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COMMUNITY OUTREACH THROUGH POLICE IN SCHOOLS

The Community Outreach through Police in Schools Program is a short-term, prevention-oriented, school-based group intervention that brings together community police officers and child clinicians as group coleaders to provide weekly sessions for middle school students who are at risk of being exposed to violence in the community. The Community Outreach through Police in Schools Program comprises eight 50-minute weekly sessions as well as pretest and posttest survey sessions. The total length of the intervention is 10 weeks.

Most experts agree that any successful violence intervention program must be collaborative. Such programs should also target youth early, before frequent exposure to violence leads them to adopt negative and dysfunctional patterns of behavior. The Community Outreach through Police in Schools Program is a collaborative intervention that targets youth before exposure to violence in their community seriously impacts their functioning. The intervention's collaborative approach commits school, police, and mental health resources within the community to provide services for children in middle school, a time when many

negative behavior patterns develop and are first identified. The program has been successful because of its unique design that calls on police and mental health experts to work together to meet the needs of children in their community. Children get to know their community police officers better, develop an understanding of the impact of violence and trauma, and learn adaptive means of dealing with the consequences of exposure to violence and trauma.

Background

Many urban areas have been affected by increased levels of community and domestic violence. The Yale University Child Study Center's Child Development-Community Policing (CD-CP) Program developed out of concern about escalating violent crime in the greater New Haven, Connecticut, area and across the country and the impact of exposure to violence and trauma on children's development. The CD-CP Program is a collaboration between the Yale University Child Study Center and the New Haven Department of Police Services that aims, in part, to address the mental health needs of children exposed to violence

Message From THE DIRECTOR

Community violence is widely recognized as a major public health problem. It affects all levels of society, and there are no simple remedies. Children exposed to violence on a regular basis are potentially more vulnerable to a number of detrimental outcomes, including poor school performance, psychological disturbances, and later violent and criminal behaviors.

Out of concern over the escalating violent crime in the greater New Haven, Connecticut, area and its impact on children, the Yale University Child Study Center developed the Child Development-Community Policing (CD-CP) Program. The subject of this bulletin, Community Outreach through Police in Schools, is an intervention implemented by this program.

The CD-CP Program relies on collaboration among school personnel, mental health providers, and police to mitigate children's exposure to violence in the community. This bulletin will be of interest not only to school administrators, teachers, and school-based mental health professionals, but also to police departments, particularly those practicing community policing.

John W. Gillis
Director

within the community. The CD-CP Program is based on the premise that although exposure to violence and trauma may compromise children's developmental potential, it may also provide a window of opportunity for introducing a variety of interventions that can help mitigate the impact of such trauma. The Community Outreach through Police in Schools Program is an example of an intervention implemented by the CD-CP collaboration that targets children who have been directly or indirectly exposed to violence and trauma within their community.

Police-Mental Health Partnership

The police-mental health partnership melds law enforcement officers' expertise in community policing with clinic-based mental health professionals' knowledge of the psychological and emotional consequences that follow exposure to violence. Police, school, and community mental health professionals gain awareness of children's perceived sources of danger and a deeper understanding of the issues facing children in the community. With this knowledge, community leaders can implement changes in the community that address both children's individual concerns and the danger they face in their neighborhood.

An integral part of the Community Outreach through Police in Schools Program is this police-mental health partnership. Police officers who work in the children's community are familiar with the conditions children face on a daily basis. By pairing a trained mental health professional with a community police officer to act as group coleaders, the program provides a unique approach to violence prevention. Through this collaborative intervention it is hoped that children will

better understand the way their feelings affect their behavior, develop constructive means of responding to violence and trauma, and change their attitudes toward police and how to seek help in their community.

During the weekly program sessions, schoolchildren establish real relationships with police officers. These interactions lead to changes in attitudes toward police and their role in the community. Children's feelings of safety and protection are enhanced as they become able to identify and internalize the positive, prosocial attributes that the officers embody.

Police Officer Participation and Selection

Participating police officers are selected by a police department supervisor based on each officer's availability and expressed interest in the Community Outreach through Police in Schools Program. The officers are usually community officers who are local to the participating schools and who demonstrate an interest in working with children and families in the community. As group coleaders, they bring knowledge and expertise in the areas of law enforcement and safety to the sessions and can act as liaisons to the children's neighborhood and community. Community police officers who participate have also completed the officer training component of the Child Development-Community Policing Program and are familiar with basic concepts of child development, violence, and trauma. Before they join the sessions, police officers are also instructed by clinical staff on the rudiments of group process and theory as well as the specific intervention intended by the Community Outreach through Police in Schools Program. In addition, the offi-

cers participate in weekly supervision meetings with a clinician who oversees the clinical aspects of the program.

Participants

The Community Outreach through Police in Schools Program is being implemented in middle schools within communities in which children are especially vulnerable to being exposed to violence and trauma. Targeted schools are in areas identified as having high rates of crime and community violence. The curriculum is designed to meet the developmental needs of middle school students, and any middle school student living in a targeted area is eligible to participate in the group. (The curriculum may not be appropriate for younger students.) Each identified school selects students from fifth or sixth grade classes, who are then randomly assigned to groups. Ideally, all students in an identified grade rotate through the program. In some cases, when resources do not allow for participation by all students in a grade, the school principal or other school officials select the group participants. To participate, students must have the permission of their parents and possess the basic skills and ability to participate in a group process. Students with severe behavioral or emotional problems may not be suited to participate in the group.

Because this is a school-based program that occurs during the schoolday, the program needs to be coordinated with school administration and faculty. Arrangements must be made for students to review any missed class material with school staff. Typically, the group is held during elective time or during class time for subject material that is relevant to the group content. In New Haven, groups are held as part of the schools' social development curriculum and approved by the

school board at the beginning of the academic year.

Process

Participation in the Community Outreach through Police in Schools Program is voluntary, and alternative programming is offered to any student who does not wish to participate or whose parents do not provide consent. Throughout the school year, each group meets weekly for 10 consecutive weeks: eight group sessions plus pretest and posttest sessions. The sessions follow a structured curriculum that includes drawing, sharing ideas, observation, learning, role playing, and group activities. Participants receive ongoing feedback and the final meeting includes a celebration and awarding of certificates for completion of the program. After the sessions end, general feedback is provided to school personnel and parents. Students who are identified as needing additional or ongoing services are referred to resources in the community.

Program Evaluation

Despite the growing popularity of violence prevention programs, there is a paucity of empirical evidence of their effectiveness. Conducting school-based research can be difficult due to numerous challenges, including negotiating complex systems and controlling for confounding variables. The program has attempted to address the challenges of evaluation by building on assessments widely used in local public school systems, such as the Social and Health Assessment Survey (SAHA). The SAHA protocol has been adapted to this research to examine exposure to trauma, student adjustment, maladaptive behaviors, and attitudes toward safety and violence both prior to and fol-

lowing completion of the school-based group program.

Pretest and posttest data are collected from all students participating via an adapted form of SAHA and the Attitudes Toward Police Scale. This pretest/posttest design reveals any changes that may occur in children's functioning and attitudes toward police following completion of the program. To avoid contamination of the results, pretests and posttests are administered by a research assistant who is not one of the group coleaders.

Preliminary Evaluation Results

Ongoing evaluation of the school-based intervention project has been conducted since the program's inception in 1998. Through the pretest, the evaluation aims to document baseline levels of violence exposure, symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), symptoms of other types of anxiety and depression, and attitudes toward community police officers.

Preliminary results show both a serious need for intervention in this population and (when evaluated in combination with posttest results) some promising outcomes of the intervention. Levels of violence exposure and PTSD symptomatology were high in the pretests and supported the assumption that children participating in the groups were exposed to high levels of community violence. For example, results indicate that 29 percent of all New Haven students participating in the groups have been threatened with serious harm, and 49 percent have seen someone else threatened with serious harm. Sixty-five percent have seen someone beaten or mugged, 31 percent have seen someone being attacked or stabbed, and 11 percent have been attacked or

stabbed themselves. Nearly half (47 percent) have seen a seriously wounded person after a fight, and one-third (31 percent) have seen a shooting or attempted shooting.

Test findings and anecdotal data support the impression that youth in these neighborhoods are highly concerned about violence in their community. In general, more than half of these children reported fears and worries related to violence exposure. For example, 69 percent reported that they are afraid they might do something bad, 67 percent reported worrying that something bad will happen to them, and 81 percent reported that they are bothered by thoughts of death.

Past survey results indicate that the greatest change following participation in the Community Outreach through Police in Schools Program can be found in students' emotional and psychological functioning. After completing the group sessions, students reported being less nervous, less worried about what is going to happen to them, less bothered by thoughts of death, and less worried at bedtime, and they also reported that their feelings are hurt less easily. In general, the majority of students demonstrated positive changes in their overall emotional responses over time. Therefore, the program seems most successful in helping children discuss their feelings and improve their overall level of emotional functioning. Although past survey results indicated positive changes in attitudes toward police officers, current findings are more mixed. However, positive changes are still evident when comparing results from pretest to posttest. For example, survey results indicate that, postparticipation, significantly fewer students believed negative statements about police officers such as "police beat up on people for no reason" or "police try to act like big shots." Thus, the Community Outreach through Police in Schools inter-

vention appears to not only improve children's ability to express and cope with the emotional consequences of exposure to violence, but also to improve their relationships with community police officers.

Training and Technical Assistance

The Community Outreach through Police in Schools Program can be replicated in communities across the country. Ideally, this program would be replicated as part of a broader communitywide Child Development-Community Policing Program initiative. This program may not be ideally suited to all communities. However, the basic principles of the program can be adapted to the needs and resources of a community. Interested communities may contact the CD-CP Program that is part of the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence (www.nccev.org), based at the Yale University Child Study Center, for more information or to request assistance with replication. Information about available training and technical assistance and

other elements of the CD-CP Program at the Yale University Child Study Center may also be obtained through the Office for Victims of Crime or the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention at the U.S. Department of Justice.

For More Information

For more information on the Community Outreach through Police in Schools Program, please contact

CD-CP Program

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For copies of this bulletin and other OVC publications or information on additional victim-related resources, please contact

OVC Resource Center

P.O. Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20849-6000
1-800-851-3420 or 301-519-5500
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E-mail: askovc@ojp.usdoj.gov
Web site: www.ncjrs.org

Or order OVC publications online at <http://puborder.ncjrs.org>.

For information on training and technical assistance available from OVC, please contact

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