



Education Policy Brief

YOUTH VIOLENCE

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Every day in the United States...

- + 4 children are killed by abuse or neglect.
- + 5 children or teens commit suicide.
- + 8 children or teens are killed by firearms.
- + 177 children are arrested for violent crimes.
- + 375 children are arrested for drug use.
- + 1,900 public school students are corporally punished.
- + 2,482 children are confirmed abused or neglected.
- + 2,756 students drop out of school.
- + 4,262 children are arrested.
- + 16,964 public school students are suspended.

Children's Defense Fund Action Council, ©2005¹

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INTRODUCTION: “AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION IS WORTH A POUND OF CURE.”²

Researchers have identified numerous individual, family, and community factors associated with youth violence.³ In *Youth Violence in the City of Wilmington*, juvenile justice specialist Christian L. Kervick compiles the most common risk factors related to aggression and anti-social behavior.⁴

Individual

- History of early aggression
- Beliefs supportive of violence
- Social cognitive deficits

Family

- Poor monitoring or supervision of children
- Exposure to violence
- Parental drug/alcohol abuse
- Poor emotional attachment to parents or caregivers

Peer/School

- Association with peers engaged in high-risk or problem behavior
- Low commitment to school
- Academic Failure

Community

- Poverty and diminished economic opportunity
- High levels of transience and family disruption
- Exposure to violence

RESEARCH FINDINGS: EIGHT LINES OF DEFENSE AGAINST LETHAL YOUTH VIOLENCE

Research informs our understanding of the risk factors that contribute to youth violence and the protective mechanisms that can be developed to insulate children from becoming violent, juvenile offenders and adults. James Garbarino identifies eight lines of defense against lethal youth violence in his book *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*.⁵ Garbarino synthesizes research on youth violence and suggests a proactive approach to eliminate violence that plagues our communities. This policy brief provides a snapshot of Garbarino’s model.

1st Line of Defense: Healthy Baby and Positive Parent-Infant Relationships.

The first safeguard against youth violence is a baby’s health and positive parent-infant relationships. Home health visit programs have been successful in promoting healthy babies and family relationships. These programs provide a host of support services to ensure that families receive prenatal care and also encourage positive familial bonds. Nurse-family partnership programs involving low-income, first-time parents have positive long-term outcomes for the program participants 15 years after the intervention.⁶ Children visited by nurses demonstrated higher academic performance, fewer behavior problems, less aggression, and, as teens, they had less involvement in the criminal justice and welfare systems.⁷

2nd Line of Defense: Positive Parenting Practices.

Studies indicate a strong relationship between parenting style and a child’s behavior.⁸ Garbarino reports that “parents’ ability to respond effectively to aggressive and troubled boys (is) vital in preventing violence.”⁹ Every child contains the potential to develop into any one of numerous different personalities, depending upon how he or she is treated. Rejection by parents

and others is the primary route through which non-abused children develop conduct disorder.”¹⁰ Programs that promote positive parenting practices provide protective mechanisms that can save children from conduct disorders.

✚ 3rd Line of Defense: Collective Action to Promote Resilience.

Collective intervention is important in supporting children who exhibit attachment-related problems. Garbarino advocates a “village” approach to combat these problems. “One of the anchors for resilience is at least one strong, secure attachment. Day-care providers, early education teachers, nurses, pediatricians are all on the front line.”¹¹ Once a child has been identified as exhibiting attachment issues, individuals need to actively help him/her develop positive relationships.

✚ 4th Line of Defense: High-Quality Early Childhood Education Programs.

These programs “offer curriculum that is both intellectually rich and broad enough to meet children’s social and emotional development needs.”¹² They “produce children with better school readiness skills and yield substantial long-term benefits, including higher education rates, fewer school dropouts, less need for special education, and less crime.”¹³

✚ 5th Line of Defense: Early Recognition of Conduct Disorder.

“Early recognition of cases of conduct disorder and effective responses to redirect behavior”¹⁴ are important deterrents to youth violence. Teaching children self-discipline early in life is important. A behavior expert at University of Delaware defines self-discipline as “assuming responsibility for one’s actions, understanding right from wrong, appreciating the importance of cooperative relationships, and inhibiting socially inappropriate behavior. It involves knowing what’s right, desiring to do what is right, and doing what is right.”¹⁵ The relationship between self-discipline and academic achievement is reciprocal, that is, “...self-discipline promotes academic achievement and academic achievement promotes self-discipline.”¹⁶

✚ 6th Line of Defense: Violence Prevention and Reduction Programs in Elementary Schools.

Garbarino identifies minimizing bullying in elementary school as an important violence prevention strategy. “Many boys who end up committing acts of lethal violence in adolescence were recognized as bullies during childhood.”¹⁷

✚ 7th Line of Defense: Character Education.

Character education programs can “mobilize the entire range of community institutions” and teach children “pillars of character.”¹⁸ These programs strive to create caring, responsible, and ethical citizens.¹⁹ Nel Noddings, an expert on character education, emphasizes the importance of caring. “If we decide that the capacity to care is as much a mark of personhood as reason and rationality, then we will want to find ways to increase this capacity.”²⁰ Schools cannot reach academic goals without addressing the fundamental needs of students for continuity and care.”²¹

✚ 8th Line of Defense: Conflict Resolution in Middle Schools.

Teaching mediation and conflict resolution skills, as well as providing peer counseling, can help kids in middle school and junior high school deal with problems that could escalate to violence. “The most important influence on how well kids resisted the temptation to be bad was the action of other kids.”²² Junior high and middle school is the time of greatest peer orientation among kids, and so this redirection of the peer culture is vital.”²³

DELAWARE SITUATION

Delaware statistics about child abuse and neglect, early childhood education programs, and vulnerable youth illustrate our state's susceptibility to youth violence.

- ✚ 6,592 children under age 18 were arrested in Delaware, a 27% increase from 5,206 arrests in 2002. Of the 6,592 arrests, 541 were for violent crimes and 134 were for possession of weapons.²⁴
- ✚ 2,214 children were served by Head Start, a 0.8% decrease from 2002.²⁵
- ✚ 5,163 children were reported as abused or neglected and referred for investigation, a rate of 26.5 per 1,000 children.²⁶

The problem of youth violence has not gone unnoticed in Delaware. Kervick's report *Youth Violence in the City of Wilmington*²⁷ examined several risk factors for youth violence: demographics, births to teens, single heads of household, education, poverty, and crime. His findings were consistent with Garbarino's research. Delaware's youth prevention services provided over a 20-year period have not effectively reduced the rate of violent crimes committed by young males. Kervick advocates prevention programs that begin early in a child's life and continue through maturity.

"...prevention efforts must begin at an earlier age, be provided more frequently and consistently, and be expanded to include more social and economic issues. Juvenile crime is the result of a widespread breakdown of the economic, educational, and social systems."²⁸

POLICY QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- ✚ How can Delaware promote sustainable partnerships among families, schools, and communities to address youth violence?
- ✚ How can effective character education programs be incorporated into our schools?
- ✚ How can schools and communities implement protective measures to save children from youth violence?
- ✚ Considering the cost of prevention as compared to the expense of punishment, what policies need to be developed to better respond to the increasing rates of youth violence in our communities?
- ✚ Recognizing the role that poverty plays, how can those committed to Delaware's economic development better address issues such as underemployment and limited funding that exacerbate community efforts to prevent violence?
- ✚ How can sufficient economic prosperity be brought to the state's at-risk neighborhoods to support the eight lines of defense against lethal violence?

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- ⁹ Garbarino, p. 185.
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- ¹⁴ Garbarino, p. 190.
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- ¹⁶ Ibid at p. 13.
- ¹⁷ Garbarino, p. 193.
- ¹⁸ Garbarino, p. 194. The pillars of character are trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship.
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