Communities That Care	●			
Cure Violence (Chicago, Illinois)	●			
Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.)			●	●
Little Village Gang Violence Reduction Project (Comprehensive Gang Model)	●			
PeaceBuilders			●	●
Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (New York City)			●	●
The Leadership Program’s Violence Prevention Project			●	●
The Peacemakers Program			●	●

	Neighborhoods	Families	Peers/School	Youth
Evidence-based programs				
Universal School-Based Social Information Processing Interventions for Aggression			•	•
Active Parenting Now	•	•	•	•
The Caring School Community (CSC)			•	•
Conflict Resolution Unlimited for Middle School Peer Mediators (CMSPM)			•	•
Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS)			•	•
Group Violence Reduction Strategy (New Orleans, Louisiana)	•			
Operation Ceasefire (Boston, Mass.)	•			
Operation Peacekeeper	•			
Lesson One				•
Metropolitan Family Services Parenting Fundamentals		•		
Peer Assistance and Leadership (PAL)			•	•
Point Break			•	•
The SANKOFA Youth Violence Prevention Program	•	•	•	•
Say It Straight (SIS)				•
Six Core Strategies To Prevent Conflict and Violence: Reducing the Use of Seclusion and Restraint (6CS)				•
The STAIR-A program			•	•
SMARTteam (Students Managing Anger and Resolution Together)			•	•
Too Good for Violence			•	•
Violent Offender Treatment Program (VOTP)				•

5.4 Additional resources

Youth violence is a public health issue that reaches across multiple aspects of everyday life. Youth violence is a concern for criminal justice and public safety. It is also connected to health, child welfare, and schools. The focus in this resource guide is the criminal justice system though a holistic approach acknowledges the importance of varied perspectives to inform proactive and reactive responses to violence.

Other agencies provide similar resources to address youth violence. These agency resources can deepen our understanding of causes of youth violence and practical applications by providing a broader picture of the scope of the problem, as well as the immediate and enduring effects of community violence.

Agency	Resource
World Health Organization	Preventing youth violence: An overview of the evidence
National Center for Juvenile Justice	Juvenile offenders and victims: 2014 national report
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention	Enhancing police responses to children exposed to violence: A toolkit for law enforcement.
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	A comprehensive technical package for the prevention of youth violence and associated risk behaviors
U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs	National Criminal Justice Reference Service repository of justice and drug-related information



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