Understanding

Youth Violence

Youth violence refers to harmful behaviors that can start early and continue into young adulthood. The young person can be a victim, an offender, or a witness to the violence.

Youth violence includes various behaviors. Some violent acts—such as bullying, slapping, or hitting—can cause more emotional harm than physical harm. Others, such as robbery, assault, or rape, can lead to serious injury or even death.

Why is youth violence a public health problem?

Youth violence is widespread in the United States (U.S.). It is the second leading cause of death for young people between the ages of 10 and 24.[1]

• 5,686 young people age 10 to 24 were murdered—an average of 16 each day—in 2005.[1]

• Over 720,000 violence-related injuries in young people age 10 to 24 were treated in U.S. emergency rooms in 2006.[1]

• In a 2005 nationwide survey, 36% of high school students reported being in a physical fight during the past 12 months.[2]

• Nearly 7% of high school students in 2005 reported taking a gun, knife, or club to school in the 30 days before the survey.[2]

• An estimated 30% of kids between 6th and 10th grade report being involved in bullying.[3]

How does youth violence affect health?

Deaths resulting from youth violence are only part of the problem. Many young people seek medical care for violence-related injuries. These injuries can include cuts, bruises, broken bones, and gunshot wounds. Some injuries, like gunshot wounds, can lead to lasting disabilities.

Violence can also affect the health of communities. It can increase health care costs, decrease property values, and disrupt social services.[4] The cost of youth violence exceeds $158 billion each year.[5]

Who is at risk for youth violence?

A number of factors can increase the risk of a youth engaging in violence. However, the presence of these factors does not always mean that a young person will become an offender.

Risk factors for youth violence include:

• Prior history of violence
• Drug, alcohol, or tobacco use
• Association with delinquent peers
• Poor family functioning
• Poor grades in school
• Poverty in the community

Note: This is a partial list of risk factors. For more information, see www.cdc.gov/injury.

How can we prevent youth violence?

The ultimate goal is to stop youth violence before it starts. Several prevention strategies have been identified.

• Parent- and family-based programs improve family relations. Parents receive training on child development. They also learn skills for talking with their kids and solving problems in nonviolent ways.

• Social-development strategies teach children how to handle tough social situations. They learn how to resolve problems without using violence.

• Mentoring programs pair an adult with a young person. The adult serves as a positive role model and helps guide the young person's behavior.

• Changes can be made to the physical and social environment. These changes address the social and economic causes of violence.

How does CDC approach youth violence prevention?

CDC uses a 4-step approach to address public health problems like youth violence.

Step 1: Define the problem
Before we can prevent youth violence, we need to know how big the problem is, where it is, and whom it affects. CDC learns about a problem by gathering and studying data. These data are critical because they help decision makers send resources where they are needed most.

Step 2: Identify risk and protective factors
It is not enough to know that youth violence is affecting a certain group of people in a certain area. We also need to know why. CDC conducts and supports research to answer this question. We can then develop programs to reduce or get rid of risk factors.

Step 3: Develop and test prevention strategies
Using information gathered in research, CDC develops and tests strategies to prevent youth violence.

Step 4: Ensure widespread adoption
In this final step, CDC shares the best prevention strategies. CDC may also provide funding or technical help so communities can adopt these strategies.

For a list of CDC activities, see *Preventing Youth Violence: Program Activities Guide* (www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/yvguide.htm).

Where can I learn more?

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov/injury

National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center
www.safeyouth.org

Stop Bullying Now Campaign
www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov

Surgeon General's Report on Youth Violence
www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence

References

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3. Nansel TR, Overpeck M, Pilla RS, Ruan WJ, Simons-Morton B, Scheidt P. Bullying behaviors among US youth: prevalence and association with psychosocial adjustment. Journal of the American Medical Association 2001;285(16):2094–100.

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