

Best Practices to Improve Denver’s Health and Quality of Life JULY, 2003

Topic: Youth violence

WHAT WORKS:

General youth violence prevention strategies:

- Identifying the highest-priority problems⁷⁵
- Assessing the risks facing youth and supports for youth⁷⁶
- Focusing on youth populations exposed to many risk factors⁷⁷
- Addressing risks in schools, family, and peer groups⁷⁸
- Offering comprehensive interventions across many systems, including health and education, and addressing multiple aspects of youths’ lives at the same time⁷⁹
- Developing intensive programs that make contact with at-risk youth many times a week or even daily⁸⁰
- Building on youths’ strengths rather than focusing on their problems⁸¹
- Working with youth in a way that recognizes their relationships with others rather than focusing just on the youth⁸²
- Starting as early as possible in a child’s life (e.g., 1st grade, not 12th grade)⁸³
- Employing mentoring and restorative justice strategies⁸⁴

Addressing gangs:⁸⁵

- At-risk youth should be introduced at an early age to work, education, and responsibility.
- Older gang members should have access to job apprentice and remedial education programs.

WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO:

School-based violence prevention:

- Frequent suspension and expulsion are *not* advised as a school safety strategy, because they typically do not improve student behavior or make schools safer, there is a high rate of repeat offenses among students who are suspended, and students of color tend to be suspended and expelled to a disproportionate degree.⁸⁶
- Schools should consider adopting a comprehensive violence prevention approach that includes family, peers, media, and community. Key components:⁸⁷
 - o Starting in the primary grades (1st grade if possible) and reinforcing at later grade levels
 - o Promoting personal and social skills, including:
 - Anger and stress management and self-control
 - Emotional intelligence
 - Learning how to step into another’s shoes
 - Decision-making and social problem-solving
 - Peer negotiation
 - Conflict management
 - o Using interactive techniques, such as group work, cooperative learning, discussions, role plays, or practicing behaviors that help to develop personal and social skills
 - o Using activities that help develop norms against violence, aggression, and bullying
 - o Using activities that promote a positive school climate or culture, including effective classroom management strategies promoting good discipline

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- o Communicating clear norms to students about behavior through rules, reinforcing positive behavior, and schoolwide initiatives (such as anti-bullying campaigns)
- o Coaching high-risk youth to reduce substance abuse through a system of rewards and punishments
- o Matching interventions to children’s stage of development
- o Using culturally sensitive material
- o Supporting staff development and teacher training

Strategies for addressing gangs in schools:⁸⁸

- Developing a flexible school curriculum directed to youth gang members who are demonstrating poor performance in school
- Involving parents of gang and non-gang youth
- Conducting parenting and gang awareness classes
- Developing relationships with relevant community organizations and agencies
- Providing special training to administrators, teachers, and staff to increase knowledge about the gang problem and community resources

WHAT INDIVIDUALS CAN DO:

Recommendations for general youth violence prevention:

- Volunteer to monitor school hallways and routes to school⁸⁹
- Volunteer for anti-violence programs⁹⁰
- Serve as mentors for students⁹¹
- Help young people to avoid situations that are likely to be violent and to resolve their conflicts without violence⁹²
- Distribute responsibility throughout family interactions, for example, by giving children early responsibility in household tasks⁹³

WHAT COMMUNITY GROUPS CAN DO:

Recommendations for general youth violence prevention:⁹⁴

- Run conflict resolution and substance abuse prevention seminars for students
- Help students run peer mediation and peer leadership programs
- Organize patrols of school hallways and school grounds
- Finance extracurricular activities for young people
- Sponsor public information campaigns against violence
- Provide free breakfasts and lunches for students
- Encourage members to volunteer in schools

WHAT BUSINESS CAN DO:

Recommendations for general youth violence prevention:

- Provide jobs, internships, apprenticeships, and training to youth⁹⁵
- Participate in adopt-a-school programs⁹⁶
- Serve as mentors to area students⁹⁷

SUCCESS STORIES:

Safe City program in Denver:

Denver’s Safe City Initiative has been recognized by the U.S. Conference of Mayors as a national best practice program. Safe City “develops and promotes community solutions that address the root causes of violence to and by youth. The SCI Office is responsible for

administering the Mayor's youth job program and the city's curfew program, coordinating all of the city's efforts with regard to youth development, and managing an annual distribution of \$1 million in city funds to community groups which serve youth...

The Safe City Office sponsors monthly meetings attended by more than 100 people, including youth. These forums serve to educate neighborhood leaders and community based organizations about the importance of pulling together with youth in identifying and supporting effective youth programs, particularly as federal practices change and monies are reduced....SCI hired approximately 300 fourteen to eighteen year olds in 1997...In 1996 SCI established two 'Safe Nite' sites in neighborhoods in northeast and northwest Denver....SCI also provides year-round leadership training to 40 youths in the Youth Power Leadership Team (YPLT)...YPLT combines employment, community service and peer centered activities. Participants work 6 hours per week in various city, community or neighborhood offices. In addition, they spend 2 hours per week on planning and implementing community service or peer tutoring/mentoring projects....More than 800 youths attended the 1997 Youth Summit, up from 700 in 1996. Professionals from around the City joined the youths in conducting anti-violence workshops. The youths produced events during the summer of 1997 that provided positive alternatives for 12-18 year olds between 7 p.m. and curfew. More than 2,500 youths and adults attended these events." ⁹⁸

RESOURCES:

Gang information, including on signs of gang involvement and why youth join gangs:

<http://www.stedwards.edu/educ/eanes/ganghome.html>

Referral database of community resources from City of Denver Safe City Program:

<http://www.denvergov.com/referral/safenite.asp>

Recommendations for effective mentoring programs:

http://www.mentoring.org/common/effective_mentoring_practices/effective_mentoring_practices_print_friendly.html

University of Colorado list of approximately 300 prevention programs that have been rated by various federal and private agencies and researchers as effective. The programs are designed to address problem behaviors, such as delinquency, aggression, violence, substance use, school behavioral problems, and risk factors identified as predictive of these problems:

<http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/matrix/overview.html>

Safe City Office, Denver Department of Safety:

<http://www.denvergov.org/SafeCity/safecity@ci.denver.co.us>

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Best Practices – Colorado Department of Health

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For the full report, see:

<http://www.cdph.state.co.us/ps/bestpractices/BestPracticesReport.pdf>