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SAFER Latinos: A Community Partnership to Address Contributing Factors for Latino Youth Violence

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Abstract

Background: This paper describes a multilevel youth violence prevention effort called SAFER Latinos (*Seguridad, Apoyo, Familia, Educacion, y Recursos*), a collaboration between The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services (GWU) and two key Latino community organizations.

Objectives: To implement and evaluate an intervention addressing factors within the social ecology of an immigrant Latino community.

Methods: The intervention includes (1) Social *promotores* for family outreach and problem resolution; (2) Youth peer advocates at the high school level; (3) a drop-in center with support services for families and youth; and (4) community events, capacity building, and messages. Evaluation includes

a baseline and follow-up surveys ($N = 1,400$) and focus groups.

Lessons Learned: (1) Community circumstances change, requiring regular program adaptation. (2) Community interventions with research face potential contradictions in purpose impacting management of the collaboration and model fidelity. (3) Etiological models tied to interventions may have to be revisited owing to changes in the character and dynamics of the immigrant community.

Keywords

Health disparities, health promotion, primary prevention socioeconomic factors, health care

This article describes the efforts of a university–community partnership to develop a model and implement a corresponding intervention addressing community–ecological factors contributing to Latino youth violence in Langley Park, Maryland, a suburb close to Washington, DC. The intervention, called SAFER Latinos (*Seguridad, Apoyo, Familia, Educacion, y Recursos*), is a collaboration between The GWU, the Maryland Multicultural Youth Center (MMYC)*, and the Latino Federation of Greater Washington (LFGW), and is funded as a cooperative agreement by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). During the implemen-

tation of SAFER Latinos, there have been three key challenges that offer useful lessons for community-level interventions in marginalized, immigrant communities: (1) Evolving community circumstances and multiple barriers may require adaptation of planned components almost from the beginning; (2) A research-based intervention that is also a community collaborative effort carries with it potential contradictions in purpose that become key issues in the management of the collaboration and in adherence to the model; and (3) ultimately, any model of contributing factors on which this kind of intervention is based may have to be revisited owing to changes in the character and

* A division of the Latin American Youth Center, Washington, DC.

dynamics of the immigrant community.

The SAFER Latinos project is one of a small number of grants awarded by the CDC to implement primary prevention strategies for youth violence that focus on the community itself, not just on a specific cohort of individuals who participate, for example, in a school-based or family-centered prevention program. Although some targeted prevention programs of the latter type have demonstrated positive outcomes with respect to risk and protective factors for violence,^{1,2} the youth or families who participate in them are often embedded in communities where violence is endemic, blunting the effect of such targeted programs. Thus, funding for the SAFER Latinos program was intended in part to assess an approach to prevention that addresses aggregate community factors. It was also intended as a collaborative effort in the community-based participatory research tradition,³⁻⁷ which generally refers to research and evaluation that is participant focused and collaborative, such that research goals and methods are generated through the collaborative interaction between academic researchers and community intervention staff.

DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMUNITY

The intervention presented in this paper is being implemented in Langley Park, Maryland, a burgeoning immigrant community of approximately 16,000 to 18,000 residents (an approximation derived from 2000 Census data and observed characteristics), very close to the northeast corner of the District of Columbia, in Prince George's County, Maryland, and bordering on Montgomery County, Maryland. Langley Park was selected as our intervention community because of recent increases in violence involving Latino youth, the reported jump in Latino gang-related activity, and a concentrated Latino population in that area. A comparable community in Virginia (Culmore) serves as the control.

From our 2007 baseline survey, Langley Park residents are primarily from El Salvador (31% of youth [ages 12-17], 25% of young adults [ages 18-24], and 36.5% of parents) and, much more recently, from Guatemala (37.5% of youth, 42.6% of young adults, and 33.0% of parents), along with significant numbers from Honduras (14.8% of youth, 14.3% of young adults, and 13.9% of parents) and Mexico (8.8% of youth, 12.3% of young adults, and 8.7% of parents). A significant percentage of residents speak only Spanish. Some Guatemalan

immigrants are not native Spanish speakers, but indigenous peoples who speak Mayan dialects or Amerindian languages (*Mam*, *Quiche*), although most speak at least some Spanish. Recent Guatemalan immigrants also seem to come from very rural areas, with low access to education, and less familiarity with an urban, U.S. context. In addition, the overwhelming majority of survey respondents were born outside of the United States (72% of youth, 98% of young adults, and 99% of parents). Survey data documented a substantial percentage of young men without family in the community, living together in crowded apartments to save money. Sixty-two percent of youth survey respondents and almost 74% of young adult respondents were male. These gender demographics are similar to other migrant work communities around the world, and may be related to the nature of health risk and risk behaviors in the community.⁸⁻¹¹

RATIONALE FOR THE INTERVENTION

Youth Violence and Prevention Efforts

SAFER Latinos addresses youth violence, an ongoing issue of serious concern, as well as a significant health disparities issue. Specifically, we are referring to violence perpetrated by youth ages 10 to 24 years, defined by CDC (drawing from the World Health organization¹²) as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against another person or against a group or community that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation." Recent data have suggested that youth violence in some areas has increased in the past few years after a long decline, particularly among selected high-poverty communities and among youth under age 25.¹³ Homicide is the leading cause of death for African-American youth age 10 to 24 years, the second leading cause of death for Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander youth, and the third leading cause for American Indian and Alaska Native youth.¹⁴ Despite the multiple prevention efforts and increasing dissemination of best practice models,¹⁵⁻¹⁸ these recent increases in youth violence show that effective prevention is still a work in progress. Of importance, the majority of these best-practice programs are closely targeted to specific domains, most often, individual-, family- or school-based risk factors within a specific cohort of program participants. Few

programs target broader community-level factors even though substantial research has identified factors of this nature that contribute to violence, including the prevalence of violent “street codes” and availability of weapons,^{19–26} and the degree of community efficacy.²⁷ With this in mind, the SAFER Latinos program is an attempt to build evidence for outcomes and impacts resulting from a multilevel, participatory model tailored to the specific circumstances of Central American immigrants and communities.

Youth Violence in Langley Park. More specifically, Langley Park, as well as several other Latino communities in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area (e.g., in Northern Virginia) have been the site of high levels of crime and violence. In Prince George’s County, where Langley Park is located, Latinos now account for 21% of all homicides investigated by county police, and were victims in 10 of the 24 homicides reported between March and May of 2008.²⁸ According to the 2000 Census, Langley Park had a violent crime risk index of 7 and property crime index of 7, compared with the national averages of 3 and 3.2, respectively. Recent data from the National Incident-Based Reporting System²⁹ show that Prince George’s County (Prince George’s County Police Department), where Langley Park is located, had the highest total of violent crimes and aggravated assaults known to law enforcement in any jurisdiction in Maryland for 2005, and the highest total of violent crimes and second highest total of aggravated assaults in 2006.

Although gang involvement in particular violent incidents can be difficult, local programs and law enforcement sources attribute at least some of the youth violence rates to gang activity. According to the Joint County Gang Prevention Task Force (2004), there has been an “alarming rise” in Latino gangs. The majority of gang-related incidents** occur in Prince George’s County Police District 1, in the core area of Langley Park. In the metro area, gangs such as MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha), 18th Street, South Side Locos, and Vatos Locos, largely composed of youth from El Salvador and other Central American countries, have been associated with interpersonal violence since the mid to late 1990s, not just in the form of homicides, but as nonlethal injuries (at one point there were a number of inci-

dents involving *machetes*, not guns). These and related gangs recruit actively among the Central American community, and retain some connections with gangs in Los Angeles as well as their counterparts in El Salvador³⁰ or Guatemala, although the extent and salience of such connections varies.[†]

DEVELOPMENT OF THE INTERVENTION MODEL

The problem of youth violence in Langley Park, Maryland, presented an important opportunity to develop and test a broader community–ecological prevention approach within a collaborative structure. In response to possibilities for funding related to mutual concerns about youth violence, and building on existing relationships, the current PI at the GWU met with two key Latino community-based organizations to develop an intervention approach for Langley Park. The first community-based organization, the LFGW, is a coalition of Latino-serving agencies in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area with a long history of community collaboration across the region, as well as experience in conducting community research that led to publication of the *State of Latino Health in the District of Columbia*. The second, the Latin American Youth Center, is a highly recognized community institution in the Washington, DC, area. It has been serving Latino youth since 1974. At the time the grant application was first discussed, Latin American Youth Center was seeking to open a youth center in the Langley Park area under its division called the MMYC, and had an existing record of collaboration with organizations in that and other nearby Maryland communities.

Based on the literature concerning risk factors for youth violence, and our collective experience working with high-risk youth, researchers from GWU shared a perspective with our community partners regarding the importance of community factors and specific socioecological determinants as contributors to youth violence. Through the course of several meetings with LFGW and MMYC staff, as well as individual conversations with community leaders recommended by these partners, we identified several key dynamics within the community that were likely contributors to violence. These factors were supported by selected, informal local data (par-

** The gang definition used by Prince George’s County is: A group of three or more persons who have common identifying signs, symbols or name, and whose members engaged in or have engaged in a pattern of definable violent criminal activities, creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation within the community.

† MS-13 and other Central American gangs are known to have roots all the way back to the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala during the 1980s.

ticularly regarding school performance among Latino youth) we obtained from Action Langley Park, an existing community advocacy organization. From this preliminary work, we identified four key mediating factors within a social ecology specific to the Latino immigrant community that were hypothesized as major contributors to (mediating factors for) youth violence, and thus the targets for the SAFER Latinos intervention. Note that at the time the partnership was formed and the model was developed, the Latino community was still predominantly from El Salvador. In brief, these factors are as follows.

- *Factor One: Family cohesion issues.* Family cohesion and communication problems resulting from sequential family immigration patterns and household stressors, where one or both parents immigrate first, followed several years later by children, who arrive to often difficult household circumstances and parental attempts to reassert their role. This dynamic was believed to decrease youth involvement with families and contribute to a reliance on peer socialization among youth. In addition, crowded and otherwise difficult housing conditions provide an additional source of family stress.
- *Factor Two: School-related barriers.* Poor school performance and high dropout rates among Latino immigrant youth due to acculturation and language barriers, together with a lack of language and culturally appropriate services or social support networks for these youth.
- *Factor Three: Community cohesion, efficacy, and alienation.* Low awareness/perception of community support, such that neighborhood (e.g., social capital, support networks), social, and health services are not accessed.
- *Factor Four: Gang presence and the integration of violence norms.* The presence of multiple Latino gangs, several of which are closely identified with Central American immigrants, and the consequent integration of violence and other risk behaviors into prevalent youth norms related to gaining status and reputation.

Although each of the four factors can be viewed independently, the assumption underlying the SAFER Latinos model is that they interact together to create a community ecology that contributes to youth violence and other risk behavior. Addressing the factors in a concurrent, coordinated manner has been the goal of this community approach. Moreover, the increase in services available to the community in itself may have a positive impact on the community ecology.³¹ GWU

researchers and community partners viewed these contributing factors as “funnels”—acting together to funnel youth into a high-risk, peer-based, street social environment where violence and risk behavior are prevalent, and where the use of violence is both instrumental within the social context and a recognized component of social esteem. Thus, the resulting intervention model included the following coordinated set of services and activities designed to concurrently address—as an integrated approach—each of the four key mediating factors described.

- *Social Promotores:* Addressing family cohesion and lack of services. The *promotores* are Latino, “lay facilitators” whose task is to conduct outreach, connect with families and provide basic guidance and support with respect to improving communication between parents and youth, and facilitate referrals to other necessary social services, including those provided through the SAFER community Drop-in Center.
- *Peer Advocates:* Addressing school barriers for Latino immigrant youth. Peer advocates are immigrant Latino students recruited from the high school that serves most Langley Park youth. Their task is to work with school English as a Second Language (ESOL) coordinators and assist in the orientation and “school acculturation” of new Latino immigrant students, help to conduct ongoing support groups for new students, and work one-on-one with Latino students (by referral from the school coordinator or self-referral) who may be experiencing school difficulties and need someone to listen, or need referrals for other services, including academic support. Where possible, peer advocates are also trained to provide early conflict avoidance information and support.
- *Community Drop-In Center:* Addressing school and family issues, and filling a gap in community support services. The Drop-in Center operates directly across the street from the central Langley Park area served by the project. It is home base for the social *promotores* and peer advocates, and offers academic support, GED classes, recreational activities, and counseling services. It is also Latino-staffed and managed.
- *Community Action Events and Media:* Addressing community alienation, access to services, and norms with respect to violence. This component includes a range of community events (small apartment building-level events, participation in larger holiday/other events), communications activities (e.g., street theater, dissemination of public messages), and

community efficacy-building activities—together designed to facilitate interaction between the community and support services, disseminate messages about alternatives to violence, and address community perceptions/norms related to violence.

The two Latino community partners have substantial responsibility for different facets of the intervention as well as data collection: MMYC manages the social *promotores*, peer advocates and the Drop-in Center, whereas the LFGW manages the community events and fields the staff of about 30 bilingual community interviewers, with GWU developing the training and conducting oversight. GWU focuses on developing the interview and focus group protocols, human subjects procedures, maintaining fidelity to the intervention model and generally managing the evaluation research and analysis. Our intervention logic model is presented in Figure 1.

Evaluation Research

As a potential model approach, substantial resources have also been allocated to evaluating the model itself and effectiveness of SAFER Latinos at the community level. The research addresses two main research questions. First, is SAFER Latinos effective at reducing youth involvement

in gangs and violence (impact)? If so, the second research question explores the potential mechanisms through which effectiveness is achieved. That is, do changes in the mediating factors of interest (e.g., family cohesion, school performance, community cohesion, violence norms) account for changes in gang involvement and violence?

Because SAFER Latinos is a test of a model and a new (rather than existing) intervention, the research was understood to be more than a program evaluation. The research questions are being evaluated using a quasi-experimental design with baseline (before the intervention) and a follow-up data collection in both the intervention and a control community (Culmore, Virginia, a community with a similar profile to Langley Park, but receiving no intervention), measuring change in a selected set of aggregate community variables that represent hypothesized mediating factors and outcomes for youth violence in Langley Park. The mediating factors were directly tied to the four contributing factor domains identified through the collaborative process. Specific instruments and scales were identified by GWU researchers; however, LFGW was directly responsible for fielding the data collection teams and so their staff provided input on protocols and procedures. Study data are obtained from four sources: A community sur-

Figure 1. SAFER Latinos Community Intervention Logic Model

vey developed to measure mediating factors and some impacts (e.g., self-report involvement in violence); a set of focus groups in each community with youth, parents, and community leaders; community and school data on youth violence and related risk behaviors; and process data of all activities conducted by social *promotores*, peer advocates, and community events/activities. To obtain a community sample for the survey (not a specific intervention cohort), a randomized cluster-sample strategy is used, with apartment buildings as the randomized units, and residents in selected buildings interviewed in person based on proportional quotas by age/category (youth 12–17, young adults 18–24, and parents of children in middle school or above). All instruments and procedures have been approved by the GWU IRB as well as by CDC (the necessity of clearing two different IRBs contributed to a delay in both the baseline data collection and intervention startup).

Baseline data (before the intervention began) were collected from September to December 2006, with 800 surveys completed in each of the intervention and control communities ($n = 1,600$), and a total of 14 focus groups, 7 in each community. This first baseline survey encountered problems of trust, particularly due to the unfortunate co-occurrence of immigration enforcement activity. A concerted public information effort by the data collection team in collaboration with community partners was necessary to establish a reputation of credibility in the community so that the survey administrators could complete their interviews. The intervention began operation with a kickoff event in February 2007. A second round of data was collected in the fall of 2007; however, because the intervention began only a few months before that and individual and family exposure to any of its components was extremely low at this point, we set aside the original baseline data and are considering this round as the more reliable baseline. Descriptive, exploratory factor, and correlational analyses have been conducted with baseline data, and focus groups have been coded. Follow-up data collection has been completed (late fall 2009).

IMPLEMENTING SAFER LATINOS

Confronting Reality: Adapting the Model During Implementation

Once implementation began, the SAFER Latinos intervention model had to be adapted in response to a host of barriers

that arose, ranging from difficulties with the school bureaucracy, community politics, the fluidity of the community and its residents (e.g., if program participants were supposed to be from Langley Park, such fluidity presented difficulties), changes in the political environment for immigrants, interpersonal issues with youth, and others. The following is a brief discussion of intervention components as implemented and adapted.

Social Promotores. The SAFER Latinos program began with two full-time and one half-time promoter, representing a mix of experience, with one lead promoter having social work training/experience, and the other two being from the community. The lead promoter is female and the community *promotores* include one male and one female. The position called for adult members of the community, preferably 30 years old or older (to ensure sufficient respect), interest in and commitment to the purposes of the project, residence in, or at least extensive knowledge of the Langley Park community, some evidence of involvement in community activities, and bilingual capability—including Spanish literacy. Once hired, all *promotores* were trained in the SAFER intervention concept and in the key areas of activity designated by the model: (1) outreach and community contact; (2) facilitating communication between parents/guardians and children; (3) facilitating communication between parents/guardians and schools; (4) providing information on and referring families to community support and social services where needed (including the SAFER Latinos Drop-in Center); and (5) assisting families in planning or carrying out social activities that would increase interaction within their family, or between community members in order to increase social support networks. The training involved role playing and covered limitations of the promoter role: *Promotores* are prohibited from intervening directly (except to refer) in situations of family violence, where illegal/criminal activity is involved, and in drug abuse or child abuse/neglect cases. With respect to the latter, however, Maryland state law requires that they report any such incidents they personally witness (no such reports have been made as of the date of this article). Social *promotores* were to make contact through (1) direct requests from families prompted by flyers and other information regularly distributed in the community; (2) suggestions or informal referrals from other community sources—for example, if a church or other program knows that a family is having difficulty in

communicating or interacting with a youth in middle or high school, they may ask the family if they would like assistance from a promoter, and provide them the referral information; or (3) formal referrals from social and community services.

Soon after the intervention kickoff, SAFER staff encountered community reticence and mistrust, even more than anticipated, partly because of an increase in anti-immigrant political activity in the metro area. Until the program gained some community recognition, Langley Park residents often responded positively during outreach activities but did not typically follow up on their initial contacts. Moreover, when an individual did talk to a promoter during outreach and express an interest in, for example, assistance with family communication or another issue, they often provided a telephone number or address (for follow-up) that turned out to be incorrect, requiring extensive efforts by *promotores* to regain contact and continue the interaction. We understood this reaction as a “dance” of sorts, where individuals were interested but mistrustful. In any case, the level of effort required limited the overall “caseload” to between 15 and 25 families receiving promoter services at any given time. This has recently changed with the addition of one new promoter, allowing for an expansion of the caseload.

To address the issue of mistrust issue, we conducted an intensified series of apartment block-level events at almost every apartment complex in the intervention area at which *promotores* and other staff (including student peer advocates) talked about the program in a family-friendly atmosphere that included piñatas, raffles, and food. The purpose of these events was to increase community awareness about, and comfort with, the SAFER Latinos program. Second, the program conducted outreach to all apartment management companies about the SAFER Latinos program, meeting with their representatives for lunch and discussing potential collaboration. As a result, we were able to secure agreement from several of these companies to conduct promoter activities directly at the apartment offices, particularly at strategic times such as during the rental payment period, thus increasing their visibility and availability. Doing so likely addresses another barrier we discuss in a later section in conjunction with the location of the Drop-in Center.

A second barrier concerned promoter familiarity with collecting process data essential for documenting program

activities and dosage. To track promoter activities, a set of reporting forms was developed, and *promotores* were trained on completion of these forms. In addition, by October 2007, a new process data recording protocol was instituted requiring direct computer entry. Particularly for the community *promotores*, the data collection requirements presented some difficulties, and a considerable amount of staff time was devoted to training and support with respect to these activities for the *promotores* who had little or no previous experience with data or computers. The additional training, together with continued support and follow-up, improved recording of these data.

Peer Advocates. The original allocation was for eight peer advocates at two local high schools—four at Northwestern High School close to the Langley Park community and four at High Point High School several miles away. Originally, peer advocates were conceptualized as bilingual Latino youth between the ages of 18 and 25 with an interest in and commitment to the purposes of the project. Like social *promotores*, they were to be either residents of, or highly familiar with, the Langley Park community, and to have some experience in community or school activities as well as an awareness of the problem of community violence. This requirement was quickly amended to focus on recruiting upper level Latino high school students, simply because it made more sense to do so for reasons of logistics and monitoring (students are already at school and there is a built-in monitoring relationship through the ESOL coordinator). peer advocates were recruited through advertised recruiting events, direct referrals from the school ESOL coordinators, and other references and were paid for their work.

Peer advocates, like social *promotores*, were trained in the task and content areas for their role. Training included (1) background on the study, goals, and process; (2) role and duties of peer advocates; (3) communication, listening, facilitation, and mediation skills; (4) school acculturation to help new immigrant students to understand the school routine as well as the importance of school (a separate manual was developed for this); (5) outreach methods; (6) how to refer students to academic support and job awareness/preparation services, as well as for other assistance (primarily at the SAFER Latinos Drop-in Center); and (7) the limits of peer advocate duties, confidentiality, and safety. The training included extensive role playing. For reasons of safety and because they are not

professionals, peer advocates are prohibited from involvement in (1) drug abuse cases; (2) child abuse cases* or family violence; (3) mediating a violent altercation already in progress; or (4) situations where there is clear evidence beforehand of illegal activities such as drug sales, a planned violent action, trafficking/prostitution, or other similar activities that would put the peer advocate in danger or expose him or her, and the project, to legal liability.

Links between peer advocates and Latino students needing assistance were to be made (1) as part of regularized contact and presence at local schools, via an agreed protocol; (2) by direct request from the schools; (3) by direct request/referral from youth and students themselves; (4) by informal referral from local service agencies or in some cases police; and (5) by formal referral from social or community services.

A host of impediments and issues at the school level created barriers soon after implementation of the peer advocates component. Although advocates were recruited and trained at both High Point and Northwestern High Schools, it became clear that there were no records indicating the number of students at Northwestern from Langley Park, even though it was the high school geographically closest to the community. Per jurisdictional boundaries, students from Langley Park were not officially assigned to Northwestern, but to High Point High School, which was located much farther away. As a result, we stopped recruiting peer advocates at Northwestern after the initial group, although we continued to integrate those few Northwestern advocates into some community events and presentations in the first year (because they had already been recruited). By coincidence, this did not end up causing any relational difficulties, because the Northwestern ESOL program was not as ready to use the peer advocates in any case.

A second issue concerned referral of students to peer advocates. As it turned out, and for understandable reasons, the school was reluctant to ask teachers to refer Latino students to peer advocates, because the advocates were not trained professionals and liability issues could arise. From that point, the peer advocate component had to de-emphasize such referrals, relying on an increased number of group activities sanctioned by the school, including monthly support groups

for Latino immigrant students, which the peer advocates helped to run. The peer advocates have also participated in specific activities and events for Latino immigrant students, as well as general SAFER Latinos outreach presentations. A small number of self-referrals have occurred, where individual Latino students have requested help from a peer advocate. Importantly, with respect to the acculturation training task, SAFER Latinos staff contacted the Prince George's County International Students Office, whose task it is to intake and assess every new immigrant student before placement, assign them to a grade level, and then provide orientations for new parents/students. Peer advocates subsequently participated in these orientations if conducted for Langley Park students. Finally, the original role conceptualized for peer advocates included early conflict mediation or prevention. This has not in fact been a significant part of their activities, in part because individual referrals were curtailed, and because peer advocates themselves expressed some reservations about any intervention related to impending or potential violence. Their concern was related to being identified as interfering, with consequent danger from threats or actual reprisals. SAFER staff, of course, respected these concerns and the direct early intervention task was dropped in favor of more generalized messages about alternatives to violence and the provision of support and role modeling.

The Drop-In Center. The Drop-in Center is shared with the facilities of the MMYC. Specific activities at the Drop-in Center are funded by SAFER Latinos; others are funded by other MMYC sources. The center itself offers youth opportunities for participating in adult-supervised prosocial and support activities (GED classes, computer and arts classes, summer programs) funded largely through the SAFER Latinos program. The social *promotores* and peer advocates are based in and managed from the Drop-in Center and a part-time youth and family counselor is available there to support the activities of *promotores* and work with SAFER Latinos community clients.

Perhaps the most significant implementation barrier encountered with respect to the Drop-in Center was its location. As originally conceptualized in the model, the Drop-in Center was to be located directly in the center of the Langley

* Only health practitioners, educators, human service workers and police officers are required to file formal reports. Other individuals are required to report incidents to social services or law enforcement, but not as a formal report.

Park community at a facility (the Mother Theresa Center) planned for construction. Unfortunately, these plans were cancelled owing to political and legal issues within the community. That left the SAFER Latinos Drop-in Center without a site, forcing staff to locate a new site as close as possible to the community core. Eventually, the current location was secured on the fourth floor of a small office building on the major boulevard that runs through Langley Park. The office building does house a number of other services for the Latino community and is therefore not an unfamiliar location for residents. However, its location precludes some of the true “drop-in” characteristics that would have been available in a central community site. Individuals who want to access the Drop-in Center have to make a distinct effort to go there, and recreational activities originally planned for youth have to be carried out elsewhere, requiring transportation. Still, the center has provided services to many community members in spite of this barrier; these include GED and ESL classes, short-term counseling, arts programs, and other youth activities.

Community Events and Media Activities. This major component of the SAFER Latinos intervention was, from the first, the most flexible component simply because a fixed schedule of events and activities could not be set out from the beginning. The proposed set of community events and media included (1) a major kickoff event in February of 2007; (2) holiday-related events, focusing on a holiday theme, but including representation by social/community services; (3) drama/street theater activities involving youth, focusing on real-life struggles to succeed in school, connect with family, and so on; (4) participation by SAFER Latinos in health fairs, job fairs, and so on; (5) development of radio spots, public service announcements, and other media materials; and (6) engagement of youth in development of community messages and materials, and in performance at events (e.g., music). This intervention component was managed by the second Latino community partner, the LFGW.

Soon after implementation, the initial media campaign and major events had to be deferred in favor of a series of smaller, apartment-block events (mentioned earlier) designed to increase residents’ awareness of and trust in the SAFER Latinos program. From baseline focus groups, it also became clear that there was a substantial lack of community efficacy and cohesiveness that needed to be addressed. Thus, the roll-

out of media and events was retooled to take this into account. SAFER staff did participate, as planned, in several community events already underway such as the annual Langley Park Day. However, in addition to the apartment-block events, a series of smaller, focused community activities was initiated. First, a set of workshops was held for families, focusing on family communication, how to communicate with schools, signs of gang involvement, and other topics. These workshops were held in an apartment building space, and, after a brief hiatus, are ongoing—although currently held at the Drop-in Center. A similar set of workshops for young women was held, but was dropped owing to low attendance. Then, SAFER Latinos brought a youth group coordinator on staff, and a young men’s group was initiated. This group was held most weeks in a small building (formerly a community policing facility) located in a popular shopping mall area until the youth group coordinator moved on to a new job. Approximately 20 to 25 young men from the community attended, and within a short period of time several young women began to attend as well. A range of topics were discussed, from decision making to jobs and violence prevention. The group also collaborated with a community food bank at the local elementary school, and engaged in regular community cleanup activities. The idea, following the SAFER Latinos model, was to help create “alternative cohorts” of young men and women in the community who engage in visible and rewarded activities that benefit the community. After a break of several months without a coordinator, a search for a new coordinator was successful, and the plan was for groups to resume.

Building on these more focused community activities, the agenda for this intervention component has begun to move back toward some of its more expansive goals. The project media coordinator established a working relationship with a major Latino publication, which has sent reporters to cover SAFER Latinos activities/events, and will be publishing short, human-interest pieces about prosocial youth and parents in the community. A press conference was held in February 2008, attended by a number of representatives from the local Latino media as well as a reporter from the major *Univision* television affiliate. Project staff has been interviewed by the most popular local Spanish-language radio station, *Radio Zol*. In addition, members of the youth group developed and are recording an anti-violence public service announcement to

be broadcast on *Radio Zol*. Recently, a T-shirt contest was held in the community, to design a T-shirt and logo for the SAFER Latinos project. Entries were judged, a winner was chosen, and the prize was presented at a community efficacy event held just before the start of the 2008–2009 school year. This event involved a very visible cleanup of a soccer field adjacent to the elementary school in the center of the community. Members of the youth group and other project staff participated, along with some community members. Most recently, CNN aired a segment on SAFER Latinos as part of its “Latino in America” series.

Collaboration, Community Need, and Fidelity to the Model

As noted, the GWU–Latino community partnership was already a developing relationship before the SAFER Latinos project, with several smaller joint efforts (with respect to research and grant applications) already completed, and a history of positive interpersonal relations. The SAFER Latinos intervention, however, has presented challenges that require an ongoing negotiation process between all partners. In addition to all the implementation issues described, a key issue is directly related to the evolution of the prevention and health promotion fields toward a more rigorous emphasis on evidence-based practice, where interventions are theory driven, and structured in reference to a logic model linking assessment, theory, intervention components, and evaluation.

In the case of SAFER Latinos, the community partners were collaborators in the identification of key contributing factors for youth violence in the Langley Park community, and participants in developing the model and resulting intervention. Nevertheless, over the course of the intervention, it is the community partners who have been involved in the day-to-day interaction with the community, and thus faced the need to address crises and immediate issues, or even the imperatives imposed by other program funding they had. Over time, this created pressure to adjust the program in ways that responded to those unfolding needs and pressures. At the same time, to produce the kinds of data necessary to develop an evidence base and determine effectiveness of the model, the GWU staff needed to monitor fidelity. These two potentially conflicting motives have been managed through a negotiating process in which changes to particular components, or the introduction of new activities, are discussed in terms of the community

need being met, and the degree to which the introduction of the change would have an impact on the basic architecture and purpose of the SAFER Latinos model. Certain issues—for example, finding employment for parents, or adolescent pregnancy—were not targeted by the SAFER model. However, insofar as they affect community factors that are within the model’s purview, including family cohesion and conflict, we worked to find ways of incorporating them into SAFER components, even if that meant just adding a new set of services to which SAFER clients would be referred.

At the same time, the SAFER intervention provided benefits to the community not solely related to violence prevention goals. Across program components, we have recruited and hired staff from the community as much as possible. This has been the case with respect to bilingual data collectors/survey administrators and two of the three Social *promotores*.

LESSONS LEARNED

Research shows that youth violence is determined by multiple, interactive, and cumulative factors at various levels³² and that community factors contribute to youth violence independently of individual and family factors.³³ With this in mind, the SAFER Latinos project is an effort to address a set of hypothesized risk factors for violence at different levels of the social ecology that were considered unique to immigrant Latino communities. Moreover, it is an effort to harness the collective expertise of all members of a university–community collaborative to identify the key community risk factors, develop a matching intervention, and conduct an evaluation. Such collaboration is necessary not only to maximize fit between the causative model and the community, but to develop an appropriate intervention and an operational protocol for carrying out an evaluation in a community that does not have a high degree of trust.

Preliminary analysis shows that the model is indeed promising, although more work is necessary. From our implementation experience, it is also clear that, although the SAFER Latinos model does capture key contributing factors for youth violence, there are others that may be significant but are not addressed, for example, substance abuse and a substantial level of racial tension between Latino and African-American students. In addition, a community intervention such as this occurs in the context of poverty, controversial

issues of legal residence and work, discrimination, unemployment, and community transience. However, cohort-specific interventions, even those that are evidence based, will have a limited effect unless they are tied to broader community processes and impacts.

For SAFER Latinos, the collaborative process has been the basis for an ongoing learning process through which the nature and role of contributing factors is clarified over time, and the utility and effectiveness of intervention components regularly assessed. Moreover, building and maintaining the collaborative relationships has been necessary to the operational aspects of implementing a multipart intervention. Although the partners do have divergent imperatives from time to time, these are managed as part of the relationship, and are in fact a feedback mechanism that provides ongoing information about the interaction between the intervention and evolving community needs. The evolving and iterative nature of a collaborative community intervention underscores the need to build in adequate time for the intervention to take root and exert an impact. This is often a difficult funding challenge. However, after a kickoff of February 2007, the SAFER Latinos intervention is now beginning to establish trust within the community—we currently have a backlog for services at the Drop-in Center, for example.

Apart from specific issues related to program components, the following are several key lessons learned so far that may generally be applicable to multilevel interventions in marginalized, Latino immigrant communities.

- Trust is particularly difficult to establish and maintain. For reasons that are not surprising, the Latino immigrant community is highly mistrustful of most programs or interventions, particularly if they “come from the outside.” Even though SAFER Latinos is a collaboration with other well-known Latino community organizations, neither of those organizations had a long involvement in Langley Park before the intervention. In fact, few organizations other than the Catholic church and other faith-based groups did, although there was an advocacy group based at the University of Maryland that had been active in Langley Park for a number of years. As a result, in combination with volatile immigration politics, the initial baseline data collection was difficult, and the intervention took time to establish a reputation. Moreover, because of its focus on youth violence prevention, SAFER Latinos does not offer

certain services that might have speeded up the community entry process—in particular immigration/legal and employment services. It may be useful in such communities to offer these services as part of an intervention package, even if that intervention is ultimately focused on other issues. Or, it will likely be necessary to engage in regular collaboration with organizations that do provide that kind of assistance.

- In a migrant community, work and money-related imperatives trump other concerns. Most Langley Park residents are focused on finding work, coping with a range of housing and social difficulties, and trying to avoid threats related to immigration status. Family problems, violence, school, and other difficulties are clearly a concern, but it is our experience that many residents are simply too overburdened to devote sustained time and energy to resolving these problems in their lives. Creativity has been necessary to devise activities that draw sustained participation. At the same time, once residents continued to hear about some of the free counseling and youth services at the Drop-in Center (as one example), demand began to rise significantly, to the point where SAFER did not have enough staff to meet the need. Or once a community youth group began to meet, and to talk about issues of interest to youth, other youth began to come.
- The community is transient, fluid, and its demographics change relatively rapidly. This is a problem on many fronts. First, SAFER is being evaluated at the community level, via repeated community surveys and community data. If the community at Time A is not the same as the community at Time B (different residents, demographic changes), what can realistically be expected in terms of evidence of impact through some of these data sources? Second, targeting an intervention to a clearly defined community is problematic when that community is not actually clear in terms of its actual boundaries or residents. Langley Park is next to Hyattsville, Maryland, where there is an increasing Latino population. It also abuts Silver Spring, Maryland (in neighboring Montgomery County), where—again—the Latino immigrant population has grown dramatically. When targeting intervention activities using a criterion of residence in Langley Park, awkward or confusing situations result. In response, we simply had to allow for some boundary flexibility—potentially impacting survey results, because the survey was conducted in a strictly defined area. Finally, from the time the model was developed and then implemented (in February 2007), community demographics changed, as

noted. Currently, Langley Park has a substantial Guatemalan population (now larger than the Salvadoran population), many of indigenous Mayan origin, and including many youth and young adults who are not in school at all. The original program components aimed at preventing school dropout were not designed to reach this new group of young people. It was necessary, somewhat late in the intervention, to adjust and try to add non-school activities that might draw in young Guatemalans. The recently hired social promoter is Guatemalan; although Spanish speaking and not indigenous, she does understand some *Mam*. We have reached a number of Guatemalan families, but have had less success with unattached youth in the community.

- The social ecology and contributing factors for violence identified during intervention development changes. In light of the demographic changes, some of the original contributing factors, although still salient, had to be expanded to include new situations. This process was magnified because of the economic downturn, which had a dramatic effect on the local housing construction market and thus a corresponding impact on available employment for Latino men. For example, where sequential migration (parent first, followed by children) to households where

parents/adults were working several jobs was part of the initial dynamic affecting family cohesion, this has evolved to include the situation characteristic of young Guatemalans who may not have close family, who come up before adults, and who often live in apartments with many other young men. It also now includes many situations where the adults no longer have jobs and for reasons of survival live in increasingly crowded conditions.

Perhaps a key message from all these situations is that an intervention in a marginalized, immigrant community like Langley Park must be flexible and mobile, with respect to both intervention components and evaluation methodology.

Finally, although SAFER Latinos was developed based on specific factors held to be determinants of violence in this community, similar conditions are likely to exist in other Latino immigrant urban communities and thus the intervention may be suitable for other communities. As more evidence is compiled and the model is disseminated, it will be possible to determine the degree to which the complex of contributing conditions identified for SAFER Latinos does in fact pertain elsewhere, and thus more broadly applicable.

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