

After-school program promoting youth empowerment, Black culture helped reduce violence

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An after-school program specifically designed to address racial and economic disparities affecting Black youth and empowering them to be a

positive change in their community has long-term effects on behavior, according to a new University of Michigan study.

The analysis looked at five years of data and compared results of students participating in regular after-school programs to those who took part in the Youth Empowerment Solutions program, which focuses on implementing a curriculum that acknowledges structural, historical and contemporary racism, said lead author Elyse Thulin, a postdoctoral research fellow at U-M's School of Public Health.

"Our study shows that this program can have lasting effects on positive [youth](#) development, both increasing positive social interaction and diminishing negative [behavior](#) a year after going through the program," Thulin said.

For the study, youth were recruited between 2012 and 2016 from after-[school programs](#) in participating schools in Flint and Genesee County, with a total of 33 program cohorts from 15 schools.

In all, 418 middle schoolers participated in the program. Of the original sample, 45% were Black, 18% biracial, 34% white and 3% reported other races. Students completed surveys at the beginning of the program, at the program's conclusion, 6 months after and 12 months after.

Students enrolled in Youth Empowerment Solutions, or YES, attended the program four days a week for about 15 weeks. The curriculum included developing youth leadership skills, increasing ability to work with peers, developing critical thinking skills, and planning and implementing community change projects.

"These results demonstrate that youth can be involved in the solution of violence prevention and not just the focus of our prevention efforts," said Marc Zimmerman, the Marshall H. Becker Collegiate Professor of

Public Health at U-M and principal investigator for the study.

"It flips the script for youth violence prevention and, importantly, provides an evidence-base for practitioners that [leadership development](#) and helping youth become change agents in their community can contribute to building safer communities and schools."

Notably, Thulin said, the curriculum included sessions that focused on African American culture and pride, including learning about Black history, African ancestry and African American contributions to American life.

A year after participating in the [program](#), researchers evaluated youth aggressive behavior and prosocial behavior. Among the key findings, researchers found that YES participation:

- Increased feelings of prosocial behavior for Black and white youth by increasing empowerment of white and Black youth
- Directly reduced aggression at the one-year follow-up but was less effective for females
- Was efficacious for decreasing behaviors in Black youth and particularly male Black youth but not for white youth

"Given the limited uptake of evidence-based programs implemented through community settings, our study demonstrates that YES can be successfully delivered in community settings, that it can have lasting effects on positive youth empowerment and that it can have lasting effects on positive youth development," Thulin said.

"Implementing a curriculum that acknowledges historical and contemporary structural racism while engaging youth at the individual, interpersonal and community level through leadership development and empowerment may be particularly effective for African American

youth."

More information: Elyse J. Thulin et al, Longitudinal effects of Youth Empowerment Solutions: Preventing youth aggression and increasing prosocial behavior, *American Journal of Community Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1002/ajcp.12577](https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12577)

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