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YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION IN FLORIDA: A COMMENTARY

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Background | Violence is a long-lasting public health concern in Florida. Since 2005, when Florida enacted the “Stand Your Ground” law, the overall monthly rate of homicide has increased 24.4% and the rate of homicide by firearm increased 31.6%¹. Particularly, violence affects youth’s well-being and is associated with multiple risk behaviors and mental health issues^{2,3}. According to CDC’s Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), 6,139 youth aged 10-19 died of violence-related fatal injuries in Florida during 2007 and 2017⁴. Youth violence is preventable³. To prevent violence and build safe environment for youth in Florida, four programs have been conceptualized based on the current literature and described below with detailed strategies.

Program 1: Florida Youth Violence Prevention Center | *Background:* Currently, five Youth Violence Prevention Centers (YVPCs) are funded by CDC⁵. These centers can prevent youth violence by building the partnership between researchers and communities and creating comprehensive evidence-based program packages^{5,6}. However, none of them are located in Florida. Given the high prevalence of violence in Florida and the lack of a leading organization, a youth violence prevention center should be established.

Strategies: The Florida Youth Violence Prevention Center should go beyond the functions of the current YVPCs, with extended efforts to monitor violence in Florida, lead the violence prevention activities, link organizations and agencies, and create a safe environment for youth. The specific strategies may include:

1) *Monitor youth violence* and other types of violence in all counties and report the data to the national violence reporting system. The center should track changes of violent behaviors over time in order to implement appropriate prevention strategies and adjust for the current prevention programs.

2) *Support public health professionals* to identify factors that cause violence, prepare the community’s readiness to reduce violence and crimes, and eventually, transfer the academic findings into practice by building academic-community collaborations^{5,7}.

3) *Provide resource and services to victims.* Many youths affected by violence have limited access to health care system and resources (e.g. counseling). The center should provide cost-effective medical resources to help victims recover from traumas and injuries by partnering with clinical care organizations⁸.

4) *Build connections between local violence prevention agencies.* Local agencies contribute to violence prevention by providing multiple services and programs for victims and survivors (e.g. emergency shelter, legal assistance, health education, child welfare projects). The center should lead the effort to build connections between them in order to share prevention strategies and balance available resources. Also, the center should assess the performance of these agencies based on National Public Health Performance Standards (NPHPS)⁹.

Program 2: Policy Development for Disadvantaged Neighborhoods | *Background:* Youth living in

disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to be involved in conflicts and exposed to multiple health adversities¹⁰⁻¹². Consequently, they have increased likelihood of taking multiple risk behaviors (e.g. gun carrying) and suffering from various types of violence^{13,14}. Therefore, prevention efforts should focus on the improvement of these disadvantaged communities to create a safe and stable environment for youth.

Strategies: The purpose of this program is to provide policy support for disadvantaged neighborhoods in order to decrease violence and increase safety for youth. Specifically, the following strategies should be implemented:

1) *Build business improvement districts (BIDs)*. BIDs refer to private non-profit corporations that are legislatively created by state government in disadvantaged areas^{15,16}. The purpose of BIDs is to improve physical environment in depressed communities and increase economic opportunities for low-income residents¹⁶. Previous implementation of BIDs in California has shown significant reduction of crime and violence in disadvantaged neighborhoods^{16,17}.

2) *Improve social cohesion and collective efficacy*. In addition to BIDs, disadvantaged neighborhoods need to improve social cohesion (connectedness among residents) and collective efficacy (willingness to help others) to reduce violence and crimes¹⁸⁻²⁰. Community-wide activities (e.g. annual events) should be organized to provide opportunities for residents knowing and supporting each other, and eventually forming a shared community value².

Program 3: School-Based Education and Skills Building | *Background:* School is an important environment for youth. During the past two decades, many studies have confirmed the effectiveness of school-based programs in violence prevention²¹⁻²³. Therefore, school-based programs are critical for youth violence prevention in Florida.

Strategies: As recommended by CDC, school-based youth violence prevention should be focused on enhancing nonviolent attitudes, beliefs, and norms and improving youth's skills to manage anger and resolve conflicts^{2,24}. This program is to provide violence prevention education and skills-building programs in the school setting. Specifically, the strategies include:

1) *School-based education* to enhance skills of problem-solving, anger control, nonviolent communication, aggressive impulse management, emotion regulation and empathy. These skills will

decrease youth's involvement of violent behaviors and promote their safety.

2) *Nonviolent policies and norms*. All the schools should have nonviolent policies and regulations, which highlight that violence is an unacceptable way to resolve conflicts and emphasizing that the consequence of misbehaviors is severe. By reiterating these policies, the school will eventually form a nonviolent environment. To speed up the process, school-wide activities are needed, such as violence prevention activities, family participation, and teachers' classroom management practices².

3) *Youth leaders* to help build a violence-free school environment. Youth leaders will be educated with non-violence solutions and then spread the skills to other students. Moreover, the leaders will provide support for students affected by violence and get involved in violence prevention programs.

Program 4: Parenting and Family-Focused Interventions | *Background:* Youth will have an increased risk of violence involvement if they lack supervision from parents. Parents' knowledge, attitudes and behaviors will affect youth's physical, mental and behavioral health²⁵. Intervention strategies aiming to enhance parenting skills are effective in reducing the risk of violence involvement among children and adolescents²⁶. Therefore, family-focused programs are needed for youth violence prevention in Florida.

Strategies: The purpose of this program is to enhance parenting skills and home safety for children and youth. Specifically, the strategies include:

1) *Improve parenting skills* by providing knowledge about healthy child development, effective communication, age-appropriate rules, behavior supervision and nonviolent disciplines²⁵. These skills can help to build strong parent-child connectedness, good family communication, and a conflict-free home environment^{2,25}.

2) *Help children to build positive relationships with other caring adults* in the community, such as neighbors. These people can provide informal supervision, protection and guidance to adolescents, which will increase their perceived safety and lower their exposure to unsafe environment². These caring adults can also serve as a role model to guide youth's behaviors³.

3) *Prevent youth to get unsupervised access to firearms* at home. Parents should be educated to follow firearm storage practices to reduce children's

unintendedly firearm injuries and deaths²⁷⁻²⁹. Moreover, strong parental relationship and effective monitoring could reduce the likelihood of youth's weapon carrying³⁰.

Conclusion | In this article, four violence prevention programs have been developed to address the policy, community, school and family needs, with an overall purpose of reducing violence and enhancing safety for youth. Collaboration and cooperation are necessary for youth violence prevention. The following organizations, agencies and collaborations are critical in violence prevention and advocacy: 1) *Academic-community collaboration* to enhance violence prevention by translating evidence-based research into effective practice^{5,7}; 2) *Clinical-public health partnership* to improve and evaluate the quality of medical support for youth victims⁸; 3) *Local violence prevention agencies* to help deliver health care service to families and communities; and 4) *Funding agencies*, which will make important contributions by prioritizing their funding opportunities to youth violence prevention.

In conclusion, youth violence prevention should focus on comprehensive strategies rather than single-level efforts. Effective prevention strategies also require an interdisciplinary approach by collaborating public health professionals, clinical medical care, local organizations, school system, communities, and families.

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