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## Evaluating voices of youth: a violence prevention program

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## Evaluating “Voices of Youth”: A Violence Prevention Program

### Introduction

Youth are tragically affected by violence. As both perpetrators and victims, the toll is enormous. Homicide continues to be the second leading cause of death of youth between the ages of 10 and 24 (Centers for Disease Control, 2011). Youth experience violence in many forms, including domestic, dating, and gun violence. As a result, youth are vulnerable to related difficulties including greater conduct problems (O’Keefe, 1996; Sternberg, Baradaran, Abbott, Lamb, and Guterman, 2006), lower self-esteem, poor social skills, attachment problems, and increased mental health difficulties (Moylan, Herrenkohl, Sousa, Tajima, Herrenkohl, and Russo, 2010). Violence has also been correlated with higher school dropout and truancy rates (Emery, 2011) as well as increased drug and alcohol usage, and other crime (Brookman and McGuire, 2010).

In preventing youth violence and victimization, it is important to assess both protective and risk factors that intersect and lead to greater vulnerability. Research on child maltreatment and risks for violence has historically focused on the identification of pathology and the development of interventions that target existing problem behavior (Benard, 1991). Intervention models that are preventative often focus on risk factors and highlight deficits within individual children, their parents, and environments, resulting in labeling and stigmatization. However, prevention programs that focus on increasing protective factors are important as these mitigate risks and increase the ability of youth to cope.

The Resiliency-Vulnerability model (Garmezy and Rutter, 1983; Rutter, 1987) provides a means of identifying the way in which individuals manage their life course, including specific challenges and stressful situations. The model is comprehensive in that it assesses elements of the life event, qualities in the individual, and features of the environment that interact to result in adaptive outcomes. Within individual and environmental realms, both risk and protective factors are identified such that a comprehensive assessment can be made for intervention planning. Most behavioral health interventions focus on stabilizing individual risk factors, and social service interventions often aim to decrease environmental vulnerabilities.

This article describes and evaluates a filmmaking program designed for inner city youth as a means of preventing violence. The program focuses on increasing protective factors, including relations with adult role models, peers, and law enforcement as well as the increased capacity for constructive expression and narrative development.

### Literature Review

#### *Risk Factors*

Research on youth violence has identified a variety of risk and protective factors. The home environment can include several factors that increase the risk for violence, including violence in the home, drug and alcohol abuse, parental separation or divorce, single parenting, poor parenting practices, or the presence of firearms (Lieberman & DeMartino, 2006; Borum, Bartel, & Forth, 2005).

Children who have been traumatized or have inconsistent attachments are also more vulnerable to problems in relationships, self-regulation, problem solving, academic success, conflict resolution, and constructive decision-making (Shaffer, Yates, & Egeland, 2009; Lieberman & DeMartino, 2006; Borum, et al., 2005). These difficulties are prevalent in violent youth.

Violent youth are also more likely than their peers to have mental health problems, drug abuse, higher school dropout rates, and increased delinquent behaviors (Ellickson, Saner, & McGuigan, 1997). Vulnerabilities in youth also overlap with each other and can serve as compounding risk factors (Zimmerman & Stoddard, 2012). For instance, having poor attachment relations and social skills coupled with mental health vulnerabilities such as poor impulse control increases a child's likelihood of exhibiting acting out behaviors (Borum, et al., 2005).

Similarly, child maltreatment, a predecessor to youth violence (Stoddard, Zimmerman, & Bauermeister, 2012; Shaffer, Yates, & Egeland, 2009), is often the result of a combination of factors. Two key factors are child behavior problems and inconsistent parenting. The risk of child maltreatment is also significantly associated with poverty (Berger, 2005). Child behavior problems such as oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder are increasing in prevalence amongst preschool and early school age children. Webster-Stratton & Reid (2004) state, "...7% to 20% of preschool and early school-age children meet the diagnostic criteria for oppositional defiant disorder or conduct disorder" and "these rates are even higher for low-income families" (pg. 261). A history of acting out behavior, trauma, and mental health problems is in turn a potential predictor of violence (Lieberman, & DeMartino, 2006; Ellickson, Saner, & McGuigan, 1997).

In addition, various socioeconomic factors increase vulnerability. These include lower socioeconomic status, community violence or disorganization, and gangs. Additionally, one of the indicators of a child's risk of exhibiting a conduct disorder is their socioeconomic status. Webster-Stratton, et al. (2008) show how children are more susceptible to having social and emotional problems when they are living in poverty. A longitudinal study of 22,000 kindergarten students showed, "[children exposed to] multiple poverty-related risks increases the odds that children will demonstrate less social competence and emotional self-regulation and more behavior problems than more economically advantaged children" (Webster-Stratton, et al., 2008, pg. 472). In addition, "family stress, such as that associated with unemployment, marital difficulties, and poverty, often contributes to ineffective parenting, resulting in poor cognitive stimulation and academic support [for the child]" (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004, pg. 262).

Many youth are surrounded by violence in their home, school, and community. A high incidence of youth violence occurs during afterschool hours when youth are unsupervised (OJJDP, 2000). According to the FBI National Incident Based Reporting System, rates of youth violence peak between 3 p.m. and 4 p.m. although this does not reflect violence that occurs in transit to or during school hours (Snyder and Sickmund, 1999). Youth are also highly influenced by peers and adults who engage in risk taking behaviors such as drug and alcohol use, violent crime, gang activity, and unprotected sexual activity (Weinstock, Berman and Gates, 2004). Youth who are victims of violence are more likely to be victims again and commit crimes themselves, including violent crime (Menert, 2002).

#### *Protective Factors*

Protective factors can be enhanced through prevention programming to address these challenges. Protective factors include supports, pro-social involvement, social skills, positive attachments, and positive attitudes toward authority (Zimmerman, et al., 2013; Borum, Bartel, & Forth, 2005). Social and emotional competency in children has been directly linked to improved functioning academically and socially and has also been tied to decreases in violent behavior and serious mental health problems later in life (Fredericks, et al., 2005). Elements of social and emotional competency include awareness of emotions, self-management skills, relationship skills and tolerance (Wang, N., Young, T., Wilhite, S., & Marczyk, G., 2011).

Individual characteristics that serve as protective factors also include self-esteem, hope, internal motivation, and temperament (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). The development of a narrative to communicate traumatic experiences also serves as a protective factor and is a common element in trauma treatment models, helping the child deal with avoidance of the traumatic experience, cognitively process the trauma more realistically, and put it in context to develop a more holistic view of themselves (Cohen & Mannorino, 2008).

#### *Programming needs*

As noted in the literature, the formula for predicting violence in youth is complicated and involves the assessment of several factors and challenges that intersect and influence one another. Individual protective factors such as social and emotional competence, for instance, make it more likely that a child can avail themselves of relationship supports. In addition, skill based programming that teaches coping strategies is beneficial in providing children with methods for dealing with stress and trauma. Due to the prevalence of violence among youth and their vulnerabilities to the effects of violence, programs that improve coping via constructive activities are necessary. Increasing supports, improving attitudes towards authority, minimizing other risk factors, and addressing overlapping problems decreases the likelihood of youth involvement in violence.

### **The “Voices of Youth” Program**

To address violence, law enforcement agencies have been increasingly focused on prevention. The United States Attorney’s Office (USAO), Eastern District of PA, has adopted an outreach and prevention approach to supplement their enforcement tactics. The USAO designed and implemented the “Voices of Youth” program with 30 youth from five different schools as a creative exploration of violence prevention programming. The goals for the “Voices of Youth” program are to change students’ perspective of violence, improve relations with law enforcement, increase knowledge about resources and support, and enhance coping ability.

The program was held in the Northwest section of Philadelphia. In 2010, shootings and homicides in this area increased by more than 25% and the number of shootings (374) and homicides (72) were the most of any of the six Philadelphia detective divisions. Mortgage foreclosures, which also threaten the stability of the community, spiked as well. From the end of 2008, when the financial crisis hit, through the beginning of 2010, mortgage foreclosure filings in the area increased 66%. The volatility of Northwest Philadelphia due to increased violence and financial instability made it appropriate for a program aimed at helping youth cope.

Three areas of best practice informed this exploratory project: the use of Positive Youth Development (PYD) Programs, the enhancement of relations between youth and law enforcement, and the provision of expressive outlets for youth who experience violence. Each of these elements enhance protective factors discussed earlier, including the development of self-esteem, positive relations with others such as authority figures, and constructive means of communicating experiences.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has outlined various best practices in working with youth. PYD programs, a best practice model, focus on the positive, adaptive qualities of youth rather than viewing them from a deficit model. These programs also integrate knowledge of child and adolescent development. PYD programs developed from prevention research and practice and shifted the focus from a negative, problem-centered approach that viewed youth as victims of their environments to a model that highlights assets and views youth as active and capable individuals motivated to reach their full potential

(Ersing 2009). Youth are viewed as resilient individuals who are able to cope with difficult situations when provided with appropriate supports and resources. When provided with safe, supportive environments, youth are more likely to develop their talents and abilities. After school programs, which can help encourage positive youth development, offer an outlet for youth to be supervised in a structured environment (Lauer 2006).

Several basic assumptions underlie the PYD framework. A strengths-based approach helps to recognize and foster developmental assets. Another focus is to provide youth with the opportunity to develop healthy relationships across various contexts such as at home, in school, and in the community. Finally, these programs focus on civic engagement such that youth are increasingly active members of the community. Programs work to build their ongoing capacity to engage with communities via increased relations with community members, volunteer services, and enhanced communication skills. Many of the programs also focus on enhancing decision-making skills.

The “Voices for Youth” program attempts to emphasize the strengths of youth who have been subject to violence by helping them identify effective coping methods and provide a constructive means to tell their stories. In addition, the program focuses on the use of supportive relationships and encourages youth to be involved in their communities, particularly as advocates for change in the way they and other youth deal with violence. The program teaches youth expressive techniques through the use of narratives and film, allows them to brainstorm with leaders and peers about how they have dealt with violence, assists in identifying a more constructive means of coping, and encourages an increased understanding and improved relationship with law enforcement officials.

Positive relations with law enforcement are representative of pro-social behavior among youth and help decrease youth violence (Esbensen, Peterson, and Taylor, 2009). These enhanced relationships improve the view of law enforcement as a means of support and promote greater awareness of laws and the consequences of crime. Programs including education from law enforcement and opportunities for sharing between law enforcement and youth have resulted in decreased gang affiliation and lower susceptibility to peer influence for delinquent behavior (Esbensen, Peterson, and Taylor, 2009). The “Voices of Youth” program includes increased exposure to law enforcement, through educational programs and agency visits. Youth are engaged in dialogues with law enforcement officials to break down perceived barriers, promote better relationships, and increase awareness of current law enforcement practices. Youth visit court proceedings and the offices of federal law enforcement as well as participate in educational discussions about law enforcement practices. In addition to improving relations with law enforcement, the “Voices of Youth” program also provides a direct way to process their experiences with violence.

Expression of traumatic experience can help the healing process. Catharsis involved in the narrative expression about traumatic experiences has been shown to increase reflection and self-improvement (Gone, 2009). In addition, processing trauma can help improve understanding and ultimately integration (Cohen, Mannarino, Kleithernes, & Murray, 2012). Lenore Terr (2003) outlines three important steps in the process of children healing from trauma: expression about the experience, gaining perspective through understanding the experience, and finding ways to repair. The “Voices of Youth” program provides a way for youth to share their stories about violence in a supportive and encouraging environment. While filmmaking has not been specifically linked to coping with violence, this program encouraged youth to reflect on their experiences with the benefit of hindsight and education about supports and alternative coping

strategies. The filmmaking activities of the project engaged youth in a new way that was less intimidating for sharing their stories as it more readily allowed for externalization of the trauma, which enhanced perspective taking ability. Youth were also supported by filmmakers, production assistants, and USAO staff throughout the program helping them process their experiences in a positive and safe environment.

The United States' Attorney's Office staff met with the youth and discussed the project details. Youth were also engaged in dialogue with other members of federal law enforcement, including judges and defense attorneys. Local law enforcement was slated to be involved in the program, but logistics impeded their inclusion at the time. Youth were educated about law enforcement protocols, court proceedings, prevention efforts, and existing supports. They attended federal court and visited law enforcement agencies.

Students were then divided into two groups and two local filmmakers each led a group of students. Students were educated on the filmmaking process, particularly as a vehicle for narrative expression. Students shared their stories of violence and program facilitators provided support for students' idea development. The youth worked collaboratively with program staff and each other in sharing their experiences, brainstorming how to best express themselves through film, creating an analogous storyline, and filming. The filmmakers helped the youth create films about violence and how it affected them. The youth were also given the opportunity to share their films with other high school students in the area to help with violence prevention. This was particularly empowering as they realized their stories could impact others, turning difficult experiences into important lessons. The details of the program are explored in greater detail in the methodology section.

Throughout the program, a supportive, structured environment was provided for the youth during afterschool hours with staff that were open to listening and helping them. Youth developed positive relationships with each other and the staff, who served as role models, particularly as youth shared their experiences with violence. This was done directly in relations with staff and by encouraging youth to develop positive social and communication skills during program activities. Discussions during programming also educated youth about constructive ways to voice their opinions, advocate for change and positively contribute to their communities.

Staff in the "Voices of Youth" program were involved in the development of these strategies and had experience as trainers for disenfranchised youth. The specific vulnerabilities of youth subject to violence were discussed in planning meetings along with how activities and interactions would help meet the program goals. These components helped enhance coping and decision making skills and foster their positive development.

## **Methods**

### ***Study Design***

The Widener Center for Violence Prevention provided program evaluation for the "Voices of Youth" program. A multi-method, descriptive program evaluation model was developed to measure the attainment of the program goals. The methods included pre- and post-test questionnaires and two focus groups at the completion of the program.

### ***Sampling***

Youth voluntarily participated from schools in Northwest Philadelphia. The USAO contacted schools in the area to invite them to participate in the program. The USAO staff educated school personnel about the program structure and goals and five of the seven schools agreed to invite youth to participate. These five schools were representative of Northwest

Philadelphia and there were no marked differences between them and the schools that declined participation. Youth voluntarily elected to participate in the program after being informed of the opportunity by their school. They were identified by their affiliation with their school, but were not mandated or rewarded by the school for their participation. In total, 30 youth agreed to participate and all were accepted into the program. Over the course of the program, 11 youth had inconsistent participation or dropped out. The final data are based on matched questionnaires from the 19 youth who completed the program and focus group interviews. Staff from The Widener Center for Violence Prevention distributed the questionnaires and conducted the follow-up interviews.

For better staff to student ratio, the program was divided into smaller groups of students. The division into groups was random and there were no outstanding differences between the cohorts. Each group in the program met once a week for two hours after school and the groups each consisted of eight students who completed the program, a filmmaker, and program assistants. The groups worked on brainstorming, drafting, and making their films. The youth worked collaboratively with each other and staff on the project; each student took on different responsibilities. Youth were part of the project planning process in each of their groups. One cohort was given their own handheld cameras to film content related to their experiences with violence. The other group worked on developing a film that highlighted the importance of decision-making. At the end of the project, the filmmakers provided professional editing and ensured that they captured the essence of the youths' experiences in one film. While the filmmakers and assistants had no formal training regarding mentoring youth, they were instructed by the USAO about the experiences these youth have encountered and the need for positive role modeling. The filmmakers were sensitive to issues of violence and some had experienced it themselves. They also had a strong history of successful work with disenfranchised youth.

The program culminated in a showing of the films at the National Constitution Center and at a local community church. One group created a film that explored the decision-making process that is involved in situations surrounding violence, with alternate endings based on good and bad choices. The second cohort created a film where the students each took home video cameras and filmed the impact of violence in their lives. Some students used artistic outlets such as poetry and rap to explore their experiences with violence. Their personal stories were juxtaposed with others' films of violence occurring in their neighborhoods. Professionals, community members and parents were present at each film showing. After the presentations, the youth completed their post-questionnaires and participated in a structured focus group interview.

### ***Measures***

The Center for Violence Prevention developed data collection tools to be used at the beginning of the program and upon completion. Pre- and post-test questionnaires were disseminated to participants and two focus group interviews were conducted with youth after the program. The written questionnaires were administered in person and measured the students' history with violence, criminal justice, and community supports. The questionnaires assessed changes in the youths' view of law enforcement, reactions to violence, community, and sense of empowerment. Most questions used a Likert scale to assess levels of agreement or disagreement with statements about law enforcement, violence, hope, and community. Other questions were open-ended and allowed youth to write in their thoughts. In the focus groups, evaluators elicited feedback in areas of positive youth development including the acquisition of new skills that improved decision-making, coping, and increased engagement with the community. Information

was also collected on the effect the program had on youth perceptions of and relations with law enforcement.

The development of the questionnaires and focus group protocols were informed by the literature referenced above and directly correlated to the program goals. Experiences of law enforcement staff planning the program were also taken into account, particularly regarding the importance of positive relations between youth and law enforcement officials. The main issues being measured included youth experience with violence, their views, experiences and beliefs about law enforcement, their trust in the criminal justice system for fair treatment and problem solving, and their views and hopes about their role in reducing violence.

The validity of the questionnaires needs to be assessed with further use and psychometric testing. There were several differences between pre- and post-test answers. While this is hoped for regarding attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs given the program goals, some of the answers should have remained relatively consistent. These include prior experience with violence and the criminal justice system as well as assessment of neighborhood violence. While some changes may have occurred during the program period or youth had increased knowledge that affected their interpretations, it's doubtful that certain answers changed to the extent the data suggests. The focus group protocols did elicit the information sought and had room for other information that youth wanted to share via an open discussion format, skilled facilitators, and several open-ended questions. This increased the likelihood that the focus groups gathered the necessary information.

The outcomes reported here reflect the evaluation of the program through the pre- and post- questionnaires and focus groups.

## **Results**

Researchers analyzed the data from the written questionnaires using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 18) for descriptive statistics, frequency statistics, and chi-square values. Values are reported in Table 1. Several analyses were found to be statistically significant at the .05 levels. Higher level analyses were not performed. The open-ended questions were coded as negative, neutral, or positive by two coders to ensure inter-rater reliability.

The eight-person focus groups were also held with participants using a structured interview format. Data from the group interviews was dictated, transcribed, and analyzed for themes by two coders for inter-rater reliability. Coding was done manually and no computer software was used. The coders had no disagreements about their thematic analysis. Students who participated in the program and came to the video presentation were included in the data set. Students who dropped out or did not attend the program consistently were not included. Information about the youth who dropped out is unknown, though their pre-test questionnaires provided similar data to the students who remained in the program consistently. Much of the data gathered from the focus group centered on the youths' experiences with and perceptions of the program, interactions with law enforcement, and their views about their ability to reduce violence in their communities. This data does not directly reflect progress but measures participants' attitudes and hope regarding violence.

## **Violence and crime**

The data indicated that the majority of participants had experience with violence, crime, and the criminal justice system. 79% of students had someone close to them who had been



arrested although 90% of youth themselves had never been arrested. Almost 80% of youth had called the police for help and 62% had a negative experience with law enforcement. About 50% of youth felt the police treated them poorly. In pre-test answers only 16% of youth reported that they were victims of crime. However, in post-test measures 48% identified themselves as victims of crime. Close to 60% of youth reported being victims of violence themselves and all had experienced violence in some form. 52% of students described their neighborhoods as frequently or very frequently having violence.

**Views on violence**

The data also examined how youths’ views changed after participating in the program. Youth were asked to rate their knowledge of what to do and how to seek support if they experienced violence tomorrow. In the pre-test, 67% of students were noncommittal in their answer (three on the Likert scale) while in the post-test, nearly the same number (61%) answered that they had such knowledge. 53% of students felt empowered to change their neighborhood violence in the pre-test and that number increased to 84% in the post-test. Before the program, 63% agreed or strongly agreed that there was hope that violence could be decreased and this value increased to 79% after the program. Students also gained knowledge on resources and supports. Before the program, 68% of students knew where to find help versus 79% who reported knowing where they could find help after the program. 52% of students felt that their view on violence improved upon completion of the program. However, views of police remained markedly unchanged with 68% reporting that their views stayed the same. Students were pleased with the program and 95% would recommend it to others.

The pre- and post- questionnaires highlighted positive changes in youths’ beliefs about their role and ability in violence prevention. Post-program questionnaires revealed both an increased knowledge about resources and supports to combat violence as well as an increased feeling of hope that violence in their communities could be changed, which in itself serves as a protective factor against violence (Stoddard, et al., 2012). Youth also reported a greater awareness of what to do when violence occurs, including the use of specific programs and supports. This, coupled with the focus on changing attitudes towards law enforcement resources, may prove beneficial in providing youth with supportive resources in their communities to effect change. Youth met with individuals from the United States Attorney’s Office and representatives from the criminal justice system during the program. They did not interact with local police however. The data in both the focus group interviews and post-test questionnaires consistently reflected that views of law enforcement were mostly negative and remained unchanged for the majority of youth.

**Frequency tables and Chi-square values**

Frequency				
<b>1-Have you ever been arrested?</b>				
	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
No	17	89.5	17	89.5
Yes	2	10.5	2	10.5
Total	19	100	19	100

P=.000<.05 Statistically significant (SS)

Frequency				
<b>2-Has anyone in your immediate family or a close friend ever been arrested?</b>				
	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
No	3	15.8	5	26.3
Yes	15	78.9	14	73.7
Missing	1	5.3	-	-
Total	19	100	19	100

P=.043<.05 SS

Frequency				
<b>6-Have you ever been a victim of violence?</b>				
	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
No	7	36.8	8	42.1
Yes	12	63.2	11	57.9
Total	19	100	19	100

P=.048<.05 SS

Frequency				
<b>8-How often does crime occur in your neighborhood?</b>				
	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Never	0	0	0	0
Very Rarely	5	26.3	5	26.3
Occasionally	7	36.8	8	42.1
Frequently	3	15.8	5	26.3
Very Frequently	4	21.1	1	5.3
Total	19	100	19	100

P=.040<.05 SS

Frequency				
<b>11-Based on your experience, how have the Police treated you or those close to you?</b>				
	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Mistreated	4	21.1	2	10.5
Poor	5	26.3	5	26.3
Okay	4	21.1	8	42.1
Good	2	10.5	2	10.5
Very Well	3	15.8	2	10.5
Missing	1	5.3	-	-
Total	19	100	19	100

P=.039<.05 SS

Frequency				
<b>12-If you, your family or friends called the Police for assistance (911), How do you think the Police would treat you?</b>				
	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Mistreated	1	5.3	0	0
Poor	3	15.8	2	10.5
Okay	11	57.9	9	47.4
Good	2	10.5	7	36.8
Very Well	2	10.5	1	5.3
Total	19	100	19	100

P=.049<.05 SS

Frequency				
<b>13-Would you tell the Police about a crime if you knew about it and they asked you?</b>				
	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Never	4	21.1	1	5.3
Probably Not	3	15.8	9	47.4
Probably	6	31.6	6	31.6
Very Probably	2	10.5	2	10.5
Definitely	4	21.1	1	5.3
Total	19	100	19	100

P=.025<.05 SS

Frequency				
<b>18-Would you consider being a Police officer after graduation?</b>				
	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Never	12	63.2	9	47.4
Probably Not	1	5.3	7	36.8
Probably	3	15.8	1	5.3
Very Probably	1	5.3	1	5.3
Definitely	2	10.5	1	5.3
Total	19	100	19	100

P=.003<.05 SS

Frequency				
<b>19-How would you describe your experience with Police?</b>				
	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Terrible	3	15.8	2	10.5
Somewhat Bad	2	10.5	2	10.5
Fine	9	47.4	8	42.1
Good	1	5.3	3	15.8
Very Good	2	10.5	3	15.8
Missing	2	10.5	1	5.3
Total	19	100	19	100

P=.019<.05 SS

Frequency				
<b>23-I believe I can do something about the crime in my neighborhood.</b>				
	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Never	2	10.5	0	0
Probably Not	7	36.8	3	15.8
Probably	2	10.5	7	36.8
Very Probably	5	26.3	5	26.3
Definitely	3	15.8	4	21.1
Total	19	100	19	100

P=.005<.05 SS

Frequency				
<b>25-I believe I can find support through the Police.</b>				
	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Never	3	15.8	1	5.3
Probably Not	3	15.8	4	21.1
Probably	3	15.8	6	31.6
Very Probably	6	31.6	7	36.8
Definitely	4	21.1	1	5.3
Total	19	100	19	100

P=.017<.05 SS

Frequency				
<b>26-I think I can find support through the court system.</b>				
	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Never	0	0	0	0
Probably Not	5	26.3	1	5.3
Probably	9	47.4	13	68.4

Very Probably	3	15.8	3	15.8
Definitely	1	5.3	2	10.5
Missing	1	5.3	-	-
Total	19	100	19	100

$P=.010 < .05$  SS

### Focus groups

The focus group data was analyzed using the qualitative method of grounded theory. Each focus group discussion was recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions were read several times for immersion into the data. The process of coding and analysis involved working from the larger array of comments to more specific categories that helped organize the material together into coherent themes that recurred in the data. Two people coded the data manually and were consistent in their thematic analysis. After the material was coded into thematic categories, further levels of coding defined the themes. Material not coded into thematic categories was then reassessed to ensure that all themes were captured. Several themes were common between the two groups. The themes highlighted the learning that occurred throughout the program and reflected the areas for improvement.

**Theme 1:** Youth reported that the program had positive and negative characteristics. The majority felt that the experience was a good one for them, but did report that they didn't have as much say in the final film as they would have liked.

*"The good thing about it was, uh, it was fun. It was a fun experience"*

*"I think for the finished movie, it was good but maybe we didn't have a say in the final actual movie part of it. I wish we could have had more of a say in it."*

**Theme 2:** Many students reported that the group helped them learn new tasks and skills, particularly related to the form of expression.

*"I was surprised by some of the, um, the creativity when we started, when we first started talking about poetry and whatnot"*.

*"Shots, audio, lighting. If the lighting ain't right, you've got to wait to come back to that same thing. People don't come)"*.

**Theme 3:** Students reported gaining a sense of community and camaraderie.

*"The program was fun. It was new. That was the first program I actually went to after school. Cause I don't like going anywhere after school but home and sleep then wake up and do homework. I've met new people."*

*"I like the fact that we all came out as peers and it's fun to communicate with each other on different things instead of arguing about everything."*

*"Once we did something positive, so many people wanted to help. We had good support."*

Theme 4: The youth also discussed the role of positive role models.

*“He let us be creative, he was wonderful”*

*“The thing I enjoyed the most was like working with the people that do all the production and stuff, like -- I think that was good that we got to meet people like that.”*

Theme 5: Students also expressed negative feelings about participation and continuation of the program. They were particularly frustrated by their peers who did not participate consistently and the fact that the program was short-lived.

*“The only thing I didn’t like was when people were like they’d come and they didn’t come. Like, how y’all going to come, say you’re going to sign up for a program, start it but don’t finish it. It irritates me, that really irritates me.”*

*“Once we’re done with it, we all go our separate ways.”*

*“After this, everything is over with. There’s nothing else. If there was another program out there we could make another movie. “*

Theme 6: The youth also provided recommendations for future students and programs.

*“I think they should spread it out. Not just Northwest. It’s not just Northwest have crime. Northwest has crime, but places like Southwest or West Philly, their mentality of things is entirely different from the Northwest. They deal with violence and everything in an entirely different way.”*

*“I didn’t like that it was only five schools. Maybe two more, or by areas. It’s just one community. You don’t know what else is going on in those specific towns.”*

*“It would give them the opportunity to be heard, not just about the violence that’s going on now but allowing them to express their feelings about the cops. And put the spotlight on the cops so then they can say how they feel and not get in trouble for it.”*

Theme 7: Students learned alternatives to engaging in violence and other risk-taking behaviors.

*“I enjoyed everything about the program. It was like, in a positive way and it helped me understand things more about violence.”*

*“I was desensitized. I didn’t really care; it was something I grew up with. Violence was just everywhere. So it wasn’t like it was a big deal to me. Like if I heard something on the news or someone told me something, I wouldn’t be shocked by it because it was just normal to me. But after doing the program and actually seeing what’s the cause and how bad it is and how we can fix it.”*

*“I think that it changed my opinion about violence such that I know now that there’s something I can do or something I should be doin. So I can’t be doin violence if I want to do things like this. And if I want to get a good job, go to college, things like that.”*

*“Now, I’m going to think before I – the next time I’m about to get into an altercation, I’m going to think before I do it.”*

**Theme 8:** Students felt empowered and expressed hope that their work would make a difference.

*“Honestly, my opinion on violence when I first came was that I didn’t care. I was a violent person. Anybody that said the wrong thing to me I was just fighting them. No matter what, I didn’t care. But since I came to this program now I see that there’s other ways to actually handle a problem than using violence, than just using your hands. And you can find a different approach and so then you can reduce the violence around the world. “*

*“Like at the end of the day, this one, this one DVD might change one person and like on the other hand, it might not affect all these other people, and some people don’t, might not even care; they might just, they’re going to keep going. But it was good, it was good that we got to send out to message out to people that were willing to listen.”*

The focus group interviews supported and expanded on the themes found in the written questionnaires and in general, indicate that the program was effective in promoting better coping and willingness to be involved in the community. Youth expressed satisfaction with their narratives about violence and took pride in the final product. They reported different perspectives on their experiences after telling their stories in the program and became cognizant of their power to effect change with other youth and their own communities via their film narratives. This outcome reflects hope once again, but is also indicative of greater skill at processing adversity and dealing with stressful situations. Both of these serve as protective factors against acting out behavior (Ersing, 2009).

## **Discussion**

The results from data gathered via questionnaires and focus group interviews validated the program’s effectiveness in promoting positive youth development. Several risk factors for violence were addressed in the program. “Youth development programs that engage young people in meaningful activities typically protect them from multiple risk factors” (Sege and Licenziato, 2001, pg. 12). Youth were empowered as they were viewed as contributors to their environment.

Those involved formed a strong sense of community and camaraderie with other students. Both the constructive activities of the program and the positive peer supports serve as a protective factor against vulnerabilities towards violence (Borum, et al., 2005). Many were upset when fellow students dropped out of the program. Both groups hoped that the program would be expanded in the future to include students from other schools and other areas of the city as they felt it was a positive experience. The students were also interested in learning about the various types of violence and the perceptions and experiences of other youth.

In addition to forming a community with other youth, many participants also connected with their parents and other community leaders. Although this was not measured on the pre- and

post-test questionnaires, during the focus groups youth reported that their families were very proud of them. Many parents who had been skeptical of the program in the beginning reported to their child that the program was helpful. Youth also connected with positive role models in the community. Many students reported having a positive experience with the filmmakers and expressed respect for their contributions to the program and the community at large. Youth became more connected to their community overall by developing healthy relationships with other students, community members, and parents. This experience provided some corrective attachments as well as different views of authority figures, thereby providing a potential buffer against future violence (Borum, et al., 2005).

In keeping with positive youth development models, students involved in the program also learned new skills, the most important of which was their increased awareness of their own power to effect change in their communities and help reduce violence. In addition, the majority of the youth did not have prior experience in filmmaking or digital media. The participants learned the process of creating a storyline, mapping out scenes, writing characters, filming techniques, scene development, and camera shooting skills. All of these skills increased their ability to process experiences and communicate them in a constructive way. The ability to process traumatic experiences is important in healing from trauma and protecting against further repercussions from it (Cohen, Mannarino, Kleithernes, & Murray, 2012).

Youth also learned about collaboration and group work. Creativity was supported and encouraged by the filmmakers, which may have helped the students to feel more empowered and encouraged about their abilities. The students also felt empowered by the magnitude of their work. Data from post-test questionnaires and focus groups indicated an increase in the number of students who felt they could change violence in their neighborhoods. The films were shown at a local community church for family and other community members and also at the Constitution Center for professionals. There were large turnouts at each, with the church presentation audience nearing one thousand. The youth were surprised at the number of people they received support from and felt encouraged to continue to express themselves. Their experiences were validated by the presence and feedback of large audiences. Various youth expressed interest in mentoring future groups of students through a similar process, which also indicates that they felt encouraged about their abilities to influence other youth and effect change.

One of the main goals of the program was to increase communication between youth and law enforcement. Many still expressed negative sentiments towards the police. These may be attributed to prior experiences or lack of interaction with police throughout the program. Youth did not seem as able to identify with the federal criminal justice system and there was no dramatic change in their understanding and trust of law enforcement. Most of the law enforcement activities in the program focused on federal law enforcement, including members of the court system. It is possible that youth don't readily identify lawyers as law enforcement. Many youth were unable to distinguish the differences between law enforcement and the U.S. Attorney's Office, so positive interactions with the United States Attorney's Office staff may not have been reflected in the data. The involvement of local law enforcement may have been more meaningful as it would be perceived as directly affecting them and their neighborhoods. Further, their difficulties in the past more readily stemmed from interactions with local police, so involvement of those personnel is pivotal to have an effect on overall relations. Youth recommended closer, more informal contact with police officers in future programs to change perceptions and increase positive relations. This would also help improve attitudes towards



authority figures and serve as another protective factor against future violence (Borum, et al., 2005).

Coping with violence was an inherent theme throughout the program, both via law enforcement interactions and in the filmmaking. However, although youth did identify an increase in that skill set, the data was not consistent or significant. Future programming should more clearly delineate those lessons, including coping strategies and available supports. Targeted training of group leaders regarding these issues would enhance their ability to directly educate and influence youth in this manner. Continued work with youth to operationalize the empowerment they experienced would also prove beneficial so that youth can identify with specific actions steps in their communities and with their peers. This, combined with participants' improved skills in processing, problem solving and relating, could help them effect meaningful change.

### **Study Strengths and Limitations**

Although the study revealed positive results, there were limitations. The program was developed to help youth deal with violence and feel better able to effect change in their environment. The study design was multi-method and descriptive. Although two different methods were used to evaluate the program, there were no longitudinal measures that would actually link the program's efficacy to decreased violence among these youth or mediation of vulnerability factors, nor were there quantitative measures of changes in the youth. There was a high dropout rate among students and sampling proved to be a major limitation. The program consisted of a small number of students, who participated on a voluntary basis. Although the sample had qualities consistent across schools in the region, it is highly likely that the sample was biased towards youth more likely to engage in programming in the first place and therefore less vulnerable to being violent offenders.

Data collection was limited by not only the sampling, but also the instruments used for the survey and focus groups. While these were developed after study of the literature, they have not been validated with larger research samples. Qualitative data analysis also inevitably involves some subjectivity. Thematic coding was completed using grounded theory methods and reliability was checked across two coders. However, the data collection instruments themselves infuse a degree of bias in the data collection and subsequent analysis. Coding is also a subjective process and despite inter-rater reliability efforts, potential bias remains.

From the data analysis, it is clear that some of the program goals were met, including empowering youth, generating hope that they can have an effect on others and their community, and forging new relations with positive role models. Other goals, while met occasionally, were not consistently achieved. These include improved coping skills to deal with violence and most noticeably, improved perceptions and relations with law enforcement. While the program worked with a small sample of youth, the sample was representative of the community. Most participants had reported knowledge of and experience with violence which indicates that the effects measured here may be duplicated in other areas of Philadelphia and even the country. The program did provide a unique outlet for youth to share their stories of violence and therefore provided different processing skills in a supportive environment.

### **Conclusion**

The "Voices of Youth" program provided a positive experience for youth that were involved. They established strong relations with each other and adult role models, learned about

federal law enforcement practices and making films, shared their stories of violence with each other and the larger community, developed a film that can be used for prevention education for other youth, and increased their own sense of power in effecting change. Other elements of the program including specific knowledge building about coping and resources and improved relations with local police need to be improved in future programs. If these areas are enhanced, this type of program proves to be a useful model for empowering youth, promoting healing and improving relations with law enforcement, all of which can help reduce violence.

**Appendix A: Pre-test questionnaires**

**2011 USAO NORTHWEST PHILADELPHIA VIOLENCE PREVENTION INITIATIVE**

Today's date: \_\_\_\_\_ Program: (please circle): *Reel Voices* *Voices of Youth*

Your opinion is important to us. We would like to understand more about how violence affects your life and how we can help to make things better. Please take a few minutes and let us know your opinion. Your answers are confidential.

1. **Have you ever been arrested?** Yes No

What for? \_\_\_\_\_

2. **Has anyone in your immediate family or a close friend ever been arrested?**

Yes No

What for? \_\_\_\_\_

3. **Have you ever been in court?** Yes No

a. **If yes, tell us about your experience:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. **Have you, or anyone close to you, ever called the Police for assistance (911)?**

Yes No

a. **If yes, tell us about your experience:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. **Have you ever been a victim of a crime?** Yes No

a. **If yes, tell us about your experience?** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. **Have you ever been a victim of violence?** Yes No

a. **If yes, tell us about your experience?** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**7. After your experience with violence, did you deal with it in a positive way?**

1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Undecided	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
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**Describe:** \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**8. How often does crime occur in your neighborhood?**

1 Never	2 Very Rarely	3 Occasionally	4 Frequently	5 Very Frequently
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**9. How often does violence occur in your neighborhood?**

1 Never	2 Very Rarely	3 Occasionally	4 Frequently	5 Very Frequently
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**10. How easy is it to get a handgun in your neighborhood?**

1 Difficult	2 Somewhat Difficult	3 Unsure	4 Somewhat Easy	5 Easy
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**11. Based on your experience, how have the Police treated you or those close to you?**

1 Mistreated	2 Poor	3 Okay	4 Good	5 Very Well
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**a. Please explain:** \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**12. If you, your family or friends called the Police for assistance (911), how do you think the Police would treat you?**

1 Mistreated	2 Poor	3 Okay	4 Good	5 Very Well
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**13. Would you tell Police about a crime if you knew about it and they asked you?**

1 Never	2 Probably Not	3 Probably	4 Very Probably	5 Definitely
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**14. If you saw a Police officer and asked for their help, do you believe the Police would help you?**

1 No	2 Probably Not	3 Probably	4 Very Probably	5 Definitely
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**15. Do you know the phrase “Stop Snitchin”?** Yes No

**16. Do you agree with the phrase “Stop Snitchin”?** Yes No

**a. Please explain:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**17. Would you support a friend or family member becoming a Police officer?**

1 No	2 Probably Not	3 Probably	4 Very Probably	5 Definitely
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**18. Would you consider being a Police officer after graduation?**

1 Never	2 Probably Not	3 Probably	4 Very Probably	5 Definitely
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**19. How would you describe your experience with Police?**

1 Terrible	2 Somewhat Bad	3 Fine	4 Good	5 Very Good
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**Please explain:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**20. Any other comments about Police?** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**21. If you experienced violence tomorrow how would you deal with it?**


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**22. I believe it is important for people to improve their own neighborhood.**

1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Undecided	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
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**23. I believe I can do something about the crime in my neighborhood.**

1 Never	2 Probably Not	3 Probably	4 Very Probably	5 Definitely
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**24. I think I can help stop violence with other youth.**

1 Never	2 Probably Not	3 Probably	4 Very Probably	5 Definitely
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**25. I believe I can find support through the Police.**

1 Never	2 Probably Not	3 Probably	4 Very Probably	5 Definitely
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**26. I think I can find support through the court system.**

1 Never	2 Probably Not	3 Probably	4 Very Probably	5 Definitely
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**27. I believe there is hope for decreasing violence.**

1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Undecided	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
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**28. I think the Police are trying to prevent violence before it happens.**

1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Undecided	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
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**29. If I witness a crime, I know how to find help.**

1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Undecided	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
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**30. Tell more about how you would find help:**

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**31. What ideas do you have about how violence can be reduced in your community?**

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**Appendix B: Post-test questionnaire**

**2011 USAO NORTHWEST PHILADELPHIA VIOLENCE PREVENTION INITIATIVE**

Today's date: \_\_\_\_\_ Program: (please circle): *Reel Voices* *Voices of Youth*

Your opinion is important to us. We would like to understand more about how violence affects your life and how we can help to make things better. Please take a few minutes and let us know your opinion. Your answers are confidential.

1. **Have you ever been arrested?** Yes No

What for? \_\_\_\_\_

2. **Has anyone in your immediate family or a close friend ever been arrested?**

Yes No

What for? \_\_\_\_\_

3. **Have you ever been in court?** Yes No

a. **If yes, tell us about your experience?**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. **Have you, or anyone close to you, ever called the Police for assistance (911)?**

Yes No

b. **If yes, tell us about your experience:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. **Have you ever been a victim of a crime?** Yes No

c. **If yes, tell us about your experience?** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. **Have you ever been a victim of violence?** Yes No

d. **If yes, tell us about your experience?** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



**7. After your experience with violence, did you deal with it in a positive way?**

1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Undecided	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
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**Describe:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**8. How often does crime occur in your neighborhood?**

1 Never	2 Very Rarely	3 Occasionally	4 Frequently	5 Very Frequently
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**9. How often does violence occur in your neighborhood?**

1 Never	2 Very Rarely	3 Occasionally	4 Frequently	5 Very Frequently
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**10. How easy is it to get a handgun in your neighborhood?**

1 Difficult	2 Somewhat Difficult	3 Unsure	4 Somewhat Easy	5 Easy
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**11. Based on your experience, how have the Police treated you or those close to you?**

1 Mistreated	2 Poor	3 Okay	4 Good	5 Very Well
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**e. Please explain:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**12. If you, your family or friends called the Police for assistance (911), how do you think the Police would treat you?**

1 Mistreated	2 Poor	3 Okay	4 Good	5 Very Well
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**13. Would you tell Police about a crime if you knew about it and they asked you?**

1 Never	2 Probably Not	3 Probably	4 Very Probably	5 Definitely
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**14. If you saw a Police officer and asked for their help, do you believe the Police would help you?**

1 No	2 Probably Not	3 Probably	4 Very Probably	5 Definitely
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**15. Do you know the phrase “Stop Snitchin”?** Yes No

**16. Do you agree with the phrase “Stop Snitchin”?** Yes No

**f. Please explain:** \_\_\_\_\_

**17. Would you support a friend or family member becoming a Police officer?**

1 No	2 Probably Not	3 Probably	4 Very Probably	5 Definitely
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**18. Would you consider being a Police officer after graduation?**

1 Never	2 Probably Not	3 Probably	4 Very Probably	5 Definitely
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**19. How would you describe your experience with Police?**

1 Terrible	2 Somewhat Bad	3 Fine	4 Good	5 Very Good
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**Please explain:** \_\_\_\_\_

**32. Any other comments about Police?** \_\_\_\_\_

**33. If you experienced violence tomorrow how would you deal with it?**

**34. I believe it is important for people to improve their own neighborhood.**

1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Undecided	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
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**35. I believe I can do something about the crime in my neighborhood.**

1 Never	2 Probably Not	3 Probably	4 Very Probably	5 Definitely
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**36. I think I can help stop violence with other youth.**

1 Never	2 Probably Not	3 Probably	4 Very Probably	5 Definitely
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**37. I believe I can find support through the Police.**

1 Never	2 Probably Not	3 Probably	4 Very Probably	5 Definitely
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**38. I think I can find support through the court system.**

1 Never	2 Probably Not	3 Probably	4 Very Probably	5 Definitely
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**39. I believe there is hope for decreasing violence.**

1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Undecided	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
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**40. I think the Police are trying to prevent violence before it happens.**

1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Undecided	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
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**41. If I witness a crime, I know how to find help.**

1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Undecided	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
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**42. Tell more about how you would find help:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**43. What ideas do you have about how violence can be reduced in your community?**

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**44. How has your view on violence changed since you started the program?**

1 More Negative	2 Less Negative	3 Stayed the same	4 Less Positive	5 More Positive
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**45. How has your view on police changed since you started the program?**

1 More Negative	2 Less Negative	3 Stayed the same	4 Less Positive	5 More Positive
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**46. What did you like about the program you were in?**

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**47. Is there anything you didn't like about the program? (please explain)**

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**48. Would you recommend the program to other youth?**

1 Definitely Not	2 Probably Not	3 Unsure	4 Probably Yes	5 Definitely Yes
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**49. Do you have other ideas about programs for youth that would help:**

**a. Them deal with violence:**

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**b. Help prevent violence:**

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**c. Get along better with law enforcement:**

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Other comments:

Thank you!

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