

# National *Academic Centers of Excellence* on Youth Violence Prevention

## *Chicago Center for Youth Violence Prevention*

### History

The Academic Centers of Excellence (ACEs) were developed soon after the tragedy at Columbine high school. Each ACE works with the communities it serves to encourage participation and partnership, mobilizing residents and researchers to craft effective solutions for violence prevention tailored to their specific community. The Centers research youth violence prevention approaches, collect and analyze surveillance data, and foster relationships with local community partners to help develop, implement, and evaluate promising prevention efforts.

Since 2005, researchers at the Chicago Center for Youth Violence Prevention (CCYVP) have been committed to studying and preventing youth violence in several inner city and urban neighborhoods of Chicago, communities identified as some of the most violent environments in the nation. The Center focuses its efforts on understanding the reasons and risks for youth violence and then testing interventions before violence begins. This approach requires accurate surveillance, thorough evaluations, and continuous collaboration between policy makers, law enforcement officials, social service agencies, and community members. Through partnerships with violence reduction researchers from the Families and Communities Research Group, the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention, and the Illinois Council for Violence Prevention, CCYVP has formed a multidisciplinary team that aspires to develop a coordinated community-based response to youth violence.

### Research

Community-led initiatives often demand the approval and cooperation of local populations. Accordingly, CCYVP has implemented an innovative prevention program that invites the participation of local youth and adults with research scientists. The Schools and Families Educating Children (SAFE Children) project is a family-based intervention for Chicago first graders and their families that promotes positive social behavior and academic achievement, reducing the likelihood of future aggression. SAFE Children researchers recruited eighth graders to tutor first grade children entering elementary school using a structured reading program, encouraging smooth transitions to the school environment. In addition, community-based mental health providers delivered a manualized multi-family preventive intervention focused on parenting, other aspects of family functioning, and parental involvement in school. SAFE Children strives to work with parents to help ensure youth have a safe and academically and socially productive school experience. CCYVP is currently evaluating the effectiveness of this unique approach to positive youth development and its effect on preventing youth violence.

CCYVP is also involved in other research projects, including

- An evaluation of the CeaseFire outreach worker project, in which young adults from local communities work to prevent violent incidents from escalating to larger

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conflicts. These results will help to refine the training and on-going supervision of outreach workers and will be valuable for other cities implementing or interested in CeaseFire.

- A teen dating violence pilot intervention developed and based on findings from the Chicago Youth Development Study, a longitudinal study of risk and protection for involvement in violence. This work also builds upon the family intervention work of SAFE Children.
- A pilot intervention for families of incarcerated men, which also builds upon the work of SAFE Children and focused on the process of re-entry into the family following incarceration.
- Studies focused on the long-term trajectories of young men involved in delinquent and violent behavior during adolescence.

## Surveillance

Surveillance is an essential component in the prevention of youth violence, and CCYVP is developing a detailed system that integrates data from numerous sources to construct a reliable and dynamic snapshot of gang-related violence in the Chicago area. This process requires the cooperation of schools, law enforcement, hospitals, and other external organizations. The completed surveillance system will be able to identify “hot-spots” of high violence activity and will be made available to community partners and stakeholders for further analysis and interpretation.

## Training

CCYVP is an active member of the neighborhoods it serves, utilizing community partnerships to ensure that

research is supportive and sensitive to each community’s needs. To enhance its research, CCYVP trains local residents to be part of the research team, as is the case in SAFE Children. CCYVP’s efforts to engage community members help to contextualize interventions and develop community capacity. This work helps assist and inform future research projects. Similarly, CeaseFire outreach workers are given the training, opportunity, and hope to mediate when violence has occurred, sometimes in their own neighborhoods.

The research environment organized by CCYVP also benefits students, interns, and junior faculty members with interests in youth violence prevention. The many activities of CCYVP provide a real-world laboratory for young researchers, providing the opportunity for “hands-on” learning that goes beyond theory. Faculty members from the University of Chicago and the University of Illinois at Chicago schools of public health, psychology, psychiatry, juvenile justice, social work, law, and sociology, assist in nurturing optimum learning environments for the next generation of violence prevention researchers and practitioners.

## Community Mobilization

CCYVP’s presence in seven inner-city and urban poor communities is much more than a youth violence prevention laboratory. Through community partnerships, CCYVP is helping to address the educational and mental health needs of residents, organize grassroots organizations, and mobilize communities to action. The inclusion of local residents as participants in many aspects of the Center’s activities ensures neighborhood representatives have access to the resources, partnership, and technical assistance to achieve their own organizations’ goals.

For more information, please contact:

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