

Youth Violence Prevention Partnership

2009-2010 Report

Pam Hiller, BA, *Community Organizer, Youth Violence Prevention Partnership Coordinator*

Samantha Kaan, MPH, *Evaluator*

Noelle Wiggins, EdD, MSPH, *Manager, Community Capacitation Center*

Prepared by Samantha Kaan



**MULTNOMAH COUNTY
HEALTH DEPARTMENT
COMMUNITY CAPACITATION CENTER**



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Executive Summary

Violence is a serious public health issue that disproportionately affects youth of color in the United States. Preventing violence is one arena in which law enforcement and communities share a common interest. However, the mutual distrust that often exists between communities that experience adverse social conditions, especially communities of color, and the police has hindered authentic dialogue about the serious issue of youth violence.

The Youth Violence Prevention Partnership (YVPP) is a community-driven collaboration between the Community Capacitation Center (CCC) of the Multnomah County Health Department (MCHD), law enforcement agencies, community-based organizations, and youth.

YVPP builds relationships between law enforcement officials and young people to achieve the overarching goal of preventing youth violence. The

objectives of YVPP include increasing mutual trust among all participants, knowledge of legal rights and laws among youth and community partners, positive future orientation among youth, and empowerment among law enforcement officials and youth; and decreasing stereotypic beliefs among both youth and law enforcement officials. The YVPP model uses the principles and methods of popular education, an empowering style of educating and organizing rooted in social justice, to engage youth and law enforcement officials as equal participants in the process of identifying the problems in their communities, discussing the root causes, and exploring and enacting ideas for social action.



“This is an incredibly valuable program, and I think it is truly one of the major ways to create change in terms of the kids and the police.”

**- YVPP
Community
Partner**

In 2009-2010, we conducted a program evaluation to measure whether and to what degree participation in YVPP was associated with increases in the partnership’s desired outcomes. We used a multiple case study evaluation design with mixed methods that included a pre-post survey for youth and interviews for law enforcement officials and community partners. During this period, YVPP reached approximately 113 youth in regular, biweekly groups at six community-based sites in North/Northeast Portland and East Multnomah County. YVPP also organized six community-oriented events at different sites which drew nearly 1,300 community members.

Results of the survey conducted with youth indicated that their participation in YVPP was associated with statistically significant changes in their attitudes toward the police. For instance, young people reported being more able to talk to a police officer if they see or hear about something they know is wrong, and less likely to believe that all police officers abuse their authority. Interviews with officers revealed that their participation in YVPP resulted in positive outcomes for their police work, including helping them to address underlying causes and to approach their work with youth and communities more positively. Interviews with community partners suggested that YVPP was effective in increasing understanding, building trust, and establishing relationships among officers and young people. Community partners also described a change in attitudes among the youth involved in YVPP, as well as in the broader population of youth in their organizations.

YVPP focuses on building relationships, requires a long-term commitment, uses popular education, and is driven by the community. This partnership recognizes that we all have a role to play in creating safer, more peaceful, and more just communities.

Introduction

The Youth Violence Prevention Partnership (YVPP) is a community-driven collaboration between the Community Capacitation Center (CCC) of the Multnomah County Health Department (MCHD), law enforcement agencies, community-based organizations, and youth. YVPP builds relationships between law enforcement officials and young people to achieve the overarching goal of preventing youth violence. The objectives of YVPP include increasing mutual trust among all participants, knowledge of legal rights and laws among youth and community partners, positive future orientation among youth, and empowerment among law enforcement officials and youth; and decreasing stereotypic beliefs among both youth and law enforcement officials. In 2009-2010, staff at the CCC conducted a program evaluation to measure whether and to what degree YVPP led to changes in the above outcomes. In this report, we outline the needs, as well as the strengths, that drive YVPP; the background of the partnership; and the impact of YVPP in 2009-2010.

Needs and Strengths

A focus on youth violence

Violence is a serious public health issue. It affects health on two levels: on the individual level, by contributing to injury, death, and emotional distress among those directly affected; and on the community level, by spreading fear and creating conditions under which people feel unsafe in their own neighborhoods¹.

Like other health disparities, violence stems from structural root causes such as racial discrimination, poverty, and unemployment². Violence therefore cannot be viewed as merely a problem of individual behavior. Like other health disparities, violence is related to a sense of powerlessness. This can be seen on the level of both individual and community. For instance, neighborhoods that experience low levels of collective efficacy are more likely to have higher homicide rates³. Individuals who are exposed to high

1 Multnomah County Health Department, *the Faces and Voices of Violence in Multnomah County*.

2 Moore, *Perspective: Violence Prevention*.

3 Morenoff et al, "Neighborhood Inequality."

levels of social disorder in their surroundings are likely to develop negative beliefs and attitudes, which result in increased risk behaviors, including violence⁴.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2010, youth of color experience disproportionate amounts of violence compared to other populations on a national level. Approximately 16 young people ages ten to 24 were killed each day in the US in 2007. Eighty-four percent of these victims were killed with a firearm. Homicide is the second leading cause of death for this age group, according to the CDC. Among those aged ten to 24, homicide is the leading cause of death for African Americans, the second leading cause of death for Hispanics, and the third leading cause of death for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Asian/Pacific Islanders. The homicide rate among African-American males aged 10 to 24 years is 60.7 per 100,000. This exceeds the rates among Hispanic males (20.6 per 100,000) and non-Hispanic White males (3.5 per 100,000) in the same age group⁵.

Oregon shows a similar pattern for youth homicide rates. Between the years 1989 and 1995, among those aged 15 to 24, homicide rates per 100,000 were 80.2 for African Americans, 25.9 for Hispanics, and 5.7 for non-Hispanic whites⁶. In terms of weapon-related activity, self-reports among youth in Oregon in 2006 reveal that 25% of eighth graders and 20% of eleventh graders said they carried a weapon other than a gun. Nine percent of eighth graders and seven percent of eleventh graders in Oregon reported carrying a gun. In Multnomah County, 19% of eighth graders and 15% of eleventh graders reported

4 Wilson et al, "Getting to Social Action."

5 CDC, Youth Violence Data Sheet.

6 Oregon Department of Human Services, Mortality Patterns by Race and Ethnicity in Oregon.

carrying a weapon other than a gun, and five percent of eighth graders and four percent of eleventh graders reported that they carried a gun⁷.

These high rates of violence, particularly among youth of color, are cause for concern. Violence is a complex issue and can appear unsolvable, but, like other social issues that affect health, it is amenable to change. From a health promotion perspective, preventing youth violence means taking an upstream approach: intervening before violent behavior occurs by empowering youth, families, and communities to build the foundation for a healthy life.

Youth and the police

Preventing violence is one arena in which law enforcement and communities share a common interest. However, the mutual distrust that often exists between communities that experience adverse social conditions, especially communities of color, and the police has hindered authentic dialogue about the serious issue of youth violence. Nationally, incidents of excessive use of force, police brutality, and racial profiling have negatively affected the public's attitude toward police, particularly among youth of color⁸. Locally, several such incidents have occurred in recent years, increasing the mistrust of communities of color toward the police.

Without invalidating the experiences and fears of youth and their communities (particularly communities of color) with regard to the police, and without overlooking the power dynamics that exist between law enforcement and people who experience adverse social conditions, we propose that police and youth can work together respectfully to prevent violence. Changing attitudes on both sides of the police-youth divide is a first step. Positive contact between youth and police is one way to create this change, as it has been found to be predictive of positive attitudes among youth⁹. Likewise, positive contact with youth can help to change the attitudes of police¹⁰.

7 Multnomah County Health Department, *Multnomah County: Unintentional Injury, Violence, and Premature Death*.

8 Brandt and Markus, "Adolescent Attitudes toward the Police"

9 Rusinko et al, "The Importance of Police Contact in the Formulation of Youths' Attitudes toward Police"

10 Rabois and Haaga, "Facilitating Police-Minority Youth Attitude Change."

A commonly held belief in our society is that young people present more problems than possibilities¹¹. This notion is reflected in public policy that characterizes youth as threats that need to be controlled and contained¹². Alternate approaches, such as Positive Youth Development, view youth not based on their risk factors or deficits, but as having strengths, assets, and protective factors to build upon¹³. Young people have valuable knowledge and experience that can be harnessed for creating positive social change. Likewise, many law enforcement officials desire to make genuine connections with youth for the dual purposes of supporting individual youth and creating safer communities. The YVPP approach is based on the belief that law enforcement officials and young people can be allies in an effort to create safer, more peaceful, and more just communities.

About YVPP

Background

The seeds of YVPP were sown in 2003, when the CCC was conducting a community-based participatory research project called Poder es Salud/Power for Health. One component of this project involved working with the African American community at Grace and Truth Pentecostal Church to identify and address issues affecting the African American community of Northeast Portland. Members of the church identified youth violence as a major concern, and suggested building relationships with local police as part of the solution. The CCC's Community Organizer drew upon relationships with two officers and began facilitating regular interactions between the church community (including youth) and the officers. In 2006, these officers

11 Ginwright and Cammarota, "New Terrain in Youth Development"

12 Ibid.

13 Ferber et al, "Strengthening Youth Policy."

expressed a desire to further build relationships and trust with the African American community by connecting with a youth-serving organization in North Portland. The Community Organizer at the CCC initiated a partnership that came to be YVPP. Since then, she has received requests from both law enforcement officials and community members to expand the partnership.

At the time this report was initiated, YVPP operated in six sites in Multnomah County that serve low-income youth and youth of color. These sites included Self Enhancement Incorporated, the Native American Youth and Family Center, Blazers Boys and Girls Club, Helensview School, De la Salle North Catholic High School, and two community sites in Wood Village. These are settings that have not typically benefitted from existing police programs that aim to reach young people. The youth involved in YVPP at these sites were middle and high school-aged, and commonly experienced adverse social conditions in their families and communities, such as discrimination, poverty, and unemployment. Many of these young people also had personal experiences with (or came from families affected by) gangs, violence, and other criminal activity.

Portland Police Bureau's (PPB) North Precinct (formerly Northeast Precinct), has been the primary law enforcement partner involved in YVPP since the program's inception. PPB espouses the philosophy of community policing, described as a cooperative effort where residents, business owners, and officers work together to resolve neighborhood issues and reduce crime.¹⁴ Multnomah County's Sheriff's Office became involved in YVPP in 2009. The Sheriff's Office is committed to reducing crime and the fear of crime through innovation, partnerships, and teamwork.¹⁵ These partners play an important role in YVPP by contributing law enforcement officials' time to plan and facilitate groups with youth, and by participating in broader community events.

The Community Capacitation Center at MCHD plays the role of convener and facilitator of YVPP. The mission of the CCC is to support communities to increase control over their lives and their health. The CCC works to achieve this mission in several ways, including

¹⁴ Portland Police Bureau website.

¹⁵ Multnomah County Sheriff's Office Mission Statement.

conducting culturally-specific health promotion in communities that experience health inequities (such as violence among youth of color). The CCC's Community Organizer has coordinated YVPP since its inception.

In the YVPP model, a group of between ten and 25 youth and two front-line law enforcement officials meet twice a month at each youth-serving organization. Groups come together for an average of 90 minutes, during which time they engage in popular education-based activities (described below). YVPP also includes group outings to destinations of choice, which have included police precincts, the forensics lab, the courthouse, and several recreational destinations. Most sites also host a Police Day, in which different specialty units (such as mounted patrol and the bomb squad) come to the organization and interact with youth, their families, and the larger community. This model blends fun activities that appeal to the young people and officers with activities that educate, empower, and encourage critical thinking.

Popular education

The YVPP model uses the principles and methods of popular education, an empowering style of educating and organizing rooted in social justice. Popular education can be effective in helping people who experience inequities to develop an awareness of their inherent capacity and organize together for a world that fits with their interests.¹⁶ Commonly-used activities include brainstorming, small group work, role play, and dinámicas (social learning games). When using popular education, facilitators do not adhere to a pre-determined curriculum, but rather develop a curriculum around issues identified by participants. Several programs have successfully used popular education and other empowering approaches to engage young people

to make positive change in their communities.¹⁷ However, we have been unable to identify other efforts to use popular education with law enforcement officials.¹⁸

YVPP uses popular education to engage youth and law enforcement officials as equal participants in the process of identifying the problems in their communities, discussing the root causes, and exploring and enacting ideas for social action. Some common topics chosen by participants in YVPP have included youth's legal rights, gangs, racial profiling, and careers.

Site profiles

Self Enhancement Incorporated (SEI)

SEI, the original site of YVPP, is a nonprofit organization located in North Portland that offers a continuum of services to support urban youth, the majority of whom are African American. YVPP started at SEI in 2006 upon a request to the Community Organizer at the CCC from police officers at North Precinct who wanted to build a relationship with SEI to overcome a history of contention between that organization, the larger African American community, and the police. Today, the officers who began working at SEI are still involved in YVPP, and have even branched out to do other community-oriented police work. One of these officers has been promoted to a training position in PPB, and now introduces new officers to the community through SEI. In 2009-2010, 17 youth participated in the biweekly YVPP group. This group included boys and girls, most



17 Wallerstein and Bernstein, "Empowerment Education;" Wilson et al, "Getting to Social Action;" Wallerstein, "Empowerment to Reduce Health Disparities;" Fusoni, "Teen Empowerment."

18 A search in JSTOR resulted in zero articles for the search term "popular education" combined with "police," "policing," or "law enforcement."

**“YVPP helps
break down
the barriers
between
the police
and the
community.”**

**- Portland
Police
Bureau
Lieutenant**

of whom were African American. In March 2010, YVPP reached over 300 youth and their families at the third annual Police Day event held at SEI.

Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA)

NAYA is a community-based organization located in Northeast Portland that primarily (though not exclusively) serves Native American youth and families. In 2008, YVPP began at NAYA's High School Academy, an alternative school, upon the request of staff members who provide youth services and gang outreach. YVPP has engaged NAYA's Native American elders as part of building this relationship, as this is a crucial part of working respectfully in this culture. In 2009-2010, 34 youth at NAYA attended the two biweekly YVPP groups at this site. This was a very diverse group in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. Upon request of the organization, YVPP conducted an educational session at NAYA about Oregon's Measure 11 with the Assistant District Attorney, which drew about 150 youth. In April 2010, NAYA hosted the police at the organization's annual Spring Gathering, which drew over 200 members of the community.

Blazer's Boys and Girls Club (BBGC)

BBGC, a community center largely serving African American youth, is located immediately next door to PPB's North Precinct, yet both parties attest to an historical lack of communication and cooperation between the two neighbors. YVPP started at this site in 2008 upon the request of North Precinct. In 2009-2010, YVPP reached 10 youth at the regular biweekly group. At BBGC's Police Day in May 2010, YVPP reached over 200 youth and their families. In winter 2009, YVPP hosted a holiday event at BBGC, in which police, Health Department staff, and BBGC staff reached nearly 300 members of the Northeast Portland community.

Helensview School

Helensview is an alternative school in Northeast Portland that serves youth whose needs have not been met by other educational institutions. Operated by Multnomah Education Service District, Helensview annually enrolls between 250 and 270 young people ages 12 through 21 from all over Multnomah County. In 2009, the school's principal and an officer with a longstanding relationship with the school requested that YVPP begin at that site. In 2009-2010, YVPP reached a diverse group of 36 youth at Helensview during biweekly group meetings.

De la Salle North Catholic High School (DLS)

DLS is a private school in Northeast Portland. The request for YVPP to begin at this site came directly from a student who was concerned about issues of crime and safety at her school. Even though DLS is a private, college preparatory school, students and staff have shared that many of the students come from communities that face the same adverse social conditions as students who attend nearby alternative schools. In 2009-2010, YVPP reached 16 youth in the regular biweekly group. This group consisted of boys only, from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Wood Village

In 2009, YVPP began working in Wood Village, a town in East Multnomah County that is under the jurisdiction of Multnomah County Sheriff's Office.

Representatives of the Sheriff's Office requested help from the CCC's Community Organizer in building a relationship with the town's growing Latino/a



community in the interest of enhancing public safety. The CCC's Capacitation Coordinator, a resident of Wood Village, drew upon her ties to the Latino/a congregation of Wood Village Baptist Church to form this partnership. Together, the partners have spent the last year in dialogue with about 30 members of the Latino/a congregation and the neighboring Latino/a community about issues such as cross-cultural communication, legal rights, and domestic violence. YVPP held two community events in Wood Village in August 2010, which drew nearly 60 people each time. Through the church, the sheriff's deputies and the Latino community have been able to build a foundation of trust.

When this report was initiated, the partnership was laying the groundwork for bringing the sheriff's deputies together with Latino/a youth in the Wood Village community to achieve the objectives of YVPP. The partners began to reach out to young people living at Wood Village Green, a trailer park adjacent to the church that is home to several hundred Latino/a families.

Impact of YVPP

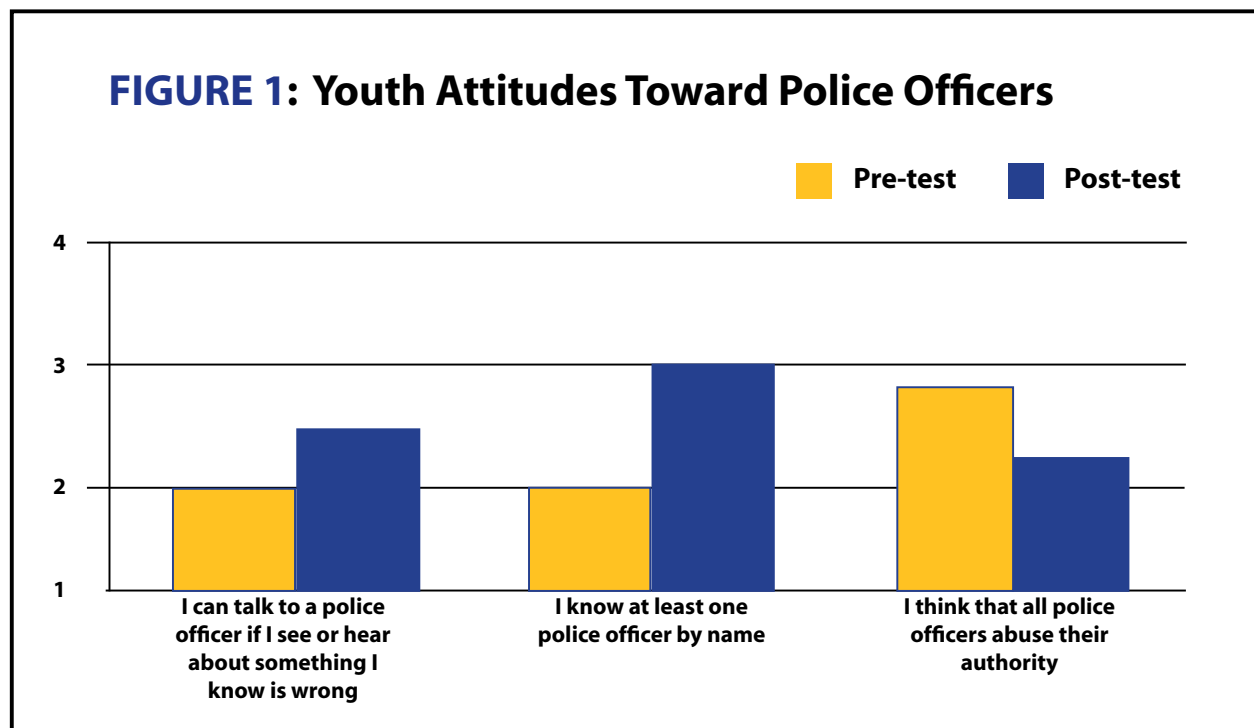
Evaluation Design

During the 2009-2010 school year, we conducted a program evaluation to measure whether and to what degree participation in YVPP was associated with increases in mutual trust among all participants, knowledge of legal rights and laws among youth and community partners, positive future orientation among youth, and empowerment among law enforcement officials and youth, and decreases in stereotypic beliefs among both youth and law enforcement officials. To measure these outcomes, we used a multiple case study evaluation design with mixed methods that included a pre-post survey for youth and interviews for law enforcement officials and community partners.

Findings

Youth Survey

We developed a three-scale survey for youth participants. We piloted the survey in 2008 and determined it to be appropriate for use with high school-aged youth. The first scale measures youth attitudes toward police officers, with questions about trust and respect. The second scale explores knowledge of laws and legal rights affecting youth. The third scale measures future orientation and empowerment, with two questions about future orientation as it relates to occupation and education, and three questions that measure perceived control at the individual level. Future orientation questions were adapted from a questionnaire for measuring this construct among African American adolescents developed by Mello, 2002, and empowerment questions were adapted from a survey developed to measure empowerment in the Latino/a community by Wiggins, 2010.



1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly agree

We administered the survey across six sites in fall 2009, and again at the end of the school year in spring 2010. We were able to match pre- and post-surveys for 21 participants across four sites.¹⁹ We analyzed the surveys using SPSS software and conducted paired t-tests to measure attitudes and empowerment/future orientation (which included continuous variables) and chi-square to analyze the laws/legal rights questions (which were dichotomous true/false questions).

Results revealed statistically significant positive changes in three of the 19 survey questions, all of which are related to attitudes (see Figure 1 on previous page). However, **all survey responses indicated change in a positive direction.** After participating in YVPP groups, participants reported being more able to talk to a police officer if they see or hear about something they know is wrong, and knowing at least one officer by name. Participants also reported being less likely to believe that all police officers abuse their authority. There were no statistically significant changes detected in overall knowledge of laws/legal rights and empowerment/future orientation, possibly due to the small sample size and the lack of sensitivity for measuring change in these outcomes. We will explore these outcomes in more depth next year via focus groups with youth.

Officer Interviews

In order to understand the impact of YVPP from the officers' perspective, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six officers involved in YVPP. Interviewees were diverse in terms of gender, race, and time spent on the police force. These officers also had participated in YVPP for varying amounts of time. All were based at North Precinct.

¹⁹ We did not administer surveys at Wood Village Baptist Church, and were unable to use surveys from one site because of possible selection bias.

To analyze the interview data, we used an iterative process of grounded theory coding, which included initial and focused coding,²⁰ using Atlas TI qualitative data analysis software.

According to respondents, the contextual factors of time, setting, and structure were the major components that contributed to the program's success. With these components in place, respondents described a process of relationship building in YVPP that involved breaking down barriers, making connections, increasing understanding, decreasing stereotypic beliefs, and increasing mutual trust between officers and youth. In addition, interviewees shared that their participation in YVPP resulted in positive outcomes for their police work, including making their jobs easier, helping them to address underlying causes, and assisting them to approach their work with youth and communities more positively. Respondents also described the barriers to participating in the program, which include a lack of street-level patrol resources, a burden on fellow officers, and a lack of knowledge of and appreciation for the program.

Contextual factors: Time, setting, and structure

Respondents emphasized that time is a key ingredient for building the relationships that are the cornerstone of the project. One of the officers suggested that other officers “be willing to just put in your time, because it does take time. You don’t build relationships overnight. You definitely have to be willing to put in the time and have the energy.” Another officer observed that “[it’s important] that officers to take the extra time to get to know people.”

The organization or school setting allows officers and youth to interact in a context other than the “street,” where encounters typically take place. An officer shared that usually, “when we are interacting with youth, we are either arresting them or taking them home to their parents. We don’t really talk to them. It’s good to have a different environment inside the school.” Another officer said that, in this program, “I’m not seeing youth necessarily on the street, I’m seeing them do positive things.”

A key aspect of YVPP is a structure (provided by popular education) that helps to create a level playing field in the group, where officers and youth are able to interact on equal

ground. One officer observed that “it’s really laid back; it’s not about authority. Especially how it’s structured: we’re all sitting down; I’m not standing over someone. I’m not coming out of a police car and barking orders.” Another officer remarked: “I get to interact with [the youth], and be on the same level.” Officers identified these contextual factors – time, setting, and structure – as important mechanisms contributing to the effectiveness of YVPP.

Breaking down barriers and making connections

According to respondents, YVPP has broken down barriers between officers and youth, allowing them to make genuine connections.

An officer shared that YVPP “opens the door and gives a chance for them to talk to us, so whatever they have been told in the past, [now] they could have another view...it opens up a door when before there was no door.” One of the officers said, “I think [the group] is where you see the barriers coming down.” A different officer observed that “this approach is actually connecting with kids in a meaningful way.” Another officer reflected on the broader connection with the youth-serving organization: “Now when we go over there people say: “Oh hey, Officer, how are you?” They even say we are part of [the organization’s] family.” According to respondents, YVPP presents a unique opportunity to break down the barriers that so often exist between law enforcement officials and young people. This allows officers and youth to make real connections.

Increasing understanding and decreasing stereotypic beliefs

As a result of breaking down barriers and making genuine connections, respondents reported that YVPP has increased mutual understanding between officers and youth, challenging what officers describe as anti-police perceptions and ultimately decreasing stereotypic beliefs on both sides.

Officers described mutual understanding as an important outcome of YVPP. For the officers, this is about understanding where a young person is coming from, or what may be going on in his or her life

that influences his or her behavior. One of the officers shared that it is “just little things, like hearing their stories, that kind of gives you perspective on where they’re coming from.” From the officers’ perspective, youth involved in the project have also increased their understanding of why police officers do what they do, and have been able to look beyond stereotypes and see them as people. An officer said “it’s humanizing; they have more empathy. It gives [them] the perspective of what it’s like for us.” Another officer shared that, in YVPP, “the community gets to know you and gets to see that you are more than just a uniform, and gets to know you as a person and maybe even to trust you.”

According to the interviewees, YVPP has challenged anti-police perceptions. One officer stated that “for these kids, maybe their family had contact with the police, someone was arrested; they see this. That’s what they know.” A different officer shared that youth can “have some positive experiences and have a personal relationship with me, and a better understanding of what I do as a profession, and what I am trying to accomplish in my profession, rather than believing that I’m looking to oppress them and control them.”

YVPP has led to a decrease in stereotypic beliefs on both sides, according to the officers. An officer spoke of how her perception had changed since becoming involved in YVPP, saying that now, “I think I know where these kids are coming from.” Another officer observed that “initially when people see the uniform, especially kids, they take this authority approach, like we are trying to arrest them and not help them out, so I think it takes time for that to change.” According to respondents, by interacting and hearing each others’ stories, officers and youth have been able to better understand each other and start to see past some of their stereotypic beliefs.

Increasing mutual trust and establishing relationships

Officers pointed to mutual trust as a desired outcome in itself and a prerequisite for establishing relationships. One of the officers noted that “you have to feel the trust, I think. People won’t allow us to come into their place if they don’t trust us.” Another officer said YVPP “builds the relationships and trust with the kids.”

According to respondents, establishing relationships is an important component of YVPP. One officer remarked that “for community policing it’s just [about] building that relationship.” Another officer told a story about building a relationship with the organization he worked with:

“I can approach the situation differently, and be more positive.”

- YVPP Officer

“It’s the first time that we have engaged each other, the police bureau and the organization. It is the first time we’ve invited each other into each others’ homes. That’s a good thing, and it’s going to just get better. Each party involved had stereotypes of the other. So, with this exchange of them coming here to the precinct to get to know us, and us going there, to their events and classes, I think we have gotten to see below the surface.”

A different officer spoke generally about the quality of a healthy relationship between officers and communities: “In a healthy relationship, the power dynamic has to be somewhat egalitarian or equal. You want to let the person know that their input is important, that they are empowered, and it isn’t about me being this power-hungry storm-trooper.” By working to build trust, the officers shared that they are able to get to this crucial step of establishing healthy, balanced relationships with youth, as well as with community-based organizations.

Outcomes for police work

Interviewees identified several ways their involvement in YVPP has made a positive impact on the way they do police work. Getting to know young people was a key part of this. One officer mentioned that “I find it makes my job a lot easier, when I can go into a situation and I know people.” another officer said “it’s helpful getting to know some of the kids in the neighborhood.”

Officers shared that as a result of participating in YVPP, they feel better able to address underlying problems when doing police work, rather than continually dealing with surface issues. An officer noted that “the goal is to deal with the problems, so then we’re not called out to have chronic, repetitive calls for service.” Another officer shared: “I see the bigger picture. It is hard to do when you are a police officer, and you don’t have a lot of time, you have a lot of calls holding, and we are short-staffed on the street, but I think I can see how it’s beneficial to try to solve the problem and work out some of the problems so you don’t have to keep coming back.”

Being involved in YVPP has had a broader impact on the way officers approach their work with youth and the community-at-large. One of the officers said that “I can approach the situation differently, and be more positive.” Another officer remarked that “people might expect that I am going to be mean to them and tell them what to do, but instead I ask them.” Respondents highlighted concrete ways that their involvement in YVPP has affected their work, from having trusting relationships in the community, to striving to address underlying problems, to approaching their work more positively.

Barriers to officer participation

The officers identified a lack of street-level patrol resources and the associated burden on fellow officers as major barriers to continuing to be involved in YVPP. One of the officers said that “patrol resources are thin. If we had more patrol officers out there, we would have more time to [build relationships]. That is what we should be doing.” The same officer said “it’s a big stretch for me to leave patrol, because I feel this pressure from my fellow officers.” Another interviewee stated that the bureau “would definitely have to financially support [YVPP] by allowing the officers the time to go [to the community sites], because, initially, you have to put in a lot of time and effort when you are first building relationships.” Another officer remarked that “it’s hard when [our peers] aren’t actually interacting with the kids, and they see that we’re doing it. It’s hard to tell them what we are actually doing, to describe it. They say, ‘well, why aren’t you taking your calls?’”

According to respondents, a lack of knowledge of and appreciation for the program among their peers and bureau leadership posed an additional barrier to participating in YVPP. One officer said “I don’t think sergeants or lieutenants talk about the program. And I would say 75% of those who work at North Precinct don’t even know what [the officer’s YVPP community site] is unless they work that district.” Another officer said “you need your supervisors to be supportive of the program, and they need to value your work. They need to recognize that by you being gone, this may put more work on the officers who are left working on the street.” This officer went on to suggest that: “just being supportive [helps], like by saying ‘hey, you are doing a great job, let us know if there is anything we can do to help you.’ Verbal recognition is good for officers who are starting a new program, because it is not helpful when [supervisors] question what you are doing, or say, ‘is this really worth our time?’”

The respondents underscored the need for officer participation in YVPP to be supported by their superiors, both verbally and financially. This support, according to respondents, would alleviate some of the burden placed on fellow officers who have to compensate for their colleagues' absence.

Community partner interviews

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with three community partners associated with different YVPP sites. Partners served as liaisons between the organization hosting YVPP and the other organizations involved in the project. Interviewees were diverse in terms of race and gender. We asked respondents about their motivations for involving their organization in the partnership, and their perceptions of the benefits of YVPP for the youth involved and for their organization. Respondents shared that YVPP was able to reach youth that they considered hard-to-reach, and that these youth were generally enthusiastic about being involved. Partners highlighted that YVPP was effective in increasing understanding, building trust, and establishing relationships among officers and young people. Finally, respondents described a change in attitudes among the youth involved in YVPP, as well as in the broader population of youth in their organizations.

Reaching hard-to-reach youth

One community partner described some of the life circumstances shared by the young people at his organization: “[The young people in the group] have got family in jail, they are gang affected, or have different situations that bring police into their lives.” Another partner noted that the YVPP youth at his site are “a diverse group of kids who needed to interact with officers in a positive way, because some of their choices outside of the school have led them to negative interactions. [These youth] needed peer support, or just needed to be a part of something in the school.” Community partners described the

“Prior to this project, the youth had negative feelings toward the police, and I definitely feel that has changed.”

- YVPP
Community
Partner

young participants in YVPP as having circumstances in their lives that put them at odds with the police. Partners expressed that having a positive, structured experience with the police could have both social and behavioral impacts for those young people.

Generating enthusiasm

Community partners shared the perception that the youth participants were enthusiastic about YVPP. One partner reported that the young people “check in with me and ask ‘are the police here today, or is it next week?’ They enjoy being a part of it. I think they enjoy having that relationship with police officers.” Another partner remarked that “[the group] is voluntary. [The youth] don’t have to come. They look forward to coming, though. They are always asking me on Thursdays, ‘Is this the day for group?’ So, it’s a good thing.”

Increasing understanding, building trust, establishing relationships

Like the officers we interviewed, the community partners described understanding and trust to be key requirements for establishing relationships. One of the partners said that “I think kids [need to] understand what the officers see, and I think then the officers need to hear from the kids who say ‘you don’t need to make that assumption about me, I might just be hanging out with my friends on the corner.’ So I think it goes both ways.” Another partner highlighted the role of trust by recounting stories he had heard about officer-youth interactions:

“I know that [one of the officers] has had a couple experiences where there was something going on [outside of the group] with some youth that know him from the group. Prior to [being involved in the group], they would’ve avoided him, but now they’ll go up and speak to him, say hi to him, sit down and talk to him. I think there’s a huge benefit in that. Hopefully that one youth will go and change the attitude of other youth.”

Also like the officers we interviewed, the community partners emphasized relationship building as an essential piece of YVPP’s success. One of the partners related that “one student had some [negative] interactions with the law. And now that he’s in the group, I think he’s starting to develop a better relationship.” Also, another partner shared that “there was one student who wouldn’t even get near [the officers] when we first started, but he ended up really liking them.” Another partner reflected that “it’s almost like making an impact on one student at a time; each and every one of [those involved in the group]

has gotten to know the police.” This partner added: “If [the young people] saw [one of the YVPP officers] in the street, I think the relationship formed at the school would impact that [interaction]. If the students were prone to mouthing off to a cop, they wouldn’t do that with this officer.” Respondents shared that by increasing mutual understanding and building trust, young people and officers were able to establish relationships.

Changing attitudes

Community partners shared that YVPP had resulted in changed attitudes. One partner remarked “I see many of the youth having a different attitude with the officers. Prior to this project by and large they had negative feelings toward the police, and I definitely feel that that has changed.” Another community partner noted “I was really surprised at how some of the youth took to it. I invited some youth to the class knowing that they would definitely have to change their attitude to be able to get some benefit out of this, and they definitely have.” Another partner described the broader impact of changing attitudes at the school: “Having officers come in for YVPP has been a benefit because [students] see the patrol car outside, and are no longer alarmed.” A different respondent shared a similar observation:

“When we first started, [youth] would walk down the street and see the cop car and turn around and leave again. They are used to seeing police cars here now. When they see a cop car in the parking lot now, [they know] it’s not always bad. They’re not always here to bust somebody, to arrest somebody, or to investigate. They might be here teaching a class. Every student knows that. That is a big difference, a big change. They used to think it was them the police were after.”

These observations attest to the broader impact of YVPP: by establishing a positive presence at a youth-serving organization, law enforcement officials can reframe the relationship between young people and the police – not only among youth who form relationships with individual officers, but for the broader organization as well.

Conclusion

YVPP focuses on building relationships, requires a long-term commitment, uses popular education, and is driven by the community. Relationship building among all partners (officers, youth, community-based organizations, and the Health Department) is necessarily a long-term process that requires commitment from all involved. The story of SEI reveals the impact of a long-term commitment to building relationships: over the last four years, both SEI and the police at North Precinct have made strides in overcoming a history of mutual distrust, and now look upon each other as allies in creating a safer community. At each site, organizational partners have come to the partnership with a willingness to commit to the process and contribute whatever resources they could. In this way, YVPP has largely been sustained with a shared, in-kind budget. However, the commitment of MCHD, through the coordination efforts of the CCC's Community Organizer, has been the driving force behind the partnership.

The philosophy and methodology of popular education is the foundation of this process of relationship building. Popular education is both the organizing strategy for engaging organizational partners, and the approach used to establish dialogue and create change between young people and law enforcement officials. It has been particularly valuable in creating a "safe space" for officers and youth to surface and address stereotypic beliefs held about each other. Popular education is also a mechanism for empowering participants. For instance, as a result of engaging in popular education-based activities with young people, officers expressed an increased capacity to interact with youth – an empowering change that had positive implications for their work as law enforcement officials.

The final element that makes YVPP successful is that it is genuinely a community-driven collaboration. At each site, the impetus for starting YVPP has come from either community-based organizations, members of law enforcement, or, in the case of one site, young people. The success of YVPP at each site builds upon previous successes, as word spreads in the community and new partners request to participate. A key contribution of the Health Department has been the willingness to hear and respond to the expressed needs of the community. This has enabled MCHD's Community Organizer to build bridges between the different cultures brought together in YVPP in order to find common cause in creating safer, more peaceful communities.

In the coming year, YVPP will continue at the existing sites and expand to new sites. We will continue to work with some of the same youth and law enforcement officials, while also involving new youth and law enforcement officials. We will establish a regular presence at the place where YVPP began, Grace and Truth Pentecostal Church, and initiate a group at Wattles Boys and Girls Club. To better understand YVPP's impact with youth, we plan to measure several of our desired outcomes (knowledge of legal rights and laws, empowerment, and future orientation) qualitatively using focus groups with youth.

YVPP recognizes that we all have a role to play in creating safer, more just communities. Building relationships – across professional disciplines, cultures, and other dividing lines - can help us to achieve this goal. The young people, law enforcement officials, and staff from the Health Department and participating community-based organizations are working together as agents of healthy change for our communities.

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Pam Hiller, BA, *Community Organizer,
Youth Violence Prevention Partnership Coordinator*
(503) 988-6250 ext. 25043
pamela.j.hiller@multco.us

Samantha Kaan, MPH, *Evaluator*
(503) 988-3663 ext. 24256
samantha.kaan@multco.us

Noelle Wiggins, EdD, MSPH, *Manager,
Community Capacitation Center*
(503) 988-6250 ext. 26646
noelle.wiggins@multco.us

Full report available at Community Capacitation Center website:
<http://web.multco.us/health/community-capacitation-center>