

Empower kids to solve community challenges and many will avoid trouble

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An after-school program that empowers young people to be agents of change in their communities has helped 8th-grade students in one Michigan area develop more prosocial behaviors and avoid antisocial behaviors, say University of Michigan School of Public Health researchers.

A five-year evaluation of the Youth Empowerment Solutions program developed by U-M and piloted in the Flint area shows the program was successful in helping youth gain confidence in themselves, think critically about their community, and work with adults to create positive change, says Marc Zimmerman, the Marshall H. Becker Professor of Health Behavior and Health Education.

"If you give middle [school](#) age kids a challenge and the opportunity to be creative within a safe and structured environment, they do amazing things when they are encouraged to think critically and think more about their communities and more outside of themselves," Zimmerman said. "This creates confidence in their abilities. They are not going to engage in destructive behaviors because they are focused on positive goals for which they feel ownership."

The program enrolled and followed for four years 367 youth from 13 urban and suburban middle schools. The participants were comprised of 32 percent white students, 46 percent African-American students and 22 percent mixed race, Asian-American, Latino, Native American or other ethnic/racial group. Sixteen percent were from Flint public schools and

the others were from nearby districts in Genesee County.

The researchers measured prosocial outcomes including helping others, academic effort and responsible decision-making, and [antisocial behaviors](#) such as aggressive and delinquent behaviors.

They say the program improved youths' sense of psychological empowerment, which was associated with more helping of others, greater academic effort, more responsible decision-making, and less aggressive and delinquent [behavior](#).

Zimmerman has written extensively about empowerment theory, which he says has three major parts: The intrapersonal component includes beliefs about control and confidence that one can make a difference; the interactional component, which involves awareness of the forces that shape life and an understanding of the resources and actions needed to create situations more aligned with personal goals; and the behavioral component, which refers to actions individuals take to make desired changes in their environment, including involvement in prosocial activities.

While many youth intervention programs incorporate some empowerment principles, few include all three of these elements, Zimmerman says.

The YES program was created based on research—much of it conducted by Zimmerman and others at the U-M School of Public Health—showing that a young person's sense of identity, particularly ethnicity, is beneficial to his or her development.

"Youth need to engage in activities that develop pride in their community and who they are, develop projects that they 'own,' and that involve active learning. That's the 'secret sauce,'" Zimmerman said.

"They learn by doing. They also learn by working with adults, but the adults don't take over. They are there for support and guidance."

Zimmerman says the curriculum provided structured lesson plans responsive to local culture and helped students develop leadership confidence and skills. It also created opportunities for intergenerational collaboration and prepared [youth](#) to plan and implement community change that they would like to see. While it was an after-school program, YES was implemented within the school structure by teachers hired by the school.

Zimmerman says they are currently collaborating with colleagues at Wayne State University to adapt the program to address dating violence among middle schoolers. The original YES program has been disseminated and implemented nationwide.

Provided by University of Michigan

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