

Understanding and Using New Knowledge

Finding 5: While the knowledge of violence is evolving, the State does not effectively acquire, assess and incorporate into policy the latest research on brain development, violence as learned behavior and effective prevention and intervention measures.

Scientific research and the experiences of communities are contributing to an ever-increasing understanding of the factors that put children at risk for violence – as well as influences that protect them from violence. At the same time, new evidence is emerging that can inform policy-makers and violence prevention practitioners about programs and strategies proven to prevent and reduce youth violence – and those that do not. But the State does not have a mechanism for effectively obtaining, evaluating and incorporating this information into its youth crime and violence prevention policies. To inform its policies and practices, the State should establish a resource center to acquire, assess and disseminate the latest information about the root causes of violence and effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Knowledge is Evolving

New knowledge about the underlying causes of youth violence and how to prevent and reduce it, not available a decade ago, has emerged from numerous scientific studies and community experiences. As detailed in the Background of this report, more is being learned about:

How the brain reacts to trauma. A growing body of scientific evidence suggests that the brains of children who are traumatized as a result of experiencing or witnessing violence develop differently than those of children who grow up in non-violent environments. Research by Dr. Bruce Perry suggests that the brains of traumatized children develop to be hypervigilant and focused on non-verbal cues, potentially related to threat. He says these children persist in a state of arousal and anxiety. The way their brains develop can negatively affect the way these children learn and interact with their families, peers and communities. As they mature, they may show signs of post traumatic stress disorder, including attention disorders, substance abuse, and aggression.

Factors that reduce risk and increase resilience. Researchers have identified many factors, such as abuse, neglect, substance abuse and poverty that can combine to increase a child’s propensity to violence. Similarly, much is known about factors that protect “at risk” children from violence, such as having at least one caring adult in their lives to help them build pro-social skills and achieve success, and being “connected” to school.

The effectiveness of community-wide efforts. The experiences of communities that have successfully reduced their rates of youth crime and violence point to the importance of strategic, collaborative efforts. This information, if easily accessed and widely disseminated, can be invaluable in guiding the State's prevention policies.

State Prevention Information Resources

Several state agencies that administer prevention programs develop, collect and disseminate materials to assist local agencies implement effective strategies.

Office of the Attorney General. The Attorney General's Crime and Violence Prevention Center develops and distributes crime prevention education and training materials and provides some training and technical assistance to communities. Resources support general crime prevention, gang and youth violence prevention, domestic violence, child abuse and elder abuse prevention activities.

Welfare Policy Research Project

The State recognized the importance of providing policy-makers and program managers access to the latest welfare-related research when it enacted the Welfare Policy Research Project to support effective implementation of welfare reform. The California Policy Research Center at the University of California was tapped to establish a research grants program to inform state and local officials, develop and maintain a public-use database of California welfare-related research, and sponsor and organize forums for policy-makers on the latest welfare-related issues and knowledge.

Since 1998, the center has operated a Statewide Community Policing Clearinghouse through a partnership with the Sacramento Police Department and a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice. The clearinghouse is the only centralized location in California where state and local agencies, community organizations and individuals can access information on community policing issues, including research on effective strategies, funding sources and training opportunities.

The office has requested a General Fund augmentation to continue and expand the Community Policing Clearinghouse to include all areas of crime prevention and a research component.

Department of Education. The California Department of Education, in partnership with the Office of the Attorney General, administers the School/Law Enforcement Partnership. One hundred experts from school districts and law enforcement agencies across the state provide training, resource materials and technical assistance to local agencies to implement collaborative strategies to enhance school and community safety.

Several years of budget cuts resulted in reductions in staffing and support for cadre members to travel to communities to provide technical assistance. Conferences to disseminate information on effective strategies and funds to evaluate the program were also eliminated. A report of The Safe Schools Task Force recommended the State revitalize these partnership activities.⁷¹ A conference is planned for fall 2001.

In response to another recommendation of the Safe Schools Task Force, the Partnership has prepared a summary of promising practices titled "Safe Schools Task Force: Great Ideas for School Safety" to help local agencies implement effective violence prevention programs.

Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs. The Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs maintains a resource center for alcohol and other drug information and mentoring. The Resource Center and Mentor Resource Center have a library, clearinghouse, conference and training calendar, referral system and an Internet Web site with links to resources worldwide.

Office of Criminal Justice Planning. The Office of Criminal Justice Planning, which describes itself as the "lead California agency in crime prevention, crime suppression, and criminal justice planning," does not maintain a resource center or clearinghouse. The agency's Web site provides links to criminal justice and prevention resource sites.

The Governor's proposed budget for 2001-02 contains \$106,000 to establish a Criminal Justice Information Clearinghouse in OCJP. The Legislative Analyst recommended against the proposal and in favor of a "more effective" Department of Justice budget proposal.

State Efforts are Fragmented and Limited

Clearly, some state agencies recognize and attempt to respond to the needs of policy-makers, community leaders and prevention practitioners for information about programs and strategies specific to their disciplines and primary missions. But in most cases, clearinghouse or resource center functions are a small part of the agency's broader mission. They may be housed in one room and be staffed by a single individual.

No state agency is charged with responsibility for a comprehensive youth violence prevention clearinghouse that would provide "one-stop shopping" for customers. For information on mentoring, go to the Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs. For information on gang violence prevention, contact the Office of the Attorney General. For information on truancy

prevention, the Attorney General may be a resource, but, then again, it could be the Department of Education.

Even for those who understand how the state is organized, tracking down the information is time consuming and frustrating. For those who do not know where to begin, navigating the labyrinth may seem impossible.

For information on developing and implementing community-wide prevention strategies like those in Los Angeles or Salinas, there is no readily identifiable statewide source of information. Organizations like the Pacific Center for Violence Prevention or the Prevention Institute may be a resource, but only if one knows to look there.

Other Resource Centers

Pacific Center for Violence Prevention. The center serves as the policy headquarters for the California Wellness Foundation's Violence Prevention Initiative, providing technical assistance and resources to the 16 community collaboratives that comprise the initiative. Services include training in local policy and media advocacy; an on-line forum where members can post and respond to inquiries, and where literature, statistics, resources, legislative data and prevention program databases can be accessed.

Other Resource Centers

Violence prevention resources also exist in private, non-profit organizations:

- National Center for Injury Prevention and Control at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov/ncipc/)
- Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (www.colorado.edu/cspv/)

And federal agencies:

- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (<http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/>)

The center maintains a library with reference services and assistance for members of the initiative and the public. The center's Web site states that it maintains the "largest specialized collection of violence and injury prevention materials" and access to numerous on-line databases. It also produces and distributes videos and print materials on youth violence. (www.pcvp.org)

The Prevention Institute. The prevention institute is a non-profit organization established to advocate for prevention. In collaboration with Harvard University's School of Public Health and the Education Development Center, it produced

Partnerships for Preventing Violence, a distance learning series of videotapes for violence prevention practitioners. The training focuses on coalition building and primary prevention and emphasizes leadership development. Approximately 2,500 California practitioners have participated in training provided by the institute.

More than half of post-broadcast questionnaire respondents reported that community awareness of violence as a problem was high at the close of broadcasts, and that awareness had increased since the broadcasts began in May 1998. More than 75 percent of respondents attributed changes in their community to the broadcasts and related local activities. A major outcome of the broadcast series is a trained cadre of violence prevention facilitators who have expressed their eagerness and readiness to promote a national violence prevention movement and build upon the work of the past three years.⁷² (www.preventioninstitute.org)

The authors of a recent report on what works to prevent juvenile violence stated:

Over the past two decades, scholars and juvenile justice policy innovators have developed the tools our society needs to significantly reduce delinquency. Yet somehow, word of these advances has not reached policy-makers or program practitioners – or if it did reach them, they haven't taken notice.⁷³

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Poor access to information about what works and what doesn't, and no effective way to translate that information into policy, may be partly to blame. Fragmentation creates two problems:

Fragmentation hinders good policy-making. Lacking a central source of information, the State's policy responses to youth violence are often not based on the latest knowledge about the underlying causes of youth violence and effective prevention and intervention strategies. The latest crisis or the ability of particular organizations to garner support for their programs – rather than reliable information – drive public policy. A bias toward pilot programs, in part, reflects inadequate information, as does the lack of confidence that some lawmakers have in the efficacy of prevention. At the same time, a lack of information and understanding allows programs shown to be ineffective to be established and to persist.

Fragmentation compromises community efforts. Community practitioners miss opportunities to implement effective strategies and squander limited resources on ineffective efforts when there is no mechanism to effectively disseminate research and best practice information across multiple disciplines.

Delbert Elliott, the director of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence in Boulder, Colorado, writes: “To date, most of the resources committed to the prevention and control of youth violence, both at the national and local levels, have been invested in untested programs based

on questionable assumptions....”⁷⁴ Lack of an effective way to obtain and transfer reliable information to policy-makers and practitioners contributes to this problem.

A State Youth Violence Prevention Clearinghouse

The Little Hoover Commission, in its 1995 report, *The Juvenile Crime Challenge: Making Prevention a Priority*, recommended the State implement a clearinghouse function that would provide “centralized assessment and evaluation of programs, promotion of models that work, and technical assistance for local governments and communities.”

Youth Violence Prevention Clearinghouse

A statewide youth violence prevention clearinghouse should do the following:

- Provide technical assistance to policy-makers
- Convene and facilitate meetings, roundtable discussions and conferences
- Sponsor briefings
- Provide links to other resources

In its 1995 report, *Violence Prevention... A Vision of Hope*, the Attorney General’s Policy Council on Violence Prevention said that “Information clearinghouses are important contributors to the compilation and dissemination of information, as well as resources for determining the extent of information gathering and analyses that have been undertaken by researchers.”

And the Legislative Analyst, in its 1999 report *Crime Prevention Programs in California: Building Successful Programs*, said that “information should

be collected on an ongoing basis, and then periodically disseminated in order to establish a baseline to be used in creating crime prevention standards.”

Knowledge about the causes of youth violence and how to address it is evolving at an ever-increasing pace and is kept by many different entities. To ensure that the latest research and knowledge is effectively integrated in the State’s funding and evaluation policies and available to guide local practices, California needs a state-wide youth violence prevention clearinghouse. To be most effective it should:

Coordinate with other resource centers. To complement the overall improved coordination of the State’s youth violence prevention efforts recommended by the Commission, the efforts of a clearinghouse should begin through coordination with state agencies and private organizations that currently provide youth violence prevention resources.

Provide “one-stop shopping.” Over time, as state coordination improves and funding streams are integrated, clearinghouse functions now performed by numerous agencies should be performed by the statewide clearinghouse. State agencies should provide links to the clearinghouse and the

clearinghouse to state agencies and other crime prevention, youth violence prevention, and youth development resources. The goal should be “one-stop shopping” through a single portal for policy-makers, prevention practitioners and community leaders.

Summary: People Need the Best Information

Much is now known about the causes and potential cures for violence perpetrated by young people. Knowledge will continue to evolve as more communities implement and gain experience with effective strategies and as research develops. But there is no central mechanism for acquiring, assessing and incorporating this information into state policy or community practice. The State should establish a resource center to gather and disseminate the latest information on the underlying causes of youth violence and the most effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Recommendation 5: Within the Youth Violence Prevention Institute, a resource center should be created to acquire, assess and disseminate research findings that impact youth violence prevention policy. Specifically, the center should:

- ❑ ***Advance knowledge.*** The center should obtain and assess the latest research in human development, social science and other disciplines and identify how state violence prevention policies could be changed to reflect the most current understanding of these issues. It should identify gaps in current knowledge and sponsor needed research.
- ❑ ***Disseminate information.*** The center should provide policy-makers, practitioners, and community leaders with information on proven and promising ideas and foster the exchange of information across disciplines. It should make the latest research available to the public and sponsor community forums to encourage discussion. It should include information about funding sources, training and technical assistance opportunities and provide links to other resources and clearinghouses.

