

# Taking Action to Prevent Youth Violence

A Companion Guide to *Preventing Youth Violence: Opportunities for Action*



National Center for Injury Prevention and Control  
Division of Violence Prevention



*Taking Action to Prevent Youth Violence: A Companion Guide to Preventing Youth Violence: Opportunities for Action* is a publication of the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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June 2014

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National Center for Injury Prevention and Control  
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Atlanta, Georgia

*Suggested citation:*

David-Ferdon C, Simon TR. *Taking Action to Prevent Youth Violence: A Companion Guide to Preventing Youth Violence: Opportunities for Action*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014.

# We Can Prevent Youth Violence

Youth violence is a significant public health problem with serious and lasting effects on our young people, families, and communities. But, it is not unavoidable or inevitable. Youth violence can be prevented.

*Preventing Youth Violence: Opportunities for Action* by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is designed to help communities use what is known about youth violence and put in place prevention approaches that work. The information provided in this companion document, *Taking Action to Prevent Youth Violence*, will help communities learn more about the causes and impact of youth violence and identify actions each of us can take to stop youth violence.


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# Understanding Youth Violence

The general term *Youth Violence* is used to describe when youth between the ages of 10 and 24 years intentionally use physical force or power to threaten or harm other people. Youth violence can take different forms. Examples include fights, bullying, threats with weapons, and gang-related violence. Youth violence typically involves young people hurting other youth.

All communities and all young people are affected by youth violence. Specific types of youth violence vary across locations and groups, but no place or person is immune. Youth can face violence from their peers in their neighborhoods, on the streets, online, and at their schools. Regardless of where youth violence happens, the consequences are felt by everyone— young victims, their friends, families, neighbors, schools, communities, and local organizations.



**Youth Violence is when young people aged 10–24 intentionally use physical force or power to threaten or harm others.**

**Fighting**

**Gang Violence**

**Bullying**

**Homicide**

**Assaults**

**Threats with Weapons**

# Youth Violence is a Huge Problem

Youth violence is a significant public health problem that impacts thousands of young people every day. It is a leading cause of death and physical injuries—**each and every day 13 young people are victims of homicide and more than 1,600 are treated in emergency departments for nonfatal physical assault-related injuries.**<sup>1</sup> It takes a huge toll on our young people, no matter if they are the victim, the aggressor, or a witness. Youth violence can have immediate and lifelong physical, mental, academic, social, and emotional consequences.

## Young people are hurt by youth violence in many different ways.



**1 out of 4 high school students** was in at least one physical fight in the past year.<sup>2</sup>



Each year, the number of youth who are victims of homicide would fill **87 school buses.**<sup>1,4,\*</sup>



Each year, the number of youth requiring hospital treatment for physical assault-related injuries would fill **every seat in 9 football stadiums.**<sup>1,3,\*</sup>



**7% of high school students** were threatened or injured with a weapon at school at least once in the past year.<sup>2</sup>



**1 out of every 5 high school students** was bullied at school in the past year; **1 out of every 6** was bullied electronically.<sup>2</sup>



**7% of high school students** did not go to school in the past month because of safety concerns.<sup>2</sup>

# Youth Violence Harms All of Us

## The High Cost of Youth Violence

Medical care and lost work due to youth violence exceed \$17.5 billion each year—enough money to put 271,000 young people through college.<sup>1,5,\*</sup>



Youth violence jeopardizes the future strength and growth of all our communities. It harms the physical, mental, and economic health of all residents. The negative impact of youth violence is felt by families, schools, emergency departments, and entire neighborhoods. Youth violence contributes to us:

- **Losing our young community members at an alarming rate.** Homicide is the third leading cause of death among youth aged 10–24 years, killing more youth than the next seven leading causes of death combined.<sup>1</sup> Future advances in art, science, technology, and business will come from our young people, but we are losing creativity and ingenuity with each life lost.
- **Struggling to develop a well-prepared workforce and residents who support community growth.** Youth violence causes young people to avoid school and residents to avoid public activities. Seven percent of high school students have missed school in the past month because of safety concerns.<sup>2</sup> When youth violence is not prevented, it hurts our ability to educate, participate, and prosper.
- **Experiencing more problems that have to be solved.** Nearly 600,000 young people were treated in emergency departments for physical assault-related injuries in 2012, and these injuries often result in life-long physical and emotional consequences and limitations.<sup>1</sup> Youth account for 40% of all arrests for violent crime.<sup>6</sup> Youth violence can also increase the risk for other youth-related problems, such as alcohol and substance abuse, obesity, and academic failure. These problems, in turn, require intervention and increase costs for our justice, education, and health service systems.
- **Making tough choices about how to use limited resources.** The cost of youth violence on medical care and lost work alone exceed \$17.5 billion each year.<sup>1</sup> Unchecked, youth violence also contributes to declining property values, disrupts social services, and threatens the success of community businesses.<sup>7</sup> When communities need to direct resources to arresting, prosecuting, incarcerating, and rehabilitating youth violence offenders and addressing the needs of victims and witnesses, fewer resources are available for other priority areas, such as schools, community infrastructure, and business development.

# Why Does Youth Violence Happen?

It is wrong to blame youth violence on any one issue. The reality is that multiple factors influence whether or not youth violence occurs. These influences vary as children get older and the community around them changes. A young person's characteristics and experiences play an important role, and so do their relationships with friends and family and the characteristics of the community where they live.

Consider Jason, a 12-year-old boy whose mother works two jobs to support him and his older brother. Unemployment and drug abuse are common in their neighborhood.

Because of bullying at school and the high crime rate in their neighborhood, Jason's brother has taught him to strike first to avoid being robbed or harassed. Jason and his friends have a reputation for being tough, and classmates are scared of them. But, even though Jason acts tough, he often feels afraid and doesn't know how to deal with his fear. After witnessing the shooting of a neighbor, he has nightmares and stomachaches that keep him awake at night. In school he feels restless and has trouble concentrating. Jason's school tries to meet the needs of its students, but with dwindling resources and increasing class sizes the school is unable to give him all the extra help he needs. After school he is often home alone and has trouble doing his homework, so he keeps falling farther behind.

Then people in Jason's community came together and developed a comprehensive approach to preventing youth violence. Jason benefits from a new afterschool program that offers a safe environment and tutoring, he is connected with a trained mentor, and his school starts using an evidence-based violence prevention program. His brother gets support from a street outreach program. And, improvements in lighting, regular neighborhood clean-up, and activities to promote economic growth all sponsored by local businesses have Jason's family feeling safer and more optimistic about the future.

Kids like Jason have multiple influences that put them at risk—emotional and academic difficulties, friends who get in trouble, encouragement to be aggressive, limited adult supervision, exposure to community violence, and poverty. Fortunately, Jason also has many protective factors including a caring family, a growing connection to neighborhood supports, and a community that is looking for ways to increase safety and prosperity.

Knowing the factors that put young people at risk helps us see the opportunities for preventing youth violence. We can do more for Jason and youth like him than just being prepared with the necessary police officers, prison cells, and hospital beds to deal with the aftermath of youth violence. We can use proven approaches to address risk factors and increase protective factors. We can prevent youth violence before it happens.

## Examples of Contributing Factors to Youth Violence

### Individual Factors:

Past exposure to violence, impulsiveness, weak school achievement, poor problem-solving skills

### Relationship Factors:

Peer delinquency, parental conflict, limited parental monitoring and supervision

### Community Factors:

Residential instability, weak economic growth and stability, gang activity, crime

### Societal Factors:

Norms about the acceptability of violence, limited education and economic supports and opportunities

# Actions You Can Take Today!

When we think about who should be working to reduce youth violence, we often point to someone else instead of looking in the mirror. We may think it's a law enforcement issue, a school problem, or a family matter. We may think that youth violence is something that happens to other people's kids, or in other communities, and that we are immune.

The reality is that youth violence is a public health problem that touches all of us, and we **all** have a role in preventing it. Effective youth violence prevention approaches are available, and they can save more than they cost—often several dollars for every dollar spent!<sup>8</sup>

As community leaders and members, public health professionals, adults who care for or work with youth, and young people, we all can take action to reduce youth violence. There are relatively easy steps that each of us can take to make a real and lasting difference in our communities.

## Examples of Youth Violence Prevention Approaches Based on the Best Available Evidence

### *Approaches for use in schools, homes, or communities:*

- **Universal School-based Youth Violence Prevention Programs** provide students and educators with information about violence and teach skills to nonviolently resolve disputes.
- **Parenting Skill and Family Relationship Approaches** provide caregivers with support and teach communication, problem-solving, monitoring, and behavior management skills.
- **Policy, Environmental, and Structural Approaches** involves changes to community environments that can enhance safety and reduce the risk for violence.

### *Approaches that focus on those at immediate risk:*

- **Intensive Family-focused Approaches** provide therapeutic services to high-risk, chronic youth offenders and their families.
- **Street Outreach and Community Mobilization Approaches** connect trained staff with at-risk youth to mediate conflict, make service referrals, and change beliefs about the acceptability of violence.

### *Approaches that focus on very young children:*

- **Early Childhood Home Visitation** provides information, support, and training about child health, development, and care to families who have infants and young children.
- **Early Childhood Education** offers high-quality, early education to disadvantaged children to build a strong foundation for future learning and healthy development.



## Community Leaders and Members

All community adults—neighbors, community leaders, business owners, health care providers, appointed and elected officials, and members of community and faith-based groups—can strengthen the communities where youth live. Every member of a community can make a difference and help prevent youth violence. They can:

- Be a mentor, tutor, or volunteer at schools or youth-serving organizations to guide youth and model nonviolence.
- Support the healthy development of all young people in the community, whether they are youth at more immediate risk for violence or youth who don't show obvious signs of difficulties.
- Provide meaningful and appropriate opportunities through businesses or social/civic groups so youth can develop their interests, skills, and talents.
- Praise youth when they behave well and help them see the benefits of their good choices.
- Take immediate action when youth violence occurs—let young people know violence is never okay, coach them on how to resolve conflict calmly and nonviolently, and involve other adults such as parents, teachers, or law enforcement.
- Support local action by joining or starting a youth violence prevention coalition and encouraging multiple groups to work together to understand and prevent youth violence.
- Make **prevention** a community priority and an essential complement to law enforcement and other responses to youth violence.
- Insist on the use of data to make decisions about what prevention programs, practices, and policies to put in place and continue.
- Insist on the use of evidence-based prevention approaches (see examples in page 6 sidebar).
- Take a comprehensive approach to youth violence prevention that strengthens the skills of young people and their families as well as addresses issues in the schools and community that influence the likelihood of violence.
- Seek out and use existing resources to learn more about effective youth violence prevention activities (see list on page 13).
- Share your progress and success to help show that youth violence is a preventable public health problem.





## Public Health Professionals

Public health professionals include researchers and practitioners working for local and state health departments, federal public health institutions or schools of public health. They also include professionals from diverse backgrounds who are taking a public health approach to youth violence prevention. Their ability to apply science and systematic approaches to challenging health problems is a significant asset to preventing youth violence. They can:

- Actively share the latest information about what works to prevent youth violence through community meetings, trainings, and electronic and written summaries.
- Join with partners to strategically plan, implement, and monitor widespread use of evidence-based youth violence prevention approaches.
- Expand and enhance data systems that monitor youth violence and factors that influence the likelihood of youth violence.
- Improve integration of data sources about youth violence and synthesize and share data about the prevalence, trends, and consequences of youth violence.
- Establish and maintain dedicated youth violence prevention staff and increase the skills and opportunities of public health professionals to work in youth violence prevention programs.
- Enhance public health leadership and support for developing strategic plans, educating partners about prevention opportunities and benefits, and implementing efforts that are based on the best available evidence.
- Continue studying what factors can protect youth, families, and neighborhoods from violence.
- Rigorously evaluate promising prevention programs, practices, and policies with different groups and in different settings.
- Study ways to help communities fully implement youth violence prevention approaches that are known to work.

## Families, Caregivers, and Adults Who Work with Youth

Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, mentors, coaches, faith-based leaders, and club advisers have the most direct contact with youth and have a profound influence on their lives. They can help stop youth violence when they:

- Model what youth in their lives should do—stay calm when faced with conflict, seek help when upset, avoid using weapons to solve problems, and always choose nonviolent solutions.
- Pay attention when young people make good choices and praise them.
- Help youth see the connection between good choices and good outcomes.
- Spend time talking with youth and listen as they share what they've done and who they spent time with and proactively talk with them about possible difficulties and solutions.
- Set age-appropriate expectations for behavior, and notice and praise good choices.
- Have clear and nonviolent consequences for misbehavior.
- Notice warning signs, such as changes in how youth act, and immediately and repeatedly talk with them about possible problems and good solutions.
- Talk with young people about violence. Let them know they are expected to be nonviolent and help them develop skills to stay violence-free.
- Always know who young people are with, where they are, and what they are doing both in the community and online. Help them pick people, places, and activities at low risk for violence.
- Know and talk regularly with people who have a strong influence on youth, such as close friends and their parents, teachers, mentors, and neighbors.
- Prevent minors from getting unsupervised access to firearms—at home or from family and friends.
- Take advantage of help and assistance available in the community to address problems, such as violence in the home, mental health difficulties, or substance abuse and to support the healthy development of children.
- Share information and resources available in the community and online with others who can support the healthy and safe development of youth.





## Young People

Young people are the most directly affected and can contribute in meaningful and significant ways to preventing youth violence. Youth can:

- Stop and think before saying or doing anything that could hurt others.
- Stay in control and always act in nonviolent and respectful ways toward others.
- Get help from a trusted adult to identify nonviolent solutions to problems.
- Go to a safe place if they are upset, scared, or threatened.
- Spend time with friends who make good choices and in places that are safe and supervised by adults.
- Consider nonviolent alternatives to television programs, movies, music, and video games that promote violence.
- Get involved with sports, clubs, employment, or volunteer activities to develop skills, interests, and connections with peers and adults who make good choices.
- Help others calm down when they're upset, and let them know violence is never okay.
- Support those who have been hurt by violence, and let them know they are cared about and violence in any form is never okay.
- Show others how to be safe by avoiding alcohol, drugs, and any form of violence and by choosing nonviolent ways to resolve problems.
- Get involved in or start a youth violence prevention program in school or in the community.

# Learn More

There are many good resources that provide free information, training, and tools on effective ways to prevent youth violence. These resources can help you get started whether you are a community leader and member, public health professional, a person who cares for and works with youth, or a young person.

## Information about Youth Violence and Prevention Tips

[CDC's Division of Violence Prevention](#)

[CDC's Parent Information](#)

[Parenting Resources on USA.gov](#)

[Find Youth Info](#)

[National Parent Helpline](#) (1-855-4 A PARENT)

[Stop Bullying](#)

## Tools, Training, and Access to Evidence-based Prevention Approaches

[Striving To Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere \(STRYVE\)](#)

[STRYVE Strategies Selector Tool](#)

[Violence Education Tools Online \(Veto Violence\)](#)

[Task Force for Community Preventive Services](#)

[Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development](#)

[Crime Solutions](#)

[National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices](#)



# Seize the Opportunity—Take Responsibility for Preventing Youth Violence

Youth violence is a significant public health issue that affects us all. Too many young people are killed or injured each day. Youth violence also causes emotional, academic, and physical scars that put young people's future in jeopardy and increases their risk for a wide range of chronic health conditions. Youth violence has a ripple effect—harming the physical, mental, and economic health of all community members.

The good news is youth violence is truly preventable. The advances in knowledge about youth violence and effective prevention strategies give us the opportunity to do more than simply wait and respond when violence occurs. We know how to proactively stop youth violence before our young people die or are injured. When communities use evidence-based prevention approaches, they see reductions in youth violence. We have a responsibility to our young people and communities to promote the healthy and safe development of our youth, and we have the knowledge to get started today.

No matter who we are—community leaders and members, public health practitioners, parents, teachers, other adults who work with youth, or young people—we all have an important role in preventing youth violence. Each of us can take steps that will make a real difference in the lives of our youth and in our communities.

## Endnote

\*The descriptions of the burden of violence among youth aged 10–24 years is based on calculations using the data of 4,708 youth homicides in 2011, the 599,336 youth who were treated in emergency departments for nonfatal physical assault-related injuries in 2012, and the \$17.5 billion in lifetime medical and lost productivity costs of youth homicide and injuries in 2010.<sup>1</sup> Calculations used 70,400 as the average seating capacity of football stadiums,<sup>3</sup> 57 as the average number of passengers of a conventional school bus,<sup>4</sup> and \$64,560 as the average cost of 4 years of tuition, room, and board at public institutions for higher learning in the United States in 2010–2011.<sup>5</sup>

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## Minneapolis: Implementing Prevention and Tracking Success

Homicide was the leading cause of death for youth in Minneapolis between 2003 and 2006. In 2006, the City Council declared youth violence a public health problem and established a multisector Steering Committee. *A Blueprint for Action to Prevent Youth Violence* was developed and implemented. Their prevention activities are being evaluated through *Results Minneapolis* and showing success. For instance, between 2006 and 2010, Minneapolis had a 56% reduction in juvenile crime, 58% reduction in incidents involving firearms and juveniles, and 36% reduction in firearm-related injuries of youths and young adults.<sup>9</sup> For more information, visit [Minneapolis' Health Department](http://www.minneapolis.gov/health).

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## For more information

To learn more about youth violence prevention, call 1-800-CDC-INFO or visit CDC's violence prevention pages at [www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention).

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