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Community-Based Participatory Research Approaches to Youth Violence Prevention: Reflections on the Special Issue

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Although the rates of violence among adults and youth have declined over the past 15 years, youth violence continues to be a significant public health concern.¹ Given the complexities associated with violence, prevention researchers often form collaborations with community partners to address this intractable public health problem. This special issue of *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, & Action* is dedicated to the topic of youth violence prevention research. We have collected a series of high-quality papers that highlight research that engages the community in the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases of programs that aim to prevent youth violence. We are pleased to showcase the work of youth violence prevention researchers, practitioners, and community collaborators that is consistent with the principles and practices of community-based participatory research (CBPR). The special issue was supported in part by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) because preventing youth violence through promoting community–research partnerships is a critical function of the CDC’s Division of Violence Prevention.¹

We received dozens of strong submissions for this special issue. Consistent with the mission of *Progress in Community Health Partnerships*, we have featured a series of Original Research and Work-in-Progress & Lessons Learned papers that apply principles of CBPR in an effort to develop or implement evidence-based violence prevention strategies.² The articles described violence prevention research conducted in different contexts, including schools, after-school programs, community-based programs, and community settings. Several different aspects and forms of youth violence were addressed, such as bullying, aggression, fighting, and gang involvement. All of the empirical articles featured in this special issue were jointly authored by academic researchers and community partners from diverse settings, such as faith-based organizations, community-based programs, community health worker programs, schools, and school districts. Furthermore, all of the articles highlighted the role of partnerships in multiple phases of the research process. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used by the research teams to document the implementation process and outcomes of the youth violence prevention activities.

Several common themes emerged across the diverse set of papers, including issues related to recruitment and retention of qualified staff to implement the programs. As with other types of prevention programs, implementation quality and sustainability were highlighted as common concerns. Some of the authors discussed the critical role of youth voice and the importance of actively engaging youth and community partners in the program development process. Another common challenge was balancing the need for a rigorous research design and meeting priorities of the community. For example, the study by Leff and colleagues³ described the process by which the Philadelphia Collaborative Violence Prevention Center selected a study design for their after-school prevention program and the decision to forgo additional qualitative data collection. This paper illustrated the importance of shared decision making in all phases of the research process. Also included in this issue is a transcript of the podcast recorded with Leff and co-author Thomas, in which they elaborate on the role of CBPR in their center’s broader program of youth violence prevention research.

The study by Drabick and Baugh⁴ presents two perspectives on the research process: One from a university-based researcher and the other from an elementary school principal. Despite CBPR's focus on eliciting community voice, few of the articles clearly illuminated the perspective of community stakeholders—adding to the significance and uniqueness of this article. These co-authors worked collaboratively to develop an observation strategy for monitoring and preventing aggressive behavior on the playground at an inner-city elementary school in Philadelphia. The researchers illustrated the utility of the CBPR framework for the development of ecologically valid assessments of aggression and peer victimization. A related study by Nation and colleagues⁵ summarizes the lessons learned from working collaboratively with the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools to prevent bullying through the development of a school-wide prevention model. The authors identify potential barriers to program implementation, including the growing emphasis on high-stakes testing. Their work is particularly timely given the increasing concern about bullying and its impact on children's risk for injury and mental health problems.

Several of the studies addressed the important and incredibly challenging issue of gang violence—for which there are few evidence-based prevention models. Specifically, the Work-in-Progress and Lessons Learned paper by Frattaroli and co-workers⁶ describes the development and implementation of a community-based model, in which streetworkers act as interventionists to prevent gang involvement and gang-related violence. The after-school Violence Intervention and Prevention program described by Rothman and colleagues⁷ also highlighted design challenges associated with random assignment and discussed implications of their work for capacity building among members of university-based institutional review boards. In summarizing the lessons learned implementing the SAFER Latinos Project, Edberg and associates⁸ addressed the growing concern of gang violence among Latino youth. By adopting a community-ecological prevention approach, they explore the influence of norms about violence, school engagement, family connections, and community cohesion on youth violence and gang involvement.

The study by Peterson, Dolan, and Hanft⁹ tackled the challenging issue of racial bias and conflict on school campuses. This project was led through a partnership between a liberal arts college and a faith-based community organization and examined predominantly Latino youths' experience with racial conflict at school. We also are pleased to feature a Policy and Practice piece by Massetti and Vivolo¹ of the CDC's Division of Violence Prevention, in which they emphasize the importance of building community receptivity and capacity to implement evidence-based approaches to youth violence prevention. The guest editors and several of the authors are affiliated with a CDC-funded National Academic Center for Excellence in Youth Violence Prevention, which serves as a platform for conducting high quality partnership research related to the prevention of youth violence.

In accordance with the mission of *Progress in Community Health Partnerships*, we believe this special issue demonstrates how youth violence prevention researchers are applying the principles of CBPR, such as obtaining meaningful input and mobilizing the talents, energy, and insights of community participants. The studies also illustrate the diverse ways in which prevention researchers are increasing the capacity of community members through collaborative engagement in original research as well as through providing training and promoting skill building. Integrating the scientific and practice activities likely results in more sustainable policies, practices, and programming changes.²

It is our hope that this series of papers inspires other researchers already engaging in CBPR to consider applying their skills and talents to the issue of youth violence prevention. Similarly, we aim to encourage youth violence prevention researchers to employ CBPR approaches to engage youth and community partners in their research activities. In closing, we are extremely grateful to editorial board, the authors, and numerous reviewers who contributed to this issue of *Progress in Community Health Partnerships*, which is focused on the important and timely issue of youth violence prevention.

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