

BEST PRACTICE BRIEFS



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OUTREACH PARTNERSHIPS

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

YOUTH VIOLENCE: SEPARATING MYTH FROM REALITY

Littleton, Colorado—Paducah, Kentucky—Jonesboro, Arkansas—Springfield, Oregon—Pearl, Mississippi—these cities have immediate associations for most Americans. Public concerns about violence by youth have been fueled by the media coverage of the seemingly incomprehensible violence that occurred in 38 schools since the '70s. It is widely perceived that young people are increasingly perpetrators and victims of violence.

This BEST PRACTICE BRIEF is the first in a series of four. It explores some misconceptions and facts about the "epidemic" of youth violence. The second BRIEF will cover understanding the components of violence that suggest intervention strategies. The third BRIEF will outline how one city, Boston, went about reducing youth homicides. The fourth BRIEF will explore approaches to youth development as a violence prevention intervention.

A SERIOUS ISSUE

During the '70s and '80s youth violence was seen as a problem of the inner city; with the school shootings in the '90s, it became a problem for the suburbs. Although the level of youth violence has stabilized or abated in the United States and in Michigan,¹ two statistics indicate the continuing seriousness of this issue:

- **Young people** between the ages of 12 and 24 make up less than a quarter of the U.S. population age 12 or older but **experience nearly half of all serious violent crimes.**²

¹ See page 5.

² C.A. Perkins, (July 1997), *Age Patterns of Victims of Serious Violent Crime*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.



- **United States youth homicide rates far exceed those experienced by other industrialized nations.** America's firearms-related homicide rate for children under age 15 is nearly 16 times the combined rate of 25 other industrialized countries.³

DEFINING YOUTH VIOLENCE

While the media spotlight has been focused on children killing children on school property, the problem of youth violence actually takes many forms. The problem of youth violence can be broadly defined as

*any behavior by or toward children and youth that threatens, attempts, or completes intentional physical or psychological harm.*⁴

Thus, violence by youth as **perpetrators** can take the forms of

- bullying and intimidation

- physical assault
- sexual assault
- unintentional homicide as part of other crimes
- intentional homicide

Violence to youth as **victims** can take the forms of

- neglect
- emotional abuse
- physical abuse or assault
- sexual assault
- homicide

Violence to youth as **witnesses** can involve their presence during

- domestic violence
- physical assault
- homicide

DEFINITIONS

Aggravated assault:

an unlawful attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury; usually accompanied by the use of a weapon or by means likely to produce death or great bodily harm

Homicide:

killing of one person by another

Rate:

number of events per 1000 population

Violent crimes:

murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault

WHERE YOUTH VIOLENCE IS OCCURRING

Children can encounter violence in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods.

VIOLENCE AT HOME

PERCEPTION: Many parents fear that their

children will fall prey to random violence by strangers.

FACT: Most violence occurs between people who know each other.

- Two of every three murdered children under the age of 18 are killed by a family member or acquaintance.⁵

³ American Youth Policy Forum, (June 2000), *Less Hype, More Help: Reducing Juvenile Crime, What Works - and What Doesn't*, Background Fact Sheet #1, Washington D.C. See www.aypf.org/mendel/facts.htm.

⁴ Some sources limit "violence" to actual or threatened physical assaults (battery, robbery, sexual assault, murder), using "aggression" to also include behaviors resulting in psychological harm such as bullying and intimidation. See A.J. Reiss Jr., and J.A. Roth, (1993), *Understanding and Preventing Violence: Panel on the Understanding and Control of Violent Behavior*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Science.

⁵ L.A. Greenfeld, (March 1996), *Child Victimizers: Violent Offenders and Their Victims*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.

The relationship between children and perpetrators varies with the age of the child victim. In most murders of young children, family members are responsible. When older teens are the victims, the perpetrators are more likely to be acquaintances or strangers.

Child Abuse

Child abuse and neglect are a particularly pervasive and disturbing aspect of violence against children. It is difficult to estimate the true extent of child abuse because much is unreported or unconfirmed.

However, nationwide physical and sexual abuse were substantiated for some 300,000 children in 1998.

Another 600,000 children experienced substantiated neglect.⁶ In Michigan, in 1999 some 5000 children were victims of physical abuse and almost 1500 of sexual abuse. Some 17,000 experienced neglect.⁷

A number of risk factors for child abuse have been identified, including:

- parental history of child abuse as a child
- parental substance abuse or criminality

- high levels of domestic violence
- unrelated male(s) living in or having access to the household
- inappropriate or inconsistent discipline

Neglect is more often a function of poverty and/or parental capacity.

The majority of abused children do not grow up to be abusers. However, a childhood history of physical abuse increases the likelihood that the survivors will behave violently themselves.⁸ Children who have been abused can, as a matter of self-preservation, become sensitized to negative social cues they see as threatening and oblivious to positive responses; they have readily accessible a repertoire of aggressive behavior. The immediate consequences of aggressive behavior reinforce aggressive children for further use of aggression. Of abused children, 35 percent will exhibit chronic bad behavior and violence (conduct disorder) compared to 5 percent of children without these experiences.⁹ Children who experience any type of maltreatment are more likely to be arrested as juveniles and later as adults.¹⁰

“CHILDHOOD VICTIMIZATION (THAT IS, PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL ABUSE AND NEGLECT)

increases significantly a person’s risk of subsequent arrest:

- by 59% as a juvenile,
- by 27% as an adult, and
- by 29% for a violent crime.

The odds for being arrested for a violent crime as a juvenile are almost two times higher for an abused and neglected child than for a child of the same gender, age, and race who grew up in the same neighborhood or who was born in the same hospital at the same time.”

Source: C.S. Widom, (1998), *Child Victims: Searching for Opportunities to Break the Cycle of Violence, Applied & Preventive Psychology*, Vol. 7, pp. 225-234.

⁶ Some 205,000 children were physically abused; almost 104,000 were sexually abused. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, (2000), *Child Maltreatment 1998: Reports from the States to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System*, Washington, D.C.

⁷ Michigan Family Independence Agency, (2000), *Protective Services Management Information System (PSMIS) Report*, PS-31D, 10/1998 through 9/1999, Lansing, MI.

⁸ C.S. Widom, (March 1995), *Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse — Later Criminal Consequences*, Research in Brief, National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.

⁹ K.A. Dodge, G.S. Pettit, J.E. Bates, (1997), How the Experience of Early Physical Abuse Leads Children to Become Chronically Aggressive, In C. Cicchetti & S.L. Toth (Eds.), *Developmental Psychopathology: Developmental Perspectives on Trauma*, Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, Vol. 9, pp. 263-288.

¹⁰ Widom, *Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse*.

Domestic Violence ¹¹

“*Witnessing*” domestic violence may involve

- *hearing the sounds of violence*
- *seeing the beating*
- *being used by the perpetrator to influence the mother*
- *seeing the murder of a parent*
- *having lives disrupted by the aftermath of the violent event*

PERCEPTION: Even when there is domestic violence, children are uninvolved or shielded from these events.

FACT: It has been estimated that at least one third of American children have witnessed violence against their mother.

- Younger children are disproportionately present in families with domestic violence and are more likely to evidence post traumatic stress syndrome and poorer cognitive functioning than other age groups.
- Children witnessing domestic violence are less likely to use problem solving and more likely to use aggression to cope with conflict.
- Recent exposure to serious physical violence and weapon use in the home is a significant factor in predicting a child’s violent behavior.
- Among adolescents, girls are more likely than boys to witness domestic violence. For adolescent girls, witnessing domestic violence or being a victim are significantly associated with violent behavior.
- For boys, being a victim or witness is not a predictor of violent behavior. The amount of violence witnessed is a better predictor for behavior problems.

Children in homes with domestic violence may also experience child abuse. One-third to one-half of men involved in domestic violence also abuse their children. The combination is more damaging to subsequent functioning than witnessing violence alone. The amount of parent-child violence overrides the effect of witnessing.

Children who have only witnessed violence will show moderate symptoms compared to those children directly experiencing abuse. A mother’s use of verbal aggression with her children predicts adjustment problems. As in other traumatic situations, positive parenting strategies appear to buffer the ill effects of stressful experiences.

Women who witnessed domestic violence from fathers or both parents as children have more problems than nonwitnesses, show greater number of trauma symptoms and higher levels of anti-social behavior, and experience more violence in dating relationships. Both men and women who witnessed violence as children are more likely to experience trauma-related symptoms; women also evidence depression and low self-esteem, greater distress, and low social adjustment.¹²

VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS

PERCEPTION: There is an epidemic of school homicides.

FACT: There is no epidemic of homicides in schools. Despite the dramatic multiple homicide events in schools cited, children have only a **one in 1 million chance of being killed in their schools.**¹³

- The number of people killed in school violence episodes has dropped by more than 50 percent over the past six years.
- In a nation with roughly 50 million school children, the number of children (26) who died in school violence during the 1998-99 school year was less than one-third the number of Americans (88) who were killed by lightning in 1996.¹⁴

Despite the relative safety of schools, 10 percent of all public schools reported one or more incidents of rape, sexual assault, robbery, or aggravated assault in the 1996-97 school year¹⁵ and a number of children and youths report that they were or felt threatened in school:

- In one survey, the percentage of students who reported that they were afraid of being attacked in school rose from 6 percent to 9 percent between 1989 and 1995.¹⁶
- In 1999, one of twenty Michigan high school students reported that they did not go to school on one or more of the past 30 days because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to and from school.

¹¹ J.L. Edleson, (August 1999), Children’s Witnessing of Adult Domestic Violence, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol. 14 (8), pp. 839-870 (a review of multiple studies).

¹² All of the above material comes from studies reviewed by Edleson.

¹³ U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice, (1998), *Annual Report on School Safety*, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴ American Youth Policy Forum, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵ National Governor’s Association, (August 23, 1999), *Making Schools Safe*, Issue Brief, Center for Best Practices, Washington, D.C.

¹⁶ National Governor’s Association.

- Nine percent of Michigan high school students reported that they have been threatened or injured with weapons on school property during 1999, and 14 percent were in physical fights on school property.¹⁷

The majority of children who experience violence in the schools are the victims of theft or bullying.

Children who experience or commit school violence are characterized by or exposed to:

- a school culture accepting intolerance and violence
- academic failure
- truancy, dropping out
- suspension or expulsion
- delinquent peers
- gang membership

VIOLENCE IN NEIGHBORHOODS AND COMMUNITIES

PERCEPTION: Juvenile homicide is an urban phenomenon.

FACT: While the overall youth homicide rate has dropped, the rate has increased in small towns and rural areas. However, juvenile homicide is a relatively localized occurrence.

- Just five cities nationwide account for one fourth of the juvenile homicides. Eighty-four percent of all counties in the United States had no juvenile homicide; 10 percent had one.¹⁸

Community and neighborhood factors that contribute to a “culture of violence” include

- exposure to physical violence
- availability of drugs and firearms
- high crime levels in the neighborhood
- poverty and economic inequality
- social disintegration
- exposure to media violence
- exposure to racial prejudice

CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE

AS PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENCE

PERCEPTION: Young people are committing more violent crimes than ever before.

FACT: Juvenile arrests have decreased (or remained constant for some age groups).

- In Michigan, in the ten-year period between 1986-88 and 1995-97, the rate of

juvenile arrests for violent crimes dropped by 11 percent.¹⁹

- Ten- to twelve-year-old children account for approximately 8 percent of all juvenile violent crime arrests and that percentage has been fairly stable over the last 15 years.²⁰

Approximately 3,300 juveniles are arrested each year in Michigan or less than 3 of every 1,000 youths in the state.²¹

AS HOMICIDE VICTIMS

Homicides of children can be categorized in three major areas:

- *younger children who die from child abuse and neglect, usually committed by parents or caregivers*
- *teenagers whose deaths typically involve adults or other teenagers as perpetrators, generally using firearms*
- *children or youth who died in situations such as drunk driving accidents or arson*

PERCEPTION: Intentional violence is a leading cause of death for all children.

FACT: Violence is the leading cause of death for African-American adolescents and young men between the ages of 15 and 24.²² Most children who die before their 18th birthday are victims of accidents or die of disease or natural causes.

- Of all children ages 1 to 18 who died in 1997 in Michigan, 42 percent were the victims of accidents, 38 percent died of natural causes or diseases, **11 percent were the victims of homicides**, and 8 percent were suicide victims. Thus, some 60 percent of children’s deaths are preventable.²³

¹⁷ Michigan State Board of Education, (2000), *1999 Michigan Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, Lansing, MI.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, (1997), *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1997 Update on Violence*, Washington, D.C.

¹⁹ *Kids Count in Michigan 1999 Data Book: County Profiles of Child Well-Being*, Lansing, MI.: Michigan League for Human Services.

²⁰ American Youth Policy Forum.

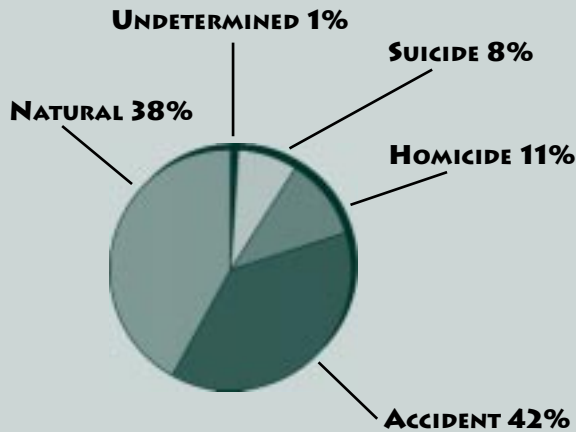
²¹ *Kids Count in Michigan*.

²² Homicide is the third leading cause of death for African-American male infants, second for boys between the ages of 1 and 4, and third for those between the ages of 5 and 14. M.J. Reeves, H. McGee, & C. Lockett, (1999), *Challenge of Lifetime Report 1999: A Description of the Mortality Experience of African-American Males 1990-1998*, Lansing, MI: Michigan Department of Community Health, Division of Epidemiology Services.

²³ Michigan Child Death State Advisory Team, (June 1999), *Child Deaths in Michigan: First Annual Report*, Okemos, MI: Michigan Public Health Institute.

CHILD DEATHS BY TYPE, MICHIGAN 1997

AGES 1—18
TOTAL DEATHS: 888



FACT: Since 1994, youth homicide rates nationwide have been declining. Homicide rates for teenagers and young adults increased dramatically in the late 1980's and early 1990's, but began to decline by the end of 1993.²⁴

- In 1997, 113 Michigan children and youths through age 18 were homicide victims, down from 146 in 1988. Child homicides peaked in Michigan in 1990, when there were 182 child victims.²⁵

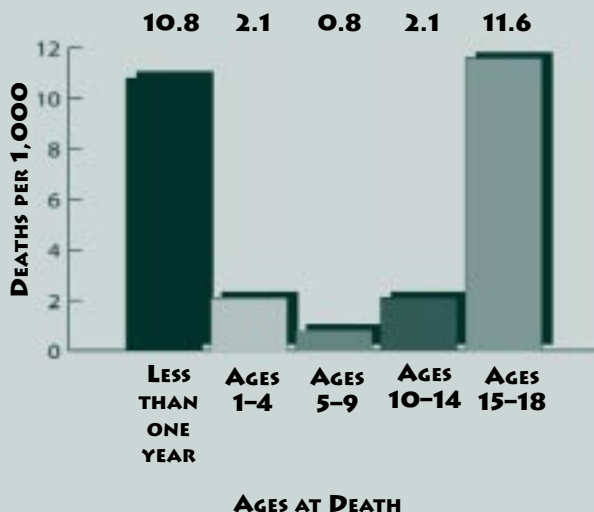
Infants and older teens have the highest homicide rates.²⁶

- In 1997, Michigan teens between the ages of 15 and 18 had a homicide rate of 11.6 deaths for every 1,000 youths in that age group.
- The homicide rate for infants under the age of one was only slightly lower: 10.8 deaths for every 1,000 infants.

African-American youth are more likely to die by homicide than whites.²⁷

- African-American boys between the ages of 15 and 18 in Michigan are 25 times more likely to be victims of homicides than their white counterparts.
- African-American girls are 5 times more likely to be homicide victims than white girls.

CHILD HOMICIDE RATES BY AGE, MICHIGAN 1997



AS WITNESS OF VIOLENCE

An unacceptably high percentage of children, particularly in urban high-crime neighborhoods, at some time in their lives directly witness violence in their homes, schools, or neighborhoods. This may involve seeing someone shot with a gun, knifed, sexually assaulted, mugged, robbed, threatened with a weapon, or being beaten up and badly hurt.²⁸

A more common experience for many young children will be the witnessing of violence in television, movies, and videotapes.

Children—particularly very young children—who witness violence experience psychological distress. They can suffer post traumatic stress disorder, expressed in anxiety and fear, difficulties in eating and sleeping and relating to others, delays in development, and learning disabilities.²⁹

²⁴ U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, (October 17, 1999), *Homicide Victimization Rate by Age, 1970-98*, Washington, D.C.

²⁵ Michigan Child Death State Advisory Team.

²⁶⁻²⁹ See next page.

SOURCE: Michigan Child Death State Advisory Team. (June 1999). *Child Deaths in Michigan: First Annual Report*. Okemos, MI: Michigan Public Health Institute.

REALITY VS. PUBLIC PERCEPTION

40%

The decrease in school-associated violent deaths between the school years 1997-98 and 1998-99

49%

The increase in persons who fear a school shooting in their communities from 1998-99

1 in 1 million

The chance that a school-aged child would die in school in 1998-99

71%

The percentage who thought that a school shooting was "likely" to happen in their community

56%

The decline in juvenile homicide arrests nationally between 1992 and 1998

62%

The percent of persons who believe that juvenile homicides are on the increase

4%

The portion of juvenile homicides that occur in rural areas

First

The rank of rural parents in fear for their children's safety in schools vs. urban and suburban parents

SOURCE: K. Brooks, V. Schiraldi, & J. Ziedenberg, (1999), *School House Hype: Two Years Later*, Justice Policy Institute, Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, Washington, D.C. See: www.cjcj.org.

PREVENTING VIOLENCE BY YOUTH

The myths and facts surrounding violence by youth suggest that the complexity of this issue thwart the search by policymakers and the public for a quick fix or "silver bullet." A manageable theory, assump-

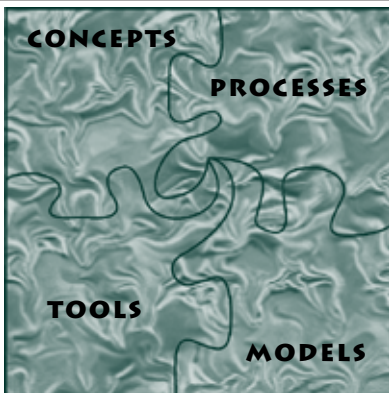
tions, and constructs are necessary before viable actions can be taken. The next **BRIEFS** will explore a framework that suggests effective approaches to the reduction of violence by youth, as well as the experience in one community that substantially reduced its juvenile homicide rate.

²⁶ Michigan Child Death State Advisory Team.

²⁷ Michigan Child Death State Advisory Team.

²⁸ Seventy two percent of a representative sample of 4023 adolescents had witnessed one or more episodes of violence; 30% had directly observed someone being beaten up and badly hurt; 43 percent of male adolescents and 35 percent of female adolescents had witnessed one or more of the other forms of violence firsthand. D. Kilpatrick and B. Saunders, *The Prevalence and Consequences of Child Victimization*, Reported in National Institute of Justice Research Preview, (April 1997), U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. In a Chicago study 88 percent had seen someone hit; 66 percent had heard live gunfire; as many as 30 percent had seen a shooting; 24 percent had seen an apparent murder victim in the last year. Higher levels of exposure to violence were reported by those who were male, older adolescents, and African-American. The level of exposure to violence also varied by the neighborhood in which the young people lived: 35 percent of those who lived in a high-crime neighborhood had witnessed a shooting in the past year, compared to 2 percent of those who lived in a low-crime neighborhood. U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, (November 1996), *Assessing the Exposure of Urban Youth to Violence: A Summary of a Pilot Study from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods*, Washington, D.C.

²⁹ J. Osofsky, (1995), The Effects of Exposure to Violence on Young Children, *American Psychology*, Vol. 550, pp. 782-788.



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