Youth Violence Crisis

Finding 1: Despite declines in some juvenile crime, California faces an immediate crisis of youth violence. Alienated and disaffected young people are escaping the attention of families, friends and teachers until they explode into violence.

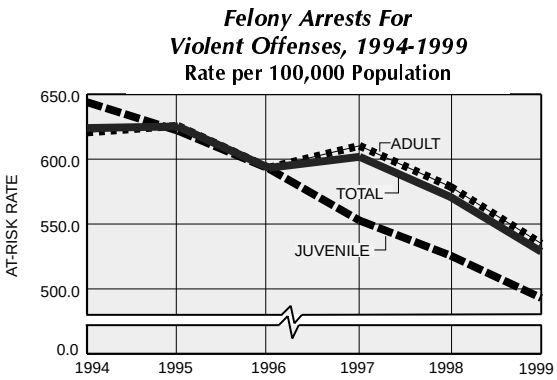
Statistics indicate dramatic and welcomed declines in violent youth crime over the last six years. But considerable evidence also shows that violence among children persists at dangerous levels. And most importantly, the best information is not guiding our actions, and the best modalities for dealing with troubled children and families are still not universally employed.

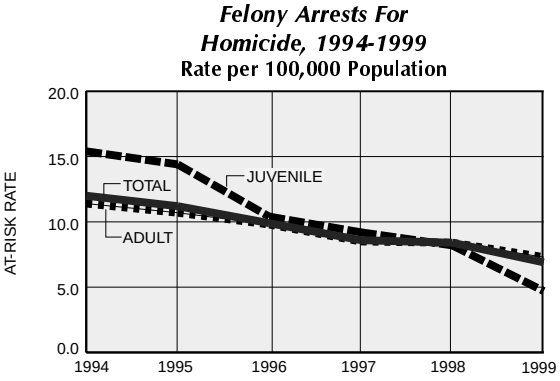
In confidential surveys, youth report committing or being the victims of non-lethal violence at rates that are as high as the mid-1990s. While homicide among California's youth has declined, suicide and suicide attempts have not declined.[35]

The worst of these concerns are captured in rare, but high-profile school shootings – which represent both the crisis and the opportunity. Families and educators, faith-based and community organizations need immediate access to the latest information about the underlying causes of youth violence and effective prevention and intervention strategies. Schools and other community institutions need to be more fully enlisted in efforts to identify and respond to children who are hurting themselves and others.

Prevalence of Youth Violence

As described earlier, crime statistics show that youth crime has plunged in recent years. In California the arrest rate for violent offenses has decreased steadily since 1994. There was a 69.5 percent decrease in juvenile arrests for homicide from 1994 to 1999.





Source: California Department of Justice, Division of Criminal Justice Information Services, *Crime and Delinquency in California, 1999: Arrests Part One*. Adult population at-risk is ages 18 to 69. Juvenile population at-risk is ages 10 to 17. http://caag.state.ca.us/cjsc/cd99/ar1.pdf.

Behind these important indicators are other statistics that show what the Surgeon General describes as an "ongoing, startlingly pervasive problem." Between 30 to 40 percent of boys and 15 to 30 percent of girls say they have committed a serious violent offense by the age 17.[36]

Moreover, even if crime rates remain stable, the problem remains large. In 2000, the average daily population of California's juvenile halls, camps and ranches was 11,529.[37] California Youth Authority institutions and camps housed 7,545 wards in March 2000.

Children also are more likely to be the victims of crimes. In 1997, youth (12 through 17) were victims of crime more than two times as frequently as adults, according to the National Crime Victimization Survey. One in four violent crime victims in America, according to the survey, is a youth.

The Tip of the Iceberg

High-profile acts of violence like school shootings are indicators of a much larger crisis of alienation and disaffection among youth. Two deadly incidents of school violence in San Diego in just over two weeks in March 2001 killed two and wounded 19, galvanizing parents, educators and policymakers to understand why these tragedies occurred and to find ways to prevent them in the future.

Case Study of a School Shooter

At 16, Evan Ramsey killed the principal and a student in Bethel, Alaska, in 1997. "I told everybody," he said in an interview from the prison where he is serving two 100-year sentences.

A victim of severe bullying, he described the pain and suffering he endured at the hands of other students and the despair he felt in not only being picked on, but in reporting it to authorities only to be told to try to ignore it.

One federal consultant said, "If every parent went away from this, not worrying that their boy is going to kill someone, but listening and paying attention to depression, we'd be better off."

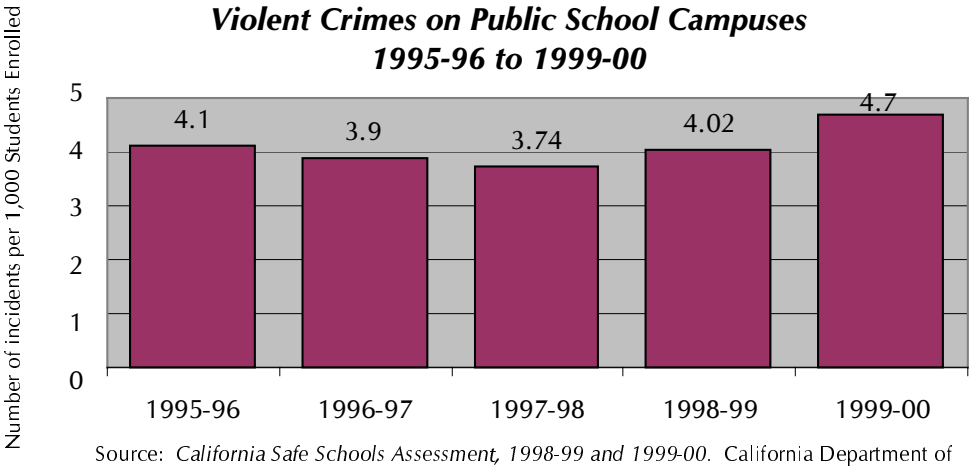
Source: *Deadly Lessons: School Shooters Tell Why,* Chicago Sun Times, April 3, 2001. Targeted School Violence Conference, April 30, 2110. U.S. Secret Service.

The U.S. Secret Service analyzed 37 school shootings that occurred over the last 25 years. The agency found that that these shootings are not as random or unpredictable as previously believed. And as a result, many can be prevented. The preliminary findings show:

- Most of these acts are the result of understandable and discernable patterns of behavior, including developing the idea and planning.
- In 75 percent of the cases, the shooter told someone about his plan. In half of the cases, multiple people knew of the plan.
- There is no accurate or useful profile of a school shooter, therefore profiling will not help to identify a potential shooter.
- In most cases the incident was resolved before law enforcement arrived on the scene, suggesting the need to develop proactive ways to assess threats.

- Most shooters said or did something to cause a responsible adult to be concerned. In 75 percent of the cases the shooter was known by a responsible adult to be having difficulty coping with major stress or loss.
- In a number of cases, having been severely bullied played a key role in the attack.[38]

It is important to remember that statistically schools are among the safest places for children. In the last 10 years the annual number of school shootings nationally have decreased. The Centers for Disease Control found that only 0.62 percent of homicides among school-aged children were school-related – meaning 99 percent occur elsewhere.[39] Still the California Department of Education reports a gradual increase in crime on campus. From the 1995-96 school year through June 2000, educators reported a 15 percent increase in violent crime. All other categories of crimes – including property crimes, drug and alcohol offenses and weapon possession – decreased. No homicides were reported during that period.[40]



Source: *California Safe Schools Assessment, 1998-99 and 1999-00.* California Department of Education.

The shootings, while rare, rightly escalate concerns and prompt calls for action to understand and prevent these behaviors. Many analysts believe that these tragedies are indicators of common, non-lethal maladies – a much larger crisis of emotional vulnerability experienced by young people. Among the indicators of this crisis:

- While the number of homicides in schools nationwide has declined, the number of incidents involving the killing of multiple victims in and around schools has risen dramatically. In less than two years, there were eight multiple shootings of students by students. Each of these incidents occurred in a place far removed from inner cities.[41]

- Homicide is the second leading cause of death for young people ages 15 to 24 in California. It is the leading cause of death for African-Americans ages 15 to 24.
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death for young people ages 15 to 24 in California, claiming 393 young victims in 1998. There were 2,745 reports of attempted suicide by youth under the age of 20 in 1998.

10 Leading Causes of Death in California
1990-1998

Rank	Ages 10-14	Ages 15-24	Ages 25-34
1	Unintentional Injury 1,563	Unintentional Injury 13,013	Unintentional Injury 15,082
2	Cancer 645	Homicide 11,580	HIV 11,782
3	Homicide 579	Suicide 4,221	Homicide 9,132
4	Suicide 252	Cancer 2,037	Suicide 6,347
5	Congenital Anomalies 240	Heart Disease 878	Cancer 5,257

Source: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Center for Disease Control, *Leading Causes of Death Reports*. http://webapp.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/leadcaus.html.

Bullying and emotional angst have long been considered a normal part of adolescence. But the realities of modern life have made the consequences of failing to address their root causes far more serious – sometimes fatal.

In the past, revenge for bullying or tormenting was exacted in a fistfight on the street corner; today it is exacted at the end of a firearm. From 1990 to 1998, 10,002 Californians ages 15 to 24 died as a result of firearm-related homicides.[42]

Opportunities Missed

Young school shooters who deal with their anger and pain by lashing out represent missed opportunities by parents and organizations responsible for developing healthy young people. In most cases the warning signs were there – but were not recognized by the individuals who might have made a difference.

The preliminary findings of the Secret Service suggest that with the right skills and knowledge, school employees can take steps to prevent disturbed and angry students from killing others. The programs below describe specific strategies that schools can use to intervene early and help young people to navigate the often turbulent waters of adolescence. They offer

ways to change the climate of schools to promote the emotional health of all students. They describe the potential of comprehensive and integrated school-based services to meet the multiple needs of children and families.

Strategies to Promote Emotional Well-Being

Social scientists assert that children can learn how to solve problems non-violently by enhancing their social relationships with peers, teaching them how to interpret behavior and improving their conflict resolution skills.[43] Interventions strive to equip children with the skills they need to deal effectively with difficult social situations, such as being teased, bullied or ostracized.

There also is better understanding about how teens react to emotional injuries resulting from loss, rejection, betrayal and humiliation. Parents, schools, places of worship and community agencies can help teens learn to cope in non-violent ways with normal hurt feelings and more serious emotional pain. Among the opportunities:

Emotional Health Education. Author Ron Brill says that for adolescents, who are highly self-conscious, a put down from a peer in front of friends deepens their own emotional insecurity, weakens self-acceptance and creates fear that they are worthless, unlovable or unacceptable. They react with denial, what he terms the "code of cool," or by lashing out at others.

He asserts that the institutions – such as families and schools – at times ignore the needs of youth to learn to "safely navigate through life's most emotionally powerful, confusing, insecure and vulnerable period." He urges middle and high schools to offer emotional health education that addresses how teen hurt becomes hate and how pain is expressed as anger. "Ignoring this type of education is dangerous in a gun-filled society," he says.[44] (www.emotionalhonesty.com)

Jigsaw Classroom. The Jigsaw Classroom is a cooperative learning technique developed in the early 1970's by Elliott Aronson and his students at the University of Texas and University of California. It is designed to transform the atmosphere of a school from competitive, cliquish and exclusionary to one in which students learn to appreciate and care for one another. Students work together in non-traditional small groups to learn traditional academic material. The technique fosters better learning of the academic material and encourages listening, engagement and empathy. The success of each student is dependent on all students working as a team. Research shows that the social atmosphere of the classroom changes to include and value all students – contributing to a safer school generally.

Aronson asserts that this program can help prevent future Columbines. (www.jigsaw.org)

Bullying Prevention Program. The Bullying Prevention Program is one of 10 programs that comprise the "Blueprints for Violence Prevention." Developed in Norway by Dan Olweus and his colleagues at the University of Bergen, the program targets students in elementary, middle and junior high schools. It includes a school wide component to assess problems and coordinate the program. Classroom rules are established and enforced to stop bullying; interventions are made with children identified as bullies and their parents. The program has resulted in substantial reductions in reports of bullying and victimization, general antisocial behavior including vandalism, fighting, theft and truancy. Significant improvements occurred in school climate and the attitudes of students about school and homework. (www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/model/ten_bully.htm)

School-Based Prevention Services

Public schools have day-to-day responsibility for educating more than 90 percent of California's school-age children, and so have intense interaction with children and their families. As such, they have unparalleled opportunities to identify and respond to children who are experiencing problems that can lead to violence. Research and experience are documenting the value of comprehensive, integrated services delivered at or near school sites. Some examples:

Healthy Start Program. The State in 1991 implemented the Healthy Start Support Services for Children Act to provide children and their families with the support services needed to ensure that children learn well. Healthy Start sites provide comprehensive, integrated services to address the many needs of children and families.

Services that families previously had to access at separate and distant locations – like primary health care, mental health, counseling, employment information and other social services – are brought together at or near school sites. Independent evaluations of the program show:

- ✓ Healthy Start reached those it intended to serve, provided many services and improved the way children and families received services.
- ✓ Student behavior, performance and school climate improved.
- ✓ Students are receiving increased health care, especially preventive care.
- ✓ The lowest performing middle and high school students improved their grade point averages by almost 50 percent.
- ✓ Unmet, basic needs of families for goods and services were cut in half.
- ✓ Student drug use decreased and self-esteem increased.

✓ School violence and family violence decreased.

Since 1991, the State has invested $294 million in Healthy Start, awarding 737 planning grants and 549 operational grants. The map shows the distribution of sites across the State.

Source: California Department of Education, *Healthy Start Program sites.* http://www.cde.ca.gov/healthystart/eval/evalworks.htm

Programs are eligible for 2-year planning grants and 3-year implementation grants, after which they are expected to be self-sustaining. The Department of Education reports that 83 to 87 percent of the sites are able to continue or increase their activities after grant funding ends.

The biggest obstacle to continuation, according to the department, is funding for a coordinator to facilitate and sustain the ongoing work of the local collaborative, estimated to cost $50,000 to $100,000 a year. Legislation has been introduced to direct money from the current allocation to support coordination activities at some sites.

A state program administrator said that after 10 years the program has achieved "good coverage" across the State. However, five counties – Alpine, Amador, Lassen, Glenn and Sierra – still have no sites. It is unclear whether their schools do not qualify or whether they lack the resources to develop what one observer described as the "application from hell." In the current funding cycle the department would have needed $61 million to fund all of the applications it received. But only $39 million is available.[45]

Juvenile Crime Prevention Demonstration Program. This initiative began in 1996 to demonstrate how comprehensive programs can strengthen families, improve school performance and reduce juvenile crime. It was designed be a four-and-a-half year, $10 million per year commitment. It is administered by the Department of Social Services.

Twelve "high-risk" communities were chosen to ensure that stressed families receive comprehensive services. Clients and community members serve on community oversight councils that develop and run the programs. Each program includes the following components:

Family Resource Centers at or near schools serve as the hub. Outreach workers identify isolated families with infants and young children and encourage their involvement in the center and community.

Families and Schools Together (FAST) brings families to schools to participate in weekly sessions designed to strengthen family communication, unity and parenting skills, elementary academic performance, and children's behavior and attendance.

Mothers and Sons programs focus on single mothers raising sons ages 10 to 14. Through intensive group support, communication and problem solving skills are developed to prevent delinquency and gang involvement.

First Offenders provides early interventions with youth ages 8 to 18 who have been cited or arrested. Staff from probation, social services, mental health and drug and alcohol agencies provide family support and advocacy with schools to deter further criminal involvement.

Beyond School Hours includes after-school, summer community service, education and recreation activities. Conflict resolution, decision-making and anger management techniques are included in program activities.

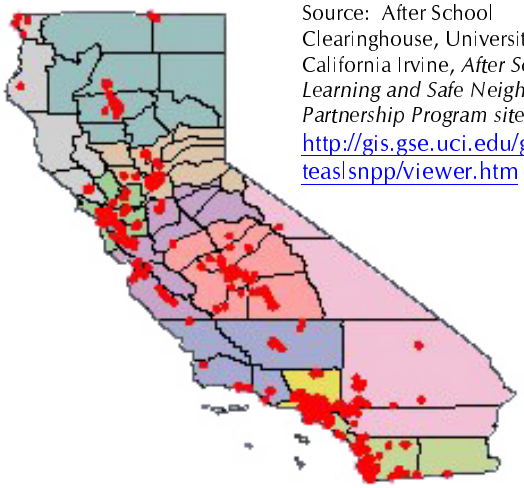
An independent evaluation showed improved outcomes between intake and case closure for children and families participating in the program, including:

- ✓ Significant decreases in violent, criminal and delinquent behaviors, including significant declines in youth picked up or cited by the police (from 41 to 17 percent) and in those arrested (from 31 to 12 percent).
- ✓ Significant decreases in negative school behaviors, including detention (from 46 to 32 percent), suspension and expulsion (from 34 to 20 percent) and failing grades (from 46 to 34 percent).
- ✓ Significant reductions in problems with basic needs such as medical care, employment, food and clothing, housing, transportation and child care (63 percent of the families experienced improvements).
- ✓ Significant improvements in family functioning (55 percent experienced improvements). Significant decreases in families' criminal justice involvement, including a decrease in the number of families reporting arrests (37 to 16 percent) and other involvement with the legal system (32 to 27 percent).[46]

The program was reauthorized in the 2000-01 state budget, subject to appropriations in the annual budget. It was targeted for elimination in the May Revision of the 2001-02 budget.

After-School Programs. The most dangerous time of day for youth is after school ends and while parents are still working. Between 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. more than half of all youth offenses are committed. Nationally, juvenile crime triples starting at 3 p.m.[47]

Without some place positive to go after school – to stay off the streets and out of empty homes – many youth end up hanging with the wrong crowd and getting into trouble. A study by the University of Southern California shows that eighth-graders without adult supervision after school were more likely to smoke, drink and use marijuana than those who have some supervision. Another study of sixth-graders showed that those in "self care" were more likely to get poor grades or exhibit bad behavior.[48] Researcher Bruce Perry believes anti-truancy programs are one of the most effective ways to identify and respond to at-risk children.[49]



Source: After School Clearinghouse, University of California Irvine, *After School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnership Program sites.* http://gis.gse.uci.edu/gisweb/stateas|snpp/viewer.htm

Importantly, policy-makers are hearing the message. At all levels of government, support for after-school programs has increased. The national effort to improve academic achievement and improve child safety has resulted in historic increases in funding for child care, Head Start and after-school programs. The 2001 federal education budget includes nearly $850 million for the after-school 21st Century Learning Centers Program.

In California, the After School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnership Program funds local after-school programs involving partnerships among schools, local government agencies, community organizations, and businesses. Programs operate on or near school sites and serve elementary and middle school students. The Governor's proposed 2001-02 state budget contains $140 million for the program.

The University of California at Irvine, which is conducting the statewide program evaluation, reports that 914 schools receive state funds for after-school programs – serving just 2.5 percent of all eligible children. A university researcher said that 70,000 children are on waiting lists for after-school programs, and to serve them, the program would have to be doubled. This number, he said, underestimates the need because most programs do not keep waiting lists. If they do, families often do not sign up when they learn the program is full. Adolescents from low-income families told focus groups conducted by Children Now that fees for after-school programs make them inaccessible to many young people.

Beacon Centers. The San Francisco Beacon Initiative, a partnership between the city, the school district and private funders, has transformed eight public schools into youth and family centers that have become "beacons" of activity in neighborhoods. At each center students have access to tutoring and computer classes, health-related and drug prevention activities, youth leadership training, art and recreational programs and career development activities. Adults receive parenting and ESL classes. The

centers are open year round, after school, in the evenings, on weekends and in the summer.

The city of San Francisco provides 80 percent of the funding through the Children's Fund, created by the passage of the Children's Initiative in 1991. The remainder of the funding is provided by 15 organizations that pool funds in the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund. Each center is managed by a non-profit agency that works with the school where the center is located to manage and coordinate its operations.

Other similar models, where community organizations are coming into public schools to provide programs and opportunities for young people and their families include New Beginnings in San Diego, Village Centers in Oakland, and Full-Service Schools in Modesto.[50]

These programs share some important common attributes and assets:

- ***Comprehensive services.*** Educators have long supported efforts to meet the physical and emotional needs of children as a way of improving academic learning. The Healthy Start program provides comprehensive screening and services to children in low-income families.
- ***Family-based services.*** Educators have long recognized that children with supportive parents achieve better academically. The Juvenile Crime Prevention Demonstration Project has proven that solving family problems can increase student performance and decrease criminal and delinquent behaviors.
- ***After-school programs.*** After-school programs can reduce crime and enhance student performance. But even with increased federal and state support, thousands of children remain on waiting lists.
- ***Community centers.*** Schools can be the locus for a variety of neighborhood services. The San Francisco Beacon Initiative transformed eight schools into youth and family centers that have become a locus of activity in those neighborhoods.
- ***Leadership.*** Teachers and administrators can be powerful role models in neighborhoods. Their concern for children, awareness of their needs, and familiarity with public agencies allow educators to be catalysts for strong community-based efforts to improve health and well-being, while reducing violence.

Immediate Action is Needed

Tragedies like school shootings – along with more frequent and less visible violent behaviors – suggest a persistent problem that has not been adequately addressed by local communities or supported by the State.

Researchers and community experience have contributed to a growing understanding of the underlying causes of youth violence – from the impact of trauma on brain development in very young children to the effects of severe and persistent bullying. Likewise, they have contributed to a growing body of strategies proven to prevent youth violence and others that have been identified as promising.

But this information has not been systematically gathered and disseminated to the individuals and institutions best positioned to help young people – families, schools, faith-based and community-based organizations.

To help young people grow up healthy, to effectively intervene when signs of trouble emerge, and to prevent future tragedies like those at Santana and Columbine high schools, we must pay attention to the emotional needs of young people. Parents, educators, faith leaders and leaders of community prevention organizations need the latest information on ways to promote the emotional health of youth – and they need it now. They need the ability to recognize and immediately respond to youth that are experiencing emotional distress in ways that do not stigmatize or alienate them.

Putting These Assets to Work

- The Youth Violence Prevention Coordinating Council recommended in Finding 2 should focus first on streamlining application and funding procedures for school-based programs. The council also should identify for policy-makers specific financial incentives to encourage school districts to use their facilities to partner with other organizations to provide community-based services.
- The Prevention Institute recommended in Finding 3 should work with schools to identify emerging leaders, mentor them and provide them with the support necessary to be neighborhood beacons.
- The institute's clearinghouse should provide policy-makers with the best models for using federal, state and private resources to operate school-based services to families.

Recommendations 2 through 6 advocate steps the State can take to prioritize prevention and institute the leadership and organizational structure to sustain it. Recommendation 5 advocates a resource center to acquire, assess and disseminate information on youth violence prevention to those who need it.

The Commission believes that the continued unacceptably high levels of juvenile violence demand that the State immediately begin that process by charging an existing entity with immediately gathering and disseminating the latest youth violence prevention information. The activities advocated below should begin immediately, but should be assumed and expanded by the resource center advocated in Recommendation 5.

Recommendation 1: California policy-makers should make prevention the primary policy for reducing youth crime and violence. As an immediate step, the Legislature and Governor should ensure that parents, educators and community leaders have the latest information on the root causes of violence and strategies to promote the emotional health and well-being of youth. Policy-makers should allocate resources for the following:

Implementing this Recommendation

The Governor and the Legislature could rely on one or more of the following agencies and organizations to implement this recommendation:

- **School/Law Enforcement Partnership.** This partnership brings the Attorney General and Superintendent of Public Instruction together to prevent violence.
- **Private Foundations.** The Wellness Foundation, David and Lucille Packard Foundation, California Endowment, and Foundation Consortium are all potential partners.
- **State Board of Education.** The board, in cooperation with the Superintendent of Public Instruction and Secretary for Education, could champion these activities and rally local school districts to the cause.

- ***Information gathering and dissemination.*** Information on the causes of youth violence and effective prevention and intervention strategies should be gathered and disseminated to parents, schools and community leaders. Information should be provided on how to identify and effectively respond to youth who are experiencing difficulties. Responses should be non-threatening and should not result in youth being labeled, excluded or alienated. Effective youth development strategies should be emphasized and encouraged. Because families are the institution with the primary responsibility for positive youth development, particular emphasis should be placed on disseminating information to them.
- ***Professional development.*** Educators and other professionals who work with youth should be educated to quickly identify and respond to youth who are struggling emotionally. Professionals should be able to make referrals to appropriate community resources. Professionals should learn to develop effective interagency partnerships.
- ***A state summit and community meetings.*** The Governor should sponsor a youth violence prevention summit as soon as possible to focus attention on and widely disseminate the latest information about youth development and youth violence prevention. The State should challenge and assist every California community to convene community forums to hear firsthand the latest research regarding the root causes of youth violence and effective preventive strategies, and to develop local action plans to prevent violence.