

Program led to lower crime, fewer violent incidents among kids

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A program built around the concept that kids can and want to reduce violence and improve their neighborhoods led to lower crime rates, better upkeep on homes and more students who said they learned to resolve conflicts without violence.

The afterschool and summer program, called Youth Empowerment Solutions for Peaceful Communities (YES), is a University of Michigan School of Public Health case study that included seventh and eighth grade students at select schools in Flint, Mich. The study co-authors are Thomas Reischl, associate research scientist at the U-M School of Public Health, and Susan Morrel-Samuels, managing director of the Michigan Youth Violence Prevention Center and the Prevention Research Center of Michigan.

The goal of the program, developed by the U-M School of Public Health and the Prevention Research Center of Michigan, is to empower YES participants to develop and carry out neighborhood improvement and beautification projects with adult support. Reischl and Morrel-Samuels predicted the program would have positive results for participants and the community.

[Middle school students](#) were randomly assigned to the YES program, including those with poor academic and disciplinary records. Over two years, neighborhood and community projects ranged from murals to trash pickup to, in one case, cleaning and beautifying an entire public park. Researchers measured outcomes at the community level, such as

crime and beautification of homes and lots near the project sites. The study also assessed outcomes on the individual level among the kids who participated.

The most promising result at the community level was a 50 percent reduction in violent crime near the Rosa Parks Peace Park renovation project—the most involved community project planned and completed by the YES kids, Reischl said. Landscaping and lawn maintenance near several of the project sites also improved.

Results also were encouraging at the individual level, he added. Kids who participated in the YES program were much more likely to report nonviolent conflict avoidance and resolution than those who did not participate. YES participants also reported fewer instances of victimization.

"The effect on the kids was really impressive," Reischl said. "These results are very encouraging."

Previous studies have suggested the promise of youth empowerment strategies for violence prevention, but this is the first case study to really put a curriculum to the test, said Reischl, who attributed the positive outcomes, though modest, to a multilayered approach.

"Youth violence is not just a matter of changing the kids," Reischl said.

Rather, it's a matter of empowering [kids](#), with adult supervision, to change the community in which the violence happens, he said.

"We feel it's a very promising strategy," he said.

Despite some limitations, the study and its promising results have led to a five-year National Institutes of Health grant that will allow U-M

School of [Public Health](#) researchers to conduct controlled studies to test YES in eight middle schools in Flint and surrounding areas. Student recruitment is currently underway.

More information: To download the free YES curriculum, scroll to the bottom of the following page:

www.sph.umich.edu/prc/projects/yes/index.html

For a Findings magazine feature on two Flint teens in YES:

www.sph.umich.edu/news_events/...108/features/one.htm

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