

**A PARTICIPATORY YOUTH EMPOWERMENT MODEL AND QUALITATIVE  
ANALYSIS OF STUDENT VOICES ON POWER AND VIOLENCE  
PREVENTION**

**by**

**Naima T. Wong**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(Health Behavior and Health Education)  
in The University of Michigan  
2008

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Marc A. Zimmerman, Chair  
Professor Barry N. Checkoway  
Associate Professor Edith A. Parker  
Associate Professor Barbara J. Guthrie

© Naima T. Wong 2008  
All Rights Reserved

## **DEDICATION**

For the young people whose voices have fallen on deaf ears.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Out of sheer ignorance and naïveté as a young doctoral student I once told another more advanced student that I thought academic pursuit could be accomplished alone. He balked at my statement. Now, I get it. While one can acquire knowledge, build skills, and engage in scholarship as a solo venture, true learning requires growing and that does not happen in a silo. I have *grown* in this process and am grateful to a long list of many.

I hold deep gratitude for my chair and mentor, Marc Zimmerman, who believed in my ideas and me at times when I did not believe myself. His support never wavered. For that I am thankful. I am also blessed to have a committee of forward thinking scholars who push past the boundaries of hegemonic thought. They challenge us to continually consider the perspectives of community, gender, youth, and those peoples who are most marginalized. I am indebted to this work and the committed support from Barry Checkoway, Edith Parker, and Barbara Guthrie. To them I am thankful.

This research was built upon the experiences and perspectives of young people in Flint, Michigan. I am grateful to have had access to their stories and hope that my analysis has done them justice. My research was also made possible by the generous support of Flint Youth Violence Prevention Center, YES Project, Lee Bell, Beverly Jacks, Toni Adams, Everett Roberts, Tony Cuttita, and Sarah Kretman.

I would not have even been able to think about writing a word had it not been for the financial support and professional development I received from the W.K. Kellogg Fellowship in Health Policy Research, the Center for Research on Ethnicity, Culture and Health (CRECH), the ASPH/CDC/PRC Minority Fellowship, and the Rackham Merit

Fellowship. I would like to specifically acknowledge the committed efforts of Harold “Woody” Neighbors, Barbara Krimgold, Susan Morrel-Samuels, Cleo Caldwell, Amy Schulz, Lynda Furstenau, Maria Briones, Barb Inwood, Mary Clark, and Annette Ramirez. Also, thank you to the staff at Georgia Health Policy Center, especially Chris Parker, for being accommodating and waiting patiently as I finished writing. I am also grateful for Lisa Pasbjerg, who reminded me of my strengths, served as my crutch, and coached me through the final stages.

I also leaned on a group that, as individuals they inspired me and as a collective served as my *community* while in Michigan. I am continually grateful for the support and friendships that were built with Debbie Barrington, R. L’Heureux Lewis, Fadrah Crowe, Edna Viruell-Fuentes, Will Burnett and the Ford Family, Rosa Peralta, A. Kilolo Harris, Monica Sosa, Ayesha Hardison, Lydia Middleton, Paul Burns, Al Defreece, Jay Pearson, Rashid Njai, Yanique Redwood, and Lisa Lapeyrouse.

My family played a formative role in shaping who I am today. I am appreciative to mom, Paula. Thank you for showing me how to be a strong woman. To my dad, York, who is one of the most fascinating people I know, thank you for being so damn original. My sisters Tara, Alison, and Chelsea, do not always know what I am up to, but their questioning, “What are you doing up there in Michigan anyway,” helped me focus and find an answer for myself. I am especially indebted to Alison for letting me bombard her with questions about my conceptual models, and for putting up with my *dissertation haze*. I am thankful for the understanding of my niece, Amelie, who has patiently waited for me to finish my *homework*. To Mariama Boone and Jill Richardson, who might as well also be my sisters, I am grateful for your lifelong friendship. I thank these people for loving me unconditionally.

## PREFACE

*They say kids should be seen and not heard.*

*They say I am too young to have nerves. What do you know? You aren't living it—  
walking in my shoes and seeing what I see.*

*Young people's voices should be heard. All adults have a generation, we will too, have  
to make it better, not worse.*

--Flint middle school students

This research was inspired by my exposure to community-based participatory research (CBPR) as a graduate student in Health Behavior and Health Education at the University of Michigan. I have been trained under leading researchers who, have not only made substantial contributions to the CBPR field, but continually push for community participation in research, grapple with the what it takes to build an authentic partnership, and inspire other scholars to partner with community for the benefit of the public's health. My particular interest is in the health of youth of color. I discovered, however, that the collaborative energy found in CBPR lies on the fringes in adolescent research. With the exception of a few cases, youth voices were absent in a discourse that was supposedly constructed to serve them. This dissertation strives to be part of an emerging tide of research that builds upon the same tenets of CBPR and values the role that young people can play in determining their own health.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>DEDICATION</b> .....	ii
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	iii
<b>PREFACE</b> .....	v
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....	ix
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b> .....	x
<b>CHAPTER</b>	
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
Focus of this dissertation .....	1
The social construction of adolescence and the silencing of young people .....	3
The origin and influence of western adolescent theory .....	4
The silencing of youth .....	7
Recognition of youth voice.....	8
Organization of the dissertation.....	12
References.....	14
<b>2. THE TYPE PYRAMID: A TYPOLOGY OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION</b> .....	22
Introduction.....	22
Youth violence .....	25

Positive youth development: Promising theoretical frameworks for youth violence prevention.....	29
Youth participation .....	36
The TYPE Pyramid: A typology of youth participation and empowerment ...	44
Implications and conclusion .....	59
References.....	62
<b>3. THE POWER OF VIOLENCE: YOUTH-DRIVEN CONCEPTIONS OF POWER IN PEER-TO-PEER VIOLENCE .....</b>	<b>78</b>
Background and theory .....	80
Focus of this study .....	88
Methods .....	89
Results and discussion .....	97
Conclusion: A pathway model of power and youth violence .....	125
References.....	135
<b>4. NEXT GENERATION EXPERTS: YOUTH RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES FOR YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION .....</b>	<b>147</b>
Introduction.....	147
Methods.....	151
Results .....	158
Discussion.....	166
Limitations .....	175
Implications.....	176



Conclusion .....	178
References.....	179
<b>5. CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>188</b>
Summary of the three papers .....	188
Issues to consider .....	192
Directions for future research .....	194
References.....	199
<b>APPENDIX.....</b>	<b>200</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

### FIGURE

1.1. The TYPE Pyramid.....	46
3.1 Conceptual Model of Youth Violence and Power .....	127

## LIST OF TABLES

### TABLE

3.1. Characteristics of the Study Sample .....	92
3.2 Essay Style by Gender .....	93
4.1. Characteristics of the Study Sample .....	153
4.2 Essay Style by Gender .....	154
4.3. Youth Violence Prevention Themes by Type and Frequency .....	159

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Focus of this Dissertation**

Adolescence, roughly the second decade, is a period during the life course when most people experience good health (Blum, Robert W. M., 1998; Call et al., 2002; Millstein, 1993; Weiler, 1997). When poor health outcomes are observed among youth, violence is often associated (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). The three leading causes of adolescent mortality—unintentional injury, homicide and suicide—are all related to violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). Although a growing industry is dedicated to preventing violence, many young people may be disempowered by the very professionals and services that aim to help them (Bennett, Coggan, & Adams, 2003; Checkoway, Allison, & Montoya, 2005; Finn, 2001; Furstenberg, 2000a; McCubbin, 2001; Mitra, 2004). As adults set the agenda for how youth programs are designed and which adolescent policies are prioritized, youth are a vital but frequently ignored source of expertise. This adult-centric approach disregards the notion that young people can be active agents in their own development.

Listening to young people's ideas can both empower youth to voice their perspectives and strengthen our understanding of what youth identify as salient. Young people can inform which violence prevention and intervention strategies will work best for them and their peers. It is then that we not only gain critical insight on youth sanctioned violence prevention strategies, but we also make way for young people to

participate in the discourse about their lives. Thus, the purpose of this research is to understand youth-centered perspectives about interpersonal peer-to-peer youth violence and prevention and contribute youth-centered perspectives to the youth violence discourse. Furthermore, this dissertation aims to make theoretical contributions to understanding the contexts, processes and ways within which adolescents ascribe power and powerlessness to violence. By uncovering these processes, we might gain perspective on what motivates youth towards or against violence. In addition, youth participation in violence prevention can occur at varying degrees. A conceptual typology delineating these degrees of youth participation can be a useful framework for youth violence intervention and prevention strategies.

The unifying theme of this dissertation is youth voice and violence prevention. Youth voice can be described as young people taking an active role in sharing their perspectives on assets, problems and potential solutions. To study youth voice and violence prevention, I use a three-paper format to explore each specific aim of my dissertation research. The specific aims of my dissertation are to:

- 1) Review relevant literature and develop a typology of youth participation
- 2) Investigate how youth conceptualize power, where they position themselves and how power may be associated with violence in their lives.
- 3) Identify youth recommended violence prevention strategies and assess their relevance to current practices.

For the first paper, I review literature on youth violence, positive youth development, empowerment and participation. I also propose a typology of youth participation rooted in a positive youth development and empowerment framework. The second paper uses

modified grounded theory methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to systematically explore personal youth narratives, and develop a model of how youth conceive power, their own social positioning, and its potential association with violence. Finally, I examine personal youth narratives regarding their ideas about youth violence prevention and compare and contrast them to current youth violence prevention and intervention strategies. To introduce the three papers, I begin by providing a rationale for why youth voice is critical to advancing adolescent health and research.

### **The Social Construction of Adolescence and the Silencing of Young People**

Adolescence is a developmental stage that is socially constructed (Brown, Larson, & Saraswati, 2002; E. Burman, 1994b; Finn, 2001; Giroux, 1996; Hendrick, 1990; James, A. and Prout, A., 1990a; Lesko, 1996; World Health Organization (WHO), 1986). Much can be learned about adolescence by how it is defined in a particular culture (Brown et al., 2002). Brown and Larson (2002) suggest the word, *teenager*, is a common term for adolescence in the United States and posit that it conjures up images of recklessness, conflict and rebellion that captures the panic most American adults possess about young people. They further suggest that some cultures also do not have a word for adolescence. This, for example, can be observed in most agrarian societies where young children tend to have adult responsibilities or where the lives of younger and older people are integrated to point making the distinction unnecessary.

Socio-cultural differences are not only found in the definition of terms but also in the ways adolescence is experienced. Margaret Mead's ethnographic research on Samoan adolescent females is frequently cited to illustrate the cultural variation of adolescence (Finn, 2001; Muuss, [1962] 1996b). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mead found

that Samoan girls experienced freer sexual expression and less turmoil than their western counterparts (Mead, 1928 as cited in Finn, 2001). Her findings are seminal in demonstrating that the turbulence associated with western youth is not universally accepted (Finn, 2001).

Thus, the definition and experience of adolescents is variable across societies, culture, time and demographics such as gender, social class and cohort (Brown et al., 2002; Call et al., 2002; Daiute & Fine, 2003; Giroux, 1996; James, A. and Prout, A., 1990a; World Health Organization (WHO), 1986). I begin with this point because western adolescent theory is the most widely documented and influential in informing how young people are defined in the U.S.; however, the social and historical forces that determine this life stage are often overlooked in adolescent research (E. Burman, 1994a; Finn, 2001; Lesko, 1996). Acknowledging the cultural and historical context within which western adolescence is constructed helps us unpack the ways youth voice has been silenced.

### **The Origin and Influence of Western Adolescent Theory**

Classic developmental theorist, G. Stanley Hall, is largely credited for popularizing adolescence as a legitimate field of scientific inquiry (Muuss, [1962] 1996a). His work is most recognized for suggesting that adolescence is a biogenetically determined period of *storm and stress* that is expressed through increased conflict with adult authority, heightened mood disruptions, and propensity towards risk and antisocial behaviors (Arnett, 1999; Bennett et al., 2003; Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995; Finn, 2001; Griffin, 2001; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; Muuss, [1962] 1996a). Influenced by Darwin's Theory of Evolution, Hall centered his ideas about adolescence

in biological determinism and recapitulation theory—i.e. the idea that ontogeny coincides with or recapitulates the evolution of species (Lesko, 1996; Muuss, [1962] 1996a; Schulenberg, Maggs, & Hurrelmann, 1997). During the first few years of life, for example, he proposed that infants crawling on all fours simulated early evolutionary stages when humans were more animalistic than human-like (Muuss, [1962] 1996a). Moreover, Hall conceptualized transition out of late adolescence as the individual embodiment of modern civilization (Muuss, [1962] 1996a). Thus, Hall postulated that overall adolescent development recapitulates stages of human evolution.

During Hall's time, however, youth were not the only group characterized as less evolved; non-western peoples and women were considered primitive savages in an *arrested adolescent* state (Burman, 1994a; Lesko, 1996; Muuss, [1962] 1996a; Schulenberg et al., 1997). Hall's theory of adolescence drew upon an ideology that was used to rationalize slavery, colonialism and the superior social position of white adult males because non-whites, women and youth were thought to be less evolved, incapable of rational thought, autonomy, and possessing rights (E. Burman, 1994a; Lesko, 1996). According to Lesko (p. 461, 1996), "Hall ingeniously combined pieces of recapitulation theory, anxieties for a manly white civilization, and the great chain of being with age-based stages of development." The origins of western adolescent theory are tied to a history where the social positions of youth, women and people of color were legitimized as inferior using a developmental rationale.

While few extol the scientific merits of recapitulation theory today, remnants of the ideology can still be observed. As some scholars argue, adolescence is *pathologized* to maintain youth as a site for moral panic and substantiate the need for adult control



(Fine et al., 2003; Finn, 2001; Kelly, 2000; Lesko, 1996; Meucci & Schwab, 1997). The *at-risk* discourse that dominates adolescent research and practice reinforces this panic (Damon, 2004; Furstenberg, 2000; Hill & Fortenberry, 1992; Kelly, 2000). In his review of leading adolescent research journals, Furstenberg (2000) observes over half of the articles are focused on youth misbehavior and maladjustment with a smaller subset focused on resilient coping and transition to adulthood. Large bodies of literature are dedicated to research on adolescent problems such as, recklessness and violence; risk-taking behaviors like early sex initiation, alcohol use, cigarette smoking and illicit drug use; and internalizing disorders such as depression, anxiety and suicide related behaviors (Damon, 2004; James, A. and Prout, A., 1990b; Kelly, 2000). Kelly (2000) argues that the seemingly endless potential for adolescent problems legitimizes adult motivations to exert control over and regulate youth. While Kelly's claim about adult intentions may be debatable, the disproportionate emphasis on problems in research discourse, at minimum, promotes a deficit characterization of youth (Bennett et al., 2003; R. W. M. Blum, 1998; Call et al., 2002; Checkoway et al., 2005; Damon, 2004; Furstenberg, 2000b; Hill & Dennis Fortenberry, 1992; Mitra, 2004).

A deficit perspective permeates well beyond research and is echoed in popular opinion and culture. When asked to describe youth, a majority of adults chose negative descriptors like undisciplined, disrespectful, and unfriendly (Farkas & Johnson, 1997). Buchanan, Holmbeck and colleagues (Buchanan et al., 1990; Buchanan & Holmbeck, 1998; Holmbeck & Hill, 1988) surveyed parent and teacher opinions on adolescent personality and behavior. Overall, their findings suggest parents and teachers see

adolescence as a difficult time for both youth and adults involved because it is viewed as a period of increased anxiety, insecurity, mood instability, risk-taking and rebelliousness.

Moreover, mass communication theorists assert that cultural institutions, such as the media, play a role in constructing popular opinion (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McQuail, 2000). Giroux (1996) argues Hollywood movies often represent youth in a *demonizing* manner, which he claims is manifested by moral anxieties of adults. In the news media, when stories include youth, they are frequently episodic reports related to isolated incidents of violence (Dorfman & Woodruff, 1998). Research suggests one out of every five stories includes some aspect of the criminal justice system (Communitarian Network, 2000). The Center on Media and Public Affairs (1997) found that coverage of violence increased seven-fold in the 1990s even while the homicide rate dropped by 20 percent. This over-representation of youth violence, in turn, informs the popular imagination in which the positive contributions of youth are overlooked and silenced (Checkoway et al., 2003; Dorfman & Woodruff, 1998; Morrill, Yalda, Adelman, Musheno, & Bejarano, 2000).

### **The Silencing of Youth Voice**

Silence or not having voice is the systematic exclusion of the life experiences and viewpoints of marginalized peoples in popular culture (e.g. mass media) (Amaro, 2001). Silencing occurs through intersecting social identities such as race, gender, class and sexual orientation, and reinforces negative stereotypes by segregating certain groups from the view of the greater society. Applying this definition, young people can be described as a marginalized population due to their lack of power and voice in adolescent discourse and mainstream culture (Griffin, 2001; Lesko, 1996; Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Peirson,

2001). Perhaps symptomatic of this marginalization, youth perspectives are largely absent from the research literature and news media (Checkoway et al., 2003; Fine et al., 2003; Morrill et al., 2000; Phelan, Yu, & Davidson, 1994; Zimmerman et al., 2004). Researchers, advocates and policy makers typically rely on data about adolescent behaviors from clinicians, parents and closed-ended adult developed surveys (Mandel & Qazilbash, 2005; Morrill et al., 2000; Zimmerman et al., 2004). When researchers examine how youth are depicted in the news media, young people seldom get the chance to speak for themselves, they are rarely depicted in positive circumstances, and few stories include their accomplishments (Dorfman & Woodruff, 1998; Figueroa, 2000). This practice exacerbates youth silence because the policy agenda is often set by public opinion mediated by the news media.

### **Recognizing Youth Voice**

A few researchers, however, are beginning to recognize the need to seek youth perspectives in order to fully understand the adolescent experience. Finn (2001), for example, in her critique of adolescent social services questions, “[W]here are the voices of young people themselves in this pathological process of treatment” (p. 186). As she and others assert, obtaining young peoples’ perspectives is necessary because the social position of adults limits what they can purport to know about youth (Bradley, Deighton, & Selby, 2004; Mandel & Qazilbash, 2005). Furthermore, Morrill and colleagues (2000) argue that to legitimately comprehend a particular articulation of youth culture, researchers must meet youth in the spaces where young people make and have their lives constructed by adults on a daily basis. Young people can inform us about their

experiences in these spaces, what challenges they face and how they make meaning in their lives.

At a basic level, youth voice is about having young people share perspectives about their life experiences and having them identify assets, problems and potential solutions. Daiute and Fine (2003) found that when they sought out youth perspectives, they began to hear about the various ways individuals and social institutions limit opportunities for positive youth contributions. In their study on school context, Phelan and colleagues (1994) found that, students had a great deal to say about what they do, what influences them, and what they think should be done when they were asked. Most of the issues students identified were under the control of teachers and administrators. Students did not feel that they possessed enough control to take action over their concerns. Students also said they felt adults were not willing to listen, take time to understand or care about their issues. Fine et al. (2003) found a similar level of adult mistrust when they interviewed young people about their perceptions of policy and public authority. The youth—especially male youth of color—expressed feelings of betrayal and vulnerability that they attributed to lack of adult empathy. Young people said that they felt like they were willing to listen to adults’ perspectives but did not sense adults were willing to do the same.

Fallis and Opatow (Fallis & Opatow, 2003) posit that violence is often the consequence of a context where there are no opportunities for individuals to make choices or engage in positive acts of control. Instead of including youth as resources, most adult-driven violence prevention is designed to exert control over youth (Morrill et al., 2000). Youth-serving institutions are increasingly employing policies and

implements that increase adult authority and reduce youth control. As Finn cites (Finn, 2001), the American Psychological Association (APA) recommends more psychological intervention to “forestall aggression and antisocial behavior related to the developmental crisis of adolescents” (p.178). In schools, for example, increases in control and surveillance are exercised by the addition of metal detectors, *no tolerance* expulsion policies and enhanced adult authority (Fine et al., 2003). Thus, while we expect youth to develop mastery, autonomy and self-control, we are increasingly limiting their opportunities to do so in a productive manner.

Instead of focusing on controlling youth problems, such as youth violence, researchers suggests that enhancing the developmental needs of adolescents may be more efficacious (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Burt, 2002; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Ginsburg, Alexander, Hunt, Sullivan, & Cnaan, 2002; Lerner et al., 2005). Ginsburg et al. (2002) found that, when asked, young people recommend focusing on supportive solutions rather than problems to enhance their likelihoods for actualizing positive futures. Encouraging youth voice may be a key supportive strategy. Mandel and Qazilbash (2005), for example, conducted an intervention study that included youth views in the development of a school health clinic. They recommend a strategy where students’ opinions are incorporated into their regiment of care and argue that this supports the adolescent need to develop autonomy. Morrill et al. (2000) found when students were asked to write narratives about their experiences with violence, the process allowed the youth to gain control and make deliberate choices about how they represented themselves. The students challenged stereotypical images of youth as gangsters and represented a diversity of experiences. Similarly, the Youth

Radio program, in the San Francisco Bay Area, also offers young people the opportunity to reconstruct their own images of themselves (Chavez, 1998). Explicitly designed to increase self-esteem, professional skills and positive development, radio professionals and more experienced peers teach youth how to produce their own radio shows. The youth participants make positive contributions by bringing their own voices, stories and experiences to a mass audience while educating them about the interests and concerns of young people.

Young people are also actively resisting the status quo and seeking spaces to express their voices. Youth in the Bronx, for example, founded Youth Force, an advocacy group created for and by Bronx-area young people (Checkoway, Figueroa, & Richards-Schuster, 2003). Foster Children Unite is an organization formed by youth in or formerly in foster care and operates a website entitled, “Our Stories: Survivors of the System” (Finn, 2001). Youth in Oakland are speaking out about the ways they feel under- and misrepresented in the larger community (Ashley, Samaniego, & Cheun, 1997). Young people are taking initiative by producing their own media in diverse mediums such as radio (Chavez, 1998), video (Saunders, 1997) and zines<sup>1</sup> (Chu, 1997). These cases, however, are the exception rather than the rule. Yet, researchers are in a prime position to investigate youth perspectives in a systematic manner. A strong methodological approach has potential to legitimize youth voice in adolescent discourse, uncover youth-identified barriers and assets, and inform current research and practice.

---

<sup>1</sup> Zines are typically independently produced non-commercial special interest publications. The term zine is derived from the word fanzine. (Chu, 1997)

My intent with this dissertation is to actualize this potential as it relates to youth voice and violence prevention.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

I have organized my research using a three-paper format. To begin, I use the first paper to delineate my conceptual thinking regarding how youth participation, positive youth development and empowerment can contribute to the prevention of youth violence. The literature I present covers relevant epidemiology, theory, and studies regarding youth violence, youth development, empowerment and participation. Building on this literature review, I also develop a five-dimensional typology that distinguishes varying degrees of youth participation. This paper aims to contribute a health-promoting conceptualization of youth violence prevention that focuses on youth assets instead of deficits. The typology is intended to be useful framework for researchers and practitioners.

Qualitative research methods—narrative analysis methods in particular—are ideal for exploring youth voice. Thus, the two empirical papers I present include analyses conducted on 391 essays written by youth. As part of a youth violence prevention essay competition, middle school students were asked to write essays responding to three questions. The contest questions posed were:

- 1) How has youth violence affected my life?
- 2) What are the causes of youth violence?
- 3) What can I do about youth violence?

In the second paper, I argue that the social positioning of youth, perceptions of power and the power youth may attribute to violence can play an integral role motivating some youth towards or against violence. To investigate youth perceptions of power,

views on their social positions and its potential association with youth violence, I assessed the different contexts and processes within which youth ascribe power to violence in their essays. I also found that some youth described a conception of power that is not associated with violence but instead relies on co-agency, and supports pro-social behaviors and cognitions. By uncovering the various meanings youth attribute to power and violence or power and non-violence, I gained a clearer understanding of the psychosocial mechanisms that contribute to youth violence. This second paper aims to contribute a youth-focused perspective on peer-to-peer violence, gain further understanding on the role of power in violence, and shed light on ways youth may resist violence through empowering factors.

Finally, for the third paper, I examined the same narratives for youth-identified strategies on youth violence prevention. I focused on youth responses to the third question they were asked to respond: What can I do about youth violence? These responses were then compared and contrasted with violence prevention research and efforts in the field deemed as best practices. This paper aims to contribute a youth-centered point of view to the violence prevention discourse.



## References

- Arnett, J. J. (1999). Adolescent storm and stress, reconsidered. *American Psychologist*, 54, 317-326.
- Ashley, J., Samaniego, D., & Cheun, L. (1997). How Oakland turns its back on teens: A youth perspective. *Social Justice*, 24(3), 170-176.
- Bennett, S., Coggan, C., & Adams, P. (2003). Problematising depression: Young people, mental health and suicidal behaviours. *Social Science & Medicine*, 57(2), 289-299.
- Benson, P. L., Leffert, N., Scales, P. C., & Blyth, D. A. (1998). Beyond the "village" rhetoric: Creating healthy communities for children and adolescents. *Applied Developmental Science*, 2(3), 138-159.
- Blum, R. W. M. (1998). Healthy development as a model for youth health promotion. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 22, 368-375.
- Blum, R. W. M. (1998). Healthy youth development as a model for youth health promotion - A review. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 22(5), 368-375.
- Bradley, B. S., Deighton, J., & Selby, J. (2004). The 'voices' project: Capacity-building in community development for youth at risk. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 9(2), 197-212.
- Brown, B. B., Larson, R., & Saraswati, T. S. (2002). *The world's youth: Adolescence in eight regions of the globe*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

- Buchanan, C. M., Eccles, J. S., Flanagan, C. F., Midgley, C., Feldlaufer, H., & Harold, R. D. (1990). Parents' and teachers' beliefs about adolescents: Effects of sex and experience. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 19*, 363-394.
- Buchanan, C. M., & Holmbeck, G. N. (1998). Measuring beliefs about adolescent personality and behavior. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 27*(5), 607-627.
- Burman, E. (1994). *Deconstructing developmental psychology*. London: Routledge.
- Burt, M. R. (2002). Reasons to invest in adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 31*, 136-152.
- Call, K. T., Riedel, A. A., Hein, K., McLoyd, V., Peterson, A., & Kipke, M. (2002). Adolescent health and well-being in the twenty-first century: A global perspective. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 12*(1), 69-98.
- Catalano, R. F., Berglund, M. L., Ryan, J. A. M., Lonczak, H. S., & Hawkins, J. D. (2004). Positive youth development in the United States: Research findings on evaluations of positive youth development programs. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 591*, 98-124.
- Center for Media and Public Affairs. (1997). *Network news in the nineties: The top topics and trends of the decade*. (No. 21). Washington, DC: Center for Media and Public Affairs.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2004). *Youth risk behavior surveillance*. (No. 53). (SS02)

- Chavez, V. (1998). *Youth Radio: Broadcasting violence prevention*. (No. 6). Berkley, CA: Berkley Media Studies Group.
- Checkoway, B. N., Allison, T., & Montoya, C. (2005). Youth participation in public policy at the municipal level. *Children and Youth Services Review, 27 (10)*, 1149-1162.
- Checkoway, B. N., Figueroa, L., & Richards-Schuster, K. (2003). Democracy multiplied in an urban neighborhood: Youth force in the south Bronx. *Children, Youth and Environments, 13(2)*, 1-19.
- Checkoway, B. N., Richards-Schuster, K., Abdullah, S., Aragon, M., Facio, E., Figueroa, L., et al. (2003). Young people as competent citizens. *Community Development Journal, 38(4)*, 298-309.
- Chu, J. (1997). Navigating the media environment: How youth claim a place through zines. *Social Justice, 24(3)*, 71-86.
- Compas, B. E., Hinden, B. R., & Gerhardt, C. A. (1995). Adolescent development: Pathways and processes of risk and resilience. *Annual Review of Psychology, 46*, 265-293.
- Daiute, C., & Fine, M. (2003). Youth perspectives on violence and injustice. *Journal of Social Issues, 59(1)*, 1-14.
- Damon, W. (2004). What is positive youth development? *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 591*, 13-24.

- Dauite, C., & Fine, M. (2003). Youth perspectives on violence and injustice. *Journal of Social Issues, 59*(1), 1-14.
- Dorfman, L., & Woodruff, K. (1998). The roles of speakers in local television news stories on youth and violence. *Journal of Popular Film and Television, 26*(2), 80-85.
- Eccles, J. S., & Gootman, J. A. (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Fallis, R. K., & Opatow, S. (2003). Are students failing school or are schools failing students? class cutting in high school. *Journal of Social Issues, 59*(1), 103-119.
- Farkas, S., & Johnson, J. (1997). *Kids these days: What Americans really think about the next generation*. Washington, DC: Public Agenda.
- Figuroa, L. (2000). *Between the lines: How the New York Times frames youth*. New York: New York City Youth Media Watch.
- Fine, M., Freudenberg, N., Payne, Y., Perkins, T., Smith, K., & Wanzer, K. (2003). "Anything can happen with police around": Urban youth evaluate strategies of surveillance in public places. *Journal of Social Issues, 59*(1), 141-158.
- Finn, J. L. (2001). *Text and turbulence: Representing adolescence as pathology in the human services*. *Childhood, 8*(2), 167-191.
- Furstenberg, F. F. (2000). The sociology of adolescence and youth in the 1990s: A critical commentary. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62*, 896-910.

- Ginsburg, K. R., Alexander, P. M., Hunt, J., Sullivan, M., & Cnaan, A. (2002).  
Enhancing their likelihood for a positive future: Focus groups reveal the voice of  
inner-city youth. *Pediatrics*, *109*(6), e95.
- Giroux, H. A. (1996). *Fugitive cultures: Race, violence, and youth*. New York:  
Routledge.
- Griffin, C. (2001). Imagining new narratives of youth: Youth research, the 'new europe'  
and global youth culture. *Childhood*, *8* (2), 147-166.
- Hendrick, H. (1990). Constructions and reconstructions of British childhood: An  
interpretive survey, 1800 to the present. In James, A. and Prout, A. (Ed.),  
*Construction and reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological  
study of childhood* (pp. 35-59). Bristol, PA: The Falmer Press.
- Hill, R. F., & Dennis Fortenberry, J. (1992). Adolescence as a culture-bound syndrome.  
*Social Science & Medicine*, *35*(1), 73-80.
- Holmbeck, G. N., & Hill, J. P. (1988). Storm and stress beliefs about adolescence:  
Prevalence, self-reported antecedents, and effects of an undergraduate course.  
*Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, *17*, 285-306.
- James, A. and Prout, A. (Ed.). (1990). *Constructing and reconstructing childhood:  
Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*. Bristol, PA: The Falmer  
Press.

- Kelly, P. (2000). The dangerousness of youth-at-risk: The possibilities of surveillance and intervention in uncertain times. *Journal of Adolescence*, 23 (4), 463-476.
- Lerner, R. M., Almerigi, J. B., Theokas, C., & Lerner, J. V. (2005). Positive youth development - A view of the issues. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 25(1), 10-16.
- Lesko, N. (1996). Past, present, and future conceptions of adolescence. *Educational Theory*, 46(4), 453-472.
- Mandel, L. A., & Qazilbash, J. (2005). Youth voices as change agents: Moving beyond the medical model in school-based health center practice. *Journal of School Health*, 75(7), 239-242.
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176-187.
- McCubbin, M. (2001). Pathways to health, illness and well-being: From the perspective of power and control. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 11(2), 75-81.
- McQuail, D. (2000). *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory* (4th ed.). London: Sage Publications.
- Meucci, S., & Schwab, M. (1997). Children and the environment: Young people's participation in social change. *Social Justice*, 24(3), 1-10.
- Millstein, S. G. (1993). A view of health from the adolescent's perspective. In S. G. Millstein, A. C. Petersen & E. O. Nightingale (Eds.). *Promoting the health of*

*adolescents: New directions for the twenty-first century* (pp. 97-118). New York: Oxford University Press.

Mitra, D. L. (2004). The significance of students: Can increasing "student voice" in schools lead to gains in youth development? *Teachers College Record*, 106(4), 651-688.

Morrill, C., Yalda, C., Adelman, M., Musheno, M., & Bejarano, C. (2000). Telling tales in school: Youth culture and conflict narratives. *Law & Society Review*, 34(3), 521-565.

Muuss, R. E. ([1962] 1996a). G. Stanley Hall's biogenetic psychology of adolescence. *Theories of Adolescence* (6th ed., pp. 15-17). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Phelan, P., Yu, H. C., & Davidson, A. L. (1994). Navigating the psychosocial pressures of adolescence: The voices and experiences of high school youth. *American Educational Research Journal*, 31(2), 415-447.

Prilleltensky, I., Nelson, G., & Peirson, L. (2001). The role of power and control in children's lives: An ecological analysis of pathways toward wellness, resilience and problems. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 11(2), 143-158.

Saunders, D. (1997). Invisible youth reappear! A review of two youth produced videos. *Social Justice*, 24(3), 100-105.

Schulenberg, J., Maggs, J., & Hurrelmann, K. (1997). *Health Risks and Developmental Transitions During Adolescence*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Weiler, R. M. (1997). Adolescents' perceptions of health concerns: An exploratory study among rural midwestern youth. *Health Education & Behavior, 24*(3), 287-299.

World Health Organization (WHO). (1986). *Young People's Health--A Challenge for Society*. No. 731

Zimmerman, M. A., Morrel-Samuels, S., Wong, N., Tarver, D., Rabiah, D., & White, S. (2004). Guns, gangs, and gossip: An analysis of student essays on youth violence. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 24*(4), 385-411.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE TYPE PYRAMID: A TYPOLOGY OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION**

#### **Introduction**

Youth violence has gained recognition as a major public health concern. Much of this recognition corresponds with the rise in youth violence rates that reached an unprecedented peak in 1993 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2004). In response, researchers have investigated numerous factors that put youth at risk for violence (Dahlberg, 1998; Ellickson & McGuigan, 2000; Farrington, 1998; Herrenkohl et al., 2000). Fewer researchers, however, have studied factors that protect young people from violence (Furstenberg, 2000). As a result, many violence prevention efforts focus on problems. More recently, researchers have begun to shift from seeing adolescents as problems to viewing them as resources. Likewise, adolescent health promotion is gaining recognition as a viable approach to not only preventing youth violence, but also enhancing positive adolescent development. Prior to this shift, young people were rarely asked to voice their opinions or participate in the development of programs designed for them. Now, studies that use participatory asset-based approaches, such as youth empowerment, are emerging in the empirical literature (e.g. Cargo et al. 2004; Foster-Fishman et al., 2005; Jennings et al., 2006; Kim et al., 1998; Wallerstein et al., 2002). The appeal of these approaches is that they both build on young people's intrinsic strengths and actively involve them in addressing issues that they themselves identify. In addition, the issues young people identify may also be community concerns; thus, the

potential to positively influence both adolescent and community development arises by actively engaging with youth.

Although participatory asset-based approaches that enhance youth voice and participation are gaining recognition, the inclusion of youth contributions is often the exception rather than rule. More than half of research articles in top adolescent journals focus on problems (Furstenberg, 2000) and much of the literature can be characterized as adult-centric (Bennett et al., 2003; Dauite & Fine, 2003; Finn, 2001). That is, adolescent research and practice is largely constructed using an adult lens while the perspectives and real-life experiences of young people are frequently overlooked. Yet, youth are uniquely positioned to make important contributions and be agents in their own development. Youth culture, for example, can evolve so rapidly that by the time older age groups begin to understand it, young people have already moved on to the next thing (Willis, 1990). Adults may not be able to relate, placing adolescents in the best position to determine the relevance of programs geared towards youth.

Moreover, early adolescence (i.e. 12-14 years old) is an opportune time to promote health. Many of the habits and health behaviors observed in adulthood begin during this stage (Millstein, Peterson & Nightingale, 1993). The desire for experimentation with different behaviors increases with the need to form an identity—a major task of adolescence. An Eriksonian view suggests identity is attained by establishing a stable self-concept through integrating past and present experiences with future notions of self (Muuss, [1962] 1996). This task is achieved through psychosocial reciprocity, a process of engaging with others, to resolve three psychological crisis questions: 1) Who am I? ; 2) Where Am I going? ; and 3) Who do I want to become?

Considering these developmental needs, it is critical that young people in early adolescence are provided with opportunities to explore these questions in an environment that encourages autonomy yet channels curiosity in a positive direction.

One strategy for encouraging this type of environment is to foster opportunities for youth to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Youth participation encourages healthy development for several reasons. Involving them in decision-making can build skills, mastery, and competence. When decisions are made in a group, young people are exposed to different ways of thinking, problem solving and strategizing—which strengthens cognitive and social development. Subsequently, seeing the result of their contributions can build confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem. In addition, youth who are involved with decisions that affect their communities may develop a stronger sense of responsibility to others. Thus, youth participation has potential to promote individual and community health by satisfying developmental needs in a positive manner while also enhancing the relevance of research, policy and practice to lived experiences of young people.

While the contributions of youth may be an under-utilized resource, I do not suggest they should carry the full burden of adolescent health promotion. Adults ought to share in this responsibility. Studies suggest that increasing egalitarian relations between young people and adults is optimal for healthy youth development (Camino, 2005; Camino, 2000; Fauth, Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2007; Fogel, 2004; Larson et al., 2005; Whitlock, 2007). Yet, few empirical assessments of shared control in youth-adult partnerships exist and therefore, the field still requires careful observation, identification, categorization and labeling (Zeldin et al., 2005). Thus, my objective is to offer a

typology that identifies degrees of youth-adult participation while considering development potential within each type. To support the developmental possibilities, I consider adolescent needs and use an empowerment framework rooted in evidence-based findings. The typology is constructed with the intention of providing researchers, practitioners and policy-makers with a common language for articulating degrees of youth participation for optimal adolescent health promotion. To begin, I first review the literature on youth violence, positive youth development, empowerment and participation to provide a context for the typology.

## **Youth Violence**

### Defining Youth Violence

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as, *the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation* (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002, p. 5). Intention is key in this definition of violence. Intention is what distinguishes violent injuries and death from those that are unintentional, such as accidental events like motor vehicle crashes, falls, drownings and fires (Hamburg, 1998; Krug et al., 2002). Intentional violence can occur on three levels: individual, interpersonal, and collective (Krug et al., 2002). Within an individual, violence can be self-directed as in suicide, suicide attempts, or self-mutilation. Violence can also occur on an interpersonal level between individuals and includes acts such as homicide, sexual assault, robbery and other interpersonal violent crime. Finally, collective violence describes violent behavior perpetrated by groups of people or governmental states such as

hate crimes, war, and terrorism. The nature of these violent acts can be physical, sexual, psychological, or involve deprivation or neglect (Krug et al., 2002). For the purpose of this paper, I focus on peer-to-peer youth violence at the interpersonal level<sup>2</sup>.

When defining youth violence, the parameters of who is considered a youth are debated (Bennett & Tonkin, 2003). Mercy et al. (2002), for example, adapt the general WHO definition of violence and describe youth violence as violence that includes children, adolescents and young adults from 10 to 29 years of age. In the United States, the CDC (2006) uses a narrower age range that considers those whom are 10 to 24 years in age as youth. In this paper, I will adhere to the CDC age range in my definition of *youth*. The terms *youth*, *young people* and *adolescent* will be used interchangeably and age ranges, other than CDC's definition, will be reported when necessary.

### Youth Violence Epidemiology

Overall, most adolescents experience good health (Blum, 1998; Call et al., 2002; Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995; Millstein, Petersen, & Nightingale, 1993). Since the 1930's, adolescent death rates from natural causes have steadily declined (Fingerhut & Kleinman, 1989). When young people do suffer from morbidity and mortality, national statistics indicate violence is a leading contributor youth (CDC, 2006). Until the past couple decades, mortality from injury and violence had remained relatively stable youth (CDC, 2006; Fingerhut & Kleinman, 1989). In 1993, however, violence-related death and crime rose to an unprecedented peak (Satcher, 2001; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). During the following period, from 1993 to 2002, the youth homicide rate dropped 44 percent (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). The most recent U.S. federal statistics reveal that

---

<sup>2</sup> I will use the term *youth violence* to describe interpersonal peer-to-peer youth violence.

5,570 young people aged 15 to 24 years were murdered in 2003 (CDC, 2004). Eighty-two percent of these homicide cases involved firearms (CDC, 2006).

Certain youth populations are at higher risk for violence than others and those youth at risk for perpetrating violence are also at higher risk for being victims of violence. Of the 5,570 murders in 2003, 86 percent were committed against males and 14 percent were female (CDC, 2006). Minority youth are disproportionately affected by homicide. A large proportion of the declining murder rate can be attributed to the reduction of minority males killing minority males (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Homicide has been the leading cause of death for young African American males and females for almost two decades and is the second leading cause of death for Hispanics and the third leading cause of death for American Indians, Alaskan Natives, and Asian/Pacific Islanders (CDC, 2006; Hamburg, 1998). On average, the odds ratio of an African American youth being murdered was four times that of a white youth in 2002 (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

Mortality statistics, however, do not fully capture the spectrum of youth violence and its effect on young people. Most youth violence is experienced through violence related morbidity such as fighting, bullying, assault, rape, weapon carrying, and other violent crime. Studies of non-fatal violence, for instance, find that for every homicide death there are approximately 20 to 40 youth who receive hospital treatment for violence related incidents (Krug et al., 2002). According to the CDC, over 750,000 youth ages 10 to 24 years were treated for violent related injuries in 2004.

Although two-thirds of youth violent crime occurs in a residence, school is a convenient site for epidemiologic surveillance because it is where young people spend

most of their time (Hamburg, 1998; Lutzker & Wyatt, 2006; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). National surveillance finds that student fighting is the most common form of youth violence at school (CDC, 2004). Similar to patterns in homicide and violent crime, rates of fighting in schools have dropped from 43 to 33 percent and weapon carrying has declined from 12 to 6 percent since 1993. Over one-third of high school students reported being in a physical fight at least one or more times in the previous year and 13 percent of the students had been in at least one fight while on school property. Approximately 6 percent of students reported carrying a weapon to school in the previous month (CDC, 2004; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

Yet not all violent related behaviors and attitudes have declined. The arrest rate for violent juvenile crime committed by females continues to rise (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Recent indicators, as measured by the CDC, suggest 9<sup>th</sup> graders, white males, and African American youth subgroups are at higher risk for being injured by or threatened with a weapon at school than in previous years (CDC, 2004). These findings may be attributed to increased student fear regarding safety at or traveling to and from school. Younger students, African Americans, and females tended to report staying home from school for safety reasons more often than other groups. Since 1993, the overall proportion of students who did not go to school for safety reasons has risen from 4.4 to 5.4 percent.

While most rates of violence have declined, unintentional injuries, homicide and suicide remain the three leading causes of death for 15 to 24 year olds and account for a vast proportion of adolescent mortality (CDC, 2006). According to the WHO, violence related mortality rates for American youth are 11.0 per 100,000, well above those in

Western Europe and Japan (Mercy et al., 2002). Violence is responsible for killing more youth in the U.S. than all diseases combined, resulting in a young person dying almost every hour of the day (CDC, 2006). Violence is also a leading contributor of injury for adolescents. A challenge for practitioners is that violence stems from preventable factors. Researchers are trying to better understand what increases risk or protects young people from violence and, more recently, are investigating approaches that build on developmental assets.

### **Positive Youth Development and Empowerment: Promising Theoretical Frameworks for Youth Violence Prevention**

Since the 1993 youth violence epidemic, the number of prevention research studies has expanded. One can find violence prevention at different levels (i.e. primary, secondary, and tertiary) and in a variety of contexts such as, individual, family, school, community and policy (Thornton, Craft, Dahlberg, Lynch, & Baer, 2002). The types of prevention studies available, however, follow a similar pattern found among youth violence research in general. That is, in the tradition of the medical model, most prevention studies are developed by adults and tend to focus on problems at the individual level. Not until recently have researchers begun to study youth violence intervention in the broader socio-ecological context (Reese, Vera, Simon, & Ikeda, 2000) and tried to understand the potential of youth voice and participation within this context (e.g. Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; Daiute & Fine, 2003; Mahiri & Conner, 2003; Zimmerman, Reischl, & Morrel-Samuels, unpublished). This research shows promise for preventing youth violence by shifting the focus from intervening on individual level problems to building upon developmental assets using socio-ecological frameworks.

#### Positive Youth Development



An emerging field, termed positive youth development, is challenging the way researchers traditionally study problem prevention among young people. Emphasis in this approach is placed on strengths instead of deficits. Building on studies that investigate resilience and protective factors, a positive youth development approach takes advantage of both assets within youth and aspects of the developmental process (Blum, 1998; Damon, 2004). Due to the emerging nature of the field, researchers place different emphasis on which assets are critical for positive development. In their work with the Search Institute, Benson and colleagues (Benson, 1997; 1998) identified 40 developmental assets (e.g. parent support, sense of purpose, etc.) that they suggest assist youth with healthy transitions to adulthood. They categorize these assets into seven types including support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, positive values, commitment to learning, constructive time use, and social competence (Benson et al., 1998). Catalano et al. (2004) claim that a positive youth development approach should aim to enhance at least one of 18 assets they identify. Some of the assets they include are bonding, resilience and various types of competence. Other researchers suggest the conditions of positive youth development include competence, confidence, character, connection and caring (Blum, 1998; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

Due to the broad range of assets identified, future research in this area can further ascertain which of the assets identified by researchers are most critical for positive youth development. It may be that certain assets are more beneficial according to circumstances or desired outcomes. Those who are interested in enhancing youth empowerment, for example, may want to focus on the developmental assets, such as

competence, self-efficacy, critical awareness and connection to others, Zimmerman (1995) identifies as critical to psychological empowerment. Yet, regardless of how researchers categorize assets, the central premise of this approach is to place emphasis on developmentally relevant strengths instead of problems.

In addition to emphasizing assets, researchers also suggest that capitalizing on aspects of the developmental process may benefit healthy development and well-being (Burt, 2002; Hart et al., 1997). Identity formation, for instance, is a major developmental task during adolescence achieved through participation and active engagement with others (Muuss, [1962] 1996). According to Erikson's developmental theory, the *Eight Stages of Man* (as cited in Muuss, [1962] 1996), identity is attained by establishing a stable self-concept through integrating past and present experiences with future notions of self. This task is achieved through psychosocial reciprocity, a process of engaging with others, to resolve three psychological crisis questions: 1) Who am I? ; 2) Where Am I going? ; and 3) Who do I want to become? It is suggested that youth who are attracted to delinquent and self-destructive behavior are withdrawn, have a poorly formed sense of personal identity, low self-esteem and have not been able to draw upon the same skills adolescents need for successful academic achievement, negotiating autonomy from parents and other adults, performing positive health behaviors, and participating with others (Compas et al., 1995; Crockett & Petersen, 1993; Matt, Sues & Schwartz, 1997). A positive youth development approach considers identity formation needs and fosters experiences to learn skills and build upon assets.

### Positive Youth Development and Empowerment

Researchers identify empowerment as a key component to a positive youth development approach (Benson, 1997). This approach suggests empowering young people offers promising potential to contribute to both positive youth development and youth violence prevention (Zeldin, 2004). Many aspects of positive youth development are consistent with empowerment. Emphasis on strengths, awareness of self and environment, and active participation, for example, are key elements of both approaches (Cargo, 2004; Chinman & Linney, 1998; Holden, Messeri, Evans, Crankshaw, & Ben-Davies, 2004; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006; Kim, Crutchfield, Williams, & Hepler, 1998; Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Peirson, 2001; Yowell & Gordon, 1996). In mid-adolescence (i.e. approximately 15-18 years), for example, one acquires the ability to examine abstract concepts and critically reason as well as adults (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958 cited in Crockett & Petersen, 1993). Thus, encouraging the development of critical consciousness—a key process in empowerment—at this age is especially relevant because youth are able to recognize psychological, affective, and social components relative to health and illness (Millstein, 1993). Delineating the features of an empowerment orientation will help clarify potential application to positive youth development and violence prevention.

### Empowerment

As suggested, empowerment and positive youth development possess similarities. Empowerment efforts seek to enhance wellness, build upon strengths, and identify sociopolitical influences on quality of (Wallerstein, 1992; Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988; Zimmerman, 2000). An empowerment orientation, however, differs from positive youth development by placing more emphasis on the connection between the individual, micro-

and macro-social structures. Empowerment, for example, assumes that many social and health problems can be attributed to unequal access to resources (Wallerstein, 1992; Zimmerman, 2000). Thus, researchers and practitioners that use this approach aim to increase the capacity of individuals, organizations, and communities by focusing on assets rather than problems, and searching for environmental influences rather than blaming individuals (Zimmerman, 2000). Establishing critical consciousness is a way to achieve this aim.

Critical consciousness, also known as critical awareness and conscientization, is central to an empowerment process. The role of critical consciousness in empowerment borrows from pedagogical principles popularized by Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (Minkler & Cox, 1980; Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988; Wang & Burris, 1997; Zimmerman & Warschausky, 1998). According to Freire ([1970] 2003, p. 64), people are oppressed or disempowered when they are unaware of causes that shape their conditions. Empowerment occurs through creation of a collective critical consciousness (Freire, [1970] 2003; Freire, 1973). Critical consciousness is achieved when, “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they* exist in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in the process, in transformation” (italics in original, Freire, [1970] 2003, p. 83). Here he suggests that empowerment is derived from an awareness that is formed regarding how individuals see their circumstances as being shaped by not only their own behavior but also broader social and historical forces. It is through questioning these circumstances that individuals and groups can uncover their own sense of agency or empowerment.

## Youth Empowerment and Adult-Involvement

To achieve critical consciousness, a democratic value orientation that supports participatory co-learning is emphasized. In an empowerment approach with youth, adults serve as a resources and collaborators—versus being the experts—by facilitating critical dialogue, awareness, and building skills towards critical consciousness in partnership with young people (Zimmerman, 2000). Youth participants are encouraged to be active collaborators and sharing their views contributes to critical dialogue, furthering awareness about how politics, socioeconomic position, culture and history can be fundamental in shaping individual life experience and health outcomes (Rappaport, 1995; Wallerstein, 1992; Zimmerman, 2000). By being active collaborators, youth can increase developmental assets such as competence, self-efficacy and sense of control by developing a critical awareness and engaging with their environment (Zimmerman, 1995). It is through this co-learning process with adults that youth can both become empowered and reap developmental benefits.

Young people, however, possess different needs in the empowerment process compared to adults because, given their developmental stage, youth are not afforded all the rights and responsibilities of adults. Due to these limits, young people must often depend on adults to fulfill a variety tasks. Adults may be needed for supervision, guidance and social support. A licensed adult, for example, must supervise a young person when they are learning how to drive a car. An adult is legally required to be present but he or she can also provide expertise and monitor driving techniques to ensure safety. Young people may also look to adults for guidance. Research on parent-child communication, for instance, suggests that most youth have questions on a wide-range of

topics they would like to ask their parents (Richardson, 2004). Adults can also provide vital social support and connection to other influential adults. Young males, for example, with higher levels of parent support are at reduced risk for suicide ideation and violent behavior (Brookmeyer, Henrich, & Schwab-Stone, 2005; Tarver, Wong, Neighbors & Zimmerman, 2004). Studies also show that youth who are connected to adults with resources increase their social capital (Jarrett, Sullivan & Watkins, 2005; Lerner et al., 2005; Zeldin, 2004). Adults can expand youths' social networks by exposing them other influential adults. Subsequently, young people may be able to draw upon these networks for personal benefit such as increased job opportunities, recommendation letters and apprenticeship.

Adult involvement may be necessary, but the mere presence of adults is not sufficient for youth empowerment. The degree and quality of this involvement can affect youth development. Adults, for instance, do not necessarily need to take active roles in young peoples' lives to influence adolescent behavior. Social learning theory suggests young people often take cues about their own behavior from adult role models (Bandura, 1977). By observing adults, youth can learn about the benefits and consequences of performing certain behaviors. Youth who are exposed to adults who smoke may acquire a smoking habit. Likewise, young people who are around adults who engage in pro-social behaviors may also exemplify similar behavior. Youth empowerment, however, requires adults to be actively involved in fostering conditions and opportunities for youth to develop critical consciousness. Adults possess the authority to create safe environments and youth-centered conditions where young people feel welcomed and, therefore, are willing to share their views. In addition, adults have an increased access to

social institutions that influence opportunities for youth to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

### **Youth Participation**

Youth participation is the process of young people contributing to decisions that affect their lives and communities (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; Hart, 1992).

Researchers argue that youth participation can have multiple developmental benefits (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Hart et al., 1997; Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005; Prilleltensky et al., 2001; Quane & Rankin, 2006; Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003).

They suggest, for example, that it can foster empowerment, autonomy, competence, and provide a safe space to explore identity through meaningful roles. An emergent area of research supports this argument. In general, this research can be divided into three areas:

1) studies about youth voice; 2) studies that examine youth participation in extracurricular activities; and 3) studies that investigate youth participation in decision making in organizations and/or communities. Much of this research has uncovered developmental benefits for young people.

#### Findings in Youth Voice Research

Youth voice can be thought of as the practice of young people sharing their opinions about problems and potential solutions (Mitra, 2006). A few researchers are investigating and creating spaces where youth voice is emphasized. Many of these efforts aim to garner youth views about particular topics, including youth violence.

Zimmerman et al. (2004), for example, assessed middle school students' narratives and found that peer-related factors were identified by the youth as a primary cause of youth violence. While the significance of peer groups is consistent with developmental theory,

the youth violence literature does not place as much emphasis as youth did in the study on factors like gossip and peer pressure. This finding suggests potential incongruence between adult-driven youth violence discourse and the experiences of youth, which reflects typical youth-adult relations.

With the exception of parents and teachers, youth are frequently segregated from non-familial adults, which limit opportunity for youth-adult communication and interaction. Morrill et al. (2000) found adults were largely absent as main characters when they asked youth to write about conflict in their lives. Yet, the influence of adult-driven institutions and discourse (e.g. media) were evident in almost all the stories. Youth, as a result, expressed being influenced by adult-driven institutional forces but lacked the daily interaction they may need from positive adult role models to guide them towards healthy development. Youth-adult segregation may also influence the struggle youth experience when trying to communicate with adults, even in situations that call for adult authority. In their ethnographic study with middle school students, Mahiri and Conner (2003) asked what youth could do about violence. One participant suggested that he could go to the police in a violent situation, but then retracted the idea in fear of the consequences. He then suggested that he would have to deal with the situation himself unless he had an adult he could trust. This student expresses desire for a trusting adult while admitting fear about the adults with authority (i.e. police).

Findings in youth voice research also supports social learning theory by suggesting that the decisions adults make play a significant role in young people's lives. Phelan et al. (1992), for example, found that when they asked students about the school environment, youth often identified concerns controlled by teachers or administrators.



Young people are also aware of and potentially influenced by negative adult behaviors (e.g. crime, drug use, alcohol abuse) (Ginsburg, Alexander, Hunt, Sullivan, & Cnaan, 2002; Mahiri & Conner, 2003; Towns, 1996). As Towns (1996) found, youth tended to excuse negative behaviors displayed by adult relatives and instead attributed the behaviors to misfortunate circumstances.

Overall these findings suggest that, when asked, youth may have different ideas about their environments compared to adults. This difference may be attributed to youth-adult segregation. Adults also can be the gatekeepers for how youth experience their environments. As a result, young people may feel alienated by not being able to contribute to decisions that influence their experiences. Youth, however, may be more inclined to voice their concerns if they have established relationships with trusting adults.

Many young people attribute their lack of voice to adult mistrust (Ashley, Samaniego, & Cheun, 1997; Dauite & Fine, 2003). Possibly more detrimental than mistrust, a group of youth activists claim that the combination of both negative stereotypes and youth silence in community matters suggests society's view of young people is hopeless (Ashley et al., 1997). Despite these feelings, youth express a desire to voice their concerns and work with adults for positive change (Ashley et al., 1997; Dauite & Fine, 2003; Fogel, 2004; Ginsburg et al., 2002; Mahiri & Conner, 2003). Building on these findings, a field examining the empowerment and wellness potential of youth-adult partnerships is emerging (Camino, 2005; Camino, 2000; Ginwright, Jennings et al., 2006; Wallerstein, Sanchez, & Dow, 2005; Wilson et al., 2006; Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). Much of this research focuses on how youth-adult partnerships engage young people in participation.

### Findings on Participation in Extracurricular Activities

Growing interest in positive youth development has spawned a number of studies examining the developmental outcomes related to youth participation in extracurricular and after-school activities (Eccles et al., 2003). Youth who spend more time in constructive extracurricular activities achieve higher academic attainment and experience less psychological (e.g. depression) and behavioral problems (e.g. crime, drug use) than youth who are uninvolved (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999; Eccles et al., 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; Quane & Rankin, 2006; Youniss & Yates, 1999). These positive outcomes have also been observed longitudinally (McGee, Williams, Howden-Chapman, Martin, & Kawachi, 2006). In addition, researchers find that youth who participate in extracurricular activities have a stronger self-concept, self-esteem and attachment to others (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Eccles et al., 2003; McGee et al., 2006; Youniss & Yates, 1999). These findings imply youth participation can enhance positive development and psychological empowerment while potentially buffering violent outcomes.

Research suggests that attendance in activities alone may not be what drives positive outcomes. McGuire and Gamble (2006) found that psychological engagement with activities was a better predictor of community belonging and social responsibility than the number of hours spent in a community service project. One way to psychologically engage youth with activities is to involve them in the planning process. This level of involvement can encourage shared ownership over the project and vested interest in a successful outcome. Furthermore, factors such as pro-social peer group, attachment to others, and identity formation appear to mediate the relationship of youth

involvement in activities (Eccles et al., 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; McGee et al., 2006; Quane & Rankin, 2006). These mediating factors suggest potential areas for intervention. Strategies that enhance pro-social peer group selection, attachment and identity formation may increase youth participation. Adults, in particular, can serve as role models and sources of reinforcement for youth to engage in these pro-social mediating factors.

While studies suggest that youth participation in extracurricular activities is associated with indicators of positive youth development and empowerment, not all types of participation have been associated with positive outcomes. Bartko & Eccles (2003) found no association between positive development indicators and certain activities such as working jobs, watching television and hanging out with friends for high school youth. Also, youth involvement in sports, for both males and females, has been associated with both positive development factors (e.g. academic achievement, less depressive symptoms) and problem behaviors (e.g. substance use, delinquency) (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Eccles et al., 2003; Fauth, Roth-Brooks-Gunn, 2007).

Encouraging youth to participate in extracurricular activities may also pose challenges for certain populations. Young people who are of color, low-income, urban or rural may have limited access to constructive extracurricular activities. Funding and resources for extracurricular programming might be inadequate, earmarked for other needs, or may not exist. Even when activities exist for youth in these contexts, the level of community violence often associated with poverty may hinder some youth from participating in activities held within the neighborhood (Fauth, Roth & Brooks-Gunn,

2007). Involving youth in organizational planning and decision-making may be a viable alternative.

### Findings on Participation in Decision-Making

Researchers are beginning to examine the potential developmental benefits of participating in organizational and community development decision-making. While many of the studies on this topic are exploratory (e.g. Breitbart, 1995; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Zeldin, 2004), some researchers have been able to systematically link youth participation in decision-making to positive youth and community developmental outcomes.

Zeldin (2004) conducted in-depth interviews with 16 youth and 24 adult organizational leaders on the process and outcomes from shared decision-making in 8 different organizations. Three areas of positive youth development and indicators of empowerment emerged from the shared youth-adult governance: 1) identity exploration, 2) skills building and, 3) community connection. Most of the youth expressed that their participation in organizational decision-making allowed them to explore new constructive roles. They attributed the challenge of governing an organization made them think more about their future career plans. Many youth also reported an increased sense of agency and acquisition of practical skills such as effective communication strategies, group facilitation, planning and management. Zeldin suggests that the young people's participation in decision-making roles increased their social capital. Youth made instrumental connections with influential adults, increased political awareness and had a leadership presence in the larger community at conferences and workshops.

Checkoway and colleagues (2003) conducted an evaluation of Lifting New Voices, a demonstration project consisting of six community-based initiatives in low-income areas that aimed to increase youth participation (i.e. 15-21 year olds) in organizational development and community change. Each site formed a steering committee, developed a strategic plan, hired a youth organizer and created structure for implementation. The evaluation of each site involved a participatory process where both youth and adult participants documented activities and lessons learned with a team of academic and community-based evaluators. Across sites, they found youth overall increased knowledge, civic competencies, skills and social responsibility. Young people also contributed to community change through activities like raising awareness about racial profiling, protesting new juvenile detention center construction and defeating a policy that would arm police in public schools.

In her studies on youth participation in school settings, Mitra (2004; 2005; 2006) found students' sense of agency, belonging, and competency increased when they were able to voice their concerns regarding school policy decisions. Mitra (2004), however, found that the manner in which youth participation is structured influences the outcome. In this ethnographic study, she followed the practices of two student groups that both sought to increase student capacity. One group used a within-system approach by developing peer-tutoring programs. The other group engaged in an outside-the-system approach by seeking to reform school policies and initiate new programs. While positive outcomes were observed in both groups, students in the latter effort built a stronger connection to the school and faculty. That is, by focusing on institutional as opposed to individual change, the students gained critical awareness of their school environment,

identified strategic areas for policy reform, and developed effective communication skills through participation--all of which can be associated with the empowerment process.

Likewise, Mandel and Qazilbash (2005) observed that youth increased critical awareness and were able to identify service gaps, previously unrecognized by adults, through their participation on a school-based health center advisory board. The students contributed their expertise on youth experience, knowledge of peer attitudes and behaviors, and experiences with procedures at the health center. Their contribution led to both increased use of analytical skills and organizational change. As a result, the students helped adult administrators recognize the need for male student outreach, improved health education, and follow-up crisis intervention.

Researchers are also documenting youth participation in local policy (Badham, 2004; Checkoway, Allison, & Montoya, 2005; Meucci & Redmon, 1997; Tisdall & Davis, 2004; Zeldin et al., 2003). State and municipal governments are beginning to encourage youth participation on youth advisory boards (Forum for Youth Investment, 2002). Zeldin et al. (2003) suggest the National Governor's Association promotes youth involvement in state decision-making regarding youth matters. States like Vermont have created youth councils and appoint student members to their State Board of Education. Checkoway et al. (Checkoway et al., 2005) report on the formation of the San Francisco Youth Commission, a representative group of seventeen 12-23 year olds that serve a year-long term to advise the mayor, supervisors and municipal department heads. At the time of the report, the commissioners raised awareness about concerns at local high schools, initiated discussion about the need for a skateboard park in recreation development plans and blocked a bootcamp-style juvenile detention center proposed by

the governor. These cases suggest that youth participation in local governance may be a viable means for increasing civic competence and youth engagement. Many of these efforts, however, can be criticized for using youth as tokens. Youth engagement can require a considerable amount of time and resources. Thus, it may be vital for local governments to consider organizational capacity for youth development to avoid unintended negative consequences.

In summary, these studies suggest that youth participation can be associated with indicators of positive youth development and empowerment. Findings in youth voice research suggest youth desire more interaction and trust with adults. When youth participate in most extracurricular activities, they have increased academic achievement, a stronger self-concept, self-esteem and attachment to others. Exploratory studies of youth who participate in organizational and community governance have shown that they can make meaningful contributions to policy while also enhancing their own competence, sense of agency and social capital. Yet, the fields of youth participation, positive youth development and youth empowerment are all in the early empirical stages. While more research is necessary to advance the respective fields, professionals who study and work with youth may benefit from conceptual thinking that distills relevant concepts and delineates their application to adolescent health promotion. With these considerations, the following typology categorizes varying degrees of youth participation drawing upon a positive youth development and empowerment framework.

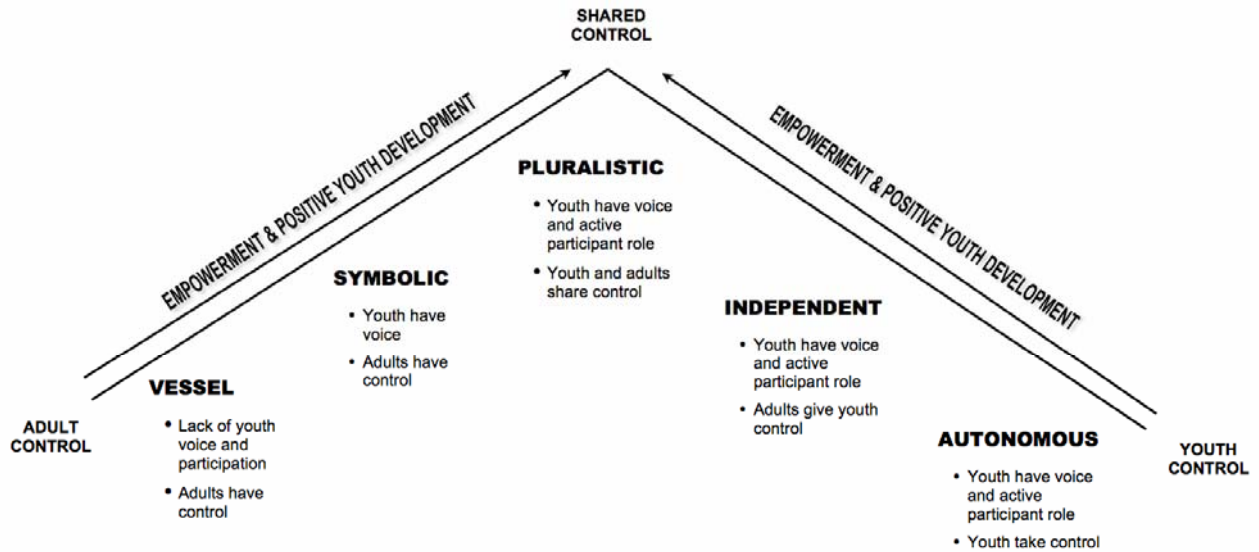
### **The TYPE Pyramid: A Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment**

Hart's (1992) Ladder of Young People's Participation, based on Arnstein's (1969) typology of citizen control, is an informative framework for articulating youth

participation types. Hart's typology, however, does not take into account recent findings in youth-adult partnership research. By placing youth-driven participation at the top of the ladder, the contribution that adult-involvement can lend to youth and community development is under valued. Furthermore, the lack of adult involvement in youth-driven participation may hinder rather than encourage optimal adolescent development and empowerment. In her evaluation of youth-adult partnerships, Camino (2005; 2000) found that activity quality and positive development outcomes could be compromised when adults are not involved. Youth may lack the skills and expertise to successfully conduct an activity alone, which can lead to frustration and unintended disempowering outcomes. Similarly, McHale, Crouter and Tucker (2007) found that children who participated in structured activities with adults rather than unsupervised activities with peers, had improved developmental adjustment in middle school years. Therefore, the proposed typology builds on Hart's ladder by considering both adolescent and adult involvement in shaping positive youth development and empowerment. We shift from using a ladder metaphor to a pyramid metaphor to integrate different configurations of youth-adult control. The typology builds on Hart's and Arnstein's models by integrating intergenerational linkages for youth participation and considering recent research developments in youth-adult partnerships. Thus, the Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment (TYPE) Pyramid is presented with five types of participation that delineate various levels of youth-adult involvement and empowerment in an inverted V schematic: (1) Vessel, (2) Symbolic, (3) Pluralistic, (4) Independent and (5) Autonomous. The pyramid shape is intended to represent degrees of empowerment and positive youth development potential for each participation type.



**Figure 1.1. The TYPE Pyramid**



Characteristics of the TYPE Pyramid

In essence, youth participation is the democratic practice of young people actively engaging with their social environment. The point of engagement can be initiated by three basic approaches: adult-driven, shared control and youth-driven. The degree of control, however, can vary within these types. In the some cases of adult-driven participation, for example, young people might have a degree of involvement, albeit limited. To illustrate, consider the degree of youth participation on a school debate team. Much of the time, adults do the administrative organizing but students may contribute

their ideas to strategy and study techniques. In the end, however, adults ultimately control the topic of debate, rules and, potentially the overall argumentative strategy. Thus, while research suggests three basic types of participation, this typology includes two variations on adult-driven (i.e. Vessel and Symbolic) and youth-driven (Independent and Autonomous) participation to capture potential variation within types.

The following description of the TYPE Pyramid presents details about each participation type by following the schematic, as presented in Figure 1.1, from left to right. Discussion about the broader participation types (i.e. adult-driven, shared-control and youth-drive) is also presented alongside each of their respective sub-types.

#### Adult-Driven Participation Types: Vessel and Symbolic

Adult-driven participation can be described as activities developed by adults that are designed to engage youth. Some suggest adult-driven participation can result in manipulation, decoration or tokenism (Arnstein, 1969; Guinier & Torres, 2002; Hart, 1992; Hogan, 2002; Kreisberg, 1992). Analysis provided by Guinier and Torres (Guinier & Torres, 2002) about race relations describes a parallel phenomenon. The authors suggest superficial racial diversity or tokenism often occurs because most strategies for social change ascribe to a hierarchical model of *power over* social relations. This power over context fosters an environment where—even among advocacy groups whose agendas are race-focused—those who are directly affected are not involved or their presence is merely decoration. As a result, dominant groups can maintain their power by pointing to the few examples of minority tokens present by not taking authentic steps towards egalitarianism. Furthermore, privilege may allow dominant groups to be unconscious of tokenism and how their power may operate to suppress others' needs.

Among youth-adult relations, manipulation, decoration or tokenism can occur when the main objective of youth presence is to advance an adult-driven agenda. Youth participation in this situation is not authentic. Young people may be cognizant of this practice and, thus, skeptical of adult motivations (Zeldin, 2004). When this happens, youth do not genuinely partake in planning activities, decision-making, or contributing their views. Instead, young people are present because it may be politically correct, projects a particular image or makes an organization feel good. This, in effect, works counter to what adults may have originally intended and can serve to exacerbate social dynamics that disempower youth on a whole.

Conversely, one can argue that young people benefit from a traditional pedagogical relationship with adults, especially when the objective is to teach specialized or technical skills (Larson et al., 2005). Several studies find positive outcomes when using an adult-driven approach to enhance youth development and prevent violence (e.g. Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Fields & McNamara, 2003; Hudson, Zimmerman, & Morrel-Samuels, 2006; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray & Foster, 1998). Larson et al. (2005) conducted a qualitative evaluation of different youth-adult partnership programs. While youth in adult-driven programs had little or no input in the development of program activities, they still expressed benefits. In a theater program, youth acquired production skills such as mastering voice projection, ad-lib and sewing techniques in addition to gaining self-confidence and socio-emotional growth. Similarly, youth in an adult-driven art program learned skills in planning and executing a large project, painting techniques and professional etiquette in the art world. The researchers suggest that it was the

characteristics and approach of the adults such as care, empathy and use of open dialogue that contributed to positive outcomes.

Despite potential benefits, May (1972) describes the underlying intention of this type of relationship as *nutrient power*. Nutrient power is power for the other; it essentially entails a helping relationship. Common examples of nutrient power relationships are those between parent and child, teacher and students, and therapist and patient. Labonte (in Bernstein et al., 1994) argues that a helping relationship is inherently one of *power over*. A power over dynamic can potentially undermine any initial well-meaning intentions. The unbalanced distribution of authority in many youth-adult nutrient arrangements inevitably challenges initial intentions because relations, whether subtle or not, operate within a context of one possessing more authoritative power over the other.

Nutrient power is demonstrated in findings from Hogan's (2002) ethnographic study of an adult-driven service-learning project. The project was designed to enhance youth development and participation; however, Hogan found adult authority unintentionally and, in some cases intentionally, limited youth participation. Power dynamics between the service learning teacher and students created a space where the teacher's ideas were dominant. While unintentional, the teacher used his authority to steer the discussion towards his expertise and gave long critical reflections when students did contribute. Hogan observed that the students would whisper among themselves, but largely refrained from sharing their views with the teacher, even when prodded. In another instance, students were asked to design and conduct a community survey, but the site's executive director overrode their efforts by presenting his own survey to the board

and did not involve youth in any subsequent discussion. Youth expressed frustration and felt that their contributions were meaningless. Although the service learning project was well intended, both the teacher and site director were limited by occupational obligations and were not able to break from their conventional roles enough to involve the students in participation at an adequate level to be meaningful.

Adult-driven participation has potential to be both beneficial and detrimental to youth development. As research suggests, the approach and characteristics of adults involved can help determine the degree to which youth benefit from participating (Camino, 2005; Camino, 2000; Hogan, 2002; Larson et al., 2005). Adults who listen to and address young people's needs are likely to observe more involvement and positive developmental outcomes than adults who choose to exercise their authority over youth. Thus, the spectrum of adult-driven participation encompasses a range between adults who have full control over decision-making to adults who listen to youth perspectives but ultimately make final decisions. These participation types are respectively labeled Vessel and Symbolic.

### *Vessel*

This participation type describes a traditional youth-adult relationship that is adult-driven, demanding little to no input from young people. The term *vessel* draws upon Friere's ([1970] 2003) writings on power and pedagogy. Freire describes the traditional pedagogical relationship as *banking education*, where the teacher's task is to *fill* the students—who are seen as empty vessels—with his or her narration. Under these circumstances, teachers are the trained experts with authority; learning and development are mediated by adult-determined lessons and agendas. It is suggested that a *banking*

*education* approach promotes a dominant power hierarchy where students may become overly dependent on teacher authority, therefore, spoiling potential for critical epistemic reflection (Hart et al., 1997; Kreisberg, 1992). This youth-adult participation type is not only observed in learning environments but is also commonly found in youth-related policy development, adolescent research, juvenile legal systems and social services (Camino, 2005; Hart et al., 1997; Larson et al., 2005; Meucci & Redmon, 1997).

Due to lack of youth involvement, the Vessel participation type has low empowerment potential. While youth may be able to learn skills and acquire new knowledge, little opportunity in this type exists for young people to contribute their own ideas. In effect, this limits potential for critical consciousness or awareness, a key part of the empowerment process. Critical awareness is gained through an open dialogical practice where both adults and youth contribute their perspectives to develop an authentic understanding of the environment. Once critical awareness is gained, action can be taken to strengthen assets or address concerns. Young peoples' critical awareness and motivation to participate, however, may be hindered when youth voice is not actively encouraged, and they are not involved in planning and decision-making. When youth participation is this low, opportunities to build on strengths like self-efficacy, or to develop skills like problem solving are limited.

### ***Symbolic***

Recent efforts have been made to increase participation and engage youth (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). Many of these efforts can be classified as Symbolic participation. In this type of participation, youth have the opportunity to voice their perspectives about problems and their potential solutions, and be heard by decision-

makers. Adults may, for example, set up formal or informal structures for youth to express their opinions and experiences. Youth positions on organizational boards, advisory committees and in advocacy work often falls into this participation type. The participation arrangement is symbolic or representative of democratic processes; however, in the end, youth often do not have much power in the decision-making or agenda setting process.

Symbolic differs from Vessel participation by including youth voice. Youth voice requires a degree of critical awareness on the part of young people. By voicing their perspectives, youth have the opportunity to practice critical thinking by formulating opinions about problems and solutions. This practice encourages the development of competence, self-efficacy and mastery—all of which are key factors in positive youth development (Benson, 1997) and psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995). While youth in the Symbolic type participate more fully than in the Vessel type, the potential for empowerment may be limited by *nutrient power* dynamics. The intentions of adults, however well-meaning, may be undermined by their greater control over decision-making. In this type, youth may experience frustration over being able to voice their perspectives but not possessing any control over decisions that will determine subsequent outcomes. This tension reduces youth access to control and limits empowerment potential.

#### Youth-Adult Shared Control Participation Type: Pluralistic

A field examining the empowerment and wellness potential of youth-adult partnerships is emerging (Jennings et al., 2006). Researchers suggest that the process of youth and adults working together can provide optimal conditions for youth

empowerment and positive youth development (Cargo, 2004; Foster-Fishman, Deacon, Nievar, & McCann, 2005; Wallerstein, Sanchez-Merki & Dow, 2002; Wilson et al., 2006). Adults can serve as role models, sources of support and social capital, and primary sources of positive reinforcement when they collaborate with youth to share decision-making and planning activities. Shared control occurs through a transactional process between adults and youth, and is a key component in youth empowerment conceptual models (Cargo, 2004; Chinman & Linney, 1998; Jennings et al., 2006; Kim et al., 1998; Wallerstein et al., 2002).

Cargo et al. (2004) describe this transaction as consisting of both adult and youth subprocesses. The adult subprocess occurs when adults create an empowering environment by providing a welcoming climate and enabling youth. For youth, the subprocess occurs through factors that encourage positive development and empowerment such as self-actualization, being engaged with others, and participating in decision-making and subsequent constructive change. The transactional process is cyclical and occurs through multiple feedback loops for both youth and adults to share control.

Shared control, however, does not necessarily translate to every decision and activity requiring equal youth and adult participation—i.e. both groups can jointly decide that adults may be better at making a decision or vice versa. Often, it is more appropriate for youth and adults to take on tasks and responsibilities that utilize their respective strengths (Libby, Rosen, & Sedonaen, 2005). It may, for example, be advantageous for youth to brainstorm new ideas and adults to recommend a timeline and procedure for carrying out the ideas. In this situation, youth may come up with ideas that adults may



not have considered while adults can draw upon experience to suggest how long the idea will take to implement, strategies for implementation and where to find resources.

Hart et al. (1997) suggest the degree and type of responsibilities assigned to both youth and adults may vary depending on the developmental needs of the young people involved. Middle school aged youth, for example, require differing developmental needs in identity formation than elementary school aged youth. In general, children (i.e. 8 to 11 year olds) take a more outwardly approach to their identity development; whereas, early adolescents (i.e. 12 to 14 year olds) are more inwardly and philosophical. Furthermore, group membership serves a different function in identity development for children and adolescents. For children, social groups provide a space where they can demonstrate competence, independence and self-worth. For youth who are older than twelve, social interaction in group settings serve as a staging ground for experimentation with and merging of different ego identities. While social interaction is still influential on identity formation for adolescents, at this later stage, their understanding of self is more intrapersonal than in earlier years. This more inward notion of self may be attributed to advances in cognitive development. The ability to critically reason and grasp abstract concepts isn't fully developed until mid- to late adolescence (Millstein & Litt, 1993). Thus, considerations on the type of planning, decisions and activities that youth and adults decide to undertake may depend on the ages of the young people involved. Early adolescents may be more adept to taking on tasks by themselves whereas children may require more adult involvement. For optimal youth development and empowerment, decisions about the degree and types of responsibilities taken on by youth and adults ought to be negotiated by both groups with a clear understanding of the rationale.

The pluralistic participation type recognizes the strengths of both youth and adults working in partnership to create and sustain both healthy youth and community development. In this type, the relationship between youth and adults is reciprocal. That is, youth and adults share planning and decision-making responsibilities to achieve goals. As partners, youth can offer creativity, a fresh perspective, willingness to try new ideas, and a youth-centered understanding of themselves and their peers; whereas, adults can contribute experience, expertise on planning, decision-making and evaluation practices, and knowledge about community history, lessons learned and best practices (Libby et al., 2005).

While youth-adult partnerships may have varying degrees of youth and adult control within them, shared planning and decision-making is what differentiates the pluralistic type from other participation types in the pyramid. The shared control between youth and adults provides a social arrangement that is ideal for positive youth development and empowerment. In this type, adults are involved at a level where the purpose of their presence is to maximize conditions and opportunities for youth to engage in pro-social activities, yet are not overly dominant or under-involved to a point where they hinder youth development or empowerment. Furthermore, youth and adult partnerships may have more empowerment potential when they are designed to both foster healthy youth development and also aim for positive organizational or community change (Schulz, Israel, Zimmerman & Checkoway, 1995).

#### Youth-Driven Participation Types: Independent and Autonomous

Participation in activities and organizations governed by youth can be thought of as youth-driven participation. This type of participation can be initiated by young people

or adults but it is youth who serve as the major decision makers. By making major decisions youth experience ownership over the agenda, they become more invested in outcomes and have opportunities to draw upon leadership skills (Larson et al., 2005). A common rationale for adults who initiate youth-driven participation is that youth are valuable resources capable of meaningful contributions (Camino, 2005; Camino, 2000; Larson et al., 2005). This rationale also includes the perspective that the uneven power differential between youth and adults will impede potential for youth empowerment by rendering youth apathetic. Thus, the adult-initiated youth-driven approach is often predicated on the notion that to eliminate the power differential adults need to give up their power for youth to gain power (Camino, 2005).

A major assumption of this rationale is that power is a zero-sum phenomenon. That is, power is *power over*, it exists in limited supply and can only be gained if it is taken or another gives it up (Kreisberg, 1992). Yet, researchers find when adults cede power to youth it may have unintended effects. In a youth-driven day camp, Larson et al. (2005) found that youth initially were able to brainstorm ideas for activities with ease but, due to inexperience, they struggled when it came to organizing and implementing the activities. As a result, the planning stalled; attendance at meetings diminished and youth expressed disappointment. It was not until adult advisors gave input when the youth were able to resolve internal conflicts and continue working. Similarly, Camino (2005) found youth and adults had differing perspectives in a youth-driven empowerment program. Adults ranked their own cohesiveness and productivity with the group as high and youth ranked them as low. In an effort to give youth control, the adults attended meetings but rarely gave input. This limited what youth could learn from adults,

hindered group effectiveness, and led to the young people feeling frustrated and abandoned by the adults. Similar potential also exists with youth-driven participation that is youth-initiated. While youth can be viewed as competent and capable, many lack of experience with organizational decision-making and technical skills. Deficient skills, coupled with a lack of guidance, may lead to poor organizational outcomes and youth feelings of inadequacy.

### *Independent*

As a response to traditional Vessel youth participation types, some adults have taken the approach that they must give up their power for youth to gain power. Adults will, for instance, create a space or make resources available for youth to conceptualize and implement their own programming. While this approach has been recognized for enhancing independence, it has also been criticized for lack of adult involvement (Camino, 2005; Larson et al., 2005). Young people, for example, may have plenty of creative ideas for programming, but may lack expertise on how to develop a strategic plan that could potentially benefit from adult involvement.

The empowerment potential within this type is not as optimal, as in the Pluralistic type, because youth are provided with limited guidance. While youth in the Independent type may have significant opportunities for active participation, they might take longer to successfully implement their ideas due to lack of skills, which could lead to frustration. Young people may also not be aware of or connected to resources that could make their planning and activities more efficient. Furthermore, when adults step aside with intentions to empower youth, they could inadvertently alienate them instead. Nevertheless, the practice of organizing, planning, and controlling major decision-making

can build skills and contribute to increased competence, critical awareness, and self-efficacy.

### *Autonomous*

The Autonomous participation type captures situations where youth have taken measures to create their own spaces for voice, participation and expression of power regardless of adult involvement. This type of youth participation operates without consent or guidance from adults. Youth may create spaces to address their own needs—which can potentially be empowering—but without adult guidance these spaces can be detrimental for healthy development. Youth gangs can illustrate how this type of participation may impede positive youth development and participation. These youth might organize to develop independence from adults, gain sense of cohesion, and participate in decision-making roles; however, the delinquent and criminal behavior associated with gang activities hinders positive development.

While deviant behavior may not always be the result an Autonomous participation type, the positive youth development and empowerment potential are limited in ways similar to the Independent type. In addition to a diminished sense of empowerment youth may feel from having not yet acquired certain skills, young people in the Autonomous type are also not able to benefit from knowledge adults can possess about community or organizational history, best practices, and lessons learned. In this instance, the opportunity to transmit intergenerational memory is lost, diminishing young people's abilities to connect their circumstances to the historical narratives of their communities. This youth-adult segregation can disempower the development of both youth and communities.

## **Implications and Conclusion**

The TYPE Pyramid identifies five distinct types of youth participation; however, all youth-adult arrangements may not be easily categorized into one type. It is possible for an organizational or programmatic approach to be classified as a combination of types. A program might, for example, begin with a Vessel approach and evolve into a Symbolic type. Organizations could also have various processes that fit into different types of youth-adult participation. Thus, the TYPE Pyramid is not designed to be a rigid framework, but rather used as heuristic device to challenge investigators and practitioners when developing research questions and youth programs.

The pyramid also does not address how potential benefits may vary according to participation type for youth at different developmental stages. Younger adolescents may benefit more from the increased adult involvement found in adult-driven participation types whereas older youth may derive more from the youth-driven types. Furthermore, the TYPE Pyramid also does not illustrate how older youth can serve as an intermediary between younger adolescents and adults; thus, partnerships can serve as a pipeline that cuts across multiple generational age groups. These pipeline partnerships have potential to be empowering for both those individuals that are involved and the larger community.

Another issue to consider is that communities of color, impoverished, urban, and rural communities may face several barriers that can impede establishing higher levels of youth participation. African American, Latino, urban, and impoverished communities are disproportionately affected by violence. The violence and crime that afflicts some of these neighborhoods may not readily lend themselves to be safe spaces for youth community work. In this context, beginning youth-adult partnerships requires a critical

mass of dedicated adults to reclaim public spaces for safe youth involvement. Adults who work towards reclaiming these spaces need to consider that the process warrants time for community buy-in, gaining trust, and building relationships. Many impoverished, urban, and rural youth are also challenged by economic divestment in their communities. Resources may not be available to provide the financial and human capital to build youth and adult partnerships. In addition, low-income youth may be burdened with extra responsibilities their higher income counterparts may not face such as working and taking care of siblings. These extra responsibilities allow little free time and perhaps energy for increased participation. Despite these barriers, past research suggests that youth in these types of communities want to be more involved with adult guidance (Fine et al., 2003; Ginsburg et al., 2002). The TYPE Pyramid can assist interested youth and adults alike in determining which participation type may best suit their context.

As previously suggested, practitioners and researchers may find the pyramid typology most useful as a heuristic device. Future research, however, may explore expanding upon the typology's functions. The typology for example, could be used to guide the design of an evaluation tool. Measurable items could be created to assess each participation type. Youth-adult partnerships, for example, that aim to either reach or maintain a certain participation type could use the tool to assess participation status. Furthermore, youth-adult partnerships warrant further research. While current findings trend towards these partnerships creating opportunities for positive youth development and empowerment, researchers still have a limited understanding of what core elements are necessary to make youth-adult partnerships successful. Understanding the core elements of Pluralistic youth-adult partnerships may help reveal how resources can be

directed towards improving youth participation, positive youth development, and empowerment.

In conclusion, the TYPE Pyramid was designed to contribute a framework for understanding different ways young people and adults can interact and how this interaction affects youth and eventually community development. Moreover, the pyramid was developed with adolescent health promotion in mind. By combining the health promoting approaches of both empowerment and positive youth development, the TYPE Pyramid delineates what participation types may be most useful at enhancing the strengths of youth rather than focusing on problems. The participation types reveal where youth voices are valued and their contributions may be most meaningful.



## References

- Arnstein, S. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216-224.
- Ashley, J., Samaniego, D. & Cheun, L. (1997). How Oakland turns its back on teens: A youth perspective. *Social Justice*, 24(3), 170-176.
- Badham, B. (2004). Participation--for a change: Disabled young people lead the way. *Children & Society*, 18, 143-154.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social Learning Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bartko, W. T. & Eccles, J. S. (2003). Adolescent participation in structured and unstructured activities: A person-oriented analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 32(4), 233-241.
- Bennett, D. & Tonkin, R. (2003). International developments in adolescent health care: A story of advocacy and achievement. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 33, 240-251.
- Benson, P. L. (1997). *All Kids are Our Kids: What Communities Must Do to Raise Caring and Responsible Children and Adolescents*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Benson, P. L., Leffert, N., Scales, P. C. & Blyth, D. A. (1998). Beyond the "village" rhetoric: Creating healthy communities for children and adolescents. *Applied Developmental Science*, 2(3), 138-159.

- Bernstein, E., Wallerstein, N., Braithwaite, R., Gutierrez, L., Labonte, R. & Zimmerman, M. A. (1994). Empowerment forum - A dialogue between guest editorial-board members. *Health Education Quarterly*, 21(3), 281-294.
- Blum, R. W. M. (1998). Healthy youth development as a model for youth health promotion - A review. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 22(5), 368-375.
- Breitbart, M. M. (1995). Banners for the street: Reclaiming space and designing change with urban youth. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 15, 35-49.
- Brookmeyer, K. A., Henrich, C. C. & Schwab-Stone, M. (2005). Adolescents who witness community violence: Can parent support and prosocial cognitions protect them from committing violence? *Child Development*, 76(4), 917-929.
- Burt, M. R. (2002). Reasons to invest in adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 31, 136-152.
- Call, K. T., Riedel, A. A., Hein, K., McLoyd, V., Peterson, A. & Kipke, M. (2002). Adolescent health and well-being in the twenty-first century: A global perspective. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 12(1), 69-98.
- Camino, L. A. (2005). Pitfalls and promising practices of youth-adult partnerships: An evaluator's reflections. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 75-85.
- Camino, L. A. (2000). Youth-adult partnerships: Entering new territory in community work and research. *Applied Developmental Science*, 4(Suppl. 1), 11-20.

- Cargo, M. (2004). Empowerment as fostering positive youth development and citizenship. *Educational Administration Abstracts*, 39(1), S66-S79.
- Catalano, R. F., Berglund, M. L., Ryan, J. A. M., Lonczak, H. S. & Hawkins, J. D. (2004). Positive youth development in the United States: Research findings on evaluations of positive youth development programs. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 591, 98-124.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2004). *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance* No. 53 (SS02)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2006). *Youth violence: Fact sheet*. Retrieved 4/4/07, 2007, from <http://www.cdc.gov.proxy.lib.umich.edu/ncipc/factsheets/yvfacts.htm>
- Checkoway, B. N. & Gutierrez, L. M. (Eds.). (2006). *Youth Participation and Community Change*. New York, NY: The Hayworth Press.
- Checkoway, B., Allison, T. & Montoya, C. (2005). Youth participation in public policy at the municipal level. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27(10), 1149-1162.
- Checkoway, B., Figueroa, L. & Richards-Schuster, K. (2003). Democracy multiplied in an urban neighborhood: Youth force in the south Bronx. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 13(2), 1-19.

- Chinman, M. J. & Linney, J. A. (1998). Toward a model of adolescent empowerment: Theoretical and empirical evidence. *The Journal of Primary Prevention, 18*(4), 393-413.
- Compas, B. E., Hinden, B. R. & Gerhardt, C. A. (1995). Adolescent development: Pathways and processes of risk and resilience. *Annual Review of Psychology, 46*, 265-293.
- Cooper, H., Valentine, J. C., Nye, B. & Lindsay, J. J. (1999). Relationships between five after-school activities and academic achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 91*(2), 369-378.
- Crockett, L. J. & Petersen, A. C. (1993). Adolescent development: Health risks and opportunities for health promotion. In S. G. Millstein, A. C. Petersen & E. O. Nightingale (Eds.), *Promoting the health of adolescents: New directions for the twenty-first century* (pp. 13-37). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Dahlberg, L. L. (1998). Youth violence in the United States: Major trends, risk factors, and prevention approaches. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 14*(4), 259-271.
- Daiute, C. & Fine, M. (2003). Youth perspectives on violence and injustice. *Journal of Social Issues, 59*(1), 1-14.
- Damon, W. (2004). What is positive youth development? *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 591*, 13-24.

- Dauite, C. & Fine, M. (2003). Youth perspectives on violence and injustice. *Journal of Social Issues, 59*(1), 1-14.
- Dworkin, J. B., Larson, R. & Hansen, D. (2003). Adolescents' accounts of growth experiences in youth activities. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 32*(1), 17-26.
- Eccles, J. S., Barber, B. L., Stone, M. & Hunt, J. (2003). Extracurricular activities and adolescent development. *Journal of Social Issues, 59*(4), 865-889.
- Eccles, J. S. & Gootman, J. A. (2002). *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Ellickson, P. L. & McGuigan, K. A. (2000). Early predictors of adolescent violence. *American Journal of Public Health, 90*(4), 566-572.
- Farrington, D. P. (1998). Predictors, causes, and correlates of male youth violence. *Crime and Justice, 24*, 421-475.
- Fields, S. A. & McNamara, J. R. (2003). The prevention of child and adolescent violence: A review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 8*, 61-91.
- Fingerhut, L. A. & Kleinman, J. C. (1989). *Trends and Current Status in Childhood Mortality, United States, 1900-85* No. 26). Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.
- Finn, J. & Checkoway, B. N. (1998). Young people as competent community builders: A challenge to social work. *Social Work, 43*(4), 335-345.

- Fogel, S. J. (2004). Risks and opportunities for success: Perceptions of urban youths in a distressed community and lessons for adults. *Families in Society*, 85(3), 335-344.
- Foster-Fishman, P., Deacon, Z., Nievar, M. A. & McCann, P. (2005). Using methods that matter: The impact of reflection, dialogue and voice. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 36(3/4), 275-291.
- Fredricks, J. A., & Eccles, J. S. (2005). Developmental benefits of extracurricular involvement: Do peer characteristics mediate the link between activities and youth outcomes? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 34(6), 507-520.
- Freire, P. ([1970] 2003). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (30th ed.). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for Critical Consciousness*. (1st ed.). New York, NY: Seabury Press.
- Furstenberg, F. F. (2000). The sociology of adolescence and youth in the 1990s: A critical commentary. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 896-910.
- Ginsburg, K. R., Alexander, P. M., Hunt, J., Sullivan, M. & Cnaan, A. (2002). Enhancing their likelihood for a positive future: Focus groups reveal the voice of inner-city youth. *Pediatrics*, 109(6), 95.
- Ginwright, S. A. (2005). On urban ground: Understanding African-American intergenerational partnerships in urban communities. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 101-110.

- Guinier, L. & Torres, G. (2002). Rethinking conventions of zero-sum power. *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy*. (pp. 108-130). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hamburg, M. A. (1998). Youth violence is a public health concern. In D. S. Elliott, M. A. Hamburg & K. R. Williams (Eds.), *Violence in American Schools: A New Perspective* (pp. 27-64). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hart, R. (1992). *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. (No. 4). Florence, Italy: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.
- Hart, R., Dauite, C., Iltus, S., Kritt, D., Rome, M. & Sabo, K. (1997). Developmental theory and children's participation in community organizations. *Social Justice*, 24(3), 33-63.
- Herrenkohl, T. I., Maguin, E., Hill, K. G., Hawkins, J. D., Abbott, R. D. & Catalano, R. F. (2000). Developmental risk factors for youth violence. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 26, 176-186.
- Hogan, K. (2002). Pitfalls of community-based learning: How power dynamics limit adolescents' trajectories of growth and participation. *Teachers College Record*, 104(3), 586-624.
- Holden, D. J., Messeri, P., Evans, W. D., Crankshaw, E. & Ben-Davies, M. (2004). Conceptualizing youth empowerment within tobacco control. *Health Education & Behavior*, 31(5), 548-563.

- Hudson, D., Zimmerman, M. A. & Morrel-Samuels, S. (2006). Youth violence prevention: Theory and practice. In A. C. Gielen, D. A. Sleet & R. J. DiClemente (Eds.), *Injury and Violence Prevention: Behavioral Science Theories, Methods and Applications* (pp. 368-392). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Jarrett, R. L., Sullivan, P. J. & Watkins, N. D. (2005). Developing social capital through participation in organized youth programs: Qualitative insights from three programs. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 41-55.
- Jennings, L. B., Parra-Medina, D. M., Messias, D. K. & McLoughlin, K. (2006). Toward a critical social theory of youth empowerment. *Journal of Community Practice*, 14(1/2), 31-55.
- Kim, S., Crutchfield, C., Williams, C. & Hepler, N. (1998). Toward a new paradigm in substance abuse and other problem behavior prevention for youth: Youth development and empowerment approach. *Journal of Drug Education*, 28(1), 1-17.
- Kreisberg, S. (1992). *Transforming Power: Domination, Empowerment and Education*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Krug, E. G., Dahlberg, L. L., Mercy, J. A., Zwi, A. B. & Lozano, R. (2002). *World Report on Violence and Health*. Geneva: World Health Organization.
- Larson, R., Walker, K. & Pearce, N. (2005). A comparison of youth-driven and adult-driven youth programs: Balancing inputs from youth and adults. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 57-74.



- Lerner, R. M., Almerigi, J. B., Theokas, C. & Lerner, J. V. (2005). Positive youth development - A view of the issues. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 25(1), 10-16.
- Libby, M., Rosen, M. & Sedonaen, M. (2005). Building youth-adult partnerships for community change: Lessons from the youth leadership institute. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 1(111), 120.
- Lutzker, J. R. & Wyatt, J. M. (2006). Introduction. In J. R. Lutzker (Ed.), *Preventing Violence: Research and Evidence-based Intervention Strategies* (pp. 3-15). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Mahiri, J. & Conner, E. (2003). Black youth violence has a bad rap. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59(1), 121-140.
- Mahoney, J. L. Cairns, B. D. & Farmer, T. W. (2003). Promoting interpersonal competence and educational success through extracurricular activity participation. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95(2), 409-418.
- Mandel, L. A. & Qazilbash, J. (2005). Youth voices as change agents: Moving beyond the medical model in school-based health center practice. *Journal of School Health*, 75(7), 239-242.
- Matt, E., Sues, L. & Schwartz, J. A. (1997). Health risks and deviance in the transition from school to work. In J. Schulenberg, J. Maggs & K. Hurrelmann (Eds.), *Health Risks and Developmental Transitions During Adolescence* (pp. 372-391). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- May, R. (1972). *Power and Innocence*. New York, NY: Norton.
- McGee, R., Williams, S., Howden-Chapman, P., Martin, J. & Kawachi, I. (2006). Participation in clubs and groups from childhood to adolescence and its effects on attachment and self-esteem. *Journal of Adolescence*, 29, 1-17.
- Mcguire, J. K. & Gamble, W. C. (2006). Community service for youth: The value of psychological engagement over number of hours spent. *Journal of Adolescence*, 29, 289-298.
- Mercy, J., Butchart, A., Farrington, D. & Cerdá, M. (2002). *Youth Violence*. Geneva: World Health Organization.
- Meucci, S. & Redmon, J. (1997). Safe spaces: California children enter a policy debate. *Social Justice*, 24(3), 139-151.
- Millstein, S. G. (1993). A view of health from the adolescent's perspective. In S. G. Millstein, A. C. Petersen & E. O. Nightingale (Eds.), *Promoting the Health of Adolescents: New Directions for the Twenty-first Century* (pp. 97-118). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Millstein, S. G. & Litt, I. F. (1993). Adolescent health. In S. Feldman, & G. Elliot (Eds.), *At the Threshold: The Developing Adolescent* (pp. 431-456). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Millstein, S. G., Petersen, A. C. & Nightingale, E. O. (1993). Adolescent health promotion: Rationale, goals, and objectives. In S. G. Millstein, A. C. Petersen & E.

- O. Nightingale (Eds.), *Promoting the Health of Adolescents: New Directions for the Twenty-first Century* (pp. 3-10). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Minkler, M. & Cox, K. (1980). Creating critical consciousness in health: Applications of freire's philosophy and methods to the health care setting. *International Journal of Health Services, 10*(2), 311-322.
- Mitra, D. L. (2004). The significance of students: Can increasing "student voice" in schools lead to gains in youth development? *Teachers College Record, 106*(4), 651-688.
- Mitra, D. L. (2005). Adults advising youth: Leading while getting out of the way. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 41*(3), 520-553.
- Mitra, D. L. (2006). Youth as bridge between home and school: Comparing student voice and parent involvement as strategies for change. *Education and Urban Society, 38*(4), 455-480.
- Morrill, C., Yalda, C., Adelman, M., Musheno, M. & Bejarano, C. (2000). Telling tales in school: Youth culture and conflict narratives. *Law & Society Review, 34*(3), 521-565.
- Muuss, R. E. ([1962] 1996). G. Stanley Hall's biogenetic psychology of adolescence. *Theories of Adolescence* (6th ed., pp. 15-17). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Phelan, P., Locke, A. & Cao, H. T. (1992). Speaking up: Students' perspectives on school. *Phi Delta Kappan, 73*(9), 695-704.

- Prilleltensky, I., Nelson, G. & Peirson, L. (2001). The role of power and control in children's lives: An ecological analysis of pathways toward wellness, resilience and problems. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 11*(2), 143-158.
- Quane, J. M. & Rankin, B. H. (2006). Does it pay to participate? Neighborhood-based organizations and the social development of urban adolescents. *Children and Youth Services Review, 28*, 1229-1250.
- Rappaport, J. (1995). Empowerment meets narrative: Listening to stories and creating settings. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 23*(5), 795.
- Reese, L. E., Vera, E., Simon, T. R. & Ikeda, R. M. (2000). The role of families and care givers as risk and protective factors in preventing youth violence. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 3*(1), 61-77.
- Richardson, R. A. (2004). Early adolescence talking points: Questions that middle school students want to ask their parents. *Family Relations, 53*(1), 87-94.
- Roth, J., Brooks-Gunn, J., Murray, L. & Foster, W. (1998). Promoting healthy adolescents: Synthesis of youth development program evaluations. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 8*(4), 423-459.
- Roth, J. L. & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2003). Youth development programs: Risk, prevention and policy. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 32*(3), 170-182.
- Satcher, D. (2001). *Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Rockville, MD: Department of Health and Human Services.

- Schulz, A. J., Israel, B. A., Zimmerman, M. A. & Checkoway, B. N. (1995). Empowerment as a multi-level construct: Perceived control at the individual, organizational and community levels. *Health Education Research, 10*(3), 309-327.
- Snyder, H. M. & Sickmund, M. (2006). *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency.
- Tarver, D. T., Wong, N. T., Neighbors, H. W. & Zimmerman, M. A. (2004). The role of father support in the prediction of suicidal ideation among black adolescent males. In N. Way, & J. Y. Chu (Eds.), *Adolescent Boys: Exploring Diverse Cultures of Boyhood*. (pp. 144). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Thornton, T. N., Craft, C. A., Dahlberg, L. L., Lynch, B. S. & Baer, K. (2002). *Best Practices of Youth Violence Prevention: A Sourcebook for Community Action*. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Tisdall, E. K. M. & Davis, J. (2004). Making a difference? Bringing children's and young people's views into policy-making. *Children & Society, 18*, 131-142.
- Towns, D. P. (1996). "Rewind the world!": An ethnographic study of inner-city African-American children's perceptions of violence. *The Journal of Negro Education, 65*(3), 375-389.
- Wallerstein, N., Sanchez-Merki, V. & Dow, L. (2002). Freirian praxis in health education and community organizing. In M. Minkler (Ed.), *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health* (pp. 195-211). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

- Wallerstein, N. (1992). Powerlessness, empowerment, and health: Implications for health promotion programs. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 6(3), 197-205.
- Wallerstein, N. & Bernstein, E. (1988). Empowerment education - freire ideas adapted to health-education. *Health Education Quarterly*, 15(4), 379-394.
- Wang, C.C. & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education and Behavior*, 24(3), 369.
- Wilson, N., Minkler, M., Dasho, S., Carrillo, R., Wallerstein, N. & Garcia, D. (2006). Student facilitators and collaborative teams for participation: Training students as facilitators in the youth empowerment strategies (YES!) project. *Journal of Community Practice*, 14(1/2), 201-217.
- Youniss, J. & Yates, M. (1999). Youth service and moral-civic identity: A case for everyday morality. *Educational Psychology Review*, 11(4), 361-376.
- Yowell, C. M. & Gordon, E. W. (1996). Youth empowerment and human service institutions. *Journal of Negro Education*, 65(1), 19-29.
- Zeldin, S. (2004). Preventing youth violence through the promotion of community engagement and membership. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 32(5), 623-641.
- Zeldin, S. (2004). Youth as agents of adult and community development: Mapping the process and outcomes of youth engaged in organizational governance. *Applied Developmental Science*, 8(2), 75-90.

- Zeldin, S., Camino, L. & Calvert, M. (2003). *Toward an Understanding of Youth in Community Governance: Policy Priorities and Research Directions* (No. 3). Ann Arbor, MI: Society for Research in Child Development.
- Zeldin, S., Camino, L. & Mook, C. (2005). The adoption of innovation in youth organizations: Creating the conditions for youth-adult partnerships. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 121-135.
- Zeldin, S., Larson, R., Camino, L. & O'Connor, C. (2005). Intergenerational relationships and partnerships in community programs: Purpose, practice, and directions for research. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 1-10.
- Zimmerman, M. A., Reischl, T. & Morrel-Samuels, S. (unpublished). *Youth Empowerment Solutions (YES) proposal*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Zimmerman, M. A. (1995). Psychological empowerment: Issues and illustrations. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), 581-599.
- Zimmerman, M. A. (2000). Empowerment theory: Psychological, organizational and community levels of analysis. In J. Rappaport, & E. Seidman (Eds.), *Handbook of Community Psychology* (pp. 43-63). New York, NY: Plenum Press.
- Zimmerman, M. A., Morrel-Samuels, S., Wong, N., Tarver, D., Rabiah, D. & White, S. (2004). Guns, gangs, and gossip: An analysis of student essays on youth violence. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 24(4), 385-411.

Zimmerman, M. A. & Warschausky, S. (1998). Empowerment theory for rehabilitation research: Conceptual and methodological issues. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 43(1), 3-16.



### CHAPTER 3

#### THE POWER OF VIOLENCE: YOUTH-DRIVEN CONCEPTIONS OF POWER IN PEER-TO-PEER VIOLENCE

Youth violence is a major cause of adolescent mortality and morbidity in the United States. Homicide is the second leading cause of death for 10 to 24 year olds (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). The most recent federal statistics reveal that 5,570 young people in this age range were murdered in 2004. Violence is responsible for killing more youth than all diseases combined, resulting in a young person dying almost every hour of the day (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). Most youth violence, however, is experienced through violence related morbidity such as fighting, bullying, assault, rape, weapon carrying, and other violent crime. Studies of non-fatal violence find that for every homicide death approximately 20 to 40 youth receive hospital treatment from violent incidents (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). According to the CDC, over 750, 000 youth ages 10 to 24 years were treated for violence related injuries in 2004.

One explanation for the prevalence of youth violence is that it may be a result of what Lesko (2001, p. 107) refers to as the pressure of *expectant time*, where adolescents attempt to gain a higher social position during a period in their lives when they are expected to take on more adult-like behaviors, yet are restrained by minor status. These two competing notions can create conditions of powerlessness. Violence, as Arendt

(1970) argues, is a “flagrant manifestation of impotence” (p. 35). For youth who feel powerless, violence may be considered a logical means for gaining power. Violence is a reaction to the incongruence between actual power and desire for more control among youth who have limited rights and responsibilities. As suggested by general strain criminologists, youth with low social standing may use violence, however dysfunctional, to fulfill psychosocial needs such as mastering control, building self-esteem and expressing power (Agnew, 1984; Fallis & Opatow, 2003; Greenberg, 1985; Marwell, 1966; May, 1972; Moffitt, 1993). Violence, in this instance, is used as an implement of power to gain status, project self-confidence, or uphold a certain reputation when youth feel susceptible to powerlessness and have few positive outlets to express control.

The impotence that may be experienced by youth is also not equally distributed. Status factors such as—race, class and gender—determine differential access to power. These power inequities likely explain youth violence disparities across demographic groups. The effect of status factors and other socio-structural determinants has been a primary focus of contemporary criminology for the past few decades. Researchers have identified community characteristics that determine patterns of violence. Sampson et al. (2005), for example, found that neighborhood context (e.g. concentrated disadvantage) is an explanatory factor in the Black-White violent crime gap. Furthermore, recent advances in multilevel modeling have also allowed researchers to build upon this work to connect macro- and micro-level factors to explain individual level violence. De Coster, Heimer, and Wittrock(2006), for example, find that youth violence is determined by a combination of individual level status factors, neighborhood and family disadvantage, and exposure to crime context. While this research has broadened our understanding of

how social determinants contribute to violence, it lacks an examination of how young people themselves interpret their own experiences with violence. Instead, many of the studies are shaped and interpreted by researchers without consulting young people. Given the ever-evolving nature of youth culture and young peoples' intimate knowledge about their peers, we may be missing crucial aspects of the youth context if their voices remain excluded.

The purpose of this study is to investigate young peoples' perspectives of and experiences with youth violence. I use their voices to understand their worldviews on power and how they view their own social status. The analysis also examines ways youth may position themselves along a continuum of being either powerless or agents of change. Finally, I explore the potential pathways youth may be motivated towards or away from violence using power as an explanatory construct. To begin, I review theoretical ideas about power and argue that youth have a lower social status due to their limited access to power.

## **Background and Theory**

### Youth Social Status

The lower social status of youth can be partially justified by their stage of development and legal status. This justification may be warranted from a developmental perspective, as a person's ability to grasp abstract and complex cognitions is formed in mid- to late adolescence (Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandri, 2002; Millstein, Petersen, & Nightingale, 1993). Legally, young people are not afforded the same rights as adults. Age requirements, for example, determine when a person can lawfully engage in certain activities such as holding a job, voting, driving, and consuming alcohol. As

such, young people are not able to fully participate in society in the same manner as adults and have less power to control their own lives as a result. Moreover, this age bias may also create a culture that inhibits adults' interest in or consciousness to provide meaningful roles for youth involvement in the decisions that affect their lives, and in developing solutions for social problems that affect us all.

While limited participation in certain activities can be supported by a clear developmental and legal rationale, the lower social status of young people—especially low-income urban youth of color—is exacerbated by the manner within which adolescents are portrayed and the ways their voices are muted. In popular culture, adolescence is often associated with recklessness, moodiness and defiance. The news media, for example, cover youth in stories about violence disproportionately compared to the actual rates of violence (Center for Media and Public Affairs, 1997; Dorfman & Shiraldi, 2001; Dorfman, Woodruff, Chavez, & Wallack, 1997; Dorfman & Woodruff, 1998). Researchers at the Center for Media and Public Affairs (1997) found that, despite declining rates of violent crime in the 1990s, the proportion of violent news stories rose 240 percent. With a focus on television news in California, Dorfman and colleagues (1997; 1998) found approximately two thirds of the stories on violence included youth and over half of the stories on youth were centered on violence in 1993. Furthermore, journalists often privilege the voices of adults in authority (e.g. police, school administrators, public officials, parents, etc.) in stories about youth while disregarding young people themselves as valuable sources of information. Dorfman and Woodruff (1998) found that young people were only quoted in 7 percent of television news overall and 28 percent in coverage about youth violence. Thus, the voices of young people are

silenced in media stories written about them. Whether intentional or not, this silence promotes the notion that young people cannot speak for themselves and their perspectives are not valued.

Similar views of youth are also prevalent in the empirical research literature. Adolescent research is frequently interpreted using a deficit rather than an asset framework. Most researchers, for example, focus on problem behaviors such as binge drinking, truancy and violence (Furstenberg, 2000). Few studies about youth actually consult with young people to assess their perspectives regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Checkoway, Allison, & Montoya, 2005; Cohen, Celestine-Michener, Holmes, Merseth, & Ralph, 2007; Fine et al., 2003; Fogel, 2004; Mandel & Qazilbash, 2005; Morrill, Yalda, Adelman, Musheno, & Bejarano, 2000; Phelan, Yu, & Davidson, 1994; Zimmerman et al., 2004). Instead, adults often rely on their own expertise to determine what research questions are relevant, and what methods and measures are to be used. When youth are queried it is often in the form of an adult formulated survey questionnaire with limited room for elaboration. What remains is an adolescent research discourse that is conventionally shaped from an adult point of view.

In both popular culture and research, the deficit view allows for few constructive spaces and formal structures where young people can make meaningful contributions, which may in turn, render feelings of powerlessness and fatalism. The message of fear and mistrust is often relayed by institutional practices largely controlled by adults. At most schools, for example, teachers and administrators have full control over school policies—i.e. making decisions that affect students—and expect students to accept their point of view uncritically. Moreover, student privacy is diminishing as school

administrators increasingly advocate for student surveillance. The use of metal detectors, for instance, is gaining popularity despite research that demonstrates these measures are more effective at creating disorder rather than increasing safety (Mayer & Leone, 1999). Students suggest these types of constraints can create an atmosphere of distrust where they do not feel valued (Ashley, Samaniego, & Cheun, 1997; Daiute & Fine, 2003; Hogan, 2002). At the same time, youth may experience dissonance between their natural desire to become more independent and the restrictions placed upon them.

Consequently, young people must contend with *expectant time*—the reality that they are expected to become productive members of society, while at the same time allowed few opportunities to do so. For specific youth subpopulations, this access to opportunities may be further limited by intersecting factors of race, gender and socioeconomic position. Violence is one plausible outcome of this tension. Past research suggests that social capital factors that affect access to opportunities can influence individual propensity for youth violence (De Coster et al., 2006; Wright & Fitzpatrick). While this research expands our understanding of how contextual social factors influence youth violence, we lack empirical insight on how youth view their own access to power and how this might influence their behavior. Moreover, few efforts have been made to solicit the unadulterated voices of youth or examine gender in these studies. Investigating gender, however, may be revealing about how *expectant time* and youth status may differentially affect violent behavior among boys and girls.

### Gender and Youth Violence

Most research on power and interpersonal violence is focused in the area of intimate relationships. The power dynamics between males and females is a frequent

explanation for differential patterns in abuse. Less often is the power associated with gender explored in peer-to-peer youth violence research, despite apparent male-female differences in youth violence rates. Young males, for example, account for the vast majority of juvenile perpetrators of violence (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Heimer and De Coster (1999) argue that this overrepresentation of males may be attributed to patriarchal expectations that condone violence differentially for boys and for girls. They connect patriarchal expectations to the social and structural ways young people learn about violence. Their findings show that the processes for how young males and females learn violent definitions differ. Boys acquire their views on violence through aggressive peers and coercive discipline, whereas, girls' views are explained by emotional bonds with family. They conclude that young males engage in more violent behavior than girls because boys are more likely to subscribe to traditional gender definitions that sanction aggressive behavior.

Differential association with gender role definitions may also explain nuanced patterns of aggression and violent behavior. Young males are more likely to commit murder against a wider demographic than young females (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). That is, victims of male juvenile homicide offenders are more likely to be adults and strangers, whereas, female victims tend to also be female, younger and family members. Consistent with Heimer and De Coster (1999), this pattern may also be attributed to patriarchal ideologies that normalize violence as an exercise of power in the public sphere more readily for males than females. This is reflected in data that show that the most juvenile perpetrators are male and the vast majority of juvenile victims known to

law enforcement are young females (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Yet, recent trends suggest that the picture may be more complicated.

Female youth have been neglected as a relevant population when investigating youth violence (Levine & Rosich, 1996), however, the rate of young female violent perpetrators is rising (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). As researchers include female adolescents in their analyses, they find that girls are just as aggressive as boys when assessing certain types of aggression (i.e. relational, indirect & social) (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Crick, Ostrov, & Werner, 2006; Yoon, Barton, & Taiariol, 2004). Girls, for example, are more likely than boys to engage in aggressive interpersonal manipulation such as gossiping and spreading rumors (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Yoon et al., 2004). This research supports the notion that differential associations with gender can shape the ways which young males and females display violence and aggression. The process is also likely tied to social forces that encourage males and females to express their power differentially. Another potential, yet complementary, explanation for these differences may be how much each gender subscribes to either a *power over* or *power with* ideology.

#### Power Over: Power as Domination

Conventional ideas about power equate it with dominance or *power over*. This tradition can be traced back to a classic pluralist conceptualization of power where, represented as an equation, *A* has power over *B* to the extent that *A* can get *B* to do something that *B* would not do otherwise (Dahl, 1957). That is, as Mills ([1956]2000) postulates, those who are powerful are able to actualize their agenda, even when confronted with resistance. Power from this viewpoint is a zero-sum phenomenon; it is a coveted possession and competition is a natural consequence (Guinier & Torres, 2002;



Kreisberg, 1992). Control and power are synonymous in this sense. Those who dominate maintain their power by controlling the agenda and serving as gatekeepers of vital resources such as education and environmental infrastructure. Domination is perpetuated by the ability of those in power to co-opt others in participating in their own powerlessness with or without intention or awareness (Freire, [1970] 2003; Guinier & Torres, 2002; Kreisberg, 1992). In this view, disparities in power are inevitable and essential for the maintenance of institutions (Kreisberg, 1992).

A basic assumption of a power over framework is that power and powerlessness exist on opposing ends of a continuum (Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Peirson, 2001). Power can be obtained through individual mobility; however, the distribution of power is largely exchanged through intergenerational social relations embedded and informed by culture and history (Kreisberg, 1992). Furthermore, power operates through intersections dictated by race, class, gender, and age relations (Kreisberg, 1992; Mullings & Schulz, 2006). In a U.S. context, for instance, an affluent middle-aged white man experiences greater access to resources, power and privilege compared to an undocumented Haitian immigrant girl. Thus, intersections determine where one lies on the status hierarchy and how particular intersections of people experience either power or powerlessness at varying degrees.

Privilege, the benefit of entitlement gained from power, allows those who hold power the luxury to be indifferent towards the perspectives of the powerless. On the other hand, powerlessness can be described as the expectant view that one does not have control over the outcomes or reinforcements that one seeks (Seeman, 1959). Few studies explicitly examine the role of power and powerlessness, and how it affects young

peoples' lives (Prilleltensky et al., 2001; Wallerstein, Sanchez-Merki, & Dow, 2002). Perhaps this oversight is a consequence of adult privilege; in which, adults experience the privilege of being able to set the youth agenda—often in the name of protection, safety, and developmental capacity (Frank, 2006; Meucci & Schwab, 1997). As Parenti (1970) suggests, it is not prevailing in the struggle that exemplifies ultimate power, rather privilege entails being able to determine which ideas reach a level of competition. Gaventa (1980) further suggests, “Together, patterns of power and powerlessness can keep issues from arising, grievances from being voiced, and interests from being recognized” (p., vii). Furthermore, this privilege can function on conscious and unconscious levels on both the part of the powerful and powerless relations (Kreisberg, 1992; Lukes, 2004). From this perspective, adult privilege maintains the acquiescence of youth to be silent.

Freire ([1970] 2003) argues that it is the humanistic task of the powerless to liberate themselves and those who hold power. For young people, this burden poses different challenges than for adult populations who may be marginalized based on other factors such as race, gender or class because young people are in the process of physical and psychological growth, and may not have equivalent levels of knowledge, skills, and cognitive (Frank, 2006; Hart et al., 1997). Moreover, have limited access to resources or forums to voice their opinions in comparison to adults. Given these conditions, the developmental disadvantage of young people is inevitable. Yet, the limited developmental capacity of youth may not be as critical of an issue if one conceptualizes power as *power with* rather than *power over*.

## Power With: An Alternate View of Power

Some researchers argue that all human relations involve inequalities in power to some degree (see Labonte in Bernstein, et al., 1994). Others, however, offer an alternate view—opting to conceptualize power as *power with* instead of *power over* (Kreisberg, 1992). Privilege and domination are the result of gaining power in a *power over* model. Conversely, empowerment, co-agency, and increased capacity are key in a *power with* model. The fundamental difference between the *power over* and *power with* is the zero-sum assumption. A *power over* position assumes that power is a limited resource to be competed for and possessed. Conversely, *power with* is not a zero-sum condition. Instead, individuals or groups maintain the capacity to exercise power that is not at the expense of others and therefore promote co-agency (Guinier & Torres, 2002; Kreisberg, 1992; Wallerstein, 1992). That is, power is manifest in the joint pursuit of developing capacity through partnership and, therefore, the power potential is located among the human interconnections within communities. As Kreisberg (1992, p. 64) explains, “Power can be an expanding, renewable resource available through shared endeavor, dialogue, and cooperation.” By working with rather than against others, one can conceivably gain power through non-violent means.

### **Focus of this Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine essays written by young people to investigate power and violence from their perspectives. When compared with other more structured approaches, the essay is a neutral medium for youth to express voice with limited bias from the researcher. Even in the unstructured interview, the researcher is in a position as the designated authority that guides the interview flow. On the other hand,

essays also allow the young person to make deliberate choices regarding how his or her perspectives are portrayed. The young person must make decisions about style—for example, whether the essay is written in first or second person. Furthermore, youth essays have the added ability to represent both personal stories and the collective narratives of young people. As Rappaport and colleagues suggest, examining personal stories and narratives reveals the meaning and significance of lived experiences (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000; Rappaport & Simkins, 1992; Rappaport, 2000; Rappaport, 1995). Storytelling can uncover how young people interpret their surroundings, and attribute coherence and meaning to life events. Therefore, youth generated essays will be the central data source for this study.

To guide the essay analysis, I utilized theoretical concepts related to power to provide a framework for understanding the youth perspectives of power and violence. Following, I enlisted young people to help reduce any researcher bias in my interpretations and further explore how youth status may contribute to violence. The specific aims of the study were to: 1) investigate youth-driven conceptions of power and violence, 2) understand how youth see how they are positioned by others and how they view themselves along a continuum of being either powerless or agents of change, 3) explore how power differentials by gender may help to construct their experiences of and perspectives on youth violence and, 4) devise a pathway model of power and violence grounded in young peoples' voices.

## **Methods**

### Study Context

Data collection took place in Flint, Michigan through a partnership with the National Campaign to Stop Violence, Flint Public Schools and the former Flint Youth Violence Prevention Center (YVPC). Flint is a predominantly small working class city with historical ties to the auto manufacturing industry. As the site of the United Auto Workers (UAW) famous sit down strike in the 1930s, the city has a strong record of community organizing with over 80 block clubs and numerous community-based organizations (Flint Urban Gardening & Land Use Corporation, 2003).

Despite strong grassroots organizing, Flint continually suffers from economic and population decline and has high poverty rates compared to the rest of Michigan (U.S. Census, 2000). The unemployment rate in Flint, as of May 2006, was 16% compared to 6% for Michigan, and 5% nationally (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). Flint has also been termed one of the nation's most dangerous cities (Morgan Quinto Press, 2006). The rate of violent crime is 859 per 100,000 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2001). The juvenile assault arrest rate in Flint is higher than the rest of the state and African-American youth from the city are more likely to be arrested, even after correcting for population proportions (Michigan State Police, 2005). Flint is 53% African-American; however, the public schools are 80% African-American (U.S. Census, 2000). At the time of data collection, the city had seven public middle schools.

### Data Collection

I used 391 middle school student essays from a competition sponsored by the National Campaign to Stop Violence in 2000. The competition asked students to respond to three questions pertaining to youth violence:

- 1) How has youth violence affected my life?

- 2) What are the causes of youth violence?
- 3) What can I do about youth violence?

Seventh and eighth grade students from all seven Flint middle schools were eligible to participate. Participation in the competition was both voluntary and compulsory depending on whether schools or teachers used the competition as an assignment. Incentives were also used to encourage participation. The school with the most essay submissions received a trophy and the teacher with the most entries in his or her class received a \$100 gift certificate to the Teacher Store. In addition, a citywide dance was held for students who entered the competition.

Following the competition, the original essays were copied and compiled into a single manuscript. Research assistants prepared the essays for analysis. Each essay was retyped verbatim with grammar and spelling errors to maintain the integrity of the original essays. Personal identification information such as names and addresses were removed and each essay was assigned a new participant identification code. The participant identification code consisted of a unique numeric identifier, gender and school.

### Participant Characteristics

Due to the secondary nature of the data, the availability of descriptive variables for this study was limited. I only had access to data on two demographic variables: gender and school. Therefore, other relevant demographics such as age, grade, race and socioeconomic status were not available for analysis. As such, the only descriptive statistics that could be calculated were the proportion of gender and school participation

and the participation rate by school. A summary of the available sample characteristics is displayed in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1. Characteristics of the Study Sample**

	Number of Participants (Percent)	Number of Students per School	Participation Rate (Mean)
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	256 (65.5%)	N/A	N/A
Male	133 (34.0%)	N/A	N/A
Not reported	2 (0.5%)	N/A	N/A
Total	391 (100%)	N/A	N/A
<b>Middle School</b>			
Holmes	162 (41.4%)	522	31.0%
Northwestern	97 (24.8%)	375	25.7%
Southwestern	55 (14.1%)	433	12.7%
Whittier	67 (17.1%)	651	10.3%
Longfellow	10 (2.6%)	534	1.9%
Total	391	2515	(16.3%)

N/A=Data not available

Most of the essays were written by students that were female and attended Holmes middle school. I presume that the uneven distributions of participants across gender and by school are due to the nature of the essay competition—that is, being both voluntary and compulsory depending on school engagement or whether teacher used the competition as an assignment. Despite a lack of available data on key demographics and

the non-randomized nature of data collection, the essays still provided rich information on how young people conceptualized power and violence.

### Essay Characteristics

The middle schools students were asked to response to three questions related to violence, however, their responses constituted a wide range of essay styles depicted in Table 3.2. Most of the students wrote in first person. They gave their opinions on what they thought were the definitions, causes, and solutions for youth violence. Other students who wrote in first person shared personal stories about their own encounters with violence as victims, perpetrators, and witnesses. A smaller portion of students chose to represent their views using creative symbolism by writing poems, rap verses, plays, and short fictional stories. Finally, I found that a handful of students wrote using a combination of essay styles and some cases were unclassifiable due to the nature of the students writing. These unclassifiable cases (n=7) were dropped from the analysis.

**Table 3.2. Essay Style by Gender**

	Opinion	Personal	Creative Symbolism	Combination	Unclassified
Gender*					
Female	142	40	27	9	5
Male	73	30	59	1	2
Total	215	70	86	10	7

\*Two participants did not indicate their gender

As indicated in the table, a gender pattern emerged. That is, male students wrote more essays using creative symbolism compared to female students, despite the higher level of female participation. While in-depth analysis on gender differences in essay style are beyond this scope of this study, this finding suggests that male and female youth



may have different stylistic approaches to expressing their perspectives on violence. One plausible explanation is that many of the essays that used creative symbolism were written in poem or rap verse format. The appeal for young males to adapt this style for their own creative expression about violence may be influenced by hip hop culture which is dominated by an urban male perspective.

### Data Analysis

Atlas.ti software was used to assist with management and coding. Each essay was disaggregated from the single manuscript by the participant ID and entered into the software as a primary document. This data entry approach allowed for ease in data management and systematic analysis by participant and gender.

A combined deductive and inductive multistage approach was used to create coding schemes and conduct the analysis (Bernard, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The process was iterative. To initiate the analysis, I developed codes based upon the research questions derived from theory and previous research. The first method I applied to the data was to assess how many times and where the word *power* and other related terms (e.g. control, powerlessness and domination) occurred among the narratives. The search was conducted as a first step to understand how youth describe power. The second analytic step continued the deductive phase of coding. Preconceived codes, informed by constructs in the literature, were applied by reading each essay line-by-line to separate and label relevant quotes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Quotes consisted of cohesive statement(s) that adequately described the code and ranged in length from one sentence to several paragraphs. This deductive phase of coding

allowed me to focus the analysis and compare participants' responses to theoretical concepts in the literature.

I found, however, that the deductive coding scheme was not adequately capturing the depth and details youth used to write about power and violence. Young people were using different language to describe scenarios of power and violence. Thus, to further refine the analysis and ground my findings using the young peoples' voices, I engaged in multiple passes through the data to identify themes and patterns that emerged from the narratives. In-depth understanding of the themes was gained by compiling and assessing quotes from each code. Following, themes were also sub-coded and networked to other relevant themes when appropriate. By using this multi-phase inductive method, I was able to distinguish theoretical concepts and observe when themes and patterns were saturated. Once saturation occurred, I was able to draw conclusions about how the themes related to each other and devised a conceptual pathway model.

### Validity Checks

To gain confidence in my findings, I conducted two methodological checks: 1) rater validity and 2) member check focus groups. First, to assess the validity of my coding, an outside rater independently coded a random sub-sample (10%) of the essays. The outside rater's codes and quotes were compared to my codes for consistency and comprehension. No new themes emerged from the outside rater's codes and they were consistent with my final coding scheme.

To strengthen my interpretation of the youth narratives, I also conducted *member check* focus groups with a sample of participants who were similar to those in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This ad hoc method was used to minimize the influence my

own adult bias may have had on the analysis. I asked youth who were similar to those in the study for their views about my interpretations of central concepts ascertained from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The focus group protocol was designed to both enhance confidence in my interpretation of the findings and to gain a fuller understanding of what constituted their authentic voice.

*Focus Group Procedure.* The procedure for the two focus groups included recruitment of 8 to 10 youth who were similar to those in the dataset. Middle schools students were recruited from a youth empowerment intervention research project that has an emphasis on youth violence prevention in Flint, Michigan. The project was selected as a convenience site for purposive recruitment because the participating youth matched the main demographic characteristics of the essay participants including:

- similar age range
- predominantly African American
- middle school students from Flint Community Public Schools

To initiate recruitment and build rapport, I volunteered with the intervention project to both acquaint myself with potential youth participants and support the program staff. Movie ticket vouchers and lunch were offered to provide incentive and compensate youth for their time.

The focus group guide was designed using a semi-structured format (see Appendix). This format allowed me to focus on specific questions about the research findings with the added flexibility of posing unanticipated questions that were inspired from participants' responses. By not fully structuring the focus group guide, I was also able to ask follow-up questions for clarification. The protocol was designed using a

*funnel* approach (Morgan, 1988). That is, initial questions probed participants to respond to general, open-ended questions followed by questions that were more specific to my research findings. This approach was used to help build rapport and acclimate participants to the focus group procedure. In addition, the process of leading from broad to specific allowed for data that were both revealing about the youth participants' perspectives and addressed specific content areas.

I did not tape record the focus groups; however, two trained graduate student research assistants observed and took notes. Specifically, both assistants wrote detailed notes as verbatim as possible. This approach was used to ensure I had an approximate record of what the youth said. Following the focus groups, observations about group dynamics and non-verbal behavior were incorporated and the notes were merged into a single manuscript. For analysis, the manuscript was coded and compared to the final coding scheme and conceptual models. The comparison included checks for common and discordant themes. The results of the member check focus groups are presented separately from and immediately following the main study findings.

## **Results and Discussion**

Middle school youth wrote about various ways power and violence affected their lives. Their narratives spoke to how they perceived their own social status and the influence of this status on youth violence. A few described what power meant to them in explicit terms while most detailed how power and violence functioned in their realities. For those who wrote about power explicitly, their concept of power mirrored theoretical concepts in the literature. Youth wrote about power as *power over* or domination, related it to violence and described how power functioned. When youth wrote about *power with*

it was often when they were making recommendations about solutions for youth violence. I found, however, most youth did not give an overt definition of power and how they saw its functions. Instead, many youth explained in implicit terms how status, power, and violence played out in their lives. They wrote about the lack of opportunity that many of them and their peers had to face and described being stigmatized by age, race, and dress. Their narratives were filled with personal encounters, observations, and third hand stories of chronic community violence. On a daily basis, these youth confronted symbols in the environment that were reminders of the violence around such as metal detectors in schools and bullet proof glass on store windows. This experience was then internalized into feelings of fear and hopelessness or externalized through power posturing or resilience.

#### Youth Conceptions of Power and Violence

To understand how youth conceptualized power and violence I initiated the analysis by conducting a frequency text search using key terms. I found that the term power only occurred 17 times out of the 391 essays. The 17 occurrences were also not mutually exclusive between narratives—that is, I observed that some youth used the word power more than once within an essay. Following, I generated a list of synonyms that might be used in place of the word power (e.g. control, strength and domination). The term control was used 34 times, strength was only used twice and domination did not occur within the text at all. After speculating that the text frequency search on the term power and its synonyms may not occur as frequently as the term powerless or its synonyms, I conducted a few more searches on the terms powerlessness, weak and fear/afraid. I found that the term fear/afraid occurred most frequently at 71 times. The

students, however, did not use the term powerlessness and only used the term weak 6 times. While the searches did not yield compelling results in terms of frequency, the text surrounding the term power provided insight on how the youth were conceptualizing and writing about power.

*Power Over.* Young peoples' conceptions of violence in the essays were similar to those found in the literature. The students made deliberate connections between power and violence. Power was viewed as phenomenon where domination operates through the use of violence. One female student, for example, suggested that power and violence were equivalent.

Violence is in a way power, the power to rule people. If people are afraid of you, you have power over them. You can make them do what you want.<sup>3</sup>

Her concept of power reflects the classic pluralist formulation posited by Dahl (1957) where power is relational—that is, *A* has power over *B* when *A* can coerce *B* to do what *A* wants against *B*'s will. In this conception, the ability of the powerful to rule over the powerless is explicit. Violence here is described as being synonymous with power and is an implement to elicit fear and coerce. From a similar point of view, another female student articulates:

We all learn in this society that power means power over and if we are targeted for violence in one area, the easiest way to deal with it is to find a place where we have power over someone else and pass the pain on to them. If your Dad yelled at and hit you, then you are permitted to take it out on a younger person.

---

<sup>3</sup> The majority of the students' quotes were left unedited to maintain the integrity of their voices. Minor grammatical errors were corrected only in cases where it improved readability.

This student views violence as a way to hold power over another. Furthermore, she describes this type of domination as being learned and transferable. Power is a social value that is taught, and from her perspective, one may deal with being powered over by using violence against another who is weaker. Her ideological sentiments support Synder and Sickmund's (2006) research that suggests when female youth perpetrate violence their victims tend to be younger. The use of violence here can be interpreted as an active coping response to deal with being powerless.

In both students' conceptions, violence is a device of power. Violence holds power and can be exercised over others. Akin to this idea, other students described violence as a social phenomenon that had power over societies. They wrote about violence possessing the ability to affect youth, their communities and the world. One student suggests, "Youth violence is so powerful it can have a very big impact on the world and young people." Violence, from this perspective, is seen as a social force that maintains power over peoples' lives.

The word search also revealed that students described feelings of powerlessness or being powered over. A male student, for example, wrote:

I don't want any more shootings to occur, but I just don't have the power to stop it. It is like anytime someone picks up a gun they could take anyone's life if they want to.

By ascribing to the conception of power as power over, he allows others to hold power over him through fear. For him, his exposure to violent shootings has led to a fear that violence can happen at anytime. He claims he can do nothing to stop the shootings; the violence is a force he feels powerless against.

*Power With.* Not all youth conceptualized power as power over. In concluding his essay, one student implied a conception of *power with* by his use of the words, *our* and *we*. By using the words, *our* and *we*, he places responsibility on the collective. He writes, “I believe this is the only way for our youth to believe that we care to try to do everything in our power to help stop violence.” In his view, people can derive power by coming together. The statement also implies that the collective action of coming together for a cause can show youth that people care about preventing violence.

In summary, while the initial text search using the term power did not yield a high frequency, the quotes surrounding the term provided insight on how youth conceptually linked power and violence. The students’ ideas about power and violence were comparable to the way power is framed in the literature. Youth defined power as being both power over and power with. Some of the students made explicit connections between power and violence where violence was seen as a vehicle for exercising power and domination. Violence was also viewed as a social value that was learned and transferred. For those who perceived themselves as being powered over, violent behavior was a justified coping response to deal with feelings of powerlessness. In contrast, other youth suggested that people could gain power by coming together for a common goal. Power in this conception is viewed as the issue to prevent rather than as a method of domination. It is the power with garnered from coming together that counters the threat of violence.

These conceptions of power revealed how some youth may rationalize violent behavior in a framework of power over and begin to hint at how others perceive the function of power within violence prevention. While the text search findings begin to



help us understand the students' operational framework on power and violence, the vast majority did not write about power in such an overt manner. Most youth did not use the theoretical language found in the power literature. This finding supports that notion that youth violence theory and research is largely constructed from an adult point of view. I suspected that the details for the students' ideas and experiences about power and violence were buried within the content of their narratives rather than in their use of power jargon. It was critical at that point, that I shift my analytical approach from deductive to inductive. Thus, the next phases of analysis included an in-depth review of each essay to assess common and atypical themes.

#### A Power Framework for Understanding Youth Violence

The students' ideas about power and the contexts from which they drew these experiences were detailed in their narratives. Grounded in their voices, several themes related to how youth viewed power emerged. To be considered a theme, the inclusion criteria I used were based on theoretical relevance and frequency. Specifically, I sought to identify themes that revealed how youth were positioned by others, how they viewed their own power and what role gender may have played in shaping these views. The criterion I used for a theme to be included in my analysis was that it had to appear at least fifteen times. Furthermore, I found that themes clustered into four overarching categories: environmental stressors, internalizing factors, power posturing and resilience factors.

#### Environmental Stressors

A number of factors in the environment shaped how youth viewed their own status and the power of their communities. Feelings of powerlessness were evident in the

manner youth described the dearth of positive opportunities in their communities, the types of stigmatizing practices they were subjected to, and the degree of community violence they endured. Some suggested that violence was justified given their circumstances. Many youth wrote about limited resources and the violent conditions they were exposed to on a chronic, daily basis. Other youth resisted the notion that violence was necessary; despite the level of community violence they were subjected to, and suggested collaborative strategies to promote *power with* to empower themselves and their communities.

*Lack of Opportunity.* The students' narratives suggest that violence can occur when young people do not have options or have few opportunities to engage in constructive activities. One student stated simply, "People choose to do violence because they have nothing else to do besides killing and hurting others." Students connected youth violence with young people having too much idle time. I found that many youth suggested that providing them with opportunities to participate in sports, after-school or extracurricular activities and teen clubs was a way to prevent violence from occurring.

People do violence because they have too much time on their hands. If you're at school or at an after school activity or just finding anything constructive to do, then you won't have so much time to hurt someone. Those who commit violence are those who have no life ahead of them or don't have anything to do.

As suggested by this female student, participating in either violent or constructive activities has bearing on one's prospects. Those who engage in violence have nothing to look forward to; whereas, those who participate in constructive activities are more focused on their futures.

While some students suggested that youth had choices to either participate in violent or constructive activities, others suggested it was community violence in the environment that restricted opportunities to engage in positive educational, occupational and extracurricular activities.

Well in some communities kids don't get a chance to get a job. They didn't get a chance to fulfill their dreams. Do you want to know why? It is because they were standing on the other side of a barrel.

Students saw the lack of opportunity in their communities as a cause for violence that had implications for what kind of lives people could make for themselves. They wrote about a direct connection between the limited availability of jobs and using violent crime as a method of survival. Violent crimes were what some people did to provide for themselves and their families. A female student describes, "If they had jobs they wouldn't have to rob stores and people's homes." Although some youth excused this violence as necessary tactic for survival, most suggested that youth violence would be unwarranted if they were provided with positive activities to keep busy and focused on their futures.

These findings are consistent with those found by Ginsburg et al (2002). In their qualitative study, they found that youth from blighted communities dealt with multiple challenges, including violence. When asked to identify solutions, youth prioritized educational and occupational opportunities over strategies that focus specifically on reducing risk factors. The same emphasis on providing opportunities was voiced by youth in this study. While students identified the lack of opportunities in their communities, they also suggested that violence could be alleviated if more positive educational, career and extracurricular options were accessible.

As Prilleltensky et al. (2001) suggest, having power and control means that a young person has the opportunity to experience positive circumstances through reciprocal person-environment fit. That is, a youth's power is derived by his or her ability to master his or her environment, yet this is not easily achieved when environmental conditions do not support development of individual and community capacities. Young people in this study suggest that they deal with restricted opportunities to develop mastery, competence and control. This limited access to opportunities places these youth at a disadvantage and may be attributed to the stigma they experience.

*Stigma.* Link and Phelan (2001) suggest that stigma consists of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination. They further propose that stigmatization occurs in a context where *power over* is exercised. Therefore, those who are stigmatized can experience status loss and powerlessness. I found that, for youth in this study, stigmatizing practices were described in several forms: stereotypes, hate crimes and discriminatory practices. Stereotypes about Black youth, in particular, were viewed as a source of status loss and shame. They wrote about the process of being negatively labeled and having others look down upon them due to age and race. A female student describes how negative stereotypes contribute to status loss and internalized shame:

When youth express their anger by violence, it makes others look down on us. Youth violence makes others think bad of us. African American teens have the highest violence rate. As an African American young lady, I feel ashamed sometimes because I know deep down in my heart that we can do better. That is why sometimes other races look down on us as if they're better than us, as if we are less than them.

Youth also wrote about how they were ostracized for wearing a certain style of clothing. They described being more susceptible to violence because of the negative

connotation associated with aesthetic markers such as skin color, hairstyle and clothing.

A female student, for example, wrote a poem that expresses these ideas.

Why do I have to be considered violent?  
Is it because my clothes may be baggy?  
Or because I'm never silent?  
Or is it because I wear a certain color?  
As my skin?  
No matter what race  
We all leave the same color trace  
Of blood when we bleed  
So, why am I categorized and stereotyped?  
Because my music is not the type you like?  
Why do you clutch your purse and walk really fast?  
When you see a group of my friends and me walking past?  
Our pants hang low  
But not our test scores  
And we are not stricken by that thing called violence  
Don't judge a book by its cover  
Is what you tell us when we get older  
But you always judge my book by its cover  
Because my clothes hang the way I sometimes choose  
And that's loose  
You scrunch your noses and buck your eyes  
When you see a group of us walking by  
You get really frightened and so do we

The marginalization this young person expresses from being stereotyped is evident in the last two lines of the poem. She feels that she is a member of a group that is separate from those that possess misconceptions about her and fear is perpetuated by a lack of understanding on both sides. Similarly, Fine et al. (2003) found that almost 40 percent of youth they interviewed reported that adults held prejudices about the way young people dress. Youth expressed that adults misconstrue young peoples' intentions when youth choose to dress, for example, in urban streetwear (e.g. sagging pants). In fact, some school districts have proposed that sagging pants should be added as a school dress code violation (2007). Urban streetwear, however, is often associated with hip hop culture and

can be a means of creative expression; yet, the negative labeling and restrictive school policies associated with this type of dress can further ostracize youth.

Youth also wrote about how they were not only stigmatized as a group, but also by being from Flint. They wrote about the divergent reputation that existed between the city and the suburbs. Those who were from the city felt stigmatized by the reputation of their surroundings. A student describes how Flint's reputation affects her,

Growing up in Flint, a city where youth violence is strong, has affected my life. When I was little, my city was voted the worst place to live out of all the cities in the U.S. Things haven't changed much in my opinion. There is as much senseless killing going on now as it was back then.

In response to feeling stigmatized, students called for social justice by alluding to the vision of Martin Luther King, Jr. and making statements such as, "We are all equal." Students also wrote about how stigma manifests itself in the form of hate crimes. They described how hate crimes of race, gender and sexual orientation were a source of youth violence.

Youth also experienced discrimination by feeling unfairly targeted by law enforcement. At a minimum, they wrote about witnessing racial profiling while others described first-hand encounters with police brutality.

Sometimes police officers start stuff too, especially when they are racist. They pull people over because they are a different color and sometimes they get mad and wanna fight. [From] time to time you can tell that they're racist by the way they act and talk about some people.

Descriptions like this reveal how youth can mistrust an institution they should be able to rely on for safety. Mistrust of law enforcement by inner-city youth is widely documented (Anderson, 1999; Fine et al., 2003; Rich & Grey, 2005). As Anderson (1999) explains, many inner-city Black youth express that they cannot depend on the

police for protection. For these young people, the police may be symbolic of a dominant society that discriminates against and frequently violates the rights of inner city youth. In response, youth are compelled to be responsible for their own safety and may use violence in self-defense or to project a certain reputation, or retaliate.

Regardless of whether youth face stigma in the form of stereotypes, hate crimes or discriminatory practices, they experience a lower social status due to negative attributes associated with being young, inner city, and for most of the sample, Black youth. As Link and Phelan (2001) suggest, a lower social position itself, can also be a means for which people discriminate. Youth in this study expressed that others looked down upon them, labeled them criminals, and were more susceptible to violence based on aesthetic markers. In consequence, youth may internalize discrimination, which can lead to feelings of disempowerment. In addition, lowered external expectations about young people's positive contributions and potential may also be hindered.

*Physical Surroundings.* Youth described several ways that conditions in the physical environment contributed to their views of power and violence. An atypical, yet compelling quote, suggested a similar notion as the *broken windows* or social disorder theory—that is, markers in the environment such as graffiti, abandoned homes, and literally broken windows are indicators of community violence (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004).

Those people who tear down houses could stop tearing down the good houses and start tearing down the crack houses and the boarded up houses. If they did this, some parts of the earth would actually look nice instead of like crap. People could help clean up the neighborhood and help clean up some abandoned houses to make them nice enough to have people live in them. This could help violence some.

While most students did not describe housing and infrastructure conditions as a relevant aspect of power and youth violence, they did suggest other markers in the physical environment played a role. Metal detectors, for example, were a common theme and I found that students had mixed feelings towards their use in schools. For some, metal detectors were a necessary security measure. One student in particular saw the security measures as such a critical component to her safety that she questioned, “What is supposed to protect me once I leave school?” For others, metal detectors were viewed as a necessary, but major impediment towards creating a safe learning environment. They described how the detectors were not always used, were not implemented at all school entrances, and students still figured out ways to smuggle weapons into school. In addition, the process of going through the detector was also taxing on students’ time. Students described being late for class because they had to get through security. For some youth, the process of being searched and mandated to walk through a metal detector was a violation of privacy and rendered feelings of powerlessness. Security bars on windows and doors and bulletproof glass also conjured up similar feelings.

Going through metal detectors makes me feel like a convict or a person being locked up for nothing. Another way is at some stores. When they have those glass windows. That makes me feel like I’m blocked from something and the people behind the glass. How would you feel giving your money to someone behind a glass window?

The use of security implements can have a psychological affect on youth. Lesko (2001)( p.107) suggests that many young people are subjected to what she terms *panoptical time*. The term is a metaphor borrowed from the structure of panopticon prisons—where guard stations are placed in a central location to constantly monitor inmates. She argues that much like the inmates in a panoptical prison, adolescents



internalize the continual condition of being watched, evaluated and measured. At the heart of this critique is the notion that youth internalize and adapt their behavior according to these restrictions.

Going to school is like going to jail, except I don't live in a cell.  
When you walk through the door you have to go through the metal detector  
Sometimes security acts like inspectors  
They look through your bags, purses and pockets, too.  
Sometimes I wonder what did I do?

This level of surveillance can lead to feelings of heightened suspicion (Fine et al., 2003). The act of constantly being monitored by security measures conveys a message that those who are being watched are untrustworthy. Furthermore, security implements that function as barriers such as bulletproof glass and metal bars exacerbate the issue. They physically segregate all those who are deemed untrustworthy out—signaling an expectation for violence. Regardless of which young people committed violent acts, they were all subjected to the inconveniences and negative labels they came along with an environment that required security measures. Youth who encountered these measures routinely had multiple viewpoints. While some youth felt safer, many felt they had to unjustly endure the consequences of their violent peers' behaviors. The use of metal detectors meant they had to wait in long lines to enter school and had no privacy because their personals were searched. In addition, youth also described how security measures made them feel as if they were being already treated as criminals. This treatment may lead youth to either internalize feelings of powerlessness, inadequacy and shame, or encourage them to fulfill expected violent and criminal behavior—all of which hinder positive development and lower expectations about young peoples' potential.

*Chronic Exposure to Violence.* Many youth wrote about how they witnessed violence in their communities on a chronic basis. They described being exposed to violence “everywhere”: the streets, schools, stores, homes, restaurants, churches, and in the media.

It’s pretty bad when you see violence every where that you go. You see it at school, at the mall, on the streets in your neighborhood, and when you are driving a car. All these places and a lot more have violence there. It affects my life because it bothers me when I see kids fighting. .  
.sometimes the youth violence gets so bad that I stay inside because I don’t want to hear or see it.

Here this student describes how violence intrudes on her ability to go places. She is powerless against the pervasive street violence she encounters. I also found that some youth wrote about community violence from a point of acceptance. For these youth, violence was endemic and continuous exposure over time had made it normal. They had accepted that violence was a part of their lives and held an expectation that it could occur anywhere, at anytime, to anyone—leading to a need to constantly remain alert. A male student explains,

Violence can be anywhere; even in a neighborhood you thought was the best. Violence is something that happens every day. Youth violence affects my life by not knowing where it is safe. Everywhere there is violence. You can’t hide from it. It’s like you’re playing a game of hide-n-seek. Everywhere you go, there it is, following you. Violence is everywhere. No matter where you’re at, it’s there.

Students in this study described experiences with community violence that are similar to those of other inner city youth (Buka, Stichick, Birdthistle, & Earls, 2001). Among a sample of low-income urban Black youth, Fitzpatrick (1997) found that nearly 80% had been victims of violence and 87% had witnessed some form of violence. As indicated by youth in this study, witnessing various forms of community violence was a

common occurrence. Some researchers argue that this level of exposure can lead to desensitization. Research findings, however, reveal mixed results. Researchers suggest youth can undergo desensitization and normalizing process when exposed to violence on a chronic basis (Farrell & Bruce, 1997; McCart et al, 2007). Farrell and Bruce (1997), for example, replicated earlier studies and found that exposure to violence was related to subsequent violence behavior, yet unrelated to emotional distress in a community sample. In contrast, McCart et al. (2007) used a national probability sample and did not find significant effects for desensitization, but found support for delinquent behaviors and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. While previous research on desensitization is unclear, several youth in this study described how community violence could lead to both violent behavior and emotional distress. Youth in this study suggested that the level of violence they witnessed meant they had to adapt, remain alert and use violence for protection if necessary. The heightened and pervasive level of violence constrained their abilities to make positive developmental choices. Several other youth also described how violence in their neighborhoods made them anxious and fearful. For these youth, their environments were disempowering by putting them at risk for being both perpetrators as well as victims of future violence.

### Internalizing Factors

I found that some students internalized their experiences with community violence through fear and hopelessness. Youth described a sense of powerlessness that accompanied these internalizing factors. These factors were manifest in both a behavioral and cognitive manner. Fear stilted the youth's motivation to carry out normal daily activities. Fear also drove youth to ruminate over when and where violence could

occur. In addition, feelings of hopelessness also impeded students' belief in the possibility of youth violence prevention. Youth who internalized this condition were not able to envision solutions nor were empowered enough to see themselves as playing a role in youth violence prevention.

*Fear.* Many students wrote about the emotional distress they experienced from witnessing violence in their communities. I found that this distress was often described in a form of fear and worry that impeded on normal daily activities.

Sometimes I am afraid to go home and be alone for the hour or so that I am home alone. The reason is because there are a lot of gangs and break-ins in my neighborhood. Nobody else in my family likes to be home alone after midnight because of the neighborhood. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night listening to guns being shot, windows being broken, people vomiting so loud you can hear them or even people yelling at the top of their lungs for someone to give them drugs.

Another student explained that fear was a natural reaction to the violence she was exposed to on a daily basis. Many youth wrote about how they were afraid to go to places that should have been safe public and private spaces such as school, stores, parks, malls and their own homes. A student questions, "Where do you go to feel safe when someone drove by and shot up your house?" This fear can lead youth to ruminate over what places are safe from violence. Another student describes how she is constantly worried about her safety and describes how youth violence has impeded upon her ability to go places.

I, myself, don't really have a problem. My mom gets mad at me because I don't like to go anywhere. I don't like to go to the mall or movies or places like that because I'm scared what could happen to me while I'm there. I really think it's messed up when someone like me is scared to walk down the street. Scared to play in their own yard. Scared to walk to the park or even ride their bike. . . I don't know why violence has gotten so out of control that you can't stand on your porch or go to school without

wondering is today the day I'm going to die or will I get to see another day.

Although this student's mother wanted her to go places, many students wrote about how their parents placed restrictions on places and times youth could travel to because they worried about safety.

Worry about the violence at and traveling to school also intruded upon education. Several students described staying at home because they were afraid of what could happen to them at school. The need to stay alert was a daily act of survival for these youth. Many wrote about having to "watch their backs" as they walked in their neighborhoods. One male student professed, ". . .for everywhere I go, I keep one eye open for danger." Another female student further articulates,

Youth or any kind of violence makes me feel like I have to watch my back constantly, which should not be needed. I mean, why should I have to look over my shoulder just because someone has anger problems and doesn't know how to properly release it in a positive way?

At a point when most adolescents are taking on more autonomous roles, for youth who witness community violence, fear can overwhelm their willingness to carry out normal daily tasks such as going to school. Recent national data suggest the proportion of students who stay home from school due to fear of violence is rising (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). As suggested by youth in this study, this fear driven avoidance can hinder school attendance and participation in activities that may contribute to positive development—placing them at a competitive disadvantage compared to students who are not subjected to violent circumstances. Furthermore, fear and violence intrudes upon these young peoples' lives. They wrote about not being able to sleep at night from hearing gun shots or not being able to visit friends because walking

put them at risk. In a sense, these youth were powerless against an environment that has repeatedly proved to be unsafe. The fear, rumination and worry about violence obstruct potential opportunities for youth to exercise power and control in a positive manner.

*Hopelessness.* Exposure to violence was also internalized by youth in the form of hopelessness. A typical statement made by students who wrote about hopelessness was, “Violence is everywhere and there is not much we can do about it.” I found that these youth described the state of violence with a sense of fatalism. Violence was inevitable and nothing could be done to prevent or reduce it. One male student articulates his frustration.

Teen and youth violence cannot be stopped. Every time someone comes close to making their point someone gets shot. . .when I think about all the lives that have been taken by guns, I want to stop it. The only problem is I don't know how. It is a harsh reality I can't stop thinking about.

Most youth who were hopeless, however, could not see their own role in contributing to violence prevention and some did not think violence was possible for anyone to prevent. Another male student suggests,

Today, there is not much we can do about violence. No matter what happens, violence will never stop and people will still get killed everyday. If we could stop violence, it would be a miracle, but it's not going to happen. There will always be violence no matter what. . . Violence is a thing that no one can stop and it will always be around.

The students' fatalistic views of violence were not far from what some experts themselves have argued in the past. Williams et al. (2007) suggest that several leading experts in the 1980s claimed that nothing could be done to prevent expanding rates of violence at the time. While overall youth violence rates have decreased since, researchers suggest that violence tends to cluster in neighborhoods with high levels of social disorder (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Thus, neighborhoods challenged

by disorder may have yet to experience enough of a marked decline in youth violence rates to improve young peoples' sense of hope. Persistent exposure to violence at a young age may make envisioning hope for the future an unimaginable task.

Furthermore, hopelessness can contribute to a cycle of violence. Exposure to violence has been associated with hopelessness, which in turn, increases youth risk for violent and maladaptive behavior (Bolland, 2003; DuRant, Getts, Emans, & Woods, 1994; DuRant, Getts, Cadenhead, Emans, & Woods, 1995). A young person who has accepted that violence is inevitable is more amenable to conform to this norm. Chronic violence can signal to a young person that this is a way of life and there are no plausible alternatives. Violence then becomes an adapted way of behaving, interacting with the environment, and externalizing one's social position.

### Power Posturing

Among the students' narratives, I found that several themes were tied to either gaining power for self or to exert control over their surroundings. These themes were coolness, reputation and peer pressure, materialism, gangs, and retaliation/self-defense. The phenomenon that ties these themes together is *youth power posturing*. Youth power posturing can be understood as the attitude and actions a young person may take on to respond to marginalized social status. The attitude was described by the youth as aloof, detached, and cool.

*Coolness*. To be cool was to outwardly demonstrate control, despite constant threats, by using violence and appearing unaffected. Coolness lent a sense of power over one's self—that is, inner control over undesirable emotions. Several youth suggest that this attitude often masks underlying fear.

Kids my age do violence because they think it is cool. Kids these days think their friends are going to be there for them. They are wrong because their friends don't really care about them. Kids also think they are so bad too, but most of them are scared.

For these youth, fear was externalized through violence. Violence served as a dysfunctional coping mechanism to deal with the disempowering limitations they faced.

I also found that violence was intricately linked with coolness and higher social status. For one male student, the lack of violence and therefore coolness was noticeably absent in his neighborhood. While the following quote is atypical in the sense that most youth wrote about chronic exposure rather than lack of violence, his sentiment about the relationship between coolness and violence is clearly expressed and was echoed in many other student's essays.

I have never confronted any violence at school or at home. My neighborhood never has violence. My street is so boring. I don't like to talk or write about it. There is never anything bad happening because there are too many goody two shoes people on my street, which makes me feel like we live in the suburbs. There is no one to cause trouble. If there were, maybe it would liven up the street some more.

Here he denounces the suburban-like qualities of his neighborhood. To him, his neighborhood is not cool; it is undesirable to the extent that he has no expressed interest in sharing the "boring" stories about where he lives. Implicit in his statements is that there is an aspect to being cool that is about reputation and others' perceptions.

*Reputation & Peer Pressure.* Youth described gaining a certain reputation for being cool or tough as another component to power posturing. A young person could not achieve a higher status among their peers if no one was present to witness or hear about the violent and aggressive acts. Peers played a role in endorsing and relaying these reputations to others. As Anderson (1999) suggests, this behavior can be understood as



campaign for respect. A student female articulates, “Young people brag to their friends about how they’ve been violent before and they’ll do it again.” In turn, youth who receive this message are pressured to appraise the sender with accolades to maintain their own sense of coolness. The pressure that follows motivates other youth to also pursue a violent campaign for respect. Another female student suggests

Peer pressure is another form of youth violence. Kids want to fit in with other kids they think are so tight, in other words, hardcore and popular kids. They do things they know are wrong so they won’t get teased by their friends.

Youth observed their peers engaging in this behavior and suggest that violence often begins for what appears to be “silly” reasons. A young person may violently attack another because they looked at them funny or somebody said something about the other person’s boyfriend or girlfriend. On a surface level, these reasons may not appear to justify the level of violence that occurs; the perpetrator’s underlying motivations may be to find any easy opportunity to project what they perceive as the opposite of fear—i.e. dominance or power over others. This dominance is sought after by using violence to gain a desired reputation. The reputation is one of false confidence and reckless violence.

A male student articulates,

From this life I have been scared, streets so cold, so hard. All this killing and drug dealing while others lay low. Why do they kill? Wait, I think I know. Great valleys of death and shadows creep though large and raging streets, people kill to see bodies lay at their feet. To stand out or be known. To feel the success of popularity for others to fear.

For these youth, their tempers were described as volatile; they were known to perpetrate violence or aggression at any moment, for any reason, whether it appeared rational or not. Unconscious motivations, however, may be deeper. Youth suggested that their peers are violent because their families and society have neglected them. They seek attention; they

do not have stable homes; they have no options; and they do not have enough personal and external resources to empower themselves through non-violent means. Rash violence becomes a call for help. It occurs because it, to some degree, allows the young person gain a sense of power and control—at least in the immediate moment. This type of impulsive decision-making may make sense for youth who are in a developmental stage where the present has more bearing on choices rather than future consequences. For many young people, the immediacy of their problems drives them to earn a reputation that will seemingly protect vulnerabilities and peer pressure is used to deflect fears onto others.

*Materialism.* Another way youth postured for power was through displaying material possessions. Violent coercion was often used to gain these possessions. The most coveted items were described as street culture symbols that signaled status such as name brand clothing, shoes, and jewelry. The message these symbols convey are that one can either afford to buy these material items or they can afford to risk the repercussions that come from robbing for them. A male student, for example, observes “There are all these kids getting held at gun point or getting shot or killed over a pair of Jordan’s and clothes like Ecko, Platinum Fubu, jean outfits, and stuff.” For some youth, risking the consequences of robbery is worth the trade-off for the status that can be gained. Another female student shares the amount of effort she endured and her personal perpetration of violence for a popular status symbol.

We went to the mall because I wanted the new grey Jordan’s and everyone knows if you want the new Jordan’s you have to go and get them early because if you don’t, then you won’t be able to get them. When I got up there, people were acting so crazy. People were fighting, breaking glass, and stealing the Jordan’s. Some people got caught, but other people got away. I was smashed by all the people in line, but I didn’t care because I

wanted them so badly. I wanted them so bad that I started to hit and push people too just to get to the front of the line.

When I finally got to the front of the line, there was a big blue sign that said, “sold out.” . . . Then I saw a girl about my age, 12 or so, and asked her if I could buy them from her. She said I’m sorry, but I’m going to keep my shoes. Then I said, what do you mean by that? I mean no, don’t you understand? So I hit her in the face and said you should have let me have the shoes. I knew it was wrong when I did it.

Many of the material symbols youth in this study described are informed by drug, gang, and rap culture—which unto themselves are adaptive responses to constrained opportunities (Dyson, 1996; Mahiri & Conner, 2003). Youth may easily adopt these symbols because of shared marginalized status with these sub-cultures; they are readily accessed through media, and modeled in their neighborhoods. Youth then make deliberate choices about how they non-verbally communicate their status through material possessions and the means they have for getting them.

*Gangs.* As previously alluded, students suggested that gangs were pervasive in their neighborhoods. While many youth see this as major source of violence, they also observed that gangs fulfilled psychological and physical protection needs for some youth. Gangs were described as an alternate for family where one could get attention and other psychological needs met. A female student explains,

Gangs have a lot to do with youth violence. Some kids don’t get the kind of love that they need from their parents so they get involved in a gang because those people make them feel like they are loved, respected, and worth something.

For some youth, gangs provided a space to feel powerful and dominant. Gang members were a source of dysfunctional social support. They encouraged each other to dominate others while also providing physical protection for youth. New members were solicited to increase their capacity to protect themselves and attack others. While joining a gang

may have offered some level of protection, many youth in this study observed that it increased the likelihood violent retaliation. This is because many gangs are often involved in a cycle of retaliatory gang violence. Youth suggested retaliation occurred amongst gangs and among individuals who were bullied.

*Retaliation/Self-defense.* The most prevalent power posturing theme students described was violent retaliation in response to being bullied. Several youth described bullying as a common source of youth violence. They wrote about how being bullied made young people feel rejected and lowered their status amongst peers.

A cause of youth violence is teasing. The reason I think teasing is a cause of youth violence is because teasing can make kids feel bad and unwanted. Then they may want to get back at you for teasing them.

Youth retaliated against bullies to exert power and gain control over immediate circumstances. Bullying, however, was not the only the reason given for violent retaliation. Youth wrote about how an unresolved fight could spur further violence. In these cases, the violence that followed usually increased in severity and involved more people.

Some causes of youth violence in my community are when fights happen on the street. The person who loses the fight often wants to come back for a rematch because they feel humiliated. So they go and get their friends and family to help get revenge. Then they just keep going back and forth starting stuff until someone is killed.

I found that when youth wrote about victimization by bullies or in fights they also often described an accompanying negative affect such as humiliation, shame, and fear. These negative emotions can elicit a sense of powerlessness for youth. In response to feelings of powerlessness, and because bullying often happens in front of others, youth may use violence to counteract the appearance of diminished control.

Students' descriptions of bullying and retaliation suggest a cyclical pattern similar to what was observed with internalizing factors. The cycle can be a *catch-22*. For youth who are surrounded by community violence, appearing weak puts them at risk for violence (Anderson, 1999; Freudenberg et al., 1999; Rich & Grey, 2005). For their own safety, youth may be compelled to bully or pick fights with others to project a reputation of being powerful rather than weak. Yet, the use of violence often begets more violence. Studies suggest that violent perpetrators tend to also be victims (Rich & Grey, 2005). As the young people in this study suggest, in attempt to exert power over each other, violent retaliation may go back and forth until serious injury or death occur.

While many youth demonstrated an understanding of their peers' logic for violent retaliation, they did not necessarily condone these actions. In contrast, I found most youth described violence as acceptable when used in self-defense. Yet, similar to retaliation, the students described self-defense as a method for regaining control of immediate victimizing circumstances.

If someone is talking about you that doesn't give you the right to start killing people because someone will always have something to say that you don't want to hear. Now I feel that if someone hit you, I think you have the right to hit him or her back because they don't have the right to hit . . . Now I know you shouldn't use violence against violence but no one is going to let somebody hit him or her.

Despite self-defense being an acceptable form of violence, the students still recognized that it put them at risk for more violence. Risks for future violent victimization may also occur because a violent perpetrator may view the self-defense as a threat to his or her power.

### Resilience Factors

As suggested, youth wrote about the limitations of their violent environments. Many described internalizing and power posturing in the face of this violence; yet, some also wrote about resisting these conditions. Themes that supported resisting violence were spirituality and youth voice.

*Spirituality.* Several students made reference to God and saw religion and spirituality as a solution for violence. For some, spirituality was a personal solution. They wrote about their gratitude to God for protection and blessings.

I'm glad God has got my back till this day he never gives up on me. My life could have been taken, but my God has watched me and he works in mysterious ways.

For other youth, prayer and spiritual belief was a solution to violence for all youth.

I would tell them if they still got a problem to pray to God and ask for forgiveness and ask him to let the person stop messing with you in the name of Jesus and God will answer their prayers. After that the person will stop messing with you and you will have a great day because the Lord can do anything if you pray and worship him. In the bible it says when the praises go up the blessings come down. That is how I will stop youth violence because as long as you pray you won't have to worry anymore.

Youth who wrote about spirituality saw it as a way to transcend the limitations of their environments. They described enlisting a higher power to help them cope with their surroundings. In addition, many youth viewed praying for others, love, and peace as youth violence prevention.

*Voice.* While youth described power posturing in a negative manner, they also suggested that youth could be empowered if they used their voices for change. Those youth who wrote about voice claimed that adults were not listening. They wrote about being marginalized and silenced. I found in their writings a recognition that the solution to youth violence could be found among youth themselves.

No I won't fight it, I'm not the type to do violence.  
And no I won't keep quiet  
I'm a talk about it  
Maybe one day somebody will buy it.

Why must every time I unfold a newspaper  
It seems this society is never praising  
But degrading  
A teen  
It seems to me  
That this society  
Feeds off negativity  
Of vicious lies, murders, scandals, and that thing called violence  
It is so hypocritical  
How can a teen at one moment be too young to understand?  
But when a crime has been committed be tried as a man?  
Adults always talk at us  
And not to us

They try and take away the little rights we're entitled to  
But if you take too much away from a person they give up  
Giving up as in suicide, drugs, and that thing called violence  
Until adults listen, there will be no cure for that thing called violence

In addition to voicing their perspectives, youth also suggested that adults needed to be there to listen and work with young people to prevent violence. Implicit in this call for action is the notion of *power with*. Students in this study suggested that violence could be overcome if youth and adults work together in partnership.

My conclusion is that if you listen to what we have to say you can understand what is going on with this generation of kids because in the new generation we have more responsibility and tasks to complete. We don't need any destruction to stop us from our goals so that is why we need help from teachers, parents, inspiring adults and politicians.

These youth recognized the power in collaborating with their peers and other adults as one that lies within relationship building rather than dominance.

#### Member Check Focus Group Results

I conducted the two member check focus groups with middle school aged youth to gain confidence in my interpretations and try to understand how young people formed their opinions. From these focus groups, I found that youth confirmed the stressful environmental conditions the students in this study wrote about. The focus group participants talked about witnessing and their own participation in violence, drugs, and gang activity in their neighborhoods. They spoke of how they felt stigmatized by adults who would not listen to their needs and fears, and how the police in their neighborhoods were complacent about their jobs. These youth did not feel protected by many of the adults in their community who were supposed to ensure their safety. They told me about how they both witnessed other youth and they themselves engaged in violence to be cool, popular, and gain power over their peers. The youth participants' mere presence in a youth empowerment intervention, however, also suggested that they were resilient and hopeful. When I asked if people could hold power without violence, they spoke about the power they possessed by just merely sitting in the room together and standing up for non-violence. Many of these same themes were reflected in the student essays.

In addition, the focus group results suggested that young peoples' opinions are influenced by a number of sources including media, parents, and peers. It is also plausible that many of the youth in the groups are either unconscious of other influences or were not able to articulate it in the allotted time. Future research could explore the parameters of what authentic youth voice means more in-depth.

### **Conclusion: A Pathway Model of Power and Youth Violence**

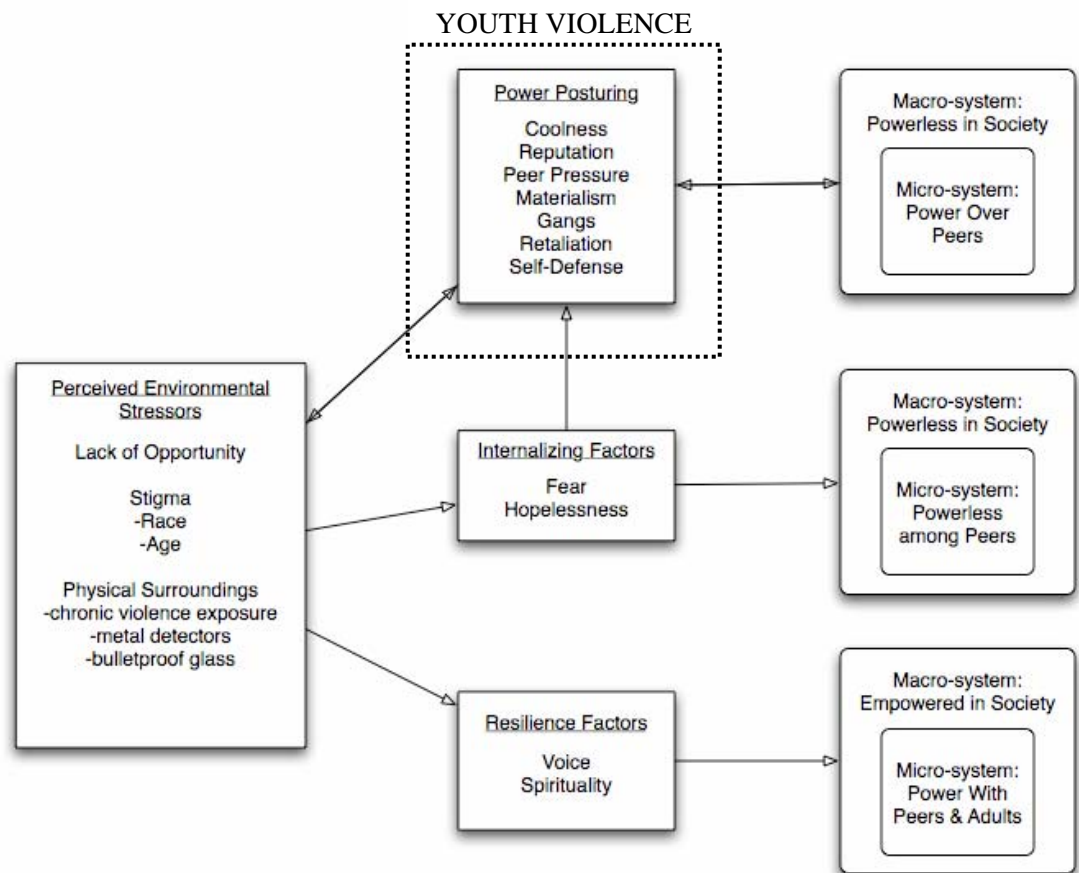
For youth in this study, the findings suggest that power operates at several different levels. As I reviewed the data, I discovered that youth made connections



between the emergent themes they described relating to power and violence. These connections suggested youth underwent a number of pathways that determined their level of power and status within their social systems. They described, for example, how exposure to chronic neighborhood violence made them fearful and led to a hopeless sense of impotence. These youth wrote about being both powerless among their peers and in society. By unpacking the major power and violence themes in the students' essays, I was able to uncover this pathway, along with others, and developed a conceptual model. The model depicted in Figure 3.1 illustrates the multitude of connections youth in this study made between power and violence, and the various pathways to power over, powerlessness, and power with.

The left-hand side of the model represents the contextual stressors youth described. Students expressed that they are continually faced with debilitating environmental stressors such as limited opportunities, stigma, and physical surroundings that serve as visual reminders of the violent conditions they face. As youth described these environmental stressors, I found that they either choose to internalize these conditions through fear and hopelessness or actively resist them through a path of externalized power posturing or resilience. Whether consciously made or not, these choices have bearing on a young person's power.

**Figure 3.1. Conceptual Model of Youth Violence and Power**



A critical point to focus on in the model is the power posturing construct. I draw attention to this area of the model because it is at this point where youth violence perpetration occurs. The power posturing concept arose from themes that related to violent perpetration such as coolness, reputation, peer pressure, materialism, gangs, retaliation and self-defense. I found that these themes appeared to be tied to youth attempts to gain control over environmental limitations and psychological needs. Two frameworks were helpful in interpreting these themes, Anderson's (1999) *Code of the Streets* and Majors and Billson's (1992) *Cool Pose*.

Both of these theories have distinct differences and overlapping similarities. Anderson's framework is centered on an informal code of conduct, which he suggests is held by inner city communities that are plagued by violence and limited social opportunities. He argues that the code is upheld in hostile environments where, for both physical and psychological protection, one is driven to demand respect by using violence or aggressive posturing. Majors and Billson, on the other hand, suggest that Black males in particular have constructed a *cool pose* in response to the threatened expression of Black masculinity. They explain that a cool pose is an active coping style that is performed to mask vulnerabilities experienced in accessing conventional masculine roles. From this perspective, while illegitimate, violence provides readily opportune means through which Black males demonstrate symbolic control in the face of perpetual blocked opportunities. In essence, the ability to successfully strike a cool pose is a fundamental principle in the code of the streets.

Much of the basis for Anderson's and Major and Billson's is centered on a Black masculinity that is stunted. They base and frame their theories on the Black male experience. While these arguments may have held in the past, youth in this study suggest that power posturing—where power and violence intersect—is not gendered. While male and female differences were found among the essays styles the student chose to write, I found no gender differences among the power posturing themes. This may be a direct reflection of rising rates of female youth violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). I found that the youth who participated in my validation focus groups supported this conclusion. They suggested that the girls they knew fought just as much, if not more, than the boys. In addition, anecdotal conversations with other youth in Flint

and with other adults who work with similar youth across the nation suggest that girls are resorting to more vindictive and non-traditional forms of violence than boys. A group of high school students in Flint, for example, told me they witnessed two females fighting during school. The fight was broken up, but one of the girls returned to campus later to throw hot chicken grease on her adversary. Clearly, the narrowing gap between male and female youth violence is not a step in the right direction. Future research that focuses more specifically on female youth violence and notions of power may be able to shed more light on this rising problem.

Furthermore, where Anderson's and Majors and Billson's frameworks contribute most to my model is in how they suggest violence has dual consequences. These dual consequences support what youth voiced in this study. That is, youth may gain a sense of control over themselves and their immediate *micro*-social environments while at the same time lose status in the broader social structure. More specifically, a cool pose can help one to cope with the daily stressors associated with being a stigmatized young person; yet, this power posturing also feeds negative stereotypes that further perpetuate the necessity to mask vulnerabilities to begin with. Similarly, the code of the streets is born in neighborhoods entrenched with antagonism to the extent that opportunities to participate in legitimate means of survival are scarce. The code then presents an alternate pathway to status; it legitimizes violence, but renders those youth who adhere to its tenets as deplorable to outsiders. In the end, the code serves basic psychological needs, but perpetuates marginalization from dominant society.

Anderson suggests that this duality can be observed within the neighborhood itself. He describes "street" individuals as those who endorse and abide by the code and

“decent” people are those who conduct themselves according to society’s ideals. This separation of ideals implies that two social systems can co-exist within neighborhoods. An entirely different set of norms and social expectations are practiced and upheld within this street system compared to the dominant system. Thus, the street system can be conceptualized as a micro-system embedded in a larger macro-system.

The power posturing outcomes illustrated in Figure 1 depict this duality through the set of embedded boxes on the right side of the model. The innermost box represents the young person’s micro-system or their immediate social network of influence, which in this case are peers. The outermost box represents the macro-system or broader society. Based on this framework, youth on the power posturing pathway can possess power over their peers within the “street” or micro-system, while at the same time be powerless in society. The power that youth experience at the micro-level reinforces the benefits for youth to continually engage in violence—especially when combined with limited opportunities for legitimate productivity and masked feelings of hopelessness. The connections between their power status and their power posturing are reinforcing and are represented in the model by the dual arrow pathway. In addition, environmental stressors also exacerbate the desire to continue power posturing and; thus, the cyclical nature of the power posturing pathway is represented by the dual arrows between environmental stressors, power posturing, and power status in the social systems.

The power status outcomes for youth who either internalize or transcend their circumstances through resilience are more straightforward and are depicted in the model through one-way arrows. Those who internalize fear and hopelessness and do not power posture are viewed as weak and powerless among their peers and powerless in society.

These are the youth who have given up and remain neglected. Another group who internalized fear and hopelessness also described externalizing this state through power posturing. For these youth, power posturing served to mask their vulnerabilities.

In direct contrast, it was clear from the narratives that another group of youth actively resist marginalization. They were resilient; through voice and spirituality, they saw themselves as part of the solution. Many of these youth also recognized the power in *power with*—i.e. more could be done to prevent violence if they partnered with adults who would listen to their needs. It is within these partnerships where the potential for young people and communities to be empowered lies.

Although this study provides unique insight on the perspectives of young peoples ideas about power and violence, it has limitations. The data set I used was secondary text gathered from a national essay contest. The contest was not designed to specifically ascertain youth views on violence and power. Instead, the students were asked to respond to more general questions about their perspectives on their experiences with violence, what they thought the causes of youth violence were, and what they believed could be done to prevent it. Thus, my analysis required me to infer meaning about the thematic content of their essays that related to the construct of power. The depth of this analysis was limited to strictly what was in the essays. To protect the confidentiality of the student essay participants, I was not able to follow up and ask further clarifying questions. These constraints restricted my ability to gain an understanding of whether the essays captured the students' true authentic voices. To overcome this limitation, I conducted the two member check focus groups with similar youth to gain confidence in my interpretations and try to understand how young people formed their opinions.

Another limitation is that this study includes middle school student perspectives from Flint, Michigan. The youth in this study may represent an experience that is unique to this geographic location. It is feasible that these youth perspectives may be akin to those of young people in similar environments; however, their conclusions may not be generalizable across all youth. Furthermore, the middle school students that participated in the essay contest represented a small proportion of students that attend the public middle schools in Flint. These students may have unique views that do not generalize to those students that did not participate in the contest. Future research in this area could explore youth perspectives with a diverse sample of young people to further understand how social indicators may play a role in determining their views. In addition, youth views on specific types of approaches, programs and policies could provide further insight into what may make some efforts more successful than others for youth.

Nevertheless, this study contributes a youth-driven perspective on power and violence. The findings uncover how some youth use violence to express domination, other youth succumb to the stressors in their environment through powerlessness, and others transcend marginalization through power with. The conceptual model that depicts these pathways can be built upon in future studies. Future research may, for example, assess the practical utility of the model by testing the pathways using structural equation modeling (SEM). A study of this nature could contribute to expanding the findings in the current study and be useful for researchers who focus on intervention. An example of how SEM may be useful is in revealing which factors in each construct are significant determinants on the pathways. Interventions could then be designed around points on the model that are significant.

As it stands now, the model still has implications for prevention research. Youth in this study suggested that environmental stressors led them to either power posture, internalize the stressors, or be resilient. Efforts that focus on eliminating these stressors have potential to reduce their effect as environmental factors that require a negative behavioral or cognitive response. The types of stressors students wrote about, however, are deeply embedded within the social structures that shape society. Therefore, interventions in this area may require multi-level systemic change where macro-levels of intervention may appear more distal from youth violence. Reducing exposure to community violence, for example, may require youth programming at the individual level and economic development at a broader level. In this case, programming may affect change among individual youth, and economic development can provide communities with alternative opportunities to violent crime, which is often a more accessible livelihood in impoverished neighborhoods.

A specific area for youth programming suggested by the model is creating interventions that support the development of resilience factors among youth. In this study, youth identified resilience factors as voice and spirituality; however, past research suggests that other factors may also contribute such as parent support and adult involvement (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Tarver et al., 2004). Future research may further explore how various resilience factors buffer the effect of power posturing and internalizing indicators associated with powerlessness and violence. Another key area to consider along the resilience pathway is further exploring the relationship between resilience and power with. Research suggests that parental involvement, and family and school connectedness contribute to youth resilience (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). By



their nature, these resilience factors imply a coming together, which is central to power with. Future studies may explore whether power with can increase resilience among youth who face chronic environmental stressors.

A related, but distinct idea is to explore the health promoting potential of youth and community empowerment. This approach is similar to resilience because it emphasizes assets. Resilience approaches, however, may be criticized because they assume that resilience arises from adversity. That is, barriers must be present for resilience to occur. Alternatively, an empowerment approach solely focuses on assets and, therefore, can be applied across contexts whether barriers do or do not exist. This approach shifts the paradigm from a) understanding how problems are buffered among some because of resilience to b) how health may be promoted for all through empowerment. Thus, theoretically, empowerment has the potential to affect change in a broader range of contexts.

In conclusion, the voices of youth in this study tell us that young people do not want to feel restricted by their environments. Instead, they desire more opportunities to practice and demonstrate mastery, competence, and inner control. Social status is also critical as they make their way through creating identities and understanding their places in the world. As youth in this study articulated, *power with* presents an alternative method for youth and communities to maintain dignity and overcome structural barriers that contribute to low social status. Youth violence prevention will require youth, adults, and their communities working together to reclaim their power.

## References

- Agnew, R. (1984). Autonomy and delinquency. *Sociological Perspectives*, 27(2), 219-240.
- Anderson, E. (1999). *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Archer, J. & Coyne, S. M. (2005). An intergrated review of indirect, relational and social aggression. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 9(3), 212-230.
- Arendt, H. (1970). *On Violence*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Ashley, J., Samaniego, D., & Cheun, L. (1997). How Oakland turns its back on teens: A youth perspective. *Social Justice*, 24(3), 170-176.
- Bernard, H. R. (2002). *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (3rd ed.). Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press.
- Bolland, J. M. (2003). Hopelessness and risk behavior among adolescents living in high-poverty inner-city neighborhoods. *Journal of Adolescence*, 26(2), 145-158.
- Buka, S. L., Stichick, T. L., Birdthistle, I., & Earls, F. J. (2001). Youth exposure to violence: Prevalence, risks, and consequences. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 71(3), 298-310.

- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2006). *Local Area Unemployment Statistics*. Retrieved 5/2006, from <http://www.bls.gov/lau/home.htm>
- Center for Media and Public Affairs. (1997). *Network News in the Nineties: The Top Topics and Trends of the Decade*. (No. 21). Washington, DC: Center for Media and Public Affairs.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2004). *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance*. No. 53 (SS02).
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2006). *Youth violence: Fact sheet*. Retrieved 4/4/07, from <http://www.cdc.gov.proxy.lib.umich.edu/ncipc/factsheets/yvfacts.htm>
- Checkoway, B. N., Allison, T., & Montoya, C. (2005). Youth participation in public policy at the municipal level. *Children and Youth Services Review, 27*(10), 1149-1162.
- Cohen, C. J., Celestine-Michener, J., Holmes, C., Merseth, J. L., & Ralph, L. (2007). *The Attitudes and Behavior of Young Black Americans: Research Summary*. Chicago, IL: Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture.
- Crick, N. R., Ostrov, J. M., & Werner, N. E. (2006). A longitudinal study of relational aggression, physical aggression, and children's social-psychological adjustment. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 2*(131), 142.
- Dahl, R. A. (1957). The concept of power. *Behavioral Science, 2*(3), 201-215.

- Daiute, C., & Fine, M. (2003). Youth perspectives on violence and injustice. *Journal of Social Issues, 59*(1), 1-14.
- De Coster, S., Heimer, K., & Wittrock, S. M. (2006). Neighborhood disadvantage, social capital, street context, and youth violence. *The Sociological Quarterly, 47*(4), 723-753.
- Dorfman, L., & Shiraldi, V. (2001). *Off balance: Youth, Race & Crime in the News*. (No. 4). Washington, D.C.: Youth Law Center.
- Dorfman, L., & Woodruff, K. (1998). The roles of speakers in local television news stories on youth and violence. *Journal of Popular Film and Television, 26*(2), 80-85.
- Dorfman, L., Woodruff, K., Chavez, V., & Wallack, L. (1997). Youth and violence on local television news in California. *American Journal of Public Health, 87*(8), 1311-1316.
- DuRant, R. H., Getts, A., Cadenhead, C., Emans, S. J., & Woods. (1995). Exposure to violence and victimization and depression, hopelessness, and purpose in life among adolescents living in and around public-housing. *Journal of Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics, 16*(4), 233.
- DuRant, R. H., Getts, A., Emans, J., & Woods, E. R. (1994). Exposure to violence and depression, hopelessness, and purpose in life among black adolescents. *Pediatric Research, 35*(4), A4.

- Dyson, M. E. (1996). *Between God and Gangsta Rap : Bearing Witness to Black Culture*.  
New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Fallis, R. K., & Opatow, S. (2003). Are students failing school or are schools failing students? class cutting in high school. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59(1), 103-119.
- Farrell, A. D., & Burce, S. E. (1997). Impact of exposure to community violence on violent behavior and emotional distress among urban adolescents. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 26, 2-14.
- Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2001). *Uniform Crime Report for 2001: Index of Crime by State and Metropolitan Statistical Area.*, 2003, from  
<http://www.fbi.gov.proxy.lib.umich.edu>
- Fergus, S. & Zimmerman, M.A. (2005). Adolescent resilience: A framework for understanding healthy development in the face of risk. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 26, 399-419.
- Fine, M., Freudenberg, N., Payne, Y., Perkins, T., Smith, K., & Wanzer, K. (2003). "Anything can happen with police around": Urban youth evaluate strategies of surveillance in public places. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59(1), 141-158.
- Fisher, A.T.; Sonn, C.C. & Evans, S.D. The place and function of power in community psychology: Philosophical and practical issues. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 17, 258-267.

- Fitzpatrick, K. M. (1997). Aggression and environmental risk among low-income African American youth. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 38, 131-148.
- Fogel, S. J. (2004). Risks and opportunities for success: Perceptions of urban youths in a distressed community and lessons for adults. *Families in Society*, 85(3), 335-344.
- Frank, K. I. (2006). The potential of youth participation in planning. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 20(4), 351-371.
- Freire, P. ([1970] 2003). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (30th ed.). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Freudenberg, N., Roberts, L., Richie, B. E., Taylor, R. T., McGillicuddy, K., & Greene, M. B. (1999). Coming up in the boogie down: The role of violence in the lives of adolescents in the South Bronx. *Health Education & Behavior*, 26(6), 788-805.
- Furstenberg, F. F. (2000). The sociology of adolescence and youth in the 1990s: A critical commentary. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 896-910.
- Gaventa, J.,. (1980). *Power and Powerlessness : Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Ginsburg, K. R., Alexander, P. M., Hunt, J., Sullivan, M., & Cnaan, A. (2002). Enhancing their likelihood for a positive future: Focus groups reveal the voice of inner-city youth. *Pediatrics*, 109(6), e95.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago,: Aldine Pub. Co.

- Greenberg, D. F. (1985). Age, crime, and social explanation. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 91(1), 1-21.
- Guinier, L., & Torres, G. (2002). Rethinking conventions of zero-sum power. *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy* (pp. 108-130). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gutierrez, B. (2007). Atlanta schools hope to end sagging pants trend. *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. From 11/6/07
- Hart, R., Dauite, C., Iltus, S., Kritt, D., Rome, M., & Sabo, K. (1997). Developmental theory and children's participation in community organizations. *Social Justice*, 24(3), 33-63.
- Heimer, K., & De Coster, S. (1999). The gendering of violent delinquency. *Criminology*, 32(2), 277-312.
- Hogan, K. (2002). Pitfalls of community-based learning: How power dynamics limit adolescents' trajectories of growth and participation. *Teachers College Record*, 104(3), 586-624.
- Keating, L. M., Tomishima, M. A., Foster, S., & Alessandri, M. (2002). The effects of a mentoring program on at-risk youth. *Adolescence*, 37(148), 717-734.
- Kreisberg, S. (1992). *Transforming Power: Domination, Empowerment and Education*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

- Krug, E. G., Dahlberg, L. L., Mercy, J. A., Zwi, A. B., & Lozano, R. (2002). *World Report on Violence and Health*. Geneva: World Health Organization.
- Lesko, N. (2001). *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*. New York, NY: Routledge Falmer.
- Levine, F. J., & Rosich, K. J. (1996). *Social Causes of Violence: Crafting a Science Agenda*. Washington, D.C.: American Sociological Association.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Link, B. G., & Phelan, J. (2001). Conceptualizing stigma. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 363-385.
- Lukes, S. (2004). *Power: A Radical View*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mahiri, J., & Conner, E. (2003). Black youth violence has a bad rap. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59(1), 121-140.
- Majors, R., & Billson, J. M. (1992). *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Mandel, L. A., & Qazilbash, J. (2005). Youth voices as change agents: Moving beyond the medical model in school-based health center practice. *Journal of School Health*, 75(7), 239-242.



- Mankowski, E. S., & Rappaport, J. (2000). Narrative concepts and analysis in spiritually-based communities. *Journal of Community Psychology, 28*(5), 479-493.
- Marwell, G. (1966). Adolescent powerlessness and delinquent behavior. *Social Problems, 14*(1), 35-47.
- May, R. (1972). *Power and Innocence*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Mayer, M. J., & Leone, P. E. (1999). A structural analysis of school violence and disruptions: Implications for creating safer schools. *Education and Treatment of Children, 22*(3), 333-356.
- McCart, M. R., Smith, D. W., Saunders, B. E., Kilpatrick, D. G., Resnick, H., & Ruggiero, K. J. (2007). Do urban adolescents become desensitized to community violence? data from a national survey. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 77*(3), 434-442.
- Meucci, S., & Schwab, M. (1997). Children and the environment: Young people's participation in social change. *Social Justice, 24*(3), 1-10.
- Michigan State Police. (2005). *2005 Uniform Crime Report.*, 2006, from [http://www.michigan.gov/msp/0,1607,7-123-1645\\_3501\\_4621-156389--,00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/msp/0,1607,7-123-1645_3501_4621-156389--,00.html)
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *An Expanded Sourcebook: Qualitative data Analysis* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Mills, C. W. ([1956]2000). *The Power Elite*. (New Edition ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Millstein, S. G., Petersen, A. C., & Nightingale, E. O. (1993). Adolescent health promotion: Rationale, goals, and objectives. In S. G. Millstein, A. C. Petersen & E. O. Nightingale (Eds.), *Promoting the health of adolescents: New directions for the twenty-first century* (pp. 3-10). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moffitt, T. E. (1993). Adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behavior: A developmental taxonomy. *Psychological Review*, *100*(4), 674-701.
- Morgan Quinto Press. (2006). *Morgan Quinto Awards: 13th Annual America's Safest (and Most Dangerous) Cities.*, 2007, from <http://www.morganquitno.com/cit07pop.htm>
- Morgan, D. L. (1988). *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Morrill, C., Yalda, C., Adelman, M., Musheno, M., & Bejarano, C. (2000). Telling tales in school: Youth culture and conflict narratives. *Law & Society Review*, *34*(3), 521-565.
- Mullings, L., & Schulz, A. J. (2006). Intersectionality and health : An introduction. In A. J. Schulz, & L. Mullings (Eds.), *Gender, Race, Class, & Health: Intersectional Approaches* (pp. 17). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Parenti, M. (1970). Power and pluralism: A view from the bottom. *The Journal of Politics*, *32*(3), 501-530.

- Phelan, P., Yu, H. C., & Davidson, A. L. (1994). Navigating the psychosocial pressures of adolescence: The voices and experiences of high school youth. *American Educational Research Journal, 31*(2), 415-447.
- Prilleltensky, I., Nelson, G., & Peirson, L. (2001). The role of power and control in children's lives: An ecological analysis of pathways toward wellness, resilience and problems. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 11*(2), 143-158.
- Rappaport, J., & Simkins, R. (1992). Healing and empowering through community narrative. In K. I. Pargament, K. I. Maton & R. Hess (Eds.), *Religion and Prevention in Mental Health: Research, Vision, and Action* (pp. 215-236). New York, NY: Haworth.
- Rappaport, J. (2000). Community narratives: Tales of terror and joy. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 28*(1), 1-24.
- Rappaport, J. (1995). Empowerment meets narrative: Listening to stories and creating settings. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 23*(5), 795.
- Rich, J. A., & Grey, C. M. (2005). Pathways to recurrent trauma among young black men: Traumatic stress, substance use, and the "code of the street". *American Journal of Public Health, 95*(5), 816-824.
- Sampson, R. J., Morenoff, J. D., & Raudenbush, S. W. (2005). Social anatomy of racial and ethnic disparities in violence. *American Journal of Public Health, 95*(2), 224-232.

- Sampson, R. J., & Raudenbush, S. W. (2004). Seeing disorder: Neighborhood stigma and the social construction of "broken windows". *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 67, 319-342.
- Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W., & Earls, F. (1997). Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. *Science*, 277, 918-924.
- Seeman, M. (1959). On the meaning of alienation. *American Sociological Review*, 24, 783-791.
- Snyder, H. M., & Sickmund, M. (2006). *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. M. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Tarver, D.B., Wong, N.T., Neighbors, H.W. & Zimmerman, M.A. (2004). The role of father support in the prediction of suicidal ideation among black adolescent males. In N.Way and J.Chu (Eds.). *Adolescent Boys: Exploring Diverse Cultures of Boyhood*. (pp. 144-163). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- U.S. Census. (2000). *Flint City, Michigan*. [Online]. <http://factfinder.census.gov/>
- Wallerstein, N. (1992). Powerlessness, empowerment, and health: Implications for health promotion programs. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 6(3), 197-205.

- Wallerstein, N., Sanchez-Merki, V., & Dow, L. (2002). Freirian praxis in health education and community organizing. In M. Minkler (Ed.), *Community Organizing and Community Building for Health* (pp. 195-211). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Williams, K., Rivera, L., Neighbours, R., & Reznik, V. (2007). Youth violence prevention comes of age: Research, training, and future directions. *Annual Review of Public Health, 28*(195), 211.
- Wright, D. R., & Fitzpatrick, K. M. Social capital and adolescent violent behavior: Correlates of fighting and weapon use among secondary school students. *Social Forces, 84*(3), 1435-1453.
- Yoon, J. S., Barton, E., & Taiariol, J. (2004). Relational aggression in middle school: Educational implications of developmental research. *The Journal of Early Adolescence, 24*, 303-318.
- Zimmerman, M. A., Morrel-Samuels, S., Wong, N.T., Tarver, D.B., Rabiah, D., & White, S. (2004). Guns, gangs, and gossip: An analysis of student essays on youth violence. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 24*(4), 385-411.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **NEXT GENERATION EXPERTS: YOUTH RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES FOR YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION**

#### **Introduction**

Adolescence, approximately the second decade of life, is a time when the susceptibility for the infections experienced during childhood has passed and the chronic diseases of adulthood have not yet emerged. Thus, most people at this age experience good health (Blum, Robert W. M., 1998; Call et al., 2002; Millstein, 1993; Weiler, 1997). When poor health outcomes are observed among this population, they are often associated with violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). The most recent national data suggests the three leading causes of adolescent mortality—unintentional injury, homicide and suicide—are all related to violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). Rates of violence, specifically homicide and other violent crimes, surged in the early 1990s. Since then, youth violence has gained recognition as a major public health problem and the number of programs that aim to reduce it have increased exponentially.

While many of these efforts are advancing the field, a major perspective is missing—that is, views from young people themselves. As adults set the agenda for how youth violence prevention programs are designed and which policies are prioritized, youth are a vital but frequently ignored source of expertise. This adult-centric approach disregards the notion that young people can be active agents in their own development. Counter to its intention, a growing industry that is dedicated to preventing violence may

be disempowering the very youth that they aim to serve (Bennett, Coggan, & Adams, 2003; Checkoway, Allison, & Montoya, 2005; Finn, 2001; Furstenberg, 2000; McCubbin, 2001; Mitra, 2004). That is, few programs are designed where the ideas and opinions of youth are represented. Instead, most prevention and intervention efforts are largely conceived, developed, and implemented by adults; yet, there is a limit to what adults can understand about youth experience. Adults can overlook critical aspects of the youth context because they are seeing it from an older—often privileged—point of view. As a result, youth violence prevention programs can be designed with an inherent adult bias that may plausibly minimize relevance, palatability, and program efficacy for youth. Freudenberg and colleagues (1999), for example, find that despite high rates of program fidelity, youth report that the programs they have participated are ineffective. To overcome this challenge it may be necessary to listen to what young people themselves identify as salient to violence prevention.

A few researchers are beginning to recognize the need to seek youth perspectives in order to fully understand the adolescent experience. Finn (2001), for example, in her critique of adolescent social services questions, “[W]here are the voices of young people themselves in this pathological process of treatment” (p. 186). Furthermore, Morrill and colleagues (2000) argue that to legitimately comprehend a particular articulation of youth culture, researchers must meet youth in the spaces where young people make and have their lives constructed by adults on a daily basis. Young people can inform us about their experiences in these spaces, what challenges they face, and what ideas they have for improvement.

At a basic level, youth voice can be described as young people sharing their perspectives about life experiences. On another level, it is also their active participation in identifying assets and problems, and contributing to decisions regarding potential solutions. In studies on youth voice, researchers find that youth often identify adult control as a major barrier to their contributions. Phelan and colleagues (1994), for example, found that students had a great deal to say about what they do, what influences them, and what they think should be done to improve the school context. Most of the issues students identified were under the control of teachers and administrators and felt adults were not willing to listen, take time to understand or care about their issues. Fine et al. (2003) found a similar level of adult mistrust when they interviewed young people about their perceptions of policy and public authority. The youth—especially male youth of color—expressed feelings of betrayal and vulnerability that they attributed to lack of adult empathy. Young people said that they felt like they were willing to listen to adults’ perspectives, but did not sense that adults were willing to do the same.

Encouraging youth voice may be a key supportive strategy that can both empower youth and improve intervention relevance. Evans (2007) found that when youth were able to express voice and make meaningful contributions in contexts with caring adults they had a stronger sense of community and expressed empowerment. Morrill et al. (2000) found when students were asked to write narratives about their experiences with violence, the process allowed the youth to gain control and make deliberate choices about how they represented themselves. The students challenged stereotypical images of youth as gangsters and represented a diversity of experiences. Similarly, the Youth Radio program, in the San Francisco Bay Area, also offers young people the opportunity to



reconstruct their own images of themselves (Chavez, 1998). Explicitly designed to increase self-esteem, professional skills and positive development, radio professionals and more experienced peers teach youth how to produce their own radio shows. The youth participants make positive contributions by bringing their own voices, stories and experiences to a mass audience while educating them about the interests and concerns of young people. As they suggest, youth violence is a major concern for many adolescents.

Despite youth violence being a major concern, few studies in the field of violence prevention highlight young peoples' voices. Among these studies, emphasis is placed on youth accounts of violence rather than their ideas about solutions. While this qualitative work contributes rich contextual details about youth realities, it does not provide direct, youth-driven recommendations for program and policy development.

In this study, youth are the key informants about what strategies they propose will work best for them and their peers. Their perspectives are derived from youth generated essays. When compared with other more structured approaches, the essay is a neutral medium for youth to express voice with limited bias from the researcher. Even in the unstructured interview, the researcher is in a position as the designated authority who guides the interview flow. On the other hand, essays also allow the young person to make deliberate choices regarding how his or her perspectives are portrayed. The young person must make decisions about style—for example, whether the essay is written in first or second person. Furthermore, youth essays have the added ability to represent both personal stories and the collective narratives of young people. As Rappaport and colleagues suggest, examining personal stories and narratives reveals the meaning and significance of lived experiences (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000; Rappaport & Simkins,

1992; Rappaport, 2000; Rappaport, 1995). Storytelling can uncover how young people interpret their surroundings, and attribute coherence and meaning to life events. Thus, to investigate what violence prevention solutions young people recommend, essays written by middle school students will be examined. In this study, I aim to uncover what these youth identify as solutions that would be salient to their lives and then compare and contrast their recommendations to current research and strategies identified as best practices in the field.

## **Methods**

### Study Context

Data collection took place in Flint, Michigan through a partnership with the National Campaign to Stop Violence, Flint Public Schools and the former Flint Youth Violence Prevention Center (YVPC). Flint is a predominantly small working class city with historical ties to the auto manufacturing industry. As the site of the United Auto Workers (UAW) famous sit down strike in the 1930s, the city has a strong record of community organizing with over 80 block clubs and numerous community-based organizations (Flint Urban Gardening & Land Use Corporation, 2003).

Despite strong grassroots organizing, Flint continually suffers from economic and population decline and has high poverty rates compared to the rest of Michigan (U.S. Census, 2000). The unemployment rate in Flint, as of May 2006, was 16% compared to 6% for Michigan, and 5% nationally (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). Flint has also been termed one of the nation's most dangerous cities (Morgan Quinto Press, 2006). The rate of violent crime is 859 per 100,000 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2001). The juvenile assault arrest rate in Flint is higher than the rest of the state and African-

American youth from the city are more likely to be arrested, even after correcting for population proportions (Michigan State Police, 2005). Flint is 53% African-American; however, the public schools are 80% African-American (U.S. Census, 2000). At the time of data collection, the city had seven public middle schools.

### Data Collection

I used 391 middle school student narratives from an essay competition sponsored by the National Campaign to Stop Violence in 2000. The competition asked students to respond to three questions pertaining to youth violence:

- 1) How has youth violence affected my life?
- 2) What are the causes of youth violence?
- 3) What can I do about youth violence?

For the purpose of this study, I focused on student responses to the third question.

Seventh and eighth grade students from all seven Flint middle schools were eligible to participate. Participation in the competition was both voluntary and compulsory depending on whether schools or teachers used the competition as an assignment. Incentives were also used to encourage participation. The school with the most essay submissions received a trophy and the teacher with the most entries in his or her class received a \$100 gift certificate to the Teacher Store. In addition, a citywide dance was held for students who entered the competition.

Following the competition, the original essays were copied and compiled into a single manuscript. Research assistants prepared the essays for analysis. Each essay was retyped verbatim with grammar and spelling errors to maintain the integrity of the original essays. Personal identification information such as names and addresses were

removed and each essay was assigned a new participant identification code. The participant identification code consisted of a unique numeric identifier, gender and school.

### Participant Characteristics

Due to the secondary nature of the data, the availability of descriptive variables for this study was limited. I only had access to data on two demographic variables: gender and school. Therefore, other relevant demographics such as age, grade, race and socioeconomic status were not available for analysis. As such, the only descriptive statistics that could be calculated were the proportion of gender and school participation and participation rate by school. A summary of the available sample characteristics is displayed in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1. Characteristics of the Study Sample**

	Number of Participants (Percent)	Number of Students per School	Participation Rate (Mean)
Gender			
Female	256 (65.5%)	N/A	N/A
Male	133 (34.0%)	N/A	N/A
Not reported	2 (0.5%)	N/A	N/A
Total	391 (100%)	N/A	N/A
Middle School			
Holmes	162 (41.4%)	522	31.0%
Northwestern	97 (24.8%)	375	25.7%
Southwestern	55 (14.1%)	433	12.7%
Whittier	67 (17.1%)	651	10.3%
Longfellow	10 (2.6%)	534	1.9%

	Total	391	2515	(16.3%)
--	-------	-----	------	---------

N/A=Data not available

Most of the essays were written by students that were female and attended Holmes middle school. I presume that the uneven distributions of participants across gender and by school are due to the nature of the essay competition—that is, being both voluntary and compulsory depending on school engagement or whether teacher used the competition as an assignment. Despite a lack of available data on key demographics and the non-randomized nature of data collection, the essays still provided rich information on what young people thought could prevent youth violence.

### Essay Characteristics

The middle schools students were asked to response to three questions related to violence, however, their responses constituted a wide range of essay styles depicted in Table 3.2. Most of the students wrote in first person. They gave their opinions on what they thought were the definitions, causes, and solutions for youth violence. Other students who wrote in first person shared personal stories about their own encounters with violence as victims, perpetrators, and witnesses. A smaller portion of students chose to represent their views using creative symbolism by writing poems, rap verses, plays, and short fictional stories. Finally, I found that a handful of students wrote using a combination of essay styles and some cases were unclassifiable due to the nature of the students writing. These unclassifiable cases (n=7) were dropped from the analysis.

**Table 3.2. Essay Style by Gender**

	Opinion	Personal	Creative Symbolism	Combination	Unclassified
Gender*					

	Female	142	40	27	9	5
	Male	73	30	59	1	2
	Total	215	70	86	10	7

\*Two participants did not indicate their gender

As indicated in the table, a gender pattern emerged. That is, male students wrote more essays using creative symbolism compared to female students despite the higher level of female participation. While in-depth analysis on gender differences in essay style are beyond this scope of this study, this finding suggests that male and female youth may have different stylistic approaches to expressing their perspectives on violence. One plausible explanation is that many of the essays that used creative symbolism were written in poem or rap verse format. The appeal for young males to adapt this style for their own creative expression about violence may be influenced by hip hop culture which is dominated by an urban male perspective.

### Data Analysis

Atlas.ti software was used to assist with management and coding. Each essay was disaggregated from the single manuscript by the participant ID and entered into the software as a primary document. This data entry approach allowed for ease in data management and systematic analysis across participants.

An inductive multistage approach was used to create coding schemes and conduct the analysis (Bernard, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This inductive approach was used to maintain the integrity of the student's voices and perspectives. The process was iterative. To initiate the analysis, I consulted the data and reviewed each essay line-by-line to identify where youth wrote about youth violence prevention. The prevention strategies were segmented into quotes. Quotes consisted of cohesive statement(s) that

adequately described the code and ranged in length from one sentence to several paragraphs. Each quote was given a descriptive label. The first phase of analysis produced eighteen descriptive labels.

Following the initial phase of analysis, I generated a code list of the eighteen themes and their corresponding frequencies. The frequency for each theme ranged from seven to forty-three. After thoroughly reviewing the isolated quotes by theme, I found that a number of the lower frequency themes were subcategories of broader themes and could be networked. In addition, two themes were dropped because they overlapped with other categories to the point where they did not warrant their own labels. In addition, each of the themes was organized by type. The type categories were: approaches, programs, and policies. One discordant category was labeled as a barrier.

### Validity Checks

To gain confidence in my findings, I conducted two methodological checks: 1) rater validity and 2) member check focus groups. First, to assess the validity of my coding, an outside rater independently coded a random sub-sample (10%) of the essays. The outside rater's codes and quotes were compared to my codes for consistency and comprehension. No new themes emerged from the outside rater's codes and they were consistent with my final coding scheme.

To strengthen confidence in my interpretation of the youth narratives, I also conducted a *member check* focus group with a sample of participants who were similar to those in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I recognized that I am an adult interpreting young peoples' perspectives and may have been limited by my own age biases. Thus, the purpose of the member check was to ask youth for their views about my interpretations of

central concepts ascertained from the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The focus group protocol was designed to both enhance confidence in my interpretation of the findings and to gain a fuller understanding of what constituted their authentic voices.

*Focus Group Procedure.* The procedure for the two focus groups included recruitment of 8 to 10 youth who were similar to those in the dataset. Middle schools students were recruited from a youth empowerment intervention research project that has an emphasis on youth violence prevention in Flint, Michigan. The project was selected as a convenience site for purposive recruitment because the participating youth matched the main demographic characteristics of the essay participants including:

- similar age range
- predominantly African American
- middle school students from Flint Community Public Schools

To initiate recruitment and build rapport, I volunteered with the intervention project to both acquaint myself with potential youth participants and support the program staff. Movie ticket vouchers and lunch were offered to provide incentive and compensate youth for their time.

The focus group guide was designed using a semi-structured format (see Appendix). This format allowed me to focus on specific questions about the research findings with the added flexibility of posing unanticipated questions that were inspired from participants' responses. By not fully structuring the focus group guide, I was also able to ask follow-up questions for clarification. The protocol was designed using a *funnel* approach (Morgan, 1997). That is, initial questions probed participants to respond



to general, open-ended questions followed by questions that were more specific to my research findings. This approach was used to help build rapport and acclimate participants to the focus group procedure. In addition, the process of leading from broad to specific allowed for data that were both revealing about the youth participants' perspectives and addressed specific content areas.

I did not tape record the focus groups; however, two trained graduate student research assistants observed and took notes. Specifically, both assistants wrote detailed notes as verbatim as possible. This approach was used to ensure I had an approximate record of what the youth said. Following the focus groups, observations about group dynamics and non-verbal behavior were incorporated and the notes were merged into a single manuscript. For analysis, the manuscript was coded and compared to the final analysis. The comparison included checks for common and discordant themes. The results of the member check focus groups are presented separately from and immediately following the main study findings.

## **Results**

A core group of sixteen themes emerged from the analysis. The themes were derived from my in-depth line-by-line review of students' responses to the question: What can I do about violence? The emergent themes were ranked from highest to lowest frequency as: 1) adult involvement, 2) community programs, 3) motivational speaking, 4) partnerships "come together", 5) conflict resolution/social skills building, 6) parent involvement, 7) gun control, 8) positive role modeling, 9) advocacy, 10) spirituality/religion, 11) policy, 12) listen to youth, 13) nothing can be done, 14) after school programs, 15) improve community resources, and 16) block watch. As depicted

in Table 4.3, each of the themes fell into four broad categories labeled: approach, program, policy and barrier.

**Table 4.3. Youth Violence Prevention Themes by Type and Frequency**

<b>Theme Type</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Approach	Adult Involvement	43
	Partnerships “Come Together”	42
	Parent Involvement	37
	Positive Role Modeling	26
	Spirituality/Religion	22
	Listen to Youth	16
		Total = 186
Programmatic Strategies	Community Programs	43
	Motivational Speaking	43
	Conflict Resolution/Social Skills	41
	After School Programs	13
	Block Watch	7
		Total = 147
Policy Strategies	Gun Control	35
	Advocacy	23
	Policy	19
	Improve Community Resources	11
		Total = 88
Barrier	Nothing Can Be Done	7

### Approach

By categorizing the themes by type, I found that most of the youth had recommendations on how to approach the issue of youth violence prevention. Approach, in this case, can be thought of the orientation, values, and core principles that program developers and policy makers use to design intervention. The vast majority of the students’ recommendations regarding approach consisted of having more positive adult and parent involvement. Youth suggested that violence could be prevented if youth felt comfortable talking to adults in their lives such as teachers, parents, and counselors about

their problems. They also wrote about how it was up to caring adults to take on this responsibility of being a resource and a guide for problem solving.

If you can go talk to someone, you should go talk to your principal, a counselor, a grown person with some wisdom, a parent or the person you are having problems with. You should sit down and try to work it out.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, several youth wrote about how simply telling an adult about an ongoing fight or any rumors they had heard about the potential for violence was a solution. Adults could then step in and use their authority to alleviate the conflict.

While students said that adults could help prevent violence in immediate circumstances, they blamed a lack of parent involvement as a cause of youth violence. They suggested youth would be less violent if parents were more involved in their children's lives, including spending quality time, monitoring kids activities, keeping close relationships with schools, and knowing their children's friends. Youth wanted parents and other adults in the community to be, not only involved in their lives, but to also serve as positive role models. Many students also suggested that this responsibility for positive role was both the responsibility of youth and adults. They also recognized their own roles in being an influence on younger kids.

To prevent youth violence I will have to be a good example for the little kids that will be leading the next generation. Other teenagers should also be a good example for the other teens and the children after them.

Another major approach youth wrote about was the idea of partnering with others or coming together. They suggested that youth violence prevention started within the

---

<sup>4</sup> The majority of the students' quotes were left unedited to maintain the integrity of their voices. Minor grammatical errors were corrected only in cases where it improved readability.

self, but that it was ultimately everyone's responsibility. One youth, for example, writes, "During all of this in our minds we say, 'Who am I, and what can I do?' We are all just wasting time with silly questions because the start of solving this problem is through you," however, she later explains, "To finally make a solution to the problem we must rally up and work together." Here the student suggests that the solution to violence can begin with the self, but that ultimately violence prevention requires more than individuals acting on their own; it necessitates a coming together to affect change. Akin to this idea, another student also suggests that youth violence prevention requires people coming together.

What I can do is limited. One person can only do so much. That's why I believe we as a nation not as a color, not as a race, but as people must come together as one, then only will we be able to fight the evil that have come to know us as Youth Violence. We can fight it, we can fight it and come out as winners. We will rise above and conquer.

A smaller subset of youth suggested that the idea of partnering or coming together to prevent youth violence should involve listening to the experiences of young people who are confronted with violence on a daily basis. They suggested that the solutions to violence might emerge from listening to their experiences while also building trust between youth and adults. They wrote about how, instead, adults often ignored their concerns and that violence would continue if young people's ideas were not taken into consideration.

Instead of adults yelling and blaming things on us  
They should help us gain their trust.

Youth violence in the world today  
Is growing more and more each day.

Adults can help stop the violence too  
Just listen to what I say do.

Talk to kids about youth violence  
Instead of standing back keeping silence.

Despite mistrust and lack of adult involvement, many youth suggested they pulled from inner spirituality and religion as a source of strength. They described faith and prayer as a way to deal with their violent circumstances and also heal others. Several youth suggested that involvement in religion and prayer for self and others were solutions to eliminate youth violence. One student recommends, “If we pray for each other and ask God for healing on one another and peace will come.” Similarly, another student articulates how prayer and religion are integral in her advice to other youth who face violence.

I would tell them if they still got a problem to pray to GOD and ask for forgiveness and ask him to let the person stop messing with you in the name of JESUS and God will answer their prayers. After that the person will stop messing with you and you will have a great day because the LORD can do anything if you pray and worship him. In the bible it says when PRAISES go up BLESSINGS come down. That is how I will stop youth violence because as long as you pray you won't have to worry anymore.

For this student, she saw her belief in God and spiritual conviction as the answer to youth violence prevention. Other students also wrote about how going to church could be a positive influence, a place to engage in prayer, and keep young people out of trouble.

### Programmatic Strategies

The second most frequently mentioned type of theme youth wrote about was programmatic strategies. Several different types of programs were described including, recreation, sports, competitions, peer mediation, conflict resolution, social skills building, and motivational speaking. Youth wrote about the need for both more community and

after school programs to keep youth busy and offer a safe place to go in the neighborhood.

One thing we can do to get kids off the street is open up a recreation center. We could put a whole bunch of activities and things you could do. You can add things like put in a gym, pool, tennis court, ping pong room and other stuff like that. You could also make this a competition like the person who brings the most people in a year wins a prize or trip, or other things like that. You could also start a neighborhood watch on every single street.

Many youth also wrote about the utility of peer mediation, conflict resolution, and social skills building. They described the need for youth have an outlet to discuss and work out their problems. Youth suggested that, in order to be effective, these programs need to be in safe and trusting spaces for young people to feel comfortable about being open.

We must devise a plan. The first step to disconnecting “the time bomb” is creating “ways out” for youngsters; for instance, getting youth to discuss their dilemmas; suggesting alternative ways to expressing anger and rage; teaching them that ridicule is an immature and juvenile act; helping youth to understand that it is better to their own minds to make important decisions, not their friends. These are all solutions to disconnecting the “time bomb.” I feel reaching youth is more effective than making more difficult to purchase guns and knives. The gun is the tool used [sic] commit the crime, but we have to reach the person behind the gun.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, several youth suggested that motivational speaking was a particular programmatic strategy that they thought they could both benefit from and also provide to their peers.

I could steer little kids away from the drugs and alcohol that would end their lives. I could try for resolve youth violence by taking part in stand [against] drugs-related substances and I could make connections that would by taking part in the fight against alcohol, and we could go to

---

<sup>5</sup> The quotation marks and underlining were written by the student in the original essay

neighborhoods to speak about our peace and maybe even have a guest speaker to speak about youth violence and how it is affecting the kids and the adults.

### Policy Strategies

Another theme category type that youth wrote about was policy. The most frequently mentioned policy level recommendation made was gun control. Youth suggested that gun control could be implemented at both the personal and policy level. Several youth suggested that adults in the community needed to keep guns off the streets and parents should not keep weapons in homes. Specific policy recommendations for gun buy back programs, and calls for stricter gun acquisition were also made. Students also called for stricter penalties for those who engaged in violent crime.

There is not much that I can do to prevent youth violence, but there are people who can, such as cops, city officials and school leaders. . .City officials can help create stricter laws for gun control and drug and alcohol abuse. Stricter laws would most likely mean fewer lawbreakers, therefore making the city a safer place to live. . .School leaders can start by making students wear clear book bags to prevent weapon or drug smuggling.

While it is not the case in the quote above, many of students saw themselves as having the ability to affect policy. They described how they could write letters, petition legislators, and advocate to their communities for change.

I can help out with youth violence by going to the mayor's office and asking him if he can post or set up a meeting for all the youth in Flint Michigan, to come together and talk about violence. But if that don't work. I can talk to my parents and ask them how violence affects their lives, and write down some ideas. Then, when they are done I can call my friend to ask her/him parents to tell them about how violence affects their lives. After that I could post a sign on the trees saying 'Parents talk to you children about what what/how violence affect your lives and about violence.

### Barrier

I found one theme that was a barrier rather than a recommended solution for

violence prevention. A small, but significant, subset of students wrote about how they thought that either they or no one could do anything to prevent youth violence. These youth suggested that violence was inevitable fact in their lives. One particular student shares how a personal experience with violence affects her ability to provide the answer that she believes was expected from essay question.

Youth violence has affected my life because my father was killed. Because of that my life has never been the same since that happen. Then two years later my sister was killed and that really messed my life up. I lost two important people in my life, but I cannot do nothing about youth violence so I think this is just something every family have to go through. So I cannot really answer this question but this is just what I think.

I found that there was a sense of hopelessness among some of the essays. These young people had accepted that violence was a powerful force that could not be stopped.

Teen and youth violence cannot be stopped. Every time someone comes close to making their point someone gets shot. . .When I think about all the lives that have been taken by guns I want to stop it. The only problem is I do not know how. It's a harsh reality that I just can't stop thinking about. I want people to live and not to die. Especially by gunfire. I don't want any more shootings to occur but I just don't have the power to stop it.

For youth who felt hopeless, violence was an inevitable force and nothing could be done to prevent or reduce it.

### Focus Group Results

I conducted the two member check focus groups with middle school aged youth to gain confidence in my interpretations and try to understand how young people formed their opinions. Overlapping themes between the focus group participants and the students' essays were adult involvement, parent involvement, listening to youth voice, religion, need for more community and after school programs, advocacy, block watch, and stricter policies. One theme mentioned by the focus groups that were not included in



this study's findings was the need for more workforce development. Themes that were found among the essays, but that did not emerge from the focus groups were role modeling, motivational speaking, conflict resolution, gun control, and improve community resources. From the participants, I also found that they had mixed feelings about their participation in violence prevention. Some believed that what they were doing was making a difference while others described how nothing had changed. This mixed enthusiasm was also reflected in the student essays when they suggested that nothing could be done. In addition, the focus group results suggested that young peoples' opinions are influenced by a number of sources including media, parents, and peers. It is also plausible that many of the youth in the groups are either unconscious of other influences or were not able to articulate it in the allotted time. Future research could explore the parameters of what authentic youth voice means more in-depth.

### **Discussion**

Since the early 1990s the number of violence prevention strategies has increased exponentially. Therefore, to compare what youth recommended in this study to what was currently being practiced, I found it necessary to narrow the scope of published literature. In their review of youth violence prevention research, Williams et al. (2007) suggest that two nationally recognized publications review and recommend effective best practices, the CDC's *Best Practices of Youth Violence Prevention: A Sourcebook for Community Action* (Thornton, Craft, Dahlberg, Lynch, & Baer, 2002) and *The Blueprints for Violence Prevention* produced by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (CSPV) (2006). For the purpose of this discussion, I will compare and contrast the youth recommendations to the Blueprint model programs when appropriate because these

programs have undergone rigorous inclusion criteria. This publication also serves as the most current source of best practices. In addition, I also draw upon other research literatures to discuss the youth recommendations when necessary.

### Approach

The findings in this study suggest that youth are concerned with how violence prevention is approached. Young people wrote about how adults ought to play a critical role in partnership with youth to prevent violence. They wanted influential adults such as parents, teachers, and counselors to be more involved in their lives. This recommendation may be contrary to stereotypical beliefs that adults hold about adolescents being rebellious, defiant, and anti-authority (Farkas & Johnson, 1997). While some youth may in fact feel this way, the students in this study suggested they wanted more adult guidance.

Young people often need adults to perform a variety of tasks. In some cases, a parent must legally be present and/or give their child permission to perform certain tasks such as driving a car. Children may also look to their parents for guidance on life choices. In a study on parent-child communication, Richardson (2004) found that the majority of the youth sample wanted to ask their parents questions on a wide range of topics. Adults can also provide vital social support and connect youth to other influential adults. Research, for example, suggests that parent social support can reduce the risk for violent behavior among young males (Brookmeyer, Henrich & Schwab-Stone, 2005). Other studies show that youth who are connected to adults with access to resources can increase their social capital (Jarrett, Sullivan & Watkins, 2005; Lerner et al., 2005; Zeldin, 2004). Adults can expand youth's social networks by exposing them to other

influential adults. In a study of youth-adult partnerships for organizational governance, Zeldin (2004) found that when youth made presentations on behalf of the organizations, they were exposed to key adult leaders. When youth have established relationships with positive adults in their lives, they increase their ability to consult adults for prosocial needs such as recommendation letters, job opportunities, and apprenticeships.

An emerging field of research is beginning to investigate the positive youth and community development benefits that can be gained from youth-adult partnerships (Camino, 2005; Camino, 2000; Ginwright, Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006; Wilson et al., 2006; Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). Researchers are finding that youth-adult partnerships that aim to strengthen youth assets can reduce problem behaviors associated with youth violence (e.g. Larson, 2005). Furthermore, Wong, Zimmerman, and Parker (under review) suggest egalitarian youth-adult partnerships that encourage empowerment are optimal for positive youth development. They argue that a co-learning approach between youth and adults can elicit optimal youth and community benefit. That is, youth and communities can be empowered when youth collaborate with adults in a democratic manner where all voices are heard and honored. Youth benefit from adult guidance and wisdom, and can build social skills, competence, self-efficacy, and a sense of control when they make meaning contributions. In turn, the community also gains from the increased intergenerational connection between youth and adults. Several current best practices recognize the value of increasing adult involvement with youth. Five of the eleven *Blueprints* model programs recommended as effective by the CSPV (2006) involve the actively building stronger relationships between youth and adults.

It is not enough, however, for adults to just be more involved. The degree and quality of adult involvement can affect youth development. Adults do not necessarily need to take active roles to influence youth behavior. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory suggests young people take cues in their own behavioral choices from adults in their lives. Youth observe adults and learn about the consequences of behavioral choices. Youth who are exposed to adults who are violent often in turn become violent. Likewise, adults who exhibit prosocial behaviors often teach prosocial behavior by example. Youth in this study recommended that violence prevention approaches should build upon providing positive adult role models. They described needing caring adult role models and suggested that youth could also be role models for their peers and younger kids.

One of the Blueprints programs, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, has taken the role modeling approach to create a renowned youth-adult mentoring program. Screened adults are matched with youth, six to eighteen years old, in a supervised mentoring relationship. Using an quasi-experimental design, evaluation outcomes suggested that youth in the program were less likely to engage in violence, violence related behaviors like drug and alcohol use, and more likely to have improved academics and higher quality relationships with peers and adults (McGill, Mihalic, & Grotzinger, 1998). This program, however, focuses on role modeling or the mentoring relationship between youth and adults. As suggested by youth in this study, other violence prevention programs using this approach may want to explore a model that builds upon a peer-to-peer or an older youth-to-younger youth mentoring model.

Another approach youth recommended to prevent youth violence was using spirituality and religion. Several youth suggested that their own spirituality protected

them from being involved in violence. They also recommended that prayer and religion for others who were involved in or thinking about violence could be a deterrent for future youth violence. This spiritual/religious approach to violence prevention is not widely investigated. Furthermore, Sussman et al. (2005) found that spirituality was neither a predictor nor a protective factor for youth violence. In contrast, Barkin, Kreiter, and DuRant (2001) found that church attendance decreased intention to use violence among early adolescents. Future research may contribute to further unpacking the relationship between spirituality/religion and youth violence.

In addition, churches are a common site for community intervention programming with African Americans. Although it was not possible for me to determine racial composition, this sample was drawn from the Flint public schools, which are 80 percent African American. Violence prevention programming in churches and other faith-based institutions may be a fruitful site for intervention as suggested by youth in this study. While faith-based organizations may not attract those youth who are most heavily involved in violence, young people who attend these services may be the type who would readily endorse and benefit from violence prevention using a spiritual or religious approach.

#### Programmatic Strategies

Prevention programs are the most common violence intervention strategy found in the literature, thus, it is not surprising these themes made up the second largest category recommended by youth in this study. The students suggested that there was a need for more programs in the community and after school to keep young people busy and engaged in fun positive activities. They also suggested that by keeping busy youth would

not have enough idle time to get into trouble. Research on youth involvement in extracurricular activities suggests that those youth who participate are less violent, engage in less problem behaviors, and are more likely to be well-adjusted adults (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005). Furthermore, violent juvenile crime occurs most often between the after school hours between three and six o'clock (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Providing more programming during this time and in young people's neighborhoods can also provide a supervised and safe alternative to the streets.

Several youth also suggested specific types of programming such as conflict resolution/social skills building, motivational speaking, and neighborhood block watches. Four of the eleven Blueprints model programs include some aspect of conflict resolution or social skills building (2006). Specifically, The Life Skills Training and Olweus Bullying Prevention Programs are interventions that focus on middle school aged youth. The Life Skills Training program focuses on self-control, positive social interactions, and negotiating drug refusal. Program outcomes suggest that substance use was reduced in program participants by fifty to seventy-five percent (Botvin, Mihalic, & Grotper, 1998). Furthermore, the same youth in this study suggested that substance use and drug culture were major sources of youth violence (Zimmerman et al., 2004). The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program provides social skills building and intervention for students identified as bullies and victims in addition to implementing classroom and school-wide components. Findings suggest a significant reduction in bullying and victimization among students (Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999).

Youth in this study made two recommendations that are not included as effective program strategies in Blueprints: motivational speaking and block watches. To widen the scope, a literature search on these two programmatic strategies also yielded no results. While the number of youth who mentioned block watches was low (n=7), several youth identified motivational speaking as a way to prevent violence. Future research and program developers may want to explore the viability of motivational speaking as an intervention strategy. While not explicitly articulated by the youth in this study, it is plausible that the desire for motivational speaking may be linked to a need for empowerment. For youth who are exposed to high levels of violence, motivational speaking may foster inner strength in similar ways to spirituality/religion. Whether listening to a message, being inspired by a speech, or giving the motivational message, youth are focused on a positive vision that transcends the violent circumstances they face. Positive visioning can lead to positive action and by diffusion the likelihood increases that others will join in. In addition, considerations may also be made for the type of venues where motivational speeches occur. These types of events can be designed with intention to be held at community forums, community-based organization meetings, and policy hearings. Holding events in these types of arenas is consistent with youths' recommendations about adult involvement, positive role models, coming together, and listening to youth voice. Thus, while this strategy is not widely explored in the research literature, it encompasses several recommendations the youth wrote about and warrants further investigation.

### Policy

A youth recommended strategy type that is also not included in the vast majority of youth violence prevention reviews is policy. A substantial number of youth suggested that increased gun control (some recommended banning weapons altogether), stricter legislation, violence prevention advocacy, and improving community resources could have a positive effect on youth violence. Few studies have been able to effectively determine the effect of policy on youth violence rates specifically. Research on gun control legislation, for example, suggests that these policies only slightly reduced homicide rates among elderly adults (Leenaars & Lester, 2001; Ludwig & Cook, 2000). These studies, however, do not take under age minors into account and, thus, research in this area needs to be expanded. In addition, other gun control research supports that this level of intervention may potentially benefit the whole community. Yurk et al. (2001), for example, found that the Oregon Ceasefire program was able to sustain a six year gun buy back program and that removed over 4,000 guns off the streets.

On the other hand, research suggests stricter school security policies (e.g. use of metal detectors) are gaining popularity, despite findings that suggest these measures are more effective at creating disorder rather than increasing safety (Mayer & Leone, 1999). In a previous study with the same study sample, I found that youth reported mixed feelings about metal detectors. Some young people suggested that the detectors were a necessity for school security. Several other youth, however, described that the inconsistent use of metal detectors deterred from their efficacy, students found ways to get around them, and that when they were used the elicited feelings of powerlessness.

Despite the limited and mixed research findings in this area, youth in this study suggested that policy was an important aspect to consider in violence prevention. This



recommendation is consistent with developmental theory such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development (see Muuss [1962] 1996). In the socioecological model, youth are connected to several systems of influence including the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems. Policy is a critical function at every level with the exception of the microsystem. Within the meso- and exo-systems, for example, a policy setting institution may be school. Because young people spend a large portion of their days at school, policies within this institution may have bearing on consequences for prevention. Policies set by local government may also influence violence prevention in communities. Local zoning codes, for example, may hinder or promote businesses that either deter or attract a violent clientele (e.g. grocery vs liquor stores). Finally, the macro-system may encompass policies that affect violence related factors at the state and federal level such as gun policy. Therefore, policy has the potential to affect youth violence at several different levels.

While some students wrote about the need for violence prevention policy, many others also described a desire to be actively involved in policy setting. They talked about writing letters to organizations and petitioning legislators for youth violence prevention. An emerging area of research that should be considered examines the benefits of youth participation in policy setting and organizational governance. Recent studies in this area are beginning to suggest that involving youth in policymaking can encourage both positive youth and community development (Badham, 2004; Checkoway et al., 2005; Meucci & Redmon, 1997; Tisdall & Davis, 2004; S. Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003).

### Barrier

A small subgroup of youth suggested that nothing could be done to prevent violence. While this is not a recommended strategy, I thought it would be critical for violence prevention practitioners to be aware that some youth do not believe violence prevention is possible. In this study, many of these youth condemned youth violence, but were hopeless that anything could be done. Any efforts to get these youth involved in violence intervention may be especially challenging. For these young people, an interpersonal or partnership rather than an individual skills building approach might be more effective. In a partnership approach, the level of hopelessness could be reduced if youth are exposed to caring peers and adults whom are all working towards the same goal.

### **Limitations**

Although this study provides unique insight on the perspectives of young peoples ideas about violence prevention, it does have limitations. The data set I used was secondary text gathered from a national essay contest. Due to the secondary nature, I was limited to the two demographic variables that were available (i.e. gender and school). In addition, to protect the confidentiality of the student essay participants, I was not able to follow up and ask further clarifying questions. These constraints restricted my ability to gain an understanding of whether the essays captured the students' true authentic voices. Another limitation is that this study includes middle school student perspectives from Flint, Michigan. The students that participated in the essay contest represented a small proportion of Flint middle school student population. The youth who chose to participate in the contest may represent a certain view that is unique in comparison to students who did not participate. Thus the findings in this study may not be generalizable to other Flint

middle school students nor youth from other geographic areas. Future research in this area could explore youth perspectives with a diverse sample of young people to further understand how social indicators such as race, age, and socio-economic status may play a role in determining their views. In addition, youth views on more specific types of approaches, programs, and policies could provide further insight into what may make some efforts more successful than others for youth.

### **Implications**

Individual youth in this study made specific recommendations for violence prevention. As a collective, however, their body of violence prevention strategies suggests that practitioners ought to consider how to combine or cut across themes. Youth, for example, suggested that interventions need to focus on building inner strength through spirituality, religion and motivational speaking. They were also highly concerned about how interventions are approached, specifically, involving more caring adults who will listen. Community and after school programming was described as a formal way for increasing interaction with adults and acquiring prosocial skills. Finally, policy and youth participation in policy setting was a structural level intervention recommendation. Together these various strategies can be combined in a comprehensive violence prevention design. Photovoice is among the many possibilities that could be an example of such a design.

Photovoice is a grassroots documentary photography method that combines art with community activism. Coined by Wang and Burris (1997), the method is based on Freirian and feminist principles of raising critical consciousness through participatory assessment and action. The method consists of phased approach where community

members hold critical dialogue about the assets and deficits in their neighborhoods, take photographs and write essays interpret these themes, and advocate for change to influential policymakers. Photovoice is appealing to use in partnership with young people because they are often attracted to opportunities that engage them with expressive and creative mediums.

Photovoice addresses the recommendations youth in this study made on several different levels. A Photovoice project, for example, could be designed to begin with youth-adult dialogues about community assets and issues that relate to violence. Following, a collective youth-adult partnership could be formed to take photos and write interpretive essays about the themes that emerged from the dialogues. Then the photos and their essays can be used to advocate to policymakers and the media for violence prevention. By collaborating with youth, adult involvement is increased. In all phases of the process, adults can also create a safe space for youth to express and work out their problems. Collaborating also allows youth and adults alike opportunities to work together to build social skills, self-control and conflict resolution. In addition, the project can be held in conjunction with faith-based organizations or include faith or spirituality as part of the process. Advocating to policy makers includes aspects of motivational speaking and both involve youth in agenda setting and could potentially create policy change. As such, it is feasible for one method to incorporate a number of violence prevention recommendations youth in this study support.

### **Conclusion**

This study provides a youth-driven perspective on youth violence prevention. I found that youth in this study were much more concerned about how intervention is

approached rather than actual prevention programs. These findings shed light on why many youth may be involved in a number of prevention activities, but have found them to be ineffective (Freudenberg et al., 1999). Practitioners and researchers should carefully consider the effective strategies that are evaluated in the literature with an understanding that youth may participate more if the right approach is used. In addition, the collective narrative of youth in this study suggests that violence prevention should be comprehensive and encompass a wide range of strategies. Youth also expressed wanting to be actively involved in preventing violence and that they needed the help of adults. Young people also tell us that adults cannot and should not do it alone. By listening to young people's voices, we not only add a missing perspective to discourse, but we also recognize that youth can make important contributions to violence prevention. Providing youth opportunities to collaborate with caring adults, voice their opinions, and contribute their ideas helps to empower both young people and the communities within which they reside.

## References

- Badham, B. (2004). Participation--for a change: Disabled young people lead the way. *Children & Society, 18*, 143-154.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social Learning Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Barkin, S., Kreiter, S. & DuRant, R.H. (2001). Exposure to violence and intentions to engage in moralistic violence during early adolescence. *Journal of Adolescence, 24*, 777-789.
- Bartko, W. T., & Eccles, J. S. (2003). Adolescent participation in structured and unstructured activities: A person-oriented analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 32*(4), 233-241.
- Bennett, S., Coggan, C., & Adams, P. (2003). Problematising depression: Young people, mental health and suicidal behaviours. *Social Science & Medicine, 57*(2), 289-299.
- Blum, R. W. M. (1998). Healthy development as a model for youth health promotion. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 22*, 368-375.
- Botvin, G. J., Mihalic, S. F., & Grotmeter, J. K. (1998). Life skills training: Blueprints for violence prevention. In D. S. Elliot (Ed.). Boulder, CO: Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence.

- Brookmeyer, K.A., Henrich, C.C. & Schwab-Stone, M. (2005). Adolescents who witness community violence: Can parent support and prosocial cognitions protect them from committing violence? *Child Development, 76* (4), 917-929.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2006). *Local Area Unemployment Statistics*. Retrieved 5/2006 from <http://www.bls.gov/lau/home.htm>
- Call, K. T., Riedel, A. A., Hein, K., McLoyd, V., Peterson, A., & Kipke, M. (2002). Adolescent health and well-being in the twenty-first century: A global perspective. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 12*(1), 69-98.
- Camino, L. A. (2005). Pitfalls and promising practices of youth-adult partnerships: An evaluator's reflections. *Journal of Community Psychology, 33*(1), 75-85.
- Camino, L. A. (2000). Youth-adult partnerships: Entering new territory in community work and research. *Applied Developmental Science, 4*(Suppl. 1), 11-20.
- Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence. (2006). *Blueprints Model Program Descriptions.*, 2008, from [www.colorado.edu/cspv](http://www.colorado.edu/cspv)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2004). *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance* No. 53 (SS02).
- Chavez, V. (1998). *Youth Radio: Broadcasting Violence Prevention*. (No. 6). Berkley, CA: Berkley Media Studies Group.

- Checkoway, B. N., Allison, T., & Montoya, C. (2005). Youth participation in public policy at the municipal level. *Children and Youth Services Review, 27*(10), 1149-1162.
- Eccles, J. S., Barber, B. L., Stone, M., & Hunt, J. (2003). Extracurricular activities and adolescent development. *Journal of Social Issues, 59*(4), 865-889.
- Eccles, J. S., & Gootman, J. A. (2002). *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Evans, S. D. (2007). Youth sense of community: Voice and power in community contexts. *Journal of Community Psychology, 35*(6), 693-709.
- Farkas, S., & Johnson, J. (1997). *Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation*. Washington, DC: Public Agenda.
- Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2001). *Uniform Crime Report for 2001: Index of Crime by State and Metropolitan Statistical Area.*, 2003, from <http://www.fbi.gov.proxy.lib.umich.edu>
- Fine, M., Freudenberg, N., Payne, Y., Perkins, T., Smith, K., & Wanzer, K. (2003). "Anything can happen with police around": Urban youth evaluate strategies of surveillance in public places. *Journal of Social Issues, 59*(1), 141-158.
- Finn, J. L. (2001). *Text and turbulence: Representing adolescence as pathology in the human services*. *Childhood, 8*(2), 167-191.



- Fredricks, J. A., & Eccles, J. S. (2005). Developmental benefits of extracurricular involvement: Do peer characteristics mediate the link between activities and youth outcomes? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *34*(6), 507-520.
- Freudenberg, N., Roberts, L., Richie, B. E., Taylor, R. T., McGillicuddy, K., & Greene, M. B. (1999). Coming up in the boogie down: The role of violence in the lives of adolescents in the South Bronx. *Health Education & Behavior*, *26*(6), 788-805.
- Furstenberg, F. F. (2000). The sociology of adolescence and youth in the 1990s: A critical commentary. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *62*, 896-910.
- Ginwright, S. A. On urban ground: Understanding african-american intergenerational partnerships in urban communities. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *33*(1), 101-110.
- Jarrett, R.L., Sullivan, P.J. & Watkins, N.D. (2005). Developing social capital through participation in organized youth programs: Qualitative insights from three programs. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *33* (1), 41-55.
- Jennings, L. B., Parra-Medina, D. M., Messias, D. K., & McLoughlin, K. (2006). Toward a critical social theory of youth empowerment. *Journal of Community Practice*, *14*(1/2), 31-55.
- Larson, R. (2005). A comparison of youth-driven and adult-driven youth programs: Balancing inputs from youth and adults. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *33* (1), 57-74.

- Leenaars, A. A., & Lester, D. (2001). The impact of gun control (bill C-51) on homicide in Canada. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 29(4), 287-294.
- Lerner, R.M., Almerigi, J.B., Theokas, C. & Lerner, J.V. (2005). Positive youth development – A view of the issues. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 25 (1), 10-16.
- Ludwig, J., & Cook, P. J. (2000). Homicide and suicide rates associated with implementation of the brady handgun violence prevention act. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 284(5), 585-591.
- Mankowski, E. S., & Rappaport, J. (2000). Narrative concepts and analysis in spiritually-based communities. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 28(5), 479-493.
- Mayer, M. J., & Leone, P. E. (1999). A structural analysis of school violence and disruptions: Implications for creating safer schools. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 22(3), 333-356.
- McCubbin, M. (2001). Pathways to health, illness and well-being: From the perspective of power and control. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 11(2), 75-81.
- McGill, D. E., Mihalic, S. F., & Grotzinger, J. K. (1998). Big brothers big sisters of America: Blueprints for violence prevention, book two. In D. S. Elliott (Ed.), *Blueprints for Violence Prevention*. Boulder, CO: Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence.

Meucci, S., & Redmon, J. (1997). Safe spaces: California children enter a policy debate. *Social Justice*, 24(3), 139-151.

Michigan State Police. (2005). *2005 Uniform Crime Report.*, 2006, from [http://www.michigan.gov/msp/0,1607,7-123-1645\\_3501\\_4621-156389--,00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/msp/0,1607,7-123-1645_3501_4621-156389--,00.html)

Millstein, S. G. (1993). A view of health from the adolescent's perspective. In S. G. Millstein, A. C. Petersen & E. O. Nightingale (Eds.), *Promoting the Health of Adolescents: New Directions for the Twenty-first Century* (pp. 97-118). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Mitra, D. L. (2004). The significance of students: Can increasing "student voice" in schools lead to gains in youth development? *Teachers College Record*, 106(4), 651-688.

Morgan Quinto Press. (2006). *Morgan Quinto Awards: 13th Annual America's Safest (and Most Dangerous) Cities.*, 2007, from <http://www.morganquitno.com/cit07pop.htm>

Morrill, C., Yalda, C., Adelman, M., Musheno, M., & Bejarano, C. (2000). Telling tales in school: Youth culture and conflict narratives. *Law & Society Review*, 34(3), 521-565.

Muuss, R.E. ([1962] 1996). Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective of human development. (pp. 312-338). *Theories of Adolescence*. (6<sup>th</sup> Edition). New York, NY: McGraw Hill Companies.

- Olweus, D., Limber, S., & Mihalic, S. F. (1999). Bullying prevention program: Blueprints for violence prevention. In D. S. Elliott (Ed.). Boulder, CO: Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence.
- Phelan, P., Yu, H. C., & Davidson, A. L. (1994). Navigating the psychosocial pressures of adolescence: The voices and experiences of high school youth. *American Educational Research Journal*, 31(2), 415-447.
- Rappaport, J., & Simkins, R. (1992). Healing and empowering through community narrative. In K. I. Pargament, K. I. Maton & R. Hess (Eds.), *Religion and Prevention in Mental Health: Research, Vision, and Action* (pp. 215-236). New York, NY: Haworth.
- Rappaport, J. (2000). Community narratives: Tales of terror and joy. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 28(1), 1-24.
- Rappaport, J. (1995). Empowerment meets narrative: Listening to stories and creating settings. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), 795.
- Snyder, H. M., & Sickmund, M. (2006). *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency.
- Sussman, S., Skara, S., De Calice, P., Hoffman, B., & Dent, C. W. (2005). Spirituality as a 1-year prospective predictor of violence perpetration and drug use among youth at continuation high schools. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 35(1), 80-99.

- Thornton, T. N., Craft, C. A., Dahlberg, L. L., Lynch, B. S., & Baer, K. (2002). *Best Practices of Youth Violence Prevention: A Sourcebook for Community Action (Revised)*. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Tisdall, E. K. M., & Davis, J. (2004). Making a difference? Bringing children's and young people's views into policy-making. *Children & Society, 18*, 131-142.
- U.S. Census. (2000). *Flint City, Michigan., 2007*, from <http://factfinder.census.gov/>
- Wang, C.C. & Burris, M. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education and Behavior, 24 (3)*, 369-387.
- Weiler, R. M. (1997). Adolescents' perceptions of health concerns: An exploratory study among rural Midwestern youth. *Health Education & Behavior, 24(3)*, 287-299.
- Williams, K., Rivera, L., Neighbours, R., & Reznik, V. (2007). Youth violence prevention comes of age: Research, training, and future directions. *Annual Review of Public Health, 28(195)*, 211.
- Wilson, N., Minkler, M., Dasho, S., Carrillo, R., Wallerstein, N., & Garcia, D. (2006). Student facilitators and collaborative teams for participation: Training students as facilitators in the youth empowerment strategies (YES!) project. *Journal of Community Practice, 14(1/2)*, 201-217.
- Wong, N. T., Zimmerman, M. A., & Parker, E. (under review). A typology of youth participation and empowerment for adolescent health promotion. *American Journal of Community Psychology*.

- Yurk, R., Jaramillo, L., Erwin, L. L., & Rendleman, N. J. (2001). Educating the community about violence through a gun turn-in program. *Journal of Community Health, 26*(5), 331-344.
- Zeldin, S. (2004). Youth as agents of adult and community development: Mapping the process and outcomes of youth engaged in organizational governance. *Applied Developmental Science, 8* (2), 75-90.
- Zeldin, S., Camino, L., & Mook, C. (2005). The adoption of innovation in youth organizations: Creating the conditions for youth-adult partnerships. *Journal of Community Psychology, 33*(1), 121-135.
- Zeldin, S., Camino, L., & Calvert, M. (2003). *Toward an Understanding of Youth in Community Governance: Policy Priorities and Research Directions*. (No. 3). Ann Arbor, MI: Society for Research in Child Development.
- Zimmerman, M. A., Morrel-Samuels, S., Wong, N., Tarver, D., Rabiah, D., & White, S. (2004). Guns, gangs, and gossip: An analysis of student essays on youth violence. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 24*(4), 385-411.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

The unifying theme of this dissertation is youth voice and violence. Youth voice can be described as young people taking an active role in sharing their perspectives on assets, problems, and potential solutions. I chose to focus my analysis on youth voice because I found that their perspectives were missing in the very literature that was constructed to serve them. Within the vast majority of this literature, youth were the topic of discourse and the targets of intervention, yet their voices were silenced within the texts. I did, however, find a few exceptions. A number of researchers are beginning to recognize the empowering potential that lies within youth contributions and are starting to conduct studies that both highlight youth perspectives and investigate positive development outcomes of youth participation. While this is a turn in the right direction, much of this research does not focus on the voices of inner city youth, youth of color, or gender—despite these various social intersections being those that represent the young people who are most silenced. It was for these reasons that the focus of my two empirical papers is on the voices of youth in Flint, Michigan. To begin, however, I needed to lay the groundwork for my orientation to violence prevention more generally.

#### **Summary of the Three Papers**

I used the first paper to delineate my conceptual thinking regarding how youth participation, positive youth development and empowerment can contribute to the prevention of youth violence. To understand current research in this area I reviewed

relevant epidemiology, theory, and studies regarding youth violence, youth development, empowerment, and participation. Building on this literature review, I developed a five-dimensional typology that distinguishes varying degrees of youth participation. The typology is intended to be a heuristic for understanding and guiding efforts that empower youth and support their participation. It was not designed to be a rigid framework, but rather is to be used as a device to challenge investigators and practitioners when developing research questions and youth programs. Furthermore, my intention for the typology is to contribute a health-promoting framework that assists in articulating different ways young people and adults can partner and how these dynamics affect youth and community development. By also using an empowerment framework, the TYPE Pyramid identifies which participation types may be most useful at enhancing the strengths of youth rather than focusing on problems. These participation types reveal where youth voices are valued and where their contributions may be most meaningful.

In my second paper, I argue that the social positioning of youth, their conceptions of power, and perceptions of their own power play an integral role motivating some youth towards or against violence. To support my argument, I used youth narratives to explore how they wrote about power and violence in their lives. This qualitative analysis of their voices gave me a sense of the various meanings they attached to their lived experiences. First, I found that a small subgroup of youth conceptualized power quite similar to theoretical concepts found in the literature. Most students, however, were less explicit about their conceptualization of power and how it related to violence. It was therefore imperative that I adopt a more grounded theory approach. By switching to this approach, I was able to get a sense of the collective story that emerged from the



narratives. I found that, indeed, youth were experiencing various levels of power depending on their orientation. This understanding led me to develop a conceptual model of the levels of power they described.

Several pathways are encapsulated in this model; however, it is the power posturing pathway that explains youth violence perpetration. This pathway suggests that environment stressors such as lack of opportunity, stigma and physical surroundings lead youth to posture for *power over* others. Power posturing emerged through themes regarding coolness, reputation, peer pressure, materialism, gangs, retaliation, and self-defense. I found that in the description of these themes youth appeared to be attempting to gain power over self or to exert control over others. Youth explained that violence was intricately tied to these themes and used as an implement to dominate and gain status. I also found that it was possible for these young people to have actual *power over* others in their immediate micro-social systems, but also be powerless in broader society or the macro-social system at the same time. These competing notions of power reinforce youth to remain engaged in the power posturing. That is, the powerlessness one may experience at the macro-level encourages one to posture for power at the micro-level. Additionally, the rewards of reverence and increased status that can be reaped from power over at the micro-level further encourage violent power posturing.

Two other pathways also emerged from the data. Youth who described internalizing environmental stressors wrote about being powerless from both fear and a sense of hopelessness. These young people were viewed as weak and powerless by their peers and, because of their lack of self-agency and low social status, they remained powerless at the macro-level. Another group of youth wrote about ways they resisted

their marginalized status. They called for adults to listen to their voices and used religion and spirituality as a means for gaining *power with*. These youth drew upon power with their peers and adults at the micro-level and were therefore empowered at the macro-level. This multilevel model suggests that youth experience power in a variety of forms. Implications from this study suggest that violence prevention efforts should build upon the resilient factors youth identified to encourage power with and empowerment.

Finally, for the third paper, I examined the same narratives to ascertain youth-identified strategies on youth violence prevention. I evaluated youth responses to the third question they were asked to address in the essay contest: What can I do about youth violence? I used inductive methods to gain understanding of what the students identified as solutions for violence. From this analysis, I found that sixteen themes that represented four broader categories emerged. The sixteen themes in the order of highest to lowest frequency consisted of 1) adult involvement, 2) community programs, 3) motivational speaking, 4) partnerships “come together”, 5) conflict resolution/social skills building, 6) parent involvement, 7) gun control, 8) positive role modeling, 9) advocacy, 10) spirituality/religion, 11) policy, 12) listen to youth, 13) nothing can be done, 14) after school programs, 15) improve community resources, and 16) block watch. The four overarching categories that captured these themes were approach, program, policy, and barrier. By far, approach and programs were the most frequently mentioned solutions given by youth. This finding is consistent with the literature that emphasizes programs versus policy or other strategies for youth violence prevention. Youth, however, suggested they were more concerned with intervention approaches rather than types of intervention programs. Young people wrote about wanting interventions that

included adult and parent involvement, religion/spirituality, and youth voice. The desire for more adult involvement is consistent with emerging research that suggests that youth-adult partnerships that address community matters may be optimal for youth and community development.

### **Issues to Consider**

My first paper presents a typology of youth participation and empowerment for youth violence prevention. In the paper I argue that the optimal youth-adult arrangement for positive youth development and empowerment is one where the relationship is egalitarian. What is not depicted in the model is how participation for some youth populations may present different challenges. Many low-income youth, for example, have to take on more responsibilities than their more privileged counterparts. While the ability for all youth to participate may be ideal, it may be an unfair ask of those youth who must, for example, work to help support their families or take care of younger siblings in their spare time. For some communities, the unsafe conditions of the neighborhood may also be a deterrent for both youth and adult participation in community matters. This issue is rarely discussed in the literature and ought to be carefully considered when engaging in youth-adult partnership building. In addition, the typology may need to shift in one direction or another to accommodate youth at different developmental stages. For example, younger adolescents may benefit more, in terms of empowerment and development, from youth-adult partnerships on the middle to left hand side of the pyramid—i.e. those partnerships with more adult control. Whereas, the optimal arrangement for older youth may need to trend towards the right hand side of the pyramid where there is more youth rather than adult control. The developmental

application of the model and complexities that come along with youth at various socioeconomic intersections are not depicted in the typology. Future research may consider how these issues affect the variable outcomes of youth-adult partnerships.

Furthermore, using qualitative methods in the empirical papers to explore youth voice was ideal to capture their ideas and maintain the integrity of their perspectives. My studies were, however, limited by my own potential bias as an adult researcher and the secondary nature of the data. Before conducting the analyses, I was concerned about what I could consider authentic voice. For the second paper, I wondered if my interpretation of their ideas on power were tainted by my preconceptions of how I saw power functioning. In my third paper, I questioned whether the solutions to youth violence that the students were recommending were really their own ideas or merely a regurgitation of the prevention strategies they were familiar with or if they were presenting a perspective cloaked in the language and ideas they thought adults in their lives would want to hear.

In an effort to address these issues, I conducted two *member check* focus groups with a group of Flint middle school students who were demographically similar to the youth in the two studies. What I found was that the youth in the focus groups confirmed the majority of my findings. I believe that this conclusion rested on my use of their voices and inductive methods. Had I approached each analysis with a set of a priori assumptions, I do not believe I would have been able to reach the same conclusions. In addition, a strong theme that emerged from the focus groups was that youth want adults to be more involved and listen to what young people have to say. This theme is both consistent with the focus of this dissertation and findings that emerged from the two

studies.

### **Directions for Future Research**

A unifying theme that emerged from my findings was the potential utility of youth-adult partnerships in positive development and youth violence prevention. In both the second and third papers, youth suggested that adult involvement was necessary to experience *power with*. Further, adult and parent involvement were among the themes that were most recommended by youth as solutions to prevent violence. These findings are consistent with the typology of youth participation and empowerment that I proposed. Research on the empowering potential of youth-adult partnerships, however, is still in its infancy. While many of the studies in this area are exploratory, researchers are beginning to systematically link youth participation in decision making with adults to positive youth and community development outcomes. Future directions for this research may include understanding the characteristics of adults that are optimal for youth adult partnerships; exploring how responsibilities and contributions are negotiated between youth and adults; uncovering how different stages of development may benefit from the youth adult partnership arrangements depicted in the TYPE Pyramid typology; and exploring how application of the typology may differ for youth at different levels of socioeconomic status.

Moreover, future studies on power and youth violence may delve deeper into how power may be conceptualized and personal power status may be perceived differentially by youth at various intersections of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. I found no gender differences in the expressed power and violence in the students' essays; yet, this null finding is consistent with a closing gap in the violence rates between girls and boys.

The secondary nature of the data did not allow me to ask specific questions that may be related to a gendered experience with violence and power. Future research may further explore how girls specifically may use different forms of violence and aggression to gain power.

Another way the second paper can be expanded is to test the conceptual model quantitatively. Future studies may, for example, assess the practical utility of the model by testing the pathways using structural equation modeling (SEM). Significant pathways in the model may reveal potential areas for intervention research. Without SEM, the model still possesses implications for intervention research. Youth in the study identified environmental stressors as a cause of a young persons choice to engage in power posturing, internalizing, or resilience. Efforts that focus on eliminating these stressors have potential to reduce their effect as environmental factors that require a negative behavioral or cognitive response. Interventions in this area, however, may require multi-level systemic change where macro-levels strategies may appear more distal from youth violence.

The model in the second paper also supports the idea of exploring the health promoting potential of resilience and empowerment. Both approaches emphasize assets; however, resilience approaches may be criticized because they assume that adversity must be present. Alternatively, an empowerment approach solely focuses on assets and, therefore, can be applied across contexts whether barriers do or do not exist. This approach shifts the paradigm from a) understanding how problems are buffered among some because of resilience to b) how health may be promoted for all through empowerment. Thus, theoretically, empowerment has the potential to affect change in a

broader range of contexts.

As such, more intervention research is needed to explore the potential benefits of applying *power with* approaches and empowering strategies to youth violence prevention. As articulated in my third paper, Photovoice is an example of an empowering approach that encompasses a wide range of the strategies youth recommended for violence prevention. Other examples of these types of approaches include community gardens and media literacy.

While community gardens do not address youth violence directly, they offer an opportunity to engage youth in a health promoting activity that changes the physical landscape of communities using a *power with* approach. Gardening is health promoting by both increasing access to fresh produce and requiring physical activity. Community gardens are often planted in outside public spaces, which can increase the presence of prosocial activity within neighborhoods. In addition, gardening is an activity that a wide range of ages can participate in and thus creates opportunities to build intergenerational relationships. It is also possible to scale up community gardens to empower communities at the next level. The urban farm movement is beginning to gain traction and some of these farms also incorporate social programs that are geared towards empowering the communities they serve. Growing Power (2008), is an example of an urban farm whose mission is aimed at food security in the Milwaukee and Chicago area, but they also partner with communities on entrepreneurial gardens and offer low-income youth long-term apprenticeships to build academic and professional skills. The community garden or urban farm are an example of an approach that can offer youth and communities empowering alternatives to engage in health promoting activities instead of violent crime.

Another potentially empowering approach that can be further explored is media literacy. As suggested by another study using the same youth as in this sample, violent media was viewed by youth as a major cause of violence (Zimmerman et al., 2004). As technology advances, the number of mediums through which media can be accessed increases. Youth can be exposed to media in several formats including television, magazines, newspapers, advertisements, the internet, radio, digital audio players and cell phones. Along with an increase in the number of media mediums, also comes increased access to participate in creating media. Media literacy, however, requires an understanding of how media messages are created and consumed. Professional and lay adults can collaborate with community youth to increase media literacy, foster critical awareness of how media functions, and support youth generated media. An example of a longstanding media literacy project is Youth Radio (Chavez, 1998). In Youth Radio, young people learn from professional adults the technical and creative aspects of producing a radio show and then collaborate to produce their own shows. A wide range of topics that are relevant to youth can be addressed such as youth violence, which has been done by this group in the past. A media literacy project can be empowering because it builds skills, critical awareness, allows for participatory action, and encourages youth voice.

Lastly, studies that expand upon findings in my third paper might further explore how youth from different regions of the country view violence prevention. Practitioners may also gain further insight on the relevance of specific violence prevention efforts if youth are engaged in qualitative process evaluation where their voices are valued. In addition, youth in this study mentioned prevention strategies, such as spirituality,



motivational speaking, and block clubs, which do not commonly appear in the research literature. Future intervention studies on these strategies may shed light on their potential benefits.

Overall, this series of papers contributes to several areas of adolescent research including positive youth development, youth participation, youth-adult partnerships, empowerment, youth voice, power, and violence prevention. These areas of research have promising potential to build on youth and community assets to not only prevent problems like violence, but also encourage health. We know from past research that when youth are given a platform to express their voices, they not only describe the ways that adults control and construct their worlds, but they also suggest that they want us to work with them to empower us all. Let us heed their call.

## References

- Chavez, V. (1998). *Youth Radio: Broadcasting violence prevention*. Issue 6. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Media Studies Group.
- Growing Power (2008). *Together we are Growing Power: Milwaukee, Chicago. . .or your own community*. From <http://www.growingpower.org/index.htm>
- Zimmerman, M.A., Morrel-Samuels, S., Wong, N.T., Tarver, D.B., Rabiah, D. & White, S. (2004). Guns, gangs and gossip: An analysis of student essays on violence. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 24 (4), 385-411.

## APPENDIX

### SEMI-STRUCTURED FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

This guide is formatted in the following manner. Sample opening dialogue for the moderator is written in italics. Content areas that were covered by the moderator are divided by subheadings and the central guiding questions are numbered. Potential follow-up questions are indented and were be posed at the discretion of the moderator.

#### Opener Questions

1) So, I've heard that most of you have been with YES for at least a year, some of you two years. Can you all tell me why you are involved with YES?

- a. How do you think your involvement in YES affects your neighborhoods?
- b. In what ways might the things you guys do in YES prevent youth violence?

#### Youth Violence Prevention

2) What are other ways you think youth violence can be prevented?

- a. Many people form their opinions based on a number of different sources. For example, your parents, teachers, media, life experiences, your own critical thoughts, and interacting with other people may influence the way you form opinions. What influenced how you came up with your opinions about violence prevention?
- b. In my research I've found that some of your peers ideas about violence prevention are [insert examples violence prevention findings here]. What

do you think about these ideas?

### Power

- 3) Some people think that using violence can help people get power. What do you think about that?
- a. Can a person or people have power without violence? What are some examples of this?
  - b. I've heard people say that adults have more power than youth. What do you think about that?
    - i. Are there ways that power is different for different people? For example, what about people of different races?
    - ii. What about between males and females?
  - c. What does power mean to you?
  - d. Earlier I mentioned that many people form their opinions based on a number of different sources. For example, your parents, teachers, media, life experiences, your own critical thoughts, and interacting with other people may influence the way you form opinions. What has influenced how you came up with your opinions about power?
  - e. In my research I've found that some of your peers ideas about power are [insert examples power findings here]. What do you think about these ideas?

### Empowerment

3) Your group is called, Youth Empowerment Solutions. The word empowerment is in the center part of the name. I've found that empowerment can mean

many things to different people. What does empowerment mean to you?

- f. What influenced how you view of empowerment?
- g. Does empowerment look different for youth compared to adults?
  - i. If so, how?
  - ii. Why do you think this is?