

Decreasing the Supply of and Demand for Guns: Oakland's Youth Advocacy Project

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ABSTRACT *This paper is a case study of how Youth ALIVE!, a nonprofit public health organization, blended direct service and policy goals to reduce youth gun violence at a time when guns became the number one killer of children in California. Youth ALIVE! trained young people living in California communities with the highest rates of gun violence to become peer educators and leaders to reduce both the supply of, and demand for, guns. The youth presented health and criminal justice data in the context of their own experiences living in communities endangered by gun violence to help build public policy solutions, contributing to the subsequent drop in gun homicides. Youth ALIVE's vibrant grassroots model provides a real-life tableau of research and direct services working together to yield realistic policy solutions to a lethal public health problem. The youths' successes demonstrate how nonprofit direct service organizations are uniquely positioned to advocate for policy and regulatory changes that can be beneficial to both program participants and society. Direct service organizations' daily exposure to real-life client needs provides valuable insights for developing viable policies—plus highly motivated advocates. When backed by scientific findings on the causes of the problem, this synergy of youth participant engagement in civil society can promote good policy and build healthy communities.*

KEYWORDS *Adolescence, Firearms, Guns, Violence, Youth*

INTRODUCTION

Recently published research suggests that changes in unhealthy environments can be achieved with the marriage of grassroots programs and policy advocacy. Referred to as “collective advocacy,” this approach dynamically involves the constituent base of an organization in the process of changing conditions which negatively and disproportionately affect them.¹ In fact, as cited in Crutchfield and Grant's study *Creating High Impact Nonprofits*, many high-functioning national nonprofit agencies blend policy advocacy and grassroots programs into their models, operating under the philosophy that “Grassroots work helps inform policy and advocacy... making legislation more relevant.”² The authors found that high-impact organizations bridged the divide between service and advocacy to achieve social change on a more significant scale than direct services alone could achieve.

As Wallack has argued, the field of public health is committed to blending science, advocacy, and politics in the context of community values to improve health. Rather than simply providing people with more personal information to navigate a hazardous health

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environment, Wallack emphasizes the benefits of training people to participate collectively in the public policy process to make the environment less hazardous.³

Kimberlin argues in *Advocacy by Nonprofits* that advocacy is one of the most important roles played by social service organizations in a democracy. She presents the case for direct service organizations, particularly human service nonprofits, to be engaged in the policy process. The author stresses the importance of "...increasing civic participation, providing opportunities for disempowered constituents to be heard by decision makers, and connecting policy makers to constituents who frequently lack these direct channels to powerful resources."¹

Whether through outright lobbying within legal guidelines, or more indirectly via public education and agenda-setting, advocacy is a legitimate activity for nonprofit organizations and can play a critical role in sustaining democracy and improving the public's health. Engaging young people in particular in advocacy, which is relevant to this case study, "...helps to create a society that is more democratic ...by virtue of being more reflective of youth concerns, perspectives, and involvement."⁴

The heart of this article is how the synergy of youth participant engagement in civil society, armed with evidence-based findings, promoted local policies, some of which became models for state legislation, and all of which contributed to building healthier communities. The article focuses on the pioneering advocacy work of youth in Oakland, California to prevent youth gun violence during the time period 1988–2004, through Youth ALIVE's! peer education and leadership program, *Teens on Target (TNT)*. Young people, who often saw themselves as victims and were often seen by others as perpetrators, took the opportunities offered to them by Youth ALIVE! to move into leadership roles to help transform both the culture and environment around them.

A NEW YOUTH HEALTH EPIDEMIC: INCREASED GUN SUPPLY, INCREASED GUN VIOLENCE

Nationwide, the rate of firearm homicide increased 160 % between 1960 and 1980, while rates of other forms of homicide declined.⁵ This spike in gun deaths was fueled by changes in federal laws. Lifting the ban on the domestic production and distribution of handguns (often called "Saturday Night Specials") proved to be a "windfall" for domestic gun manufacturers.⁶ With few restrictions on sales, states and local communities were flooded with new guns, many pocket-sized and low-priced. Demand for guns increased, as two events collided: urban manufacturing jobs shrunk as factories closed and the crack cocaine street economy burgeoned. The impact on the health and safety of youth living in cities was devastating.

Gun deaths and injuries increased so rapidly that US Surgeon General C. Everett Koop charged that it was dangerous to be young in America. One in twenty high school youth reported that they had carried a gun to school.⁷ Boys maneuvered to get to school alive as they walked through warring neighborhoods claiming different colors, carrying multiple T-shirts, and changing colors as they crossed streets. The gun industry stepped up its lobbying efforts, and the nation remained unprotected by simple accountability laws, such as product standards for the gun industry, registration of guns, or licensing of gun owners. Meanwhile, from the emerging field of injury prevention, public health strategies surfaced that had been effective in reducing deaths from other products, such as motor vehicles, and their utility was explored in reducing gun deaths.

In the 1980s in California, guns were the leading killer of youth. As new assault rifles flooded the streets, a powerful multisector coalition supported what was then, and still is, the strongest assault gun ban in the country—California Senate Bill 23. Participation in the

successful effort to pass this bill inspired hundreds of residents to strengthen gun violence prevention laws. This effort saved lives. By 2010, California's gun death rate had been cut by over half (56 %) of the rate in 1990, reducing the state's gun death rate from fifteenth to forty-first among the 50 states, falling from above to below the national average. During this same 20-year period, firearm mortality rates declined in the rest of the US by only 29 %.⁸

The inspiration for a youth gun violence prevention program in Oakland came in 1988, when a legislator in Oakland refused to accept as normal the flood of assault guns coming into California, and joined by Oakland residents, championed SB 23, the state assault gun ban. At this same time, a police sergeant in Oakland became sick at the number of unregulated local residential gun dealers, and discussed a ban with a very interested city council. Stunned by the back-to-back shootings of young students, a coalition of elected officials, school and law enforcement personnel, and community leaders gathered to mourn and discuss what to do. Significantly, a school administrator joined the discussion, and so did a public health advocate who "could not take it anymore," having just learned that guns were now the leading killer of young people in California. At that time, the voices of youth were absent in the gun policy debate. But, living in the city with the highest gun death rate in the state, youth in Oakland were looking for a way to join the conversation. The public health advocate set out to look for the data the youth would need to shape their message, and the school administrator connected her to a high school media teacher who offered his students as a sounding board for that information. This initial collaboration, launched in 1988 in Oakland, CA, was first called *Teens on Target (TNT)* and later formalized organizationally as Youth ALIVE!

FINDING THE EVIDENCE AND CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUTH

Dodging bullets is no way for children to live. But it was 1988—before the Internet or the existence of standardized trauma registries in California—and there was little data on this public health epidemic. Concerned employees in public health departments gathered relevant data, but the National Rifle Association worked hard to severely limit the ability of government agencies to collect and share those facts that did exist.⁹ Using data for violent crime prevention in law enforcement was a new idea, and many employees were unprepared to provide public data on local dealers, gun homicides, and shootings to those outside of law enforcement. The combination of these factors frequently resulted in sources providing data only on condition of anonymity, sometimes transferring the information literally "under the table," in a paper bag, or at a clandestine meeting in the doorway of a building. These transactions felt more like illegal drug deals than law-abiding data deals.

Not all sources were shared, but the data was, as part of the effort in the greater San Francisco Bay Area by elected officials, community leaders, health activists, and concerned law enforcement staff to educate the public about gun violence and build local policies and programs to make communities safer. It was hearing the presentation of the 17 pages of these painstakingly gathered facts on what was happening in their city and county that inspired a media class of Oakland high school students—who were tired of losing one another—to participate in the civic process. They wanted to turn those numbers around, and envisioned passing that responsibility on to hundreds of their peers. This collaboration with the students shaped Youth ALIVE's! early efforts, as the organization provided resources to these young Oakland residents to create a structure for their vision, offering the students a program model, advocacy training, presentation skills, technical assistance, and funding.

Just like other students in their high schools, almost all of them were from neighborhoods considered to be "at war" with each other. However, the youth quickly

discovered their common bond; the daily effort that it took to live in a violent community and not become a part of that lifestyle. They were suspicious of young people they did not know, and would typically cross to the other side of the street to avoid them. As one of them commented, “It is hard to study when this is the day you think you might get shot.”

The high school youth brought their knowledgeable voices from the street to shape effective strategies to make their lives and communities safer. Youth ALIVE! staff captured the youth argot and perspectives and incorporated them into a program curriculum, press releases, program promotional material, and policy discussions. The youth mixed their real world experiences with the data, using their own words to make the synthesis more accessible to the public. The US Department of Health and Human Services incorporated Youth ALIVE’s information into their fact sheets and distributed them nationwide.¹⁰ At one of their earliest meetings, one youth reflected on how zoning impacted levels of violence: *Why in our neighborhoods can we walk to get guns, drugs, and alcohol and have to take the bus to (other neighborhoods) to get school supplies?*¹¹ Licensed home gun dealers and liquor stores did a prolific business in their neighborhoods.

LINKING DIRECT SERVICES AND POLICY ENGAGEMENT

One of the first responsibilities the young people took on was to define the factors that put them at risk for violence. The conclusions of the youth, in their own words, were—not surprisingly—the same as published research findings from the fields of criminal justice and public health.¹¹ Because of the threat that guns posed in their daily lives, their analysis underscored the need to address both the supply of guns coming into communities and the demand.

Risk factors: In the words of youth
 Easy to get guns, drugs, and alcohol
 No jobs in our neighborhood
 Disrespect for Youth
 No hope for a way out

Risk factors: In the writing of researchers
 Availability of guns, drugs, and alcohol
 Relative economic disparity
 No positive role for youth in society
 Lack of resources in the community

These categories became the foundation for the program and prevention strategies, and the frame for the agency’s work: Reduce youth gun violence by training youth from CA neighborhoods with high rates of gun violence to be peer educators and leaders.

Diving into the civic culture for the first time, the youth began to feel armed with something that could not only protect them, but might also help them to save other lives. They started meeting after school with Youth ALIVE! staff to craft their peer education and leadership program to prevent youth violence. They developed membership guidelines, training requirements, and presentation goals for providing peer violence prevention education in the schools—their first program activity.* The young people added their experiences and ideas to the scientific data staff had

*Staff responsibilities also included: guiding participant meetings, setting up trainings, scheduling and attending all presentations; providing members with transportation, support and feedback; outreach to participants’ families to engage with the program, including attendance at public presentations and program celebrations; outreach to school staff to address behavior or academic issues for participants. Staff also provided information on services requested by the youth, such as counseling, child protection, tutoring, and various health issues. Youth ALIVE! raises the funding necessary for support of these programs.

collected in order to build a peer education curriculum, which was later published and sold nationwide. The curriculum provides information to build the participants' skills to define violence and its causes, to identify the impact of violence on the community, and, most importantly, to develop solutions and reduce violence. It includes information on the philosophy of democracy and the individual's responsibility to help make it function and the structure of national, state, and local government. It was within this framework that the participants could now activate their own philosophy: *We young people have been given the means to hurt and kill each other. It seems like the streets have been made safe for guns and violence, not for youth. We need to discuss where violence starts, so that we can stop it. We need to speak out and take action before violence happens. We need to take this on the road, as we are the experts on preventing youth violence.*¹¹

High school students entered the program with a range of grade averages, many close to flunking out or quitting school. School staff referred students whose negative behavior concerned them. Some simply followed the smell of pizza at the first meetings of the year, or the information on fliers that were passed out on campus. Like other students in their neighborhoods, some lived with at least one parent or guardian who worked, often at an income level close to the poverty line, while others lived with a parent or guardian receiving government financial assistance. Some were on probation, some lived with drug addicted or alcoholic family members, and many had experienced or witnessed physical abuse in their home. They were all at risk from their environment by virtue of living and attending school in neighborhoods called "the killing fields" by police. *They knew that their families could not move away from the violence.* One self-identified former gang member offered a perspective on the only way that some youth saw to exit their environment: "You know if you shoot someone, he's gonna' double X you—give it back to you twice—so homicide is like a macho way of being taken out, or suicide."

In 1991, Youth ALIVE! was officially born as a 501 (c) 3 nonprofit agency, providing an organizational structure to support the students' initiatives in Oakland. It blended service and policy in its mission to train youth to be the leaders in their communities to reduce the environmental factors causing gun homicide. This meant teaching program participants to guide community leaders and elected officials to look "upstream" to generate policies and regulations in order to address the source of the gun deaths. The health and safety of these children and their communities were clearly not supported by the current civic response of focusing "downstream"—or after the fact, on hospitals, morgues, or the criminal justice system. Put so simply at the time: *Prevention is the only approach to dealing with violent crime that doesn't require that a crime first take place.*

From the beginning, Youth ALIVE! established a variety of programs and strategies to engage youth, first in Oakland and then in Los Angeles, including the TNT peer education and advocacy violence prevention program and the hospital-based peer intervention program, *Caught in the Crossfire*. Over a 20-year period, over 900 youth educators were trained to bring their voices and strategies to audiences numbering nearly 50,000 people on how to make neighborhoods and cities safer. *Caught in the Crossfire* has served 1,300 youth hospitalized for violent injuries and is now replicated in hospitals across the country. These programs sought to provide "solutions"—positive alternatives—to each of the risk factors that were paramount in the participants' minds: ease of access to guns, lack of income earning opportunities, lack of respect, and hopelessness for positive change. Accordingly, the TNT prevention program focused on strategies to reduce the supply and demand for guns, arranged stipends for the participants' work, and through leadership opportunities generated pride, respect, and opportunities for success.

The *Teens on Target* program fostered a social responsibility strategy. As one of the young members said, *We need to be leaders ourselves instead of blaming everyone else for not leading us in the right direction.* A key area of leadership was as peer educators in school classrooms, providing positive peer role models to their audiences; another, as advocates beyond the classroom for a safer environment for young people to grow up in. Participants learned who made the decisions that created the conditions in their school and neighborhood environments. With staff assistance, they researched the names of their local and state representatives in government, school board members, and community leaders, learned the protocol for contacting them, and met many of them in person.

The members of the program had ambitious goals. Called “audacious idealism,” it is an essential ingredient in high-impact nonprofit organizations.² The youth wanted to take on some of Oakland’s biggest problems. They even dreamed they could present their ideas to the President in the White House—which they did, in 1994. They manifested the power of being a player in the civic process and planning a future, instead of the often short life of a “player” feared on the streets. They were so effective and received so much publicity for their work that now when their peers saw them coming, they crossed the street to meet them.

ADDRESSING THE RISK FACTORS: POLICY

The youth not only wanted to help other youth step away from being at either end of a gun, but also wanted to provide local policy makers with the tools to interrupt the gun supply market. They knew that with each purchase of a gun, and each shooting of and by a young man in their neighborhood, fear increased, which acted as free advertising to sell—and buy—more guns.

Teens on Target participants made themselves “visible to the decision makers in our lives” (their words) by learning the roles and responsibilities of government, and working closely with their school board, city council, county board representatives, and their state legislators. Their passionate presentations of workable policy solutions as ones who were subject to gun violence themselves generated a call for effective policy and program innovation that was extremely difficult for policymakers and the media to dismiss.

Demand for Guns. The youth were aware that the media had an important role in shaping public attitudes and were distressed about the negative portrayal of urban youth. They met with journalists to learn how to counter these negative images. An opportunity arose in the spring of 1999 when Oakland’s daily newspaper published an ad for a sale of semiautomatic handguns at a local gun store. The ad appeared next to an obituary for an Oakland high school student who had died from a shooting with a similar weapon. *Teens on Target* members were distressed that their local paper was publicizing the low price and availability of the same weapons that were used to kill youth in their neighborhoods. After unsuccessful attempts to set up a meeting with the paper’s publisher to discuss changes to advertising policies, they held a press conference to pressure the newspaper to stop carrying such ads. In spite of broad coverage in regional print and electronic media, this strategy elicited no response from the newspaper’s publisher.

The youth reached out to community members and organizations to strengthen their campaign, and called on the Oakland City Council, which used the newspaper as a “paper of record,” to write a letter to the newspaper in support of their position. The publisher and owner of the newspaper finally agreed to meet with the *TNT* youth, almost 1 year after they made their first request.

At the meeting, *Teens on Target* members presented facts about the impact of non-sporting guns in their community, and offered the advertising policy of San Francisco's daily newspaper as an alternative. The newspaper executives agreed to a new policy, effective August 1, 2000, in which only advertisements for sporting rifles and hunting guns would be carried. *Teens on Target* held a follow-up press conference in the offices of the newspaper, inviting representatives of law enforcement, health, and the media. Each of the leaders of this newly visible coalition—the chief of police, the publisher, and the local hospital trauma director—all underscored the significance of this policy change to protect the public from gun violence, and the importance of the role of *TNT* youth's leadership in negotiating this important policy.¹² This successful campaign and extensive media coverage was intended to affect *demand* for guns by limiting advertising of non-sporting guns and by demonstrating the benefits of youth involvement in civic life.

Supply and Access. In 1991, the determination of these young advocates helped to reduce the number of residential gun dealers in Oakland from 114 to 4. These dealers were a likely source of guns used in crime and were virtually unregulated at the time. With a goal of shutting down the flow of illegal guns in their communities in order to limit access, these youth advocates hoped to uncover the actual addresses of gun dealers selling guns illegally to kids. They were angry when they found out the number of residential gun dealers in Oakland, many of them operating in their own neighborhoods. The sellers operated out of their own homes, virtually unregulated in the guns they ordered, what they sold, and who they sold to.

But first, *TNT* members wanted to determine whether their concerns were shared by other youth. They began with a simple straightforward question asked of students in all of their 7th grade workshops on gun violence prevention: "Raise your hand if you would be able to get hold of a gun if you wanted to." They were not surprised when over half of the students in each class raised their hand in affirmation. When asked how long that would take, the 7th graders, after discussion, agreed that it could happen "within a couple of hours".

At the same time, the Oakland Police Department and city council members were wrestling with the issue of gun availability and strategies to reduce the illegal supply of weapons flooding the streets. They too wanted to reduce the number of residential gun dealers in Oakland and they invited *Teens on Target* members to testify at a council meeting about the impact of guns on their own lives and in their communities. The youth presented data they had gathered from the younger students, and also showed a videotape they had made of New Year's Eve in their neighborhoods. Capturing the sounds of semiautomatic gun fire, police sirens, and casings dropping on the tops of cars, and flashes of semiautomatic weapons firing, the videotape provided compelling testimony to the elected officials. As part of his invited expert testimony, one *TNT* leader pointed to one of the gun dealers present and said: "Why should they (gun dealers) be selling guns to us in our communities so that they can make a profit and we can kill each other. It isn't fair."

In 1992, the city of Oakland passed the most comprehensive gun dealer ordinance in the state, banning residential gun dealers. Using zoning principles, this ordinance eliminated 110 of the 114 residential gun dealers in the city (allowing only residential pawnbrokers to sell guns) and became a model followed in 41 other communities in California.¹³ The passage of a similar state law followed, and in 1995, in the absence of a federal ban on residential gun dealers, a new federal law required that all licensed gun dealers must comply with state and local licensing requirements. In the next 3 years, gun-related homicides dropped by half (50 %) in Oakland.¹⁴

Regional Participation. In 1996, *Teens on Target* was invited to take their expertise regionally by partnering with the East Bay Public Safety Corridor Partnership, composed of representatives of elected officials and public agencies in 26 communities in 2 counties, formed to collaborate on strategies to reduce crime and violence. *Teens on Target* staff and participants led an inspirational kick-off press conference, and Oakland's Gun Dealer Ordinance became the model for the 40 city gun violence prevention ordinances the partnership succeeded in getting passed in California. *Teens on Target* members were invited to testify at 15 of these city council meetings. *This effort was heralded in the media as the largest regional effort in the nation to stop gun violence.*¹⁵

Illegal Gun Sales. Just as the *TNT* members felt that they needed to be held accountable for their own actions, they believed gun sellers should be held accountable for illegally selling guns to minors. Linked to this objective, in 1997, Youth ALIVE! staff and *TNT* members learned that the Oakland police department was ignoring a federal mandate to trace the source of guns used in crime confiscated from youth. This inexpensive gun tracing system could link local law enforcement data to state and federal agency databases in order to discover, and hopefully close down, those profiting from the illegal sale of these guns to prohibited purchasers (minors). Youth and staff met with representatives of local, state, and federal law enforcement and elected officials to attempt to resolve this issue, and participated in establishing the Oakland Gun Tracing Task Force to develop evidence-based policy recommendations.

Since public employees were not carrying out the juvenile gun tracing mandate, staff of Youth ALIVE! obtained the approval of a judge to request records from law enforcement of the sales of crime guns recovered from Oakland youth and the police records of juveniles who were found in possession of the guns, in order to conduct juvenile gun tracing themselves. Their analysis of this data, presented to the task force, revealed the significance of tracing guns recovered in juvenile crimes. Staff reported that three-quarters of the guns were purchased in or near Oakland, and that the juveniles found in possession of the guns had had an average of five probation violations—information that was essential to develop and pursue targeted prevention strategies in reducing illegal gun sales and gun crimes. Based on Youth ALIVE's findings, the task force made these recommendations to the police department and city council as follows: (1) trace all guns confiscated from youth and report findings to the city council, (2) pass a city ordinance requiring the reporting of stolen/lost guns, (3) expand intervention services for juveniles the first time they enter the criminal justice system, and (4) convene a statewide committee to improve policies related to tracing through regulations and legislation. All of these recommendations were implemented.^{16†}

ADDRESSING THE RISK FACTORS: YOUTH

Learning to be messengers of violence prevention provided program participants with a culture filled with positive avenues for personal empowerment and success, an antidote to the risk factors for violence. (1) *TNT* members moved from being

[†]*Inspired by the local success of Oakland's Gun Tracing Task Force, in 2004, the President of the California Senate partnered with Youth ALIVE! staff and convened a statewide California Gun Tracing Task Force, in order to overcome technological and training barriers to link local, state, and federal tracing systems. This state Task Force, composed of representatives of federal, state, and local law enforcement and gun violence prevention experts, recommended California Automated Firearm System reforms which were funded and fully implemented by the state of California in 2011.*

victims, who in their own words had no way out from the challenging conditions they were growing up in, to being leaders in their communities and participants in the policy process. (2) The program helped them beat the odds of not graduating from high school. While attending schools whose graduation rates hovered at 40 %, nearly 100 % of the students trained as peer educators earned their high school diplomas.¹⁷ Based on anecdotal information from former *TNT* members to staff, many attended college and found employment in youth and community services, the media, and as staff for elected officials. (3) By participating in the civic process and appearing frequently in the media, *TNT* members found a positive role for themselves in their communities, providing a positive role model for others. Their visibility in the classroom challenged negative self-images common among many young people growing up in urban areas. As a founding member of *TNT* said: *I say where I live and where I go to school and everyone assumes I'm going to be a failure.* (4) Most *TNT* members needed to contribute to their household income. Knowing that there were few jobs for youth, Youth ALIVE! provided each member with clear job responsibilities, ongoing supervision, and a stipend for their work.

Finally, simply engaging the youth in learning how to participate in changing the environment around them served to take them out of harm's way and provided a positive alternative to the violence.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTNERS

Youth ALIVE! never worked alone. Building partnerships across multiple disciplines (hospitals, schools, the legislature, law enforcement, community organizations, the media, researchers, and funders) was essential to achieving program and policy goals. The implementation of the agency's mission is consistent with nonprofit literature research findings that "...high-impact nonprofits work with and through organizations and individuals outside themselves to create more impact than they ever could have achieved alone."² This is consistent with the public health perspective that the only way to reduce violence is through an integrated approach across disciplines.¹⁸

The roots of the organization emerged from and were first supported by a public health injury prevention organization in San Francisco. The Oakland school district administration embraced the program, providing financial support and linkages to school personnel for meeting space, and for classroom presentations. Leaders in the field of public health, many with experience in tobacco control, provided expertise in research, policy development, and community and state mobilization for prevention strategies. Representatives of national gun control organizations shared strategies for their successes. Critical information and research findings came from experts in the fields of law, policy, medical research, and criminal justice. Youth ALIVE! staff provided a bridge to these outside resources for the youth.

Funders became partners. The unique and ambitious goals of Youth ALIVE! required an equally ambitious and sustainable fundraising effort. Youth ALIVE! raised money from foundations, local, state and federal governments, the school district, and individual donors. These resources were expanded when a health care foundation launched a 10-year "violence prevention initiative" in 1992, which rejected the view that violence is inevitable (and, implicitly, "acceptable") in certain communities. The initiative supported and convened service providers, program participants, media and communications specialists, researchers, legal experts, community members, and policy makers to address "What is Killing Our Kids".¹⁹ This same foundation inspired other

foundations to adopt violence prevention as an objective. These resources and connections contributed to the success of Youth ALIVE!

In Oakland, strong linkages with schools, community members, hospitals and public health institutions, the media, policy makers, and other nonprofit organizations were critical to initiate and sustain program and policy development. Often a connection with just one willing individual, sometimes located in institutions with thousands of employees, was the key to forming an “institutional partnership”. Shifting the violence paradigm from the after-the-fact criminal justice approach to preventing violent crime from happening in the first place meant building trust with law enforcement. Members of the Oakland Police Department were among the first to raise concerns about residential gun dealers. Both the leadership in the Police Department and the California Police Chief’s association were strong supporters of effective gun violence prevention policies.

PROGRAM CHALLENGES

Staffing. Finding staff who were knowledgeable about the risk factors for violence in the environment and who also had solid youth service program management and policy expertise was challenging. Agencies need to allow a substantial training time to fill the gaps in these qualifications. Another difficulty in finding qualified applicants was the perception of the potential applicant (often well founded) of the fragility of small nonprofit organizations and low salary level in the youth field. Not being able to meet salary expectations of fully trained and experienced staff was also an issue.

Youth Culture, Impatience. Program participants were highly motivated to reduce gun violence in their communities. However, once they felt prepared to reach out to policymakers, they were frustrated to learn that the process of policy change is slow and detailed. Staff worked closely with the youth to reassure them that the lack of an immediate response by an elected official did not automatically reflect disrespect or a lack of interest in the issue. This was a difficult but important lesson that was particularly hard for impatient teenagers.

Measuring Outcomes: Youth Culture, Trust. Although it is well understood that careful documentation and a rigorous evaluation can increase the likelihood of replication, during the time period this document covers, the only data obtained on the program participants was their own contact information, contact information for their parent or guardian and their schools, and grade averages at the beginning and end of each semester. Although individual participants confidentially shared a great deal of information with staff over time, staff prioritized developing trust with and among the participants, and felt that collecting more detailed data (criminal justice, mental health, protective services, etc.) would jeopardize that trust, and also jeopardize the program. Therefore, there is no data to measure changes in individual participant behavior or attitudes, or to compare participant behavior to students not participating in the program, except for high school graduation. Each agency should decide how significant these measures are for demonstrating program success and potential replication.

Measuring Outcomes, Data Collection. Endemic to the field of violence prevention is the problem of reliably measuring outcomes of experimental strategies. Untangling and isolating variables which cause, or ameliorate, the problem is difficult. Compounding this problem in the gun violence prevention field is the

ongoing difficulty in obtaining data relevant to defining the scope of the issue and developing and measuring relevant strategies to address the problem. The gun lobby continues to successfully push for restrictions on data collection and sharing by public agencies, and has limited funding for research that could contribute to developing and measuring successful strategies for saving lives.⁹ Not having reliable data on outcomes can inhibit funder interest in addressing the issue and can limit the likelihood of replication of what may be a successful approach to reducing gun violence.

CONCLUSION

This case study documents how youth at a grassroots nonprofit agency successfully participated in developing critical local and state policies which helped to reduce easy access to guns, through a mixture of direct service and policy advocacy. As stated so clearly by Kimberlin, nonprofit organizations with a focused policy approach stemming from the voices of program participants, their own data, and data from other sources can have a significant impact on policy and regulatory reform.¹ The strategies used that incorporated the youths' own perceptions of the risk factors behind the killings helped to shape public policy goals; their civic leadership contributed to transforming the culture around them, making their environments safer.

By becoming effective and persuasive messengers, they joined the dialogue about this life and death issue and became fully engaged in civil society; their mindset changed from wondering if this was the day that they would be shot, to envisioning what life would be like as an adult. The work of the *TNT* youth to reduce the supply of and demand for guns in their communities modeled positive images of urban youth to the media and policy makers, and to their peers, promoted model laws for cities, and helped to inspire state policies which contributed to California's dramatic fall in gun deaths.

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