

Sectors Connect To Prevent Youth Violence in Boston, Massachusetts

How do you get everyone on the same page when it comes to preventing youth violence?

The Challenge

Grassroots groups in many of Boston's tightly knit neighborhoods worked hard to protect youth from harm. At the same time, city agencies did their best to promote the health and safety of city residents. There was just one problem. These grassroots groups rarely spoke to each other. And they didn't always communicate well with government agencies.

The Solution

The groups in Boston who work with youth saw that violence affected every part of the city. Their solution? Step by step, they began to forge partnerships—a work in progress. Three key factors helped move everyone closer together:

- Coordinating the work,
- Sharing quality data, and
- Building collaborative relationships.

Coordinating the Work—To start with, Boston had a great asset in its progressive city government. Led by Mayor Thomas Menino, city agencies have made healthy youth their priority. Among other efforts, city agencies pooled their insight and resources in:

- Connecting families to schools
- Providing one-on-one support to high risk kids via youth development specialists
- Launching a cyber-safety media campaign, created by students
- Promoting peace through a joint effort with youth, residents, and community groups
- Using social networks for a youth-led anti-violence campaign

Sharing Quality Data— Getting the bird's eye view was another factor in building a citywide partnership. The City of Boston collected data on youth violence through a survey of summer students working for the city. The Boston Police Department also collected data on higher-level violence in the city. But these sources didn't tell the whole story.

The city had a good partner in the Harvard Youth Violence Prevention Center (HYVPC), a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Academic Center of Excellence for Youth Violence Prevention (ACE). The HYVPC offered to help create a comprehensive data system that would provide rich and representative data about violence (e.g., fights, bullying) in Boston. This system would also provide consistent and comparable data across neighborhoods and over time. Two randomized biennial surveys, the Boston Youth Survey of high school students, and the Boston Neighborhood Survey of adults, were part of that system. The surveys provided data about fear of violence, witnessing violence, and being a perpetrator or a victim of violence. The information answered practical questions: "Where

are kids afraid in Boston?” “Who is most likely to be bullied?” “Is lack of sleep associated with violence?” The HYVPC shared the results with everyone—grassroots community groups, activists, the school system, the health department, the police, and the mayor’s office. The data showed that neighborhoods were facing many of the same problems.

Building Collaborative Relationships—It was easy to see the need for collaboration. Making it happen in the real world was a challenge. Neighborhood groups, faith communities, community health centers—each had different strengths. And each had its own mission, needs, interests, goals, and objectives. Each wanted, indeed needed, to protect its own funding sources. Each was also justifiably proud of its efforts to protect young people from violence. Some hesitated to commit to joint activities that might give little return.

As a first step, the HYVPC helped create a formal coalition of eleven grassroots community organizations. Members quickly began receiving information, support, and encouragement from each other. They developed a real understanding of the needs and interests of each other’s neighborhoods and grew to value other points of view. Partners began to feel safe speaking their minds. They knew others were facing the same challenges. Each group knew it could maintain its point of view and work hand-in-hand for the health and safety of the entire city. The partners have continued to maintain this ethic of open, honest, and respectful communication. And the coalition has given the community organizations increased visibility with the city government.

City Government Partners

Boston Mayor’s Office
Boston Public Health Commission
Boston Centers for Youth and Families
Boston Public Schools
Boston Police Department

Grassroots Community Partners

Black Ministerial Alliance of Greater Boston, Inc.
Harvard Street Neighborhood Health Center, Inc.
Hispanic Office of Planning and Evaluation
Louis D. Brown Peace Institute
Massachusetts Alliance of Portuguese Speakers
Mattapan Community Health Center
South Boston Community Health Center
Teens Advocating a Global Vision
The Boston Ten Point Coalition
Whittier Street Community Health Center

Impact

Today, these grassroots community partners meet on a regular basis to plan efforts and participate in training events. They exchange information and discuss topics related to their overall mission of preventing youth violence. Sharing their expertise and assets, the partners have begun to align their work to prevent youth violence. And it all adds up. As David Hemenway of the HYVPC said, “What police do matters; what businesses do to provide summer employment matters; what schools do matters. There are lots of individuals, groups and institutions doing lots of work—it is a huge team effort.”

The efforts in Boston are a great example of a movement to create real-world partnerships rooted in a common purpose.

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