

Evidence Brief

Seven Best Practices for Agency-Based Violence Prevention Programs in Urban Settings

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "violence," "intervention," "programs," "urban," and "youth."

Summary of Evidence: Seven Best Practices

1. Identify a target population.

Effective violence intervention strategies focus on a well-defined population of youth at greatest risk for violence within a particular area. Identifying a target population can provide clarity and help organizations develop an effective program model (City of Indianapolis, 2019). For instance, Cure Violence programs classify youth as "high risk" if they match at least four of the following seven requirements (City of Indianapolis, 2019, p. 24):

- Gang involvement
- Key role in a gang
- Prior criminal history
- Involved in high-risk street activity (e.g., drug markets)
- Recent victim of a shooting
- Between the ages of 16 and 25
- Recently released from prison

As part of this model, outreach workers approach potential participants on the street and attempt to gather enough information to assess a young person's level of risk for being involved in gun violence. Many programs have adopted or modified this client recruitment strategy.

2. Integrate outreach.

Evidence suggests that outreach is a critical component of effective violence intervention initiatives (City of Indianapolis, 2019). Outreach workers connect youth to social services, and help them transition from criminal activities through coaching, mentoring, and relationship-building. There is evidence that connecting youth to employment services is particularly beneficial (Campie et al., 2017). Outreach workers often become positive role

models or mentors for young people, and play an important role in inspiring youth to stay in the program (Campie et al., 2017; Free, 2020). One study found that personal interaction with staff was associated with increases in non-violent attitudes toward conflict (Milam et al., 2016).

3. Recruit and hire outreach workers with similar backgrounds to youth.

Programs should consider their target population in order to strategically recruit, hire, train, and mentor staff who seem most suitable to support and intervene successfully in their lives. Many effective initiatives hire individuals who have ties to the community and lived experience (e.g., formerly gang-involved, incarcerated, or both) (City of Indianapolis, 2019; Delgado et al., 2017b; Free, 2020). Outreach workers who have a similar background to youth are more credible to participants and local residents. Being familiar with the neighbourhood may allow outreach workers to navigate streets more safely at night.

4. Consider the use of ‘violence interrupters’.

Many effective interventions have adopted the use of ‘violence interrupters’, a specialized form of outreach introduced by the Chicago-based Cure Violence model. Violence interrupters typically work the street at night in order to identify and mediate potentially violent conflicts between individuals and gangs. In the aftermath of a conflict, they intervene to prevent additional gun violence by connecting with the associates and family of recent shooting victims. The presence of Cure Violence programs in two New York City neighbourhoods has been associated with declines in gun violence and pro-violence attitudes (Delgado et al., 2017a; Delgado et al., 2017b).

An evaluation of Baltimore’s Safe Streets program found an association between program-related reductions in homicides and conflict mediations conducted by outreach workers (Webster et al., 2012). This program averaged over 15 conflict mediations per month, with staff reporting that 96% of these were likely to have resulted in a shooting without intervention (Milam et al., 2016).

It is not clear if violence interruption and outreach should be separate (City of Indianapolis, 2019). Some initiatives combine outreach and violence interruption activities, while others have found that this makes caseload management difficult. Consider that each role requires a unique skillset, and staff may be likely to overemphasize one responsibility over others.

5. Effectively engage the community.

Methods of community engagement should be tailored to the local context. However, research suggests that organizations should consider the following five principles, which are common across cultures and geography (Morrel-Samuels et al., 2016):

- i. **Establish trust** by devoting sufficient time and attention to relationship-building and establishing connections with local organizations.
- ii. **Build transparency** by discussing the roles of various partners, plans for the future (including duration), resources, and expectations. Consider making formal agreements with schools, agencies, and other organizations that outline the responsibilities of each partner. Create advisory groups with a range of local representatives to seek input on the program's goals and methods.
- iii. **Ensure that communication among partners is frequent and consistent**, as “differences in perspectives, cultures, and disciplines may interfere with clear communications and understandings” (Morrel-Samuels et al., 2016, p. 203). Choose forms of communication that reflect local norms and values, e.g., consider that some communities may prefer face-to-face meetings over email and conference calls.
- iv. **Make your commitment to the community clear** by building on existing community assets to build capacity, enhance the sustainability of violence prevention work, and contribute to the local economy. Consider recruiting staff from the community and partnering with local organizations.
- v. **Make space for flexibility in your program** in order to take advantage of unexpected opportunities, adopt new strategies when needed, and incorporate community input.

6. Mobilize the community.

Visible community responses can “reinforce norms against violence and give individuals the sense that they can take collective action against crime in their neighbourhoods” (City of Indianapolis, 2019, p. 30). Community mobilization relies on the broader community and is driven by outreach workers, residents, and youth. Examples include rallies, marches, and prayer vigils in the aftermath of violent incidents. Similarly, public education campaigns aim to change norms about violence and increase awareness of the costs of violence. Activities may include door-to-door canvassing, the distribution of program literature, posters, ads, and signage in commercial establishment windows.

7. Provide outreach staff with comprehensive training and support.

Research reveals a number of issues that affect street outreach work, including high staff turnover, little relevant work experience, and inadequate training (Free, 2020). Outreach workers are “all too often expected to wear a multitude of hats and be experts in many areas ... to serve as mentor, counselor, educational instructor, legal advocate, first responder, therapist, and probation officers” (Free, 2020, p. 17).

Violence prevention programs should engage in rigorous recruiting, hiring, training, and professional development practices. Focus on key skills such as good communication, problem-solving, and interpersonal relationship skills (Free, 2020). Organizations should also be aware of the stress and trauma involved in outreach work, and provide staff with a variety of supports, such as professional counselling, group support, medical insurance, and flexible time off (Free, 2020). Consider providing specialized training in crisis intervention and grief counselling (Resilience Research Centre, 2018). This can improve staff wellbeing and health, reduce staff turnover, and contribute to more effective staff-client relationships.

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