



“We’re Brokers”: How Youth Violence Prevention Workers Intervene in the Lives of At-Risk Youth to Reduce Violence

“The current findings parallel prior studies that have found youth violence prevention workers link clients to social services and employment opportunities, help at-risk youth engage in prosocial activities, act as a liaison with clients and the community, and leverage resources and support both formally and informally” (p. 15).

1. What is the research about?

Youth violence has serious consequences on the physical, mental, and social health of marginalized youth. In the United States, homicide is the third leading cause of death for youth aged 10–24, and the leading cause of death for African American youth in the same age group (p. 4). Increasingly, cities and organizations are implementing comprehensive programs that employ **youth violence prevention workers (YVPWs)**: individuals who “provide support, advocacy, resources, and mentorship to at-risk youth, many of whom are gang-involved” (p. 2). This study examines how YVPWs intervene in the lives of marginalized youth in order to reduce youth violence.

2. Where did the research take place?

The research was conducted in a city in the northeastern region of the United States.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about youth violence prevention workers (YVPWs). Most participants identified as male, U.S. born, and African American/Black. They had an average of 14 years of work experience in the field.

4. How was the research done?

In order to recruit participants, researchers created a list of agencies that employ YVPWs, and contacted each agency to invite YVPWs to participate in the study.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 47 youth violence prevention workers. Participants were asked to describe different aspects of their job, including duties, responsibilities, as well as perceived challenges and rewards. Interviews were an average of 35 minutes long. Participants received a \$15 gift card for their time and willingness to participate.

The generalizability of this study is limited by the small number of participants and limited geographical scope. The study’s findings might be affected by selection bias, as some YVPWs and one organization declined to participate.

5. What are the key findings?

The authors identified **five salient intervention strategies** used by YVPWs when intervening in the lives of marginalized youth.

i) Sharing information with other YVPWs.

YVPWs described sharing information with their peers in order to ensure safety for their clients and themselves, discover or access resources, collaboratively problem-solve, and coordinate efficient responses to crises.

ii) Collaborating and networking with the community.

YVPWs work with local organizations to address clients’ needs, provide a comprehensive response to violent incidents, and establish a network of support

for their clients. Examples include formal partnerships with police departments, collaborations with public schools, and networking with community members.

iii) “Being a presence” and building relationships with clients.

In order to foster a sense of safety, YVPWs made themselves visible in the community and available to their clients. For some, this meant having an open-door policy in their office, and giving clients their personal phone numbers to reach them during off hours. Many YVPWs became positive role models or mentors for their clients.

iv) Responding to conflicts and crises.

A critical component of youth violence prevention work is intervening in conflicts (fights between rival gangs) and crises (such as impending gang warfare and youth homicide). One respondent described YVPWs as “brokers” (p. 14) who step in to resolve conflicts before violence occurs.

v) Providing clients and their families with resources and advocacy.

YVPWs connect clients with a variety of supports, including social services, legal advice, health insurance, financial assistance, education, and job opportunities. In many cases, YVPWs act as young people’s advocates in courts, hospitals, workplaces, and social services agencies.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This research highlights **the use of incentives** – positive rewards for not engaging in violence – as a key aspect of violence prevention work. Organizations should consider which incentives are available to YVPWs, and find ways to make these more effective.

Agencies should engage in **rigorous recruiting, hiring, training, and professional development practices** for YVPWs. Consider hiring individuals who have community ties and lived experience (e.g., formerly gang-involved or incarcerated). Be aware of the stress and trauma involved in youth prevention work, and provide staff with comprehensive supports, such as professional counselling, medical insurance, and flexible time off.

If possible, organizations should consider **specializing in one area of client need** (e.g., mental health services, homelessness and housing, etc.) in order to guarantee that clients get the most appropriate and effective support. Take care to establish effective **interagency networks and collaborations**.



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