



THE YOUTH VIOLENCE SYSTEMS PROJECT: A Community-Based Framework of Understanding Youth Violence in Boston

The Youth Violence Systems Project (YVSP) was initiated to empower the community's perspective on youth violence in Boston by creating a framework for developing intervention strategies that lead to real change. Since 2008, YVSP has been using a community-based approach coupled with systems dynamics modeling to create a virtual laboratory to model youth violence intervention strategies. Our goal is to help develop the capacity for deep and honest dialogue among a wide range of people to collaborate toward a shared goal of reducing youth violence in our neighborhoods.

This article gives an overview of the community-based process that is at the heart of YVSP. In addition, the story of the YVSP process is further told in three related articles:

- **The YVSP Strategy Lab** describes YVSP's system dynamics model in detail, including an introduction to the key systems concepts for understanding the model.
- **The Reason Why We Haven't Solved the Gang Violence Problem** discusses how the YVSP team solicited the input of gang members in the design process, and describes the findings and insights gained.
- **What We Are Learning** describes how the model is being used in various settings, and what different folks are learning from the discourse so far.

The Youth Violence Systems Project (YVSP) incorporates community, academic, and institutional perspectives on the interrelated causes of youth violence in Boston. It came about through the confluence of four streams: thoughtful conversations, passionate people, key partnerships, and funding. People based in a wide range of fields (like active community members, non-profit community organizations, churches, law enforcement, public health, etc.) are highly motivated to see a reduction in youth violence. Ideally, these groups would collaborate, but they have historically been hindered by the lack of a shared framework of understanding. The goal of YVSP was to create just such a framework through community-based research and a system dynamics approach. To be successful it had to rely on the wisdom and experience of the communities most affected by youth violence, including the youth themselves.



“The model becomes a tool that can be used by people who weren't in the planning process. Folks in the community can sit down and talk about youth violence together. Anything that would help create a way for people to come to an understanding of the root causes of youth violence would be helpful. Creating tools that people could use that help us think beyond the knee-jerk response.”

—Design Team Member



“I think that leaving the model in the hands of the community is the right approach. They have the insight to the issue and the interventions they think will work.” —*Design Team Member*

What follows is the story of YVSP from its beginning as a compelling conversation in a Boston Capacity Tank meeting to its current broad training work. Members of three key communities, professionals from different fields, and a multi-disciplinary steering committee worked together to create a computer simulation model and the accompanying shared framework of youth violence in Boston. Much of what we have learned together through the last few years of this Project is built into the model and framework, but we wanted to capture the story here, too, so that we could detail that learning, underscore the process that got us to the model, and articulate clearly the driving values and vision of the Project.

How YVSP Got Started

The Project grew out of ongoing conversations at the Boston Capacity Tank (BCT), a coalition of faith-based organizations, funders and community leaders that seeks to build the capacity of youth-serving organizations in Boston. Rev. Rocklyn Clarke—a Boston pastor and chair of the board of the Emmanuel Gospel Center (EGC), a BCT partner—began asking what we could do to understand the root causes of youth violence in our communities. His questions resonated with the group, and Klare Shaw suggested that the Barr Foundation—where she was at that time a Senior Advisor—might be interested in funding a project of this sort. Jeff Bass, EGC’s executive director, then agreed to begin to put together a project proposal to use system dynamics modeling for understanding youth violence in Boston from a community-based, systemic perspective.

The idea and the funding started to come together over the next several months, as did the passion and skills to carry it out. Khary Bridgewater had just come to EGC as the director of Applied Evaluation Systems (AES)—EGC’s consulting arm—and brought with him an existing desire to understand gang violence from a systems perspective. Paul Bothwell, who had been using systems thinking tools in the Boston community for some time, and Lynne Lyman, a political consultant and community advocate, joined the Project as strategic consultants. Steve Peterson, the model builder, joined in through prior connections with Mr. Bothwell and with the Barr Foundation. His personal commitment to make his services available at well below his usual market rate has been critical to the Project’s ongoing effectiveness.

“The thing that has drawn me to this Project is the sophistication of design in conjunction with the true process of community partnership that I believe will result in potential for change that’s greater than other programs I’ve seen in the past.”

—*Jack McDevitt, Project Advisor*

As the Steering Committee was formed, and other Project advisors and consultants were selected, it was clear that our goal was not to become “the experts” on youth violence in Boston. Instead, we wanted to work together with the communities most directly affected by youth violence to create this system dynamics model. The community would be the experts, and the model would then serve as a virtual laboratory to simulate youth violence intervention strategies in order to generate both better dialogue and better intervention strategies as gauged by the involved communities.

In Boston, violence is clustered in hotspot areas, so a few of these areas became the starting point of the Project. Rather than leaning only on outsider expertise, a favorite intervention strategy, or a particular philosophy of youth violence, the Project started with the idea that members of these most affected communities will understand youth violence the best. While we did also get input from a range of valuable outside perspectives, the community perspective was kept at the forefront throughout every step of the Project.

The Underlying Assumptions of the Project

There are three main sets of assumptions that undergird the whole Project:

- Current youth violence interventions are hindered in their ability to collaborate because they lack a shared framework.
- The system dynamics approach can provide a suitable framework.
- The degree of true community involvement determines the value and success of the framework.

Youth Violence and Youth Violence Interventions

Part of the backdrop of this work is the national data that has been gathered relating to youth violence. Youth violence—particularly gang violence—is a serious problem in most major U.S. cities.¹ Although levels of youth violence have declined since peaking in the mid-1990s,² the percentage of gun-related deaths has increased since 2000.³ This increase has been particularly marked among young black men in recent years,⁴ making homicide the leading cause of death for black males ages 10-24.⁵

Prevention-minded researchers have suggested that most initiatives to reduce youth violence operate mainly in isolation,⁶ despite findings that cities which employ more coordinated efforts have lower rates of youth violence.⁷ There are many youth violence task forces, but few include partners from outside of the criminal justice field. Some in the public health community have suggested the use of a multidisciplinary approach to engage health, justice, mental health, and education in addressing youth violence^{8,9} but attempts at collaboration are hindered by the absence of a shared framework.

The System Dynamics Approach

What does *system dynamics* even mean? System dynamics enables you to look at interrelated groups (think businesses, organizations, societies) or entrenched situations (such as poverty, health disparities, or in our case, youth violence) from a wide-angle perspective that can take in the whole of the many people, institutions, and organizations involved; their interactions and relationships; group structures; etc. (these are the **systems**) and

how all these things relate and change over time (these are the **dynamics**). From this perspective, we can see the way that the system is put together (its structure) and the patterns of dynamics that it exhibits over time (its behavior). Beyond just a new outlook, though, the system dynamics approach then allows us to use our *deeper understanding* to generate insight both about *improvement of* and about *communication around* a problem, issue, or challenge.

Youth violence is just the kind of complex issue where the system dynamics approach has potential to generate this kind of understanding, improvement, and communication. We would miss a lot if we focused only on one small aspect of the problem, but with this approach we were freed from having to *avoid* the complexities of youth violence. We were able to incorporate multiple voices from a variety of backgrounds in order to discern together the underlying structure and patterns of behavior of youth violence, to endeavor to coordinate intervention efforts, and to develop a shared language that allows us to communicate well with each other and with a broader audience about youth violence.

For greater detail on the system dynamics approach and an introduction to systems concepts, please see *The YVSP Strategy Lab*, Steve Peterson's article about the YVSP model.

Community-Based Participatory Process

Community involvement is integral to the success of addressing any community-based problem. We knew that, given the opportunity, community members would have the ability to carry out every step of the process from problem definition to analysis to solution creation. We then wanted to build relationships where there was enough trust for all of us to work together. For YVSP, that meant starting from our existing relationships in the selected communities (through the Emmanuel Gospel Center, the Boston Capacity Tank, the High Risk Youth Network, and other partners) and then making new relationships with key community leaders, important neighborhood organizations, youth workers, families, gang members and other youth in the targeted neighborhoods. Taking our time and working through existing relational networks set up a Project that would both be acceptable to a range of community members and provide the required data for model building.

From the beginning we sought to establish credibility and ownership within the community so that this Project did not become another "outside-in" program. Community buy-in was essential to ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Project because residents repeatedly described incidents where researchers failed to respect the community's perspective due to race, class, and/or gender issues. This more sustainable approach, however, required a lengthy process in order to connect and build trusting relationships. We perceived this investment of time as being worthwhile in order to enable genuine collaboration in the model-building process.

As trust grew over the course of the Project, community residents became more open in sharing their unique, valuable insights into youth violence. In many cases residents had already devoted significant thought to the problem. We know that communities contain a diversity of perspectives, capacities, abilities, and levels of motivation. Through trusting relationships built around genuine respect and with thoughtful listening, we were able to

wade into the complexities of youth violence and find out the real understanding of people living in communities touched by this issue. We especially wanted the deep and meaningful insights that can be gained by understanding the opinions of youth. All in all, we knew that without community involvement we would run the risk of only creating more *misunderstanding* about youth violence.

Making the Idea a Reality: Funding, Overall Project Design, and Leadership

Funding

In June of 2007, we put together a concept paper for mapping youth violence in Boston and by October of that year there was a full project outline in place. In November, a proposal was submitted to the Barr Foundation that laid out the purpose of the Project as developing “a system dynamics model which reflects the best current thinking about youth violence in Boston” and made clear that this “best current thinking” would come from the minds of key community stakeholders.

The Barr Foundation became the major funder for the Project. Other significant funding partners joined in over the following months which are listed in full at the end of this article.

Overall Project Design

From the beginning, the Project was conceived as an iterative, four-phase process. Each successive phase was intended to bring a deepening understanding of the system dynamics that would then be reflected in the increasing complexity and strength of the model. The first phase laid the groundwork; we conducted a review of academic literature and established the project plan. From this phase we had a basic model. During the second phase, we studied one high-violence neighborhood in Boston and convened a Design Team made up of community workers, residents and youth. We also assembled a “psych team” of psychology specialists to learn from their expertise. All of these Phase II contributors significantly enriched the model. During the third phase we expanded this process to include two more high-violence neighborhoods, and conducted listening sessions with gang members and leaders over the course of four months. Through each successive phase the model was improved to reflect the input of these many contributors.

Phase IV, which began in early 2010, emphasizes training youth workers, community leaders, youth, and many others on how to use the model to create effective conversations regarding how to reduce youth violence in our communities. We will continue to revise and improve the model based on what we learn throughout this phase, so that it can enable a variety of stakeholders to see how specific actions can affect the system of youth violence and what the likely results will be. We never expected to have “the solution” to youth violence at the end of this Project. We have, however, put into play a powerful tool that can have meaningful influence on many levels of intervention and help our communities and Boston leaders more broadly identify the highest leverage actions to take toward reducing youth violence.

Leadership: The Steering Committee

The Steering Committee gathered for the first time in March of 2008, and there has been a group meeting monthly since then. It was a key decision of the Project to convene a multi-disciplinary team to shepherd the Project throughout and keep us focused on the community. The membership has changed somewhat during the Project, but it has always been comprised of representatives from AES/EGC, the model designer, researchers, various project supporters, and community liaisons. This team has also been supported by Organizational Partners and Project Advisors. Past and current Steering Committee members, Organizational Partners, and Project Advisors are listed at the end of this article.

Phase I: Literature Review and Groundwork for the YVSP Community Process

After obtaining funding and gathering the Steering Committee, the Project was underway. The first phase of the Project ran from April to June of 2008, during which time we put together a literature review and laid the groundwork for the subsequent phases.

Literature Review

We decided that a careful review of the academic literature was the appropriate first step for the Project, which allowed us to begin gathering perspectives from a broad spectrum of disciplines. The research team identified multiple theories in criminology, psychology, human development, and public health, and frameworks for how professionals and academics in those fields approach youth violence as a problem. These frameworks guide the goals and strategies in each field's programming and response to youth violence.

Like the Project as a whole, the literature review was conducted under the theoretical framework of systems theory. Because of that perspective, we were looking for understandings of violence that addressed four related systems related to any one person: the individual, the family, the community, and the larger culture/society. We then organized the information along these lines in the following way: general resources, the individual and violence, relational, community, and society. The literature review can be accessed online at: http://www.gettingtotheroots.org/literature_review.

Groundwork for the YVSP Community Process

After researching the broader literature, we began the local research process and chose to look at the issue of youth violence by neighborhood. Not every neighborhood in Boston is a high-violence one, so we assumed that there must be something particular to some neighborhoods that produced higher youth violence. Therefore we set out to understand the system dynamics in these particular neighborhoods. The broad literature review was a valuable starting point for general information, but we knew that for the specifics necessary to the system dynamics model, we needed the perspectives of neighborhood leaders, youth work practitioners, families, and youth.

Early on, the stage was set for a focused design process that would work both with and for the communities involved. The intent was always to create a resource that would belong to the community, and so we created a process to help residents capture their own know-

ledge by participating in the design, execution, and evaluation of the Project. This approach was welcomed, with one participant declaring, “You’re asking me what I think creates the violence cycle? Now that’s a first. Usually outsiders come and tell us what they think, and then leave, and we never see them again!”

In Phase I, the parts of the process that would become Phases II and III were envisioned as first getting to know the selected neighborhoods and then convening Design Teams to oversee the development of the model.

Phases II & III: Designing and Revising the Model

After the careful setup process of Phase I, the model-building process started and took place during Phases II and III of the Project. Phase II ran from July 2008 to March 2009, and Phase III ran from April 2009 to March 2010. The iterative process of these phases defies a chronological retelling, because Phase III was in many ways an expanded reprise of Phase II. It is easier to capture the learning of these two phases by grouping them and reviewing the four main threads of learning throughout:

- **Neighborhood Briefing Documents** were put together on each neighborhood. These documents provide the history, demographics and trends, assets (including schools, organizations, and faith communities), and public safety concerns for each neighborhood.
- **Design Teams** were convened from three of the original four selected neighborhoods: Uphams Corner, Bowdoin/Geneva, and Grove Hall.
- **Gang Member Listening Sessions** were conducted based on an anthropological approach to understanding the violent subculture of gangs and resulted in a deeper understanding of their distinct norms and behavioral codes.
- **Key Stakeholder Interviews and Specialist Groups** were held during both of these phases and introduced a broad range of perspectives on youth violence from police, the psychology team, youth workers, and mothers of killed youth.

Neighborhood Briefing Documents

The Steering Committee chose four neighborhoods for focus: Uphams Corner, Grove Hall, Bowdoin/Geneva, and South End/Lower Roxbury. These specific neighborhoods were selected because they are areas where there is a higher concentration of youth violence. Calling a neighborhood a “hotspot” of violence, however, was one-dimensional at best. We knew that there was much more to be said about each of these neighborhoods, so the Steering Committee set out as our first task to learn more about the full picture of each neighborhood. In order to engage community residents with credibility, we needed to know what was generally known about each neighborhood. Our hope was that a well-done report would then also be valuable to community members (nothing like this existed previously) and would show we were serious about our relationship.

Each of the Neighborhood Briefing Documents is 40-60 pages long and provides history, demographics and trends, assets (including schools, organizations, and faith communities), and public safety concerns. These carefully researched documents contain:

- **History.** A roughly four-century overview of the area.
- **Boundaries.** Geographical outlines of these neighborhoods based on common understanding, US census tracts, the Boston Redevelopment Authority, and/or postal ZIP code.
- **Population trends/Racial and ethnic trends.** Growth and decline of the population, including specifics based on race and ethnicity (includes comparisons to state and national trends).
- **Age characteristics of the population.** Numbers and distribution of different age ranges, with particular focus on youth (includes comparisons to state and national trends).
- **Family structure.** Household size and structure, including living arrangements for children.
- **Economics and income.** Census information about poverty rates.
- **Housing.** Describes the housing stock, percentage of home ownership, and occupancy rates.
- **Churches, schools, and community organizations.** Detailed lists including contact information and maps.
- **Public Safety and Crime.** Boston police districts and youth arrest information.
- **Community Newspapers and media.** Lists newspapers, magazines, websites, and/or blogs dedicated to area.

A total of six Neighborhood Briefing Documents have been written. The first, Uphams Corner, was published in the spring of 2009. This one was followed by Grove Hall, Bowdoin/Geneva, and South End/Lower Roxbury in the summer of 2009. Since then two more studies were added in the summer of 2010: Greater Dudley and Morton/Norfolk. The research and publication resources of the Emmanuel Gospel Center (including the work of Senior Researcher, Rudy Mitchell) were used to create and then publish these documents for use by the YVSP collaborators and have also been made publicly available for anyone interested. These documents can be downloaded from: www.egc.org/yvspbriefingdocs.

Design Teams

During Phases II and III, Design Teams were convened from three of the selected neighborhoods: Uphams Corner (winter 2009), Bowdoin/Geneva (fall 2009), and Grove Hall (fall 2009). The Steering Committee had originally intended to convene a South End/Lower Roxbury Design Team as well but ultimately determined that this was not feasible.

Rather than having all three teams going at once, the Steering Committee chose to go through the whole process with the Uphams Corner team and then branch out to the Grove Hall and Bowdoin/Geneva teams. The benefit of this approach was the ability to debrief and then revise the process along the way. There was enough flexibility to be able to make changes if something was not working.

Who they were and what they did

Each neighborhood Design Team consisted of 12 representatives—six adults and six youth—drawn from three partner organizations in each area. The partner organizations were chosen for their history of work in youth violence and respected status as communi-

ty-led agencies. The selected agencies appointed their own representatives (one agency worker, one adult community resident, and two youth community residents).

Once assembled, the teams were led through a collaborative learning process focused on building trust and a spirit of inquiry where participants openly challenged assumptions, experimented with ideas, reflected publicly about the project design, and—of course—dug deeper for insights related to the dynamics of youth violence.

The work of these teams was to oversee and approve the development of the model framework and the core logic of the model. That is, they were to work together to reflect deeply on how violence was happening right then as well as uncovering trends of how it has happened over time. They each made specific contributions to the development of the model both in the theoretical framework and the model mechanics. For an example, see the “slippery slope” map shown later in this article and also in Steve Peterson’s “The YVSP Strategy Lab.”

Bird Street Community Center
Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation
Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative

UPHAMS CORNER

The Design Team from Uphams Corner was the first to begin shaping the computer model in the late fall of 2008 and into the

winter of 2009. The team met five times. They started with training around system dynamics and went on to conversations about the culture of violence and other big picture ideas like community trauma. They discussed the role of public institutions and the ways these institutions are hindered in carrying out their purposes such as lack of resources, inappropriate policies, and/or cultural biases. They analyzed the movement of youth through the various “buckets,” introduced the ideas of association and apprenticeship, and clarified the differences among more- and less-organized gangs.

Bowdoin Street Health Center
College Bound Dorchester
Catholic Charities Teen Center at St. Peter’s

BOWDOIN/GENEVA

The Design Team from Bowdoin/Geneva met four times during the fall of 2009. They did not create the original version of the model

and were skeptical at first about some aspects of the framework. Over time they came to accept major aspects of the model while altering others. This team discussed in depth how youth become involved in gangs. They also called for a longer list of interventions, and they introduced a new “rogue” bucket to account for violence carried out by youth not involved in a gang (perhaps motivated by revenge). They also drew attention to an individual’s context, noting the importance of where and with whom someone grows up in determining their later involvement in violence.

Charles Street AME Church
Freedom House, Inc.
Project RIGHT

“Being on the Design Team showed me that I had a different role than I thought I had. It’s kind of major to be on a Design Team like this that’s going to help the entire city. It kind of boosted my self-esteem as a youth in the community that I can have hands-on contact with something that’s going to change the community.”

—Grove Hall Design Team Member, youth

GROVE HALL

The Grove Hall Design Team met four times in the fall of 2009. Like the team from Bowdoin/Geneva, they were continuing the work started by the Uphams Corner team. This team did a lot of work on how young people move into gangs, how they decide to become violent, and especially the impact of family and community on youth. This group broadened the conversation beyond youth violence to include other issues, needs, and strengths of their community. They also confirmed the basic flows of movement of youth into gang involvement and violence.

Our Learning about Design Teams

Even as the model was being worked on by the Design Teams, the YVSP team was learning how best to facilitate that process. Here are some examples of our overall thinking on the Design Team process, which in some instances was refined along the way as the work was unfolding:

- **The visual language of diagrams.** Some of the systems jargon could be too dry and abstract, so we shifted to the visual language of diagrams (e.g. the Slippery Slope map) that gave us a simple, shared way of talking about a complicated system. As these diagrams were refined, they became the visual log of the Design Teams’ decisions and analysis.
- **Reducing what could get “lost in translation.”** By the time the second and third Design Teams were meeting, we saw the wisdom of having the model builder (Steve Peterson) present at those meetings so that the extra step of reporting back to him was removed from the process.
- **Asking “how?”** It is tempting to focus on the “why” of youth violence and gang involvement. The Design Teams worked on creating a model of what involvement is and *how* it happens.
- **Hiring of consultants.** Design Team members—including youth—were paid workers, not volunteers.
- **Different groups, different approaches.** Each group had a distinct feel. We didn’t want to have a “one size fits all” approach to the teams, and we were free to let them shape themselves and to be responsive to what approach worked best for the people in the room.
- **Listening to youth.** We listened to the youth and included their views because they were full partners in the design process. We did not invite them in as “junior partners” to witness the adult conversation.
- **The team had passion, too.** We did not come in as flat, objective outsiders. Khary Bridgewater led the way in bringing in personal passion to the research process and sharing this passion openly with the Design Team members.

Gang Member Listening Sessions

As described above, the community members on these Design Teams made significant contributions to the model and its framework of understanding youth violence. That said, these same community members also expressed reservations because they actually knew little of the inner workings of gangs or the behavior and motivations of gang members. We therefore determined to seek the participation of both active and former gang members in understanding and addressing youth violence.

We started by holding two focus groups with gang violence experts to create a safe, effective way of engaging gang members. From the input of these groups came two key strategies that shaped the overall approach to what became the listening sessions:

- **Go deep and ask for details.** Rather than asking about general information on gang violence, we asked for detailed information about their personal experiences related to gang violence.
- **Take your time and meet as a group.** Rather than meeting one-on-one, we hosted group sessions where we could take our time and allow for the opportunity to build trust and gain a deeper understanding regarding these personal experiences about which we were asking.

Taken together, these strategies led to a direct, interpersonal approach to the inquiry process.

The actual listening sessions were held in the summer of 2009. There were four sessions for younger, active members and one for older, former gang members. It seemed natural to separate the two groups given the distinctions in both their current and past experiences implied by the age and status differences. We assumed that all of these participants, while part of this semi-isolated subculture, would still care about reducing youth violence in their neighborhoods. It is important to note that, as with all other Project designers, they were compensated for their time.

These gang members contributed significantly to the development of the model, and it seemed that the time spent carefully listening to their personal experiences was very valuable. They helped refine the assumptions underlying the model and framework and clarify the movement of young people along the slippery slope.

Khary Bridgewater has described his personal experiences during this research process and detailed findings from it in *The Reason Why We Haven't Solved the Gang Violence Problem*. Here is a brief overview of the findings:

- Increasing violence is driven by dramatic increases in gang members.
- Traumatic stress is changing the way violent and nonviolent youth behave.
- Gang violence is addictive.
- There are significant unintended consequences of suppression strategies.
- Gangs represent a significant alternative social system.

Additional Stakeholder Interviews and Specialist Groups

In addition to the research done through the creation of the Neighborhood Briefing Documents, the work of the Design Teams, and the listening sessions with gang members, we also conducted several interviews with additional key stakeholders and convened two specialist groups.

Stakeholder Interviews

These interviews were conducted with key stakeholders who have both an “inside” and big picture view on youth violence in Boston. Here is a brief synthesis of what we learned from these sources:

- **Police representatives** commented on their lack of a diversity of tools for responding to youth violence (basically incarceration or the threat of it). They noted generally the influence of the bad economy leading to lack of jobs leading to illegal means of getting money.
- **Courtney Grey**, director of trauma services at the Boston Public Health Commission, introduced a foundational concept to the model through the idea of community trauma. He contributed the understanding that collective community trauma influences individual responses to stimuli.
- **Emmanuel Tikili**, at that time Director of Programs for the Boston TenPoint Coalition, brought in an understanding of the dynamics within a community where there is certainly tension between gangs but also among various residents and youth in general.

Specialist Groups

Psychology Team

The psych team contributed a great many concepts to the model. Here are some of their key influencing ideas:

- Natural limits to adolescent cognitive development may explain some violent behavior (e.g. difficulty in seeing consequences).
- The notion of a personal predisposition toward or away from violence.
- Various motives for violence like self-defense, retaliation, compliance with behavioral norms of gangs, thrill-seeking, transference of past hurts, operating from “survival mode,” etc.
- High trauma exposure leading to PTSD-type behaviors such as physiological hyper-arousal and avoidance.

Tina Chery’s Mothers Group

In February of 2009, Tina Chery, founder of the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute, hosted a group of about ten mothers whose children were killed in gang-related violence. They, too, contributed many concepts to the model. Here are some themes that emerged from this group:

- Parents have a powerful voice in their children’s lives
- There have been marked changes in access to and use of guns in recent years

- Violence seems to be carried out without any feeling or attention toward long-term repercussions
- There is a general awareness of the lack of grief services and other important community supports for those who have lost loved ones to violence

The YVSP Model

The YVSP Strategy Lab—or “the model,” as everybody refers to it—is where all these many contributions came together. It reflects the thinking of the Design Teams, the specialist groups, gang members, and the other key stakeholders along with the background research to give us a computer simulation that captures key interdependencies in the dynamics of youth violence in Boston communities. The design process included many major and minor revisions of the model, and it is still being updated and strengthened to better represent reality.

Overview

The model is driven by the interaction of five key components: slippery slope dynamics, high-risk interactions, community trauma, affinity for violence, and youth violence.

What you see here is that slippery slope dynamics (explained below) among youth provide the context in which high-risk interactions occur. As suggested by the name, high-risk interactions are those interactions among individuals and groups within the community, that have the potential to result in violent activity. Violence, in turn, can cause the buildup of symptoms of trauma for some members of the community, which then increases the likelihood of high-risk interactions among certain youth. Finally, among those engaged in violence, violent acts can drive the buildup of an affinity for violence as the default mode of interaction, further driving violent activity over time.

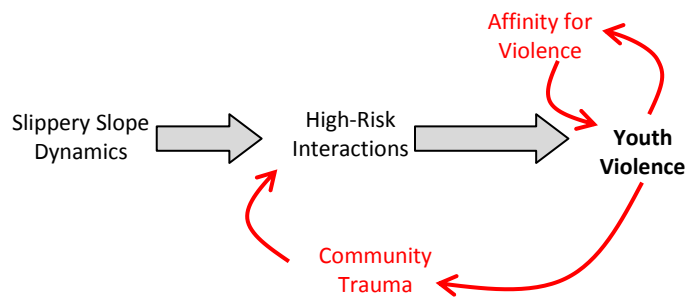


Figure 1. Overview of the YVSP Strategy Lab

Slippery Slope Dynamics

The slippery slope map (shown on next page) was developed over multiple Design Team meetings. It is a fundamental organizing framework for the model. The stocks—or “buckets”—shown as rectangular boxes in the map categorize youth along the spectrum from “Uninvolved” to “Gang Shooter/Leader.” The flows, indicated by directed arrows, represent pathways by which youth can move over time between the different buckets. Overall, the slippery slope enables us to capture the potential for youth within a defined community to drift over time toward gang involvement.

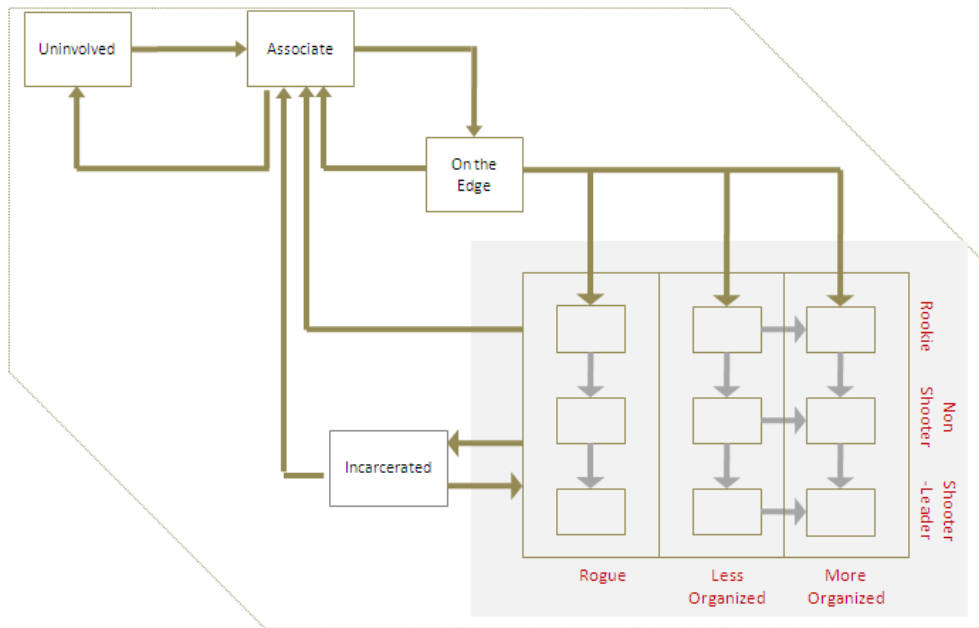


Figure 2. The “Slippery Slope”

High-Risk Interactions

Slippery slope dynamics create the context in which high-risk interactions take place. In any community there is a network of potential connections between individuals and groups. Over time, interactions occur along these lines of connection. The further down the slippery slope, the riskier these interactions are in their potential for violent activity.

Community Trauma

Referring back to the first diagram (figure 1), you see “slippery slope dynamics” creating the context for “high-risk interactions” which increase the likelihood of youth violence. Above and below are two other components that are shown in feedback loops with the others. Community trauma is the first of these.

Many high-violence communities tend to exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress (like a persistent fearfulness and watchfulness). For some, these symptoms can cloud the way they read a particular situation, turning a benign interaction into one that has potential for violence. A feedback loop then gets created where the heightened level of community trauma leads into a higher likelihood for high-risk interactions, which in turn results in more violence and more trauma.

Affinity for Violence

The second feedback loop in the overview diagram (figure 1) links in “affinity for violence.” Here is a slightly more detailed feedback loop to explain this component of the model. The loop says that the more one engages in violence, the more violence becomes the “default” operating mode for interacting

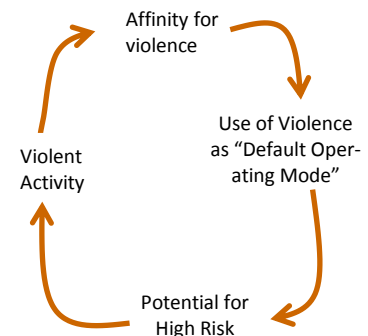


Figure 3. Affinity for violence

with others. This, in turn, further fuels the cycle for those who choose to engage in violent activity.

Youth Violence: Tying it all together

Slippery slope dynamics, high-risk interactions, community trauma, and affinity for violence all come together in the generation of youth violence. The model and its accompanying framework can help individual and group exploration of initiatives aimed at changing the rates of movement of individuals along the slippery slope, as well as initiatives aimed at changing the nature of social interaction within the community.

"I am now able to see, understand and explain where my organization fits in with other initiatives and organizations to reduce youth violence."

—Tina Chery, meeting August 2010

If you are curious to know more about the model, Steve Peterson (who created the computer simulation) has described it in much fuller detail in an article called *The YVSP Strategy Lab*. He gives a thorough walkthrough of the model along with an introduction to systems.

What We Are Learning

Our goals for this phase are to broaden the base of users of the model, create a broader conversation about youth violence, help people see where they fit into the framework, discern what is missing, and increase the dialogue about what strategies are needed. We do not need to defend the model as it stands or teach it as an end result. Rather, we need to continue the conversations which allow it to be deliberately refined in order to reflect reality better and be an increasingly useful tool.

People are using the model, and its power to provide a shared framework of understanding and a shared language for communication about youth violence is becoming clearer and clearer. Organizations are not only gaining a deeper understanding of how their own work serves to reduce youth violence, but they can easily appreciate the approach taken by another group from their own or a different neighborhood when it's demonstrated through the model and talked about in its now-familiar terms. These groups can then celebrate the value of their combined efforts and take a larger, systemic view that shows how they can partner together to serve youth better as well as communicate more broadly about what works for their communities.

Since the model was launched, a wide range of people have interacted with it in a variety of settings. Here are some of the places the model is being put to use for collaborative learning:

- **Youth Worker and Agency Trainings.** YVSP is providing training on the model and framework to any interested agencies. neXus Boston is also hosting a Learning Center for youth workers as an expression of its existing work as a learning community.

- **Learning Centers.** Some of the organizations that have been partners throughout the Project are now hosting Learning Centers: Catholic Charities Teen Center at St. Peter's, Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, and Project RIGHT.
- **Community Forum.** The YVSP Community Forum took place in December 2010. The centerpiece of that evening was presentations from the three learning centers (listed above), from one youth worker connected through neXus (Joel Furrow, Bridging the Gap), and from a representative of a partner agency (Tina Chery, Louis D. Brown Peace Institute).

We are seeing the payoff of all the design work now as people are better able to communicate effectively about youth violence and work together toward improving all our neighborhoods. The more the model is used and refined, the more the momentum builds for it to be an effective framework and tool for dialog, collaborative decision making, and thoughtful action.

This Project has been characterized by a thoughtful, deliberate process, and this phase will be no different. We are aware of the potential of this tool to inform a community-centered process and empower community members to strategize about ways to achieve a long-term reduction in violence. On the other hand, it could be taken and misused in an ultimately divisive and counterproductive way. We will therefore keep to the same types of thoughtful processes we've used all along to accomplish the purpose of sharing the model more broadly so that its essential orientation toward learning, sharing, and collaboration is not lost.

For more detail (and more stories and photos) on who is using the model and for what purposes, see *What We Are Learning*. If you are interested in receiving training, please see the contact information listed at the end of this article.

Reflections on the YVSP Process

The combination of a community-based research process and system dynamics methodology has led to a model of youth violence that is increasingly able to serve its intended purpose of providing a shared language and shared framework of understanding around youth violence.

The value of the Project has been the collaborative learning process through which the partner organizations, community members, youth, and the Steering Committee have gone together. What follows are some reflections on the essential takeaways of this process:

- **Successful partnership requires considerable effort.** We included a range of partners—youth, community members, agency representatives, and gang members—in the development of the Model, all as co-researchers. This process took twice as long as originally planned, but this type of partnership is more satisfying all around, especially for groups who often serve as a source of information for academic research but are seldom included in what information is analyzed or presented.

- **Yes, the community can do systems thinking.** Community members—particularly youth—readily take to the systems approach and the computer simulation. Many people have a strong intuition for interdependencies and the sense of “everything is connected to everything else.” The model and framework put language to this existing understanding and fosters the empowerment to make lasting changes.
- **Going deeper with gang members helped us to begin to understand the subculture.** We consistently put the understanding of community members first in the research process. When these community members, however, pointed to gaps in their understanding of what really happen within gangs, we approached gang members directly. The resulting very direct, interpersonal approach for the gang member listening sessions enabled us to begin to understand the rules, norms, behaviors, and motivations of gang members and led to the perception of a subculture with fundamentally different behavioral norms.
- **People are thinking and talking together from different neighborhoods, disciplines, ages, and backgrounds.** This Project was envisioned as a tool for creating a shared framework of understanding around youth violence that would be meaningful to a wide range of people from different fields who are all working to reduce youth violence. It is encouraging to see that already happening through the creation of Learning Centers and the kind of large group conversation that happened at the Community Forum.
- **People understand their own neighborhoods in a deeper way.** Alongside this thinking and talking together across neighborhoods was a profound experience of understanding within each neighborhood. The framework and shared language allowed each neighborhood to speak of and reflect on its unique, local experience of violence and how that works *without* having to generalize across neighborhoods. That opportunity added more integrity, deeper reflection, and better insight into the conversation and removed the element of judging “those people over there.” Each team knew that their unique insights would be represented in the model along with the unique insights from people in other areas.

Summary

YVSP employed a community-based participatory research process in which community residents participated in the design, execution, and evaluation of a detailed, system dynamics computer model of youth violence in Boston. These residents, from agency leaders to youth to gang members, provided unique insights into the behavior of violent youth in Boston. Their empowerment and engagement in a community-driven process fostered a collaborative environment in which the logic of community residents could be articulated and explored. The group model-building process created enthusiasm from community residents as they saw their own logic reflected in the evaluation of violence-reducing initiatives.

We are excited about the model that has been created, but we are perhaps more excited about the collaborative learning that has taken place throughout the process of listening

to the many voices and many perspectives that give the model its value. This effort took time, commitment, and the efforts of many people to bring it to fruition. It was worth it. The model is a powerful tool when applied to the neighborhoods from which it was generated. For those who would want to carry out similar work in another locale, it is the *process* that would need to be imported, not the model.

Going forward we are excited to broaden the base of users of the model while preserving the core values of the Project to date. To that end, we will continue putting the community first and allowing the basic neutrality of the framework to provide us with a way into deeper understanding and better communication so that we can take thoughtful action toward reducing youth violence in our city.

¹ Weiss B. An Assessment of Youth Violence Prevention Activities in USA Cities. Los Angeles, CA: Southern California Injury Prevention Research Center UCLA School of Public Health; 2008.

² Elliot D, Hatot NJ, Sirovatka P, eds. Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General. Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services, 2001.

³ Fox J, Swatt A, Swatt M. The Recent Surge in Homicides involving Young Black Males and Guns: Time to Reinvest in Prevention and Crime Control. Boston, MA: Northeastern University; Dec. 2008.

⁴ Fox J. *Ibid.*

⁵ Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS). *Ibid.*

⁶ Cohen L, Davis R, Franchak S, Prothrow-Stith D, Quaday S, Swift S, Uchishiba N. Shifting The Focus: An Interdisciplinary Framework For Advancing Violence Prevention. Prevention Institute Web site. <http://www.thrive.preventioninstitute.org/shifting.html> Updated 27 July 2006. Accessed 6 Jan. 2010.

⁷ Weiss B. *Ibid.*

⁸ Cohen L. *Ibid.*

⁹ Cook P, Laub J. The Unprecedented Epidemic in Youth Violence. *Crime and Justice*. 1998; 24:27-64.

Steering Committee, Advisors, Partners, and Funders

Steering Committee

The Steering Committee has provided oversight and maintained the Project's community focus throughout.

Jeff Bass*	Tamecia Jones	Rudy Mitchell
Paul Bothwell*	Sam Kim*	Steve Peterson*
Khary Bridgewater*	Myra Kinds*	Talia Rivera
Matthew Gibson	Jin Min Lee*	LeSette Wright*

**denotes current members*

Project Advisors

The Advisory Team consists of leading scholars and practitioners in the youth violence prevention field who inform the underlying strategy and approach of the YVSP and regularly advise the project team.

Rev. Dean Borgman
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary,
Charles E. Culpeper Professor of Youth Ministries, 1976

Rev. Jeffrey Brown
Executive Director of Boston TenPoint Coalition

Rev. Dr. Ray Hammond
Chair and Founder of the Boston TenPoint Coalition

Dr. Jack McDevitt
Northeastern University, Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Studies in the
College of Criminal Justice
Director of the Center for Criminal Justice Policy Research
Director of the Institute on Race and Justice

Organizational Partners

Emmanuel Gospel Center
Black Ministerial Alliance of Greater Boston
Boston Capacity Tank
Boston TenPoint Coalition
High Risk Youth Network
United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley

Community Partners

Bird Street Community Center
Bowdoin Street Health Center
Catholic Charities Teen Center at St. Peter's
Charles Street AME Church
College Bound Dorchester
Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation
Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative
Freedom House
Project RIGHT

Funders

Barr Foundation
Charles H. Pearson Foundation Fund, Bank of America, Trustee
Florian O. Bartlett Trust, Bank of America, Trustee
Frank Reed & Margaret Jane Peters Memorial Fund I, Bank of America, Trustee
State Street Foundation
United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley
Yawkey Foundation II

Further Reading/List of Publications

Related Articles

There are three partner articles to this one. Each was written to provide a depth of detail on particular aspects of YVSP that complement corresponding shorter sections of this article.

- The YVSP Strategy Lab describes YVSP's system dynamics model in detail, including an introduction to the key systems concepts for understanding the model.
- The Reason Why We Haven't Solved the Gang Violence Problem discusses how the YVSP team solicited the input of gang members in the design process, and describes the findings and insights gained.
- What We Are Learning describes how the model is being used in various settings, and what different folks are learning from the discourse so far.

Literature Review

Our research team compiled a survey of academic studies, reports and other resources on youth violence from disciplines as far-ranging as sociology, criminology, public health, psychology and economics. The over 200 sources listed are only a part of the background research conducted for this project to determine what is publicly known about youth violence and how academics are interpreting that information. Available at: www.gettingtotheroots.org/literature_review.

Neighborhood Briefing Documents

Since the project began in the spring of 2008, we have published six neighborhood briefing documents that provide history, demographics and trends, assets (including schools,

organizations, and faith communities) and public safety concerns. Here is the list of Neighborhood Briefing Documents:

- Uphams Corner
- Bowdoin/Geneva
- Grove Hall
- South End/Lower Roxbury
- Greater Dudley
- Morton/Norfolk

Available at: www.egc.org/yvspbriefingdocs

Journal Article

In spring 2011 an article entitled “A Community-Based Systems Learning Approach to Understanding Youth Violence in Boston” will be published in *Progress in Community Health Partnership: Research, Education and Action* about YVSP. It describes the work of YVSP for an academic and public health audience and was written by:

- Khary Bridgewater, Emmanuel Gospel Center
- Steve Peterson, Lexidyne, LLC
- John McDevitt, Ph.D., Northeastern University College of Criminal Justice
- David Hemenway, Ph.D., Harvard School of Public Health
- Jeffrey Bass, Emmanuel Gospel Center
- Paul Bothwell, Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative
- Ros Everdell, Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative

For More Information

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