

Peer mentoring program shows promise for preventing African youth violence

October 8 2018, by Kwadwo Adusei-Asante



Credit: Kwadwo Adusei-Asante

[Recent episodes](#) of violence among Australian youth of African descent

have been a topic of mounting concern for politicians, the police and African communities alike.

The Australian public is divided on the issue. Some believe these violent acts are isolated cases that are being hyped by the media to create moral panic. Others argue that authorities are [downplaying concerns](#) over so-called "African gangs" and question the [integration](#) of all African migrants in Australia.

According to ABS data, Sudanese people have the [highest imprisonment rate](#) per capita of any ethnic group in Australia. But incarceration has not been an effective deterrent in reducing crime – many young people reoffend after returning to the community as they lack relevant support systems and opportunities to reintegrate.

Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton has [proposed a more radical solution](#) to the problem – deporting criminal offenders. Some parents and guardians have resorted to [sending their children back to Africa](#) to keep them out of trouble.

A new peer-oriented approach

But there may be another, less drastic way forward – peer mentoring.

Peer mentoring is considered an effective vehicle for communicating values to young people as they are more apt to listen and learn from like-minded youths in their communities rather than authority figures.

In 2017, the non-profit [Organisation of African Communities of Western Australia \(OAC-WA\)](#) launched the [Stop the Violence Project \(STVP\)](#), whose mission is to identify youths in the African community at risk of committing crimes and match them with peer mentors who can steer them out of trouble.

The program is being implemented in two phases. Phase One was dedicated to training 18 young Africans between the ages of 18 and 29 to become peer mentors.

This training involved a six-month program where they learned about WA criminal law, conflict resolution, the importance of self-esteem and identity, the history of African migration to Australia, the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse, financial management, the value of formal education and leadership skills.

The program is now in Phase Two, which involves the mentors going out to their respective communities to share [violence](#) prevention and conflict resolution techniques. A second batch of mentors is currently being recruited, as well.

Cultural differences revealed

Edith Cowan University has designed an evaluative case study to examine the impact of the program. In the first part of the study, focus groups have been conducted with program facilitators and mentors before and after their training.

The discussions have so far focused on the nature of violence committed by African youths, the impact the program has had on the mentors' lives and the readiness of the mentors to engage with their peers.

The study identified three main forms of violence occurring among African [youth](#): inter-African country violence (for example, conflicts between sporting clubs of different African countries at sporting events); inter-ethnic or tribal conflict; and fights between groups over specific territory in their communities.

This helped the mentors understand the dynamics underpinning violence

in their communities and develop more effective strategies for combating it.

The focus groups also revealed that many mentors were themselves unaware what types of behaviours constituted a crime in Australia. As a couple of the mentors explained to us: "I didn't know that touching a person could be a crime and the law is against it ... back home, we touch people freely ... but it's not OK here. I knew about resolving conflict, but I would do it my own way, which usually involved the use of force. But the facilitators ... explained them systematically in a way that made sense and is very applicable to us. I have learned that before violence breaks out, it goes through stages before escalating into aggression. "

The mentors are now beginning their outreach into their communities. The impact of the mentoring on their peers will be evaluated, particularly where the peers are under 18.

Some of the mentors are organising seminars and workshops for their peers, at times also including their parents, the WA police and other community organisations. One [mentor](#) has launched cultural dance sessions as a way of keeping [young people](#) off the streets, while another is running a support program for African youths who have returned from detention, to help them reintegrate into the community.

Overall, the mentors report that they feel better equipped now to relate with their peers, recognise when an innocuous argument is likely to lead to violence and deescalate tensions when they do arise. "At first when I see violence about to start or people arguing I was confused and didn't know what to do. But I have learned techniques to calm them down."

A positive impact in other communities

Peer mentoring programs have proven effective in preventing youth

violence in other countries. According to [one survey](#), at-risk youths who took part in the [Big Brothers, Big Sisters](#) program in the US were 32% less likely to hit another person, 46% less likely to start using drugs, and 27% less likely to start drinking alcohol. The program also showed other benefits, such as better school attendance and improved relationships with parents.

Another study looking at a [Youth Inclusion Program](#) in the UK found a 62% decrease in arrest rates and a 27% reduction in suspensions from school among a test group of 50 at-risk youths.

Our hope is the Stop the Violence project can achieve similar positive outcomes in Perth and perhaps be replicated in other communities in Australia. This depends, of course, on the outcome of the pilot program and the continued support from the community and funding from the government.

Our findings so far suggest we are on the right track, and Australian youth of African descent will be far better at communicating positive [conflict resolution](#) to their communities than tough-on-crime politicians.

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