

Preventing Youth Violence is Possible: A Blue Print for Action

Goals and Recommendations

The City of Minneapolis is making youth violence a high priority public health concern. Through Mayor Rybak's leadership and the commitment of the Minneapolis City Council, the opportunity exists for systemic change and a new mind set.

The Committee's target population for this *Blueprint for Action* is all youth in Minneapolis from birth to age 22. The emphasis, however, is on youth ages 8 to 17 who face factors that place them at higher risk for being a perpetrator or victim of crime, including those who:

- Have been brought to the Juvenile Center for curfew or truancy violations.
- Are in family situations that are unstable.
- Had one or more encounters with law enforcement or the justice system.
- Are gang members, gang affiliates, or gang associates.
- Have been suspended or expelled from school.
- Are victims or witnesses of violence.
- Live in the Folwell, Hawthorne, Jordan, McKinley, or Phillips neighborhoods -- where the majority of homicides in Minneapolis happen.

There is strong agreement that research-based youth violence prevention and intervention reduce youth violence. This is not to say it is easy. Positive pressure must be exerted everywhere children are, regardless of whether they've *never* engaged in violence or have had multiple experiences with violence.

We must:

Connect youth to trusted adults. At the core of any prevention effort is the role of caring, trusted adults in the life of every young person. Relationships are how children and youth learn about the world. The goal is to make sure those relationships are positive and nurturing. Whether through employment, a mentor, joining a community-based or faith-based group, quality after-school programs, participating on a team, or doing community service – all young people need a caring adult in their life. Students who spend no time in extracurricular activities, such as those offered in after-school programs, are 49 percent more likely to have used drugs and 37 percent more likely to become teen parents than are students who spend one to four hours per week in extracurricular activities. Beyond simply offering a safe haven, after-school programs offer children and youth opportunities to learn new skills such as conflict resolution, prepare for a successful career, improve grades and develop relationships with caring adults. These skills can be critical in helping youth develop in positive ways.

Support and education for families on effective parenting skills is an effective prevention strategy. This is especially true for teen parents, and why we must work to reduce unwanted teen pregnancy and provide support to teen parents. Teen parents often have little energy left to provide the stimulation critical to a child's

early development. Children who begin their first critical years with unhealthy starts are likely to begin school not ready to learn. Children who struggle in school are at increased risk for engaging in violence in childhood and adolescence.

Intervene at the first sign that youth are at risk for violence. Action is at the heart of this plan: intervene early when a child, young person or family first exhibits signs that they are at risk for or involved in violence. All the places where young people go (parks, schools, health care facilities, and social service organizations) need to know how to support and provide assistance to young people who witness or are a victim of violence. We must help young people who engage in risky behavior (e.g. skip school/are suspended from school, substance use) find a different path to take. In our communities and schools, we must create alternative opportunities to gain skills, while still holding them accountable for their behavior. We must take steps to ensure our schools and our communities are safe and welcoming, and have policies supporting the academic success and healthy development of all children and youth. And we need to shore up the community resources to meet young people's emotional and mental health problems that increase their risk for violence. Lastly, parents of young people who are at-risk of using violence or re-offending need education and support so they have the tools and resources they need to help their children move in a positive direction.

Restore youth who have gone down the wrong path. Youth can change the trajectory of their life if given the support, opportunities and services they need within the juvenile justice system and when they return to the community. As young people re-enter a community they need to have a plan that includes education, employment, physical and mental health, positive social relationships outside of the mandatory ones (probation), and perhaps repairing the damage to themselves and their community created by their actions. Upholding this belief requires changing our orientation from one that focuses solely on punishment to one that holds young people accountable but also provides opportunities for healthy youth development. This requires that all systems working with youth offenders need to strengthen or re-invent how they coordinate and collaborate to support better outcomes for young offenders.

Unlearn the culture of violence in our community. Researchers have proven that long-term public education campaigns on violence prevention, family education, alcohol and drug prevention, and gun safety curricula in school are effective strategies to help prevent delinquency. Researchers also agree that involving youth and developing community consensus around these values are essential to an effective public education process.

A well-designed public education campaign can make a positive impact on public opinion and be a cost-effective way of providing critical information to a large number of people. For example, it can enhance community understanding about the nature and value of the juvenile justice system. It can educate all members of the community about effective prevention and intervention strategies. It can help communities identify and access local resources. And it can inform policymakers of tested, proven options for effective juvenile justice at all levels.

BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION GOAL #1:

Every young person in Minneapolis is supported by at least one trusted adult in their family or their community.

Recommendations:

- Ensure there is a trusted adult in the life of every young person in Minneapolis by increasing the number of quality mentoring opportunities for young people, along with proper training for mentors of all ages and backgrounds.
- Increase the number of private businesses providing jobs through the City of Minneapolis STEP-UP to give more young people the opportunity for employment and positive interactions with engaged adults.
- Strengthen the coordination of public and private youth programs, services and opportunities.
- Increase the number of high-quality community-based youth programs, services and opportunities, including leadership training. Equip these organizations their leaders with the skills needed to direct youth away from violence and towards positive alternatives.
- Reestablish Minneapolis Police liaisons in Public Schools to give young people opportunities to build positive relationships with the Minneapolis Police and strengthen coordination between schools, parks and police.
- Provide year-round *You[^]th Are Here* bus service so that young people have safe reliable transportation to services and activities
- Give young people safe spaces for activities during out-of-school times by increasing the hours when Library, Park and School buildings are open.
- Provide young people with consistent, effective and meaningful violence prevention training by developing a shared curriculum and coordinated training program for the Minneapolis Libraries, Parks, and Schools.
- Increase the number of training and support programs available for parents of teenagers so they have the knowledge, tools, education and resources to spot early warning signs and raise teens that do not condone or engage in violence.
- Increase teenage pregnancy prevention programs in Minneapolis, so teens do not become parents before they have completed their own education and before they are prepared to take on the enormous responsibility of raising children.
- Reduce the number of second children to teen parents by connecting every teen parent with health, education and parenting resources to ensure that they have the tools they need to raise healthy children.

BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION #2:

Intervene at the first sign that youth and families are at risk for or involved in violence.

Recommendations:

- Find meaningful employment for young people who may be more difficult to employ by expanding the summer employment programs for at-risk youth and expand the City's STEP-UP youth jobs program and better connect to County employment programs for youth already in the justice system.
- Provide focused attention and resources toward early intervention with juvenile offenders by establishing the juvenile service center and maintaining the MPD's juvenile unit.
- Develop a standard protocol and train adults to use it in parks, schools and health care facilities in the aftermath of critical incidents so that those critical incidents can be used to educate young people on the ways to prevent and de-escalate violent behavior.
- Establish and promote a youth help line to give young people a safe, confidential way to report trouble or seek help.
- Establish policies and training making every library, park and school a nonviolence zone, so that young people see nonviolence being actively practiced and do not see violence being ignored or condoned by adults at facilities that are meant to be safe places for learning and activities.
- Support alternatives to suspension and expulsion in Minneapolis schools as a way to determine effective tools and policies to prevent violence and deescalate violent incidents.
- Provide young people with consistent and effective support by creating a common definition of "risky behavior," and coordinating set of actions to be taken as a result; to be shared and used by Minneapolis Parks, Schools, and City government, Hennepin County, and the broader juvenile justice system.
- Increase training and support programs for parents of at-risk teenagers, including juvenile re-entry, so that these parents have the knowledge, tools and resources they need to get their kids back on the right track.
- Increase the capacity of Hennepin County's Truancy intervention program for students with mental health and chemical dependency issues so that these young people have the added support and resources stay in school and out of trouble.
- Provide young people who have an incarcerated parent with additional adult support by creating mentor programs that match these youth with individualized support.
- Expand street outreach, including bold door-to-door outreach that engages families and re-connects youth exhibiting risky behavior towards quality education and employment opportunities.

BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION GOAL #3:

Do not give up on our kids, work to restore and get them back on track.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen cross-jurisdictional mechanisms so that the various parts of the juvenile justice system (probation, police, corrections, health care providers, community-based organizations, etc.) can better coordinate services and support systems for young offenders.
- Expand the scope and increase the funding of juvenile probation to better integrate young offenders back into the community. This should include incorporating youth development practices into probation instead of solely focusing on punishment and monitoring.
- Identify and implement a comprehensive assessment tool that identifies a juvenile's mental health and related needs and connects them to available services without putting at risk of self-incrimination.
- Decrease re-offence rates by better connecting youth offenders to educational opportunities, employment skills and health care services.
- Expand restorative justice programs for youth offenders, which have been shown to effectively reduce re-offenses by reintegrating offenders into the community, and enable offenders to assume active responsibility for their actions.
- Strengthen and expand proven after-care models to ensure that each youth returning from out of home placement has a comprehensive plan to re-enter their community. Better engage community and faith organizations in helping to provide after-care solutions for these youth and their families.
- Develop relevant and culturally appropriate rights of passage to support a more comprehensive process for youth offenders to re-enter the community. Helping these youth and their families will alleviate many community concerns and buoy their confidence and civic engagement.
- Expand sentencing options for youth to include comprehensive and intense behavioral training and therapy for young offenders and their families.
- Ensure that support systems for youth offenders are extended to strengthen the families these youth come from and return to.

BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION GOAL #4:

Recognize that violence is learned and can be unlearned by reducing the impact of violent messages in our media, culture and entertainment.

Recommendations:

- Work with local experts and youth to develop a local public education campaign to ensure that young people and our entire community see their roles and responsibilities in stopping violence, while also providing the knowledge and tools needed to de-escalate violence and safely intervene when violence occurs.
- Recognize that youth violence is a national problem and Minneapolis should play a leadership role in leading the discussion by partnering with mayors and city leaders in other cities to form a national coalition against youth violence.
- Support sensible illegal gun laws and work to change community values to reduce the acceptance of guns. This includes seeking stronger penalties for people who sell and distribute illegal guns, and profit from the sale and distribution of illegal guns to young people.