Toward Preventing Youth Violence: Engaging Urban Middle-School Students in Community Service Learning

by Renee E. Sieving and Rachel Widome

As part of the service learning curriculum, the sixth-grade class from the Lead Peace–Plus school packaged 4,000 meals at a local nonprofit called Kids Against Hunger.

Youth violence is a highly visible, profoundly devastating problem in contemporary society. Adolescents involved in violence may be victims, perpetrators, or witnesses, and the consequences vary in severity both for the individuals involved (psychological stress, injury, or death) and for the larger community (reduced community cohesiveness, lower productivity, lower property values, or increased healthcare costs).

In the United States, many communities have been affected by the problem of youth violence in some way. According to the National Adolescent Health Information Center, in 2004 an average of more than 14 young people between the ages of 10 and 24 were murdered in the United States each day. The Minneapolis Police Department's annual homicide report documented that 26 Minneapolis residents between the ages of 15 and 24 were murdered in

2006. Although death is the most severe consequence of violence, nonfatal injuries are far more common. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2004 more than 750,000 10- to 24-year-olds in the United States were treated in emergency rooms for injuries caused by violence. Many acts of violence do not involve either the healthcare or criminal justice system and are therefore more difficult to quantify. According to the 2004 Minnesota

Student Survey, 46% of sixth-grade students in public schools in Minneapolis reported being kicked, bitten, or hit, and 58.5% reported being punched, shoved, or grabbed during the previous year. In a 2007 Minneapolis Public Schools survey, 33% of fifth graders reported that crime and violence were problems around their neighborhoods and schools. By any of these measures, violence involving youth is common.

Certain communities—including low-income, resource-poor urban neighborhoods—tend to be more afflicted by serious forms of violence. In addition, specific demographic groups such as males and African Americans are overrepresented in homicide statistics. According to the CDC, homicide is the leading cause of death among African American young people between the ages of 10 and 24. The National Adolescent Health Information Center reports that males 15 to 19 years of age are 6.2 times more likely to die from homicide than same-age females, and that murder rates for African American males 10 to 24 years of age are 3 to 16 times higher than rates for other groups of males. However, as a 2001 report on youth violence from the Office of the Surgeon General points out, self-reports of general violence perpetration do not differ substantially across racial/ethnic groups.

Bullying behaviors also fall along the continuum of violence. Bullying is a broad term that refers to behaviors that are intended to threaten another person who is more vulnerable. Bullying can include making verbal threats, spreading rumors, ruining someone's belongings, pushing or shoving, and other intimidating behaviors. In a 2001 article published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association,* Nansel and colleagues reported that approximately 30% of U.S. sixth to tenth graders have been involved in bullying either as a bully, victim, or both. Young people who are bullied are at greater risk for emotional distress and perpetration of violence.

This article highlights research for Lead Peace, a middle-school service learning program developed by the Minneapolis Public School District. Lead Peace aims to (1) enhance middle-school students' connectedness to and prosocial involvement in their schools and communities; and (2) reduce students' involvement in violence and early substance use, behaviors that interfere with positive school and community involvement. Through Lead Peace, students actively participate during their sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade years in community service designed to meet authentic community needs. Weekly classes provide structured time for preparation and reflection before, during, and after students' service activities. Lead Peace programming is led by partners from the Village Social Services, Minneapolis Public Schools, Kwanzaa Community Church, and the Healthy Youth Development–Prevention Research Center (HYD–PRC). With funding from CURA's Faculty Interactive Research Program and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, HYD–PRC is evaluating the impacts of Lead Peace on students involved in the program. Our findings will provide information for refining Lead Peace program activities.

Preventing Youth Violence: Youth Development Approaches

The Lead Peace program is grounded in the view that violence is a public-health problem and not solely a crime issue. The public-health perspective views violence as preventable. Preventing violence before it occurs eliminates the ill effects it has on individuals and communities. By understanding factors that make some populations more vulnerable to violence involvement and evaluating programs aimed at preventing it, we can gain a better understanding of the problem and formulate effective interventions and policies to prevent violence.

The 2001 Office of the Surgeon General's report on youth violence urged practitioners and policy makers to adopt evidence-based approaches to preventing youth violence, including programs that employ a dual strategy of addressing known risks for violence while building protective factors that buffer adolescents from violence involvement. Risks that can be addressed programmatically include *personal and behavioral risks* such as poor school performance, feeling alienated from school, aggressive behaviors, emotional distress, antisocial attitudes, and hopelessness. Modifiable *environmental risk factors* include pervasive role modeling of antisocial behaviors, as well as limited opportunities and support for prosocial school and community involvement. *Protective factors* are events, circumstances, and experiences that buffer young people from violence involvement. Research suggests protective factors against violence involvement that are amenable to change include a commitment to school involvement, academic achievement, attitudes that are intolerant of deviance, positive social and emotional skills, a strong sense of connection to school, and involvement with adults and peers who value avoiding violent behaviors.
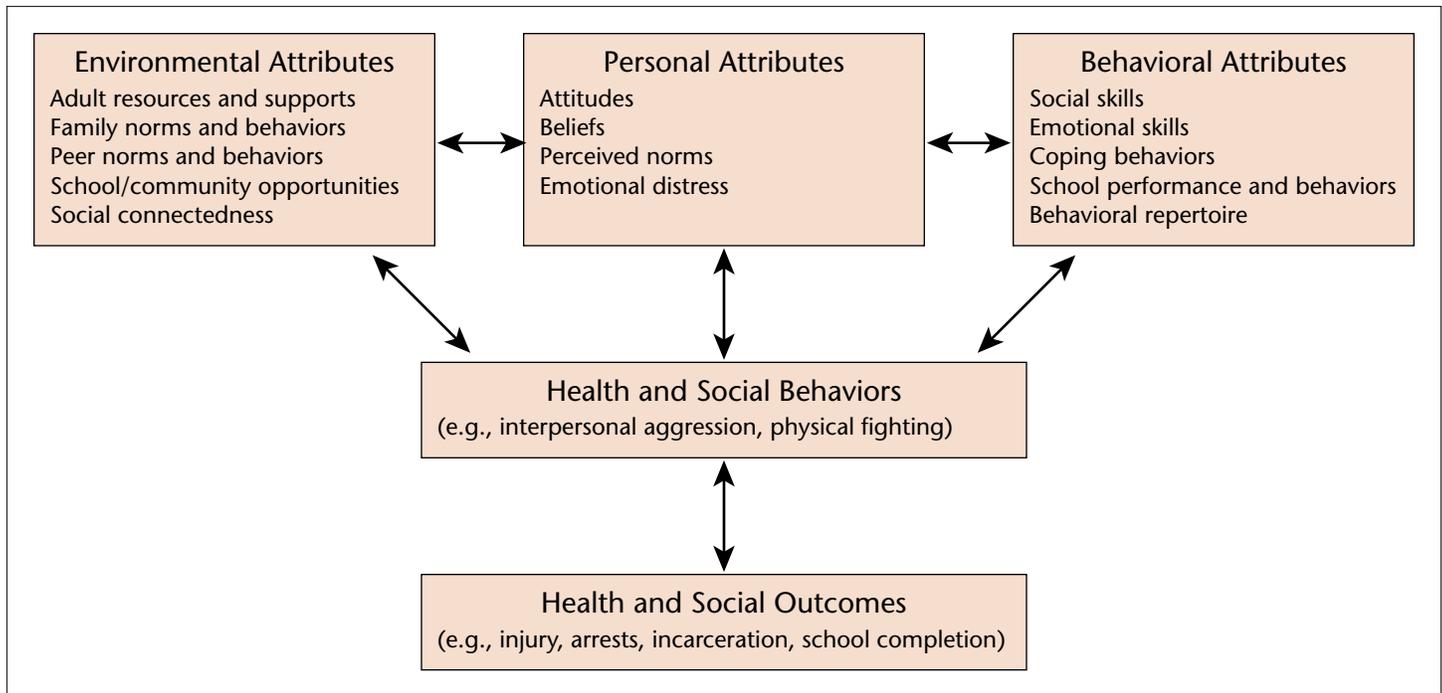
Understanding the interplay between risk and protective factors within the social contexts of adolescents' lives is essential to developing effective health-promotion programming. The *resilience paradigm*, which identifies factors that protect against unhealthy behaviors and adverse outcomes in vulnerable youth populations, provides a theoretical basis for the Lead Peace program. In this paradigm, depicted in Figure 1, health and social outcomes, including violence-related injury, arrests, and incarceration, emanate from health and social behaviors such as bullying, aggressive behaviors, and physical fighting. These behaviors, in turn, result from the dynamic interplay of *environmental attributes* (adult resources and supports; family norms and behaviors; peer norms and behaviors; school and community opportunities; connectedness to family, peers, school, and community) with individuals' *personal attributes* (attitudes, beliefs, and perceived norms; level of emotional distress) and *behavioral attributes* (social and emotional skills, coping behaviors, school performance, and behavior).

Multiple studies provide evidence that the environmental, personal, and behavioral attributes identified in the resilience paradigm are important buffers against violence.[1] Research suggests communities that provide higher concentrations of organizations and services for youth and other neighborhood residents reduce the likelihood of adolescents engaging in aggressive behaviors or becoming victims of violence.[2] Furthermore,

[1] Examples include I. Borowsky, M. Ireland, and M. Resnick, "Adolescent Suicide Attempts: Risks and Protectors," *Pediatrics* 107 (2001): 485–93; I. Borowsky, M. Ireland, and M. Resnick, "Violence Risk and Protective Factors among Youth Held Back in School," *Ambulatory Pediatrics* 2 (2002): 475–484; and M. Resnick, M. Ireland, and I. Borowsky, "Youth Violence Perpetration: What Protects? What Predicts? Findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 35 (2004): 424e1–424e10.

[2] B. Molnar, M. Cerda, A. Roberts, and S. Buka, "Effects of Neighborhood Resources on Aggressive and Delinquent Behaviors among Urban Youth," *American Journal of Public Health* (forthcoming). Published online ahead of print as 10.2105/AJPH.2006.098913.

Figure 1. The Resilience Paradigm: Factors that Protect Against Unhealthy Behaviors and Adverse Outcomes in High-Risk Youth Populations

Environmental Attributes	Personal Attributes	Behavioral Attributes
Adult resources and supports Family norms and behaviors Peer norms and behaviors School/community opportunities Social connectedness	Attitudes Beliefs Perceived norms Emotional distress	Social skills Emotional skills Coping behaviors School performance and behaviors Behavioral repertoire

Health and Social Behaviors
(e.g., interpersonal aggression, physical fighting)

Health and Social Outcomes
(e.g., injury, arrests, incarceration, school completion)

young people's connectedness to school has been shown to protect against violence involvement.[3] Connectedness is enhanced by structured opportunities for young people to develop social and emotional skills.[4] In addition, a close relationship with even one caring, consistent adult who recognizes, values, and rewards prosocial behaviors has been found to be a key protective factor in the lives of resilient youth.[5]

The resilience paradigm has expanded the traditional pursuit of exploring pathology in the social and behavioral sciences to include a quest for understanding successes and strengths, as well as resistance and resilience. With respect to intervention research, the paradigm underscores the importance of approaching youth intervention strategies by asking, *How can we successfully nurture protective factors in young people who live in highly challenging, stressful environments, and will*

these protective factors improve outcomes for these young people?* This approach is particularly salient for racial/ethnic minorities and populations who have experienced oppression. By emphasizing resources and protective factors rather than focusing on pathology, this theory-guided, solution-oriented approach has found increasing acceptance among marginalized groups precisely because it emphasizes hope and potential. The resilience paradigm identifies protective, nurturing factors that can positively influence adolescents who would otherwise likely experience a variety of adverse outcomes.

Youth development programs can use the power of protective factors to counteract risk. Effective youth development programs help young people develop social and emotional skills and build prosocial relationships with their peers. They underscore the importance of supportive relationships with adults who provide paths to achievement and who consistently communicate high expectations for behavior. Successful programs typically are offered over one or more academic years to bring about desired changes in behaviors. One type of youth development program, service learning, focuses on helping young people build a sense of connection and contribution through activities that serve the community. The National Youth Leadership Council has defined service learning as "an educational

method that involves students in challenging tasks that meet genuine community needs and require the application of knowledge, skills and systematic reflection on the experience."

Middle-School Service Learning: The Lead Peace Program

The Lead Peace middle-school service learning program addresses critical risk and protective factors for youth violence involvement identified by the resilience paradigm. As such, it emphasizes opportunities for young people to practice social skills, including communication, decision making, problem solving, and conflict resolution; to develop emotional self-regulation skills; to build caring relationships with peers and adults; and to gain experience in prosocial school and community involvement.

Developed by the Minneapolis Public Schools, the Lead Peace curriculum includes key components noted in Table 1, including team building, leadership skills development, community mapping, goal setting, and planning, implementing, and reflecting on community service learning projects. Through service learning projects and other experiential activities, Lead Peace engages students and gives them tools to be leaders in their schools, homes, and communities.

At the invitation of the Minneapolis Public Schools, the University's

[3] M. Resnick et al., "Protecting Adolescents from Harm. Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 278 (1997): 823–32.

[4] J.D. Hawkins et al., "Promoting Positive Adult Functioning through Social Development Intervention in Childhood," *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 159 (2005): 25–31.

[5] B. Egeland, "Mediators of the Effects of Child Maltreatment on Developmental Adaptation in Adolescence." In D. Cicchetti and S. Toth (eds.), *Developmental Perspectives on Trauma: Theory, Research, and Intervention* (University of Rochester Press: Rochester, NY, 1997). pp. 403–434.

Table 1. Key Components of the Lead Peace Curriculum and Service Learning Projects

Lead Peace Curriculum
Team Building—Initial sessions use creative and interactive activities to help students get to know each other, build trust, and develop team norms.
Leadership Skills Development—Sessions focus on helping students to develop a clear understanding of what leadership means and to see themselves as leaders.
Community Mapping—Sessions illustrate how community issues can be broken down into root causes, resources, and outcomes.
Goal Setting—Sessions give voice to students' personal hopes and dreams, and teach them how to create goals for their lives.
Service Learning Projects
Project Planning—Sessions focus on the planning process and steps that lead to service. Students work together to create expectations for themselves in the classroom and in service settings.
Implementation—Sessions focus on implementing service projects. Emphasis is placed on experiential learning, in which students apply content knowledge, critical thinking, and good judgment to address genuine community needs.
Reflection—Sessions allow students to reflect on their service projects and the lessons they have learned about themselves and others through their service projects.

Healthy Youth Development–Prevention Research Center is evaluating the impacts of the Lead Peace service learning program on middle-school students. The Lead Peace outcomes evaluation study involves four K–8 schools in North Minneapolis that were selected in partnership with the Minneapolis Public Schools. All study schools have ethnically diverse and economically disadvantaged student bodies. Schools have been assigned to one of three conditions: Lead Peace, Lead Peace–Plus, and a comparison group. The study cohort includes students from the eighth-grade class of 2009 at each of these schools.

The two comparison schools will offer their usual middle-school curricula during the study period (2006–2009). The Lead Peace program school will offer weekly Lead Peace sessions for 16 to 28 weeks per year during the students' sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade years. The Lead Peace–Plus program school will offer an 8–10 session classroom health education program, the Lead Peace service learning program (including 30 classroom sessions with 15–20 additional hours of community service), and parent/family outreach activities during the students' sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade years. Lead Peace and Lead Peace–Plus programs are led by a group of school and community partners, including staff from each of the program schools and the Minneapolis Public Schools, social workers from a North Minneapolis branch of Hennepin County Human Services and Public Health, youth workers from Kwanzaa Church in North Minneapolis, and staff from HYD–PRC. Analysis of student responses to self-report questionnaires administered at the beginning of sixth grade and the end of sixth, seventh, and eighth grades will permit us to compare bullying and aggressive behaviors, violence involvement, and school performance, as well as core risk and protective factors for these behaviors, among students exposed to the three different curricula.

To examine associations between violence outcomes and environmental, personal, and behavioral attributes at the beginning of the sixth grade, we completed linear regression analyses with data from students in the Lead Peace study cohort (number of students = 118). Violence involvement was measured using a 4-item scale that assessed students' involvement in physical fights, group fights, and weapon use in the past year. Bullying behaviors were assessed with a 12-item scale that measured the frequency of students' teasing, bullying, and aggressive behaviors in the past week. Regression analyses adjusted for the effects of age, gender, race/ethnicity, and similarities in violence and bullying behaviors among students in a given school.

Sixth-grade students' bullying behaviors and violence involvement were clearly related.[6] As reported in Table 2, there were significant relationships between a select group of environmental, personal, and behavioral attributes and violence outcomes at the beginning of the sixth grade. Examining environmental attributes, sixth graders who reported stronger connections with their teachers, school, and schoolwork were less likely to be involved in bullying and violence than their peers with lower levels of school connectedness.

Selected personal beliefs and attitudes were also related to violence outcomes. Sixth graders who perceived that getting into a fight looks "tough" were more likely to engage in bullying and violence than students who did not have this attitude. In addition, students who perceived that getting into a fight looks "cool" were more likely to be involved in violence than their peers who did not express this attitude.

Among behavioral attributes, students who were frequently teased or bullied in the past week were more likely to be involved in bullying and violence than students who were infrequently teased or bullied. Students who reported frequently skipping school, breaking school rules, or getting into trouble at school were more likely to be involved in bullying than those with lower levels of school misbehavior. High levels of emotional and social intelligence appear to be buffers against violence involvement, as students who reported higher levels of recognizing, respecting, and caring about others' feelings were less likely to be involved in bullying and violence than students with lower levels of these interpersonal skills. Students who reported being able to manage their own emotions in stressful situations were less likely to be involved in bullying and violence than peers who had lower levels of stress-management skills. Finally, students with greater abilities to express their own feelings and those demonstrating higher levels of cooperative and caring behaviors with other students were less likely to be involved in bullying than peers with lower levels of intrapersonal emotional skills and caring and cooperative behaviors.

Conclusions and Policy Considerations

These findings provide valuable insights into key attributes associated with

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[6] Bivariate correlation r = 0.68, $p < 0.001$.

Table 2. Associations between Environmental, Personal, and Behavioral Attributes and Violence Outcomes

	Violence Outcomes	
	Bullying behaviors, past week	**Violence involvement, past year**
Environmental Attributes		
Involvement in prosocial community activities (4-item scale)	—	—
School connectedness (10-item scale)	–0.262 ****	–0.258 ***
Peer connectedness (8-item scale)	—	—
Personal Attributes		
Academic aspirations	—	—
Getting into a fight looks…		
"cool"	—	0.282 *
"stupid"	—	—
"grown up"	—	—
"tough"	0.306 ****	0.316 ***
"out of control or crazy"	—	—
Behavioral Attributes		
Victim of bullying, past week (12-item scale)	0.319 ****	0.297 ***
School misbehavior (6-item scale)	0.130 **	—
Interpersonal emotional skills (5-item scale)	–0.302 ***	–0.158 *
Stress-management skills (4-item scale)	–0.269 ****	–0.238 ****
Intrapersonal emotional skills (2-item scale)	–0.098 **	—
Caring and cooperative behaviors (11-item scale)	–0.040 ***	—

Note: Where no result is reported, the relationship was not found to be statistically significant. Where a result is reported, a positive number indicates that the stronger the attribute, the greater the likelihood of bullying behavior or violence involvement, whereas a negative number indicates the stronger the attribute, the lesser the likelihood of bullying behavior or violence involvement. The regression analysis controlled for age, gender, race/ethnicity, and school.

* Statistically significant at the 0.10 level ($p < 0.10$), meaning there is a less than 10% probability that the statistical relationship is a result of chance.

** Statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($p < 0.05$), meaning there is a less than 5% probability that the statistical relationship is a result of chance.

*** Statistically significant at the 0.01 level ($p < 0.01$), meaning there is a less than 1% probability that the statistical relationship is a result of chance.

**** Statistically significant at the 0.001 level ($p < 0.001$), meaning there is a less than 0.1% probability that the statistical relationship is a result of chance.

bullying and violence among middle-school students currently involved in the Lead Peace service learning program. Identifying potent risk and protective factors for student bullying and violence in our target population will help to guide refinements to core Lead Peace program objectives. Each program objective relates to a core risk or protective factor, and is addressed through multiple activities during the sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade years. For example, a core program objective is to foster students' prosocial involvement and connectedness with their schools. Related to this objective, many of the sixth-grade service learning projects consisted of interactions with younger students, enhancing middle-school students' sense of involvement with their school. Other sixth-grade Lead Peace activities aimed at building positive student-teacher connections include a teacher-appreciation lunch hosted by students and a celebration of students' service learning accomplishments attended by middle-school teachers.

Our findings also raise several questions for policy consideration. Higher levels of emotional and social intelligence are related to a decreased likelihood of involvement in bullying and violence. Thus, an important question to consider is how can families, schools, and communities nurture these protective emotional and social skills in young people? In addition, high levels of connection to school appear to act as a protective buffer against violence outcomes. Previous research has identified critical requirements for building students' school connectedness, including high academic expectations coupled with support for learning, positive adult-student relationships, and physical and emotional safety. What school and community resources can be drawn upon to make schools places where students feel welcome, safe, and supported? How can schools, community partners, and families work together to clearly convey high expectations for students' learning and academic performance? How can school connectedness be nurtured among young people who attend schools with dwindling resources and high rates of staff turnover? Understanding best practices in building young people's prosocial connections and contributions to their schools and communities will provide valuable insights for framing social policies aimed at preventing violence and promoting civic engagement among our youngest citizens.

Findings from our research to date verify important risk and protective factors for violence involvement among urban middle-school students involved in the Lead Peace program. A controlled evaluation of student outcomes associated with Lead Peace that we are currently undertaking will allow us to understand whether this service learning program realizes its goals of enhancing students' school

Through Lead Peace service learning activities, students develop supportive relationships with adults who encourage positive community involvement and prosocial behaviors.

and community connectedness while reducing their involvement in bullying, violence, and early substance use. We will report the results of this work in a follow-up article to be published in a future issue of the *CURA Reporter.*

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