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The impact of Youth Alert! intervention in reducing violence in schools

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Abstract

Youth violence has long-term adverse effects on both victims and their communities. Most interventional strategies have little or no impact on reducing violence because they target supporting the victims whilst ignoring a social environment that continually facilitates exposure to violence through social and entertainment media. This paper provides some supporting evidence that interventional strategies that target changing attitudes and behaviour at a very young age through education are likely to positively change behaviour.

Introduction

Youth violence typically involves persons between the age of 10 and 24, who may be exposed to violence in any form or shape, i.e. as an offender, a victim, or a witness (<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/index.html>). Aggressive behaviour may include physical or emotional violence against another in the form of bullying, cyber bullying, fighting, theft, pushing, etc. that may lead to harm or sometimes death, self-harm and suicide. Over and above the long-term negative health outcomes, violence in educational settings has also long-term negative effects on educational and social outcomes such as isolation, disengagement and disfranchisement from scholar and academic activities (Nansel *et al.*, 2001; Rothon *et al.*, 2011).

There are, on the one hand, exogenous factors such as patterns of social change influencing social perceptions, attitudes and beliefs, and policy formation, and on the other, endogenous factors such as individual characteristics, individual perceptions and attitudes that influence individuals' social, health and educational outcomes. In other words, any violence prevention

programme must address both endogenous and exogenous factors to make a positive impact in reducing violence. Otherwise, focussing on programmes that merely supports victims of bullying, e.g. through mental health services, counselling, assertiveness training, etc, will often fail, because during and following the intervention victims have to face the same circumstances, social and educational environments that made them a victim in the first place! That is prevention strategies must go well beyond the intervention philosophy and change the social environment.

In this paper, we report the results from a universal programme that was implemented in schools in the USA to reduce violence in schools.

Methodologies

Youth Alert! (YA!) is a none for profit and public charity organisation with a sole purpose of reducing youth violence and bullying by ten-percent reduction through volunteerism, education, and teamwork. The YA!'s educational model attempts to reduce the incidence and prevalence of violence in schools by modifying adolescents' behaviour. The programme is implemented in selected schools. The presentation in each school is comprised of slide and video presentations explaining violence and its impact on the individual and the community. It also provides the students on ways to combat violence and avoid confrontation, handling of bullying and seeking help when needed. It focuses on nonviolent approach to life in and out of school. For the remainder of this paper YA! indicates Youth Alert! intervention model.

In Kentucky, YA! was delivered to all children in classrooms in a grade or in a school. Similarly, programs targeted to schools in high-risk areas are delivered to all children in a grade or school in those high-risk areas.

This design allows comparison of outcomes over time (i) within schools or a district, (ii) between schools or districts such as comparing outcomes from high risk schools/districts with low risk schools/districts.

Relevant data, before and after implementation of the programme, was collected to assess any change in outcomes. For the purpose of this report results are reported as rates of reported violence as recorded by the Education Department.

Study design

A prospective comparative study design was adopted. The programme targets all schools in Kentucky. However, the programme is rolled out in a staggered manner so not all schools receive the programme at the same time. This design allows a natural grouping for comparison and detecting change in behaviour (i) between schools with and without YA! (ii) Within schools, i.e. any change in outcomes after YA!

Method

As described in the introduction violence is defined as behaviour intended to hurt, harm or damage self or someone else. These can be physical or emotional harm. The Education Department requires schools to record and report incidence of violence in schools.

Each year, Kentucky schools publish School Report Cards (SRC) and post them on the Kentucky Department of Education Website. Not to be confused with student report cards, School and District Report Cards provide information about each school and district, including test performance, teacher qualifications, student safety, awards, parent involvement, and much more. The school and district report cards were established by statute, KRS 158.6453 (20), and regulation, 703 KAR 5:140. Additionally, the report card must incorporate the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind ACT (NCLB)

(<http://education.ky.gov/aa/distsupp/pages/src.aspx>)

This information will provide measures of violent behaviour for schools. School Report Cards were used to extract data on reported violence as the outcome measure.

A primary interest was to observe a reduction in the number of violent behaviour reported by schools. In this context, outcome measure of interest to collect was the number of reported violent behaviour before and after the implementation of YA!

In addition, reductions in violent behaviour may be sustained if perceptions and attitudes of students to violence are changed. To measure attitudes and to assess any change in students' perceptions of violence as a result of the programme participants were also surveyed before and immediately after the programme and later at month interval.

To explore usability and any impact on individual behaviour participating students and instructors were surveyed using an evaluation questionnaire.

Analysis

The analysis reported in this paper is based on 578 pre-test and post-tests immediately after the programme and then 30 and 90 days later.

Data generated from this study are mainly in the form of proportions or frequency distributions. Exploratory and descriptive statistics and simple test of proportions, were applicable, are applied to the data.

Sampling

Our program focuses on the middle and high schools with the greatest need. Middle and high schools with the highest reported behaviour events and alternative schools (schools that accept youths with behaviour problems as an alternative to suspension) were selected.

Results

Reported behaviour includes all incidents of assault, violence, use of weapons, alcohol, drugs (including tobacco), bullying and harassment regardless of the event resolution.

Events are linked by students identifier which means that any given student identifier may be linked to more than one behaviour events. Thus, in some schools the total count of behaviour events may be higher than total number of students.

A comparison of routinely recorded data on reported violence (e.g. harassment and bullying) suggests that over time those schools receiving YA! Performed significantly better, Table 1. The reduction in reported violence at schools with YA! Ranged from 33% in Lassiter Middle School, reputedly with one of the highest level of violence in Kentucky, to 67% in Frederick Law Olmsted Academy South.

On the contrary, the controls did not perform well at all, in most schools

Table 1 – comparison of School pairs – Highlisted are schools where (YA!) Presented

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	
School pair 1	No. of behaviour events (total students)	No. of behaviour events (total students)	No. of behaviour events (total students)	Change (%)
Highland Middle School, KY	X	699 (1055)	379 (1079)	320 (45.8) ↓
Stuart Middle School, KY	X	292	468	176 (60.2%)↑
School pair 2	x			
Fern Creek Traditional High School, Ky	x	1616 (1489)	679 (1504)	937 (58) ↓
Eastern High School, KY	x	416	712	296 (71.1%)↑
School pair 3				
Lassiter Middle School, KY	1,658	1,540	x	118 (7.1%)↑
Ramsey Middle School, KY	339	479	x	140 (41.3%)↑
School pair 4				
Frederick Law Olmsted Academy South, KY	480 (688)	160 (656)	x	320 (66.7) ↓
Frederick Law Olmsted Academy North, KY	1,417	2,104	x	687(48.5%)↑
School pair 5				
Leestown Middle School, KY	609 (658)	409 (759)	x	200 (32.8%) ↓
X	x	x	x	x

↑ indicates increase in violence; ↓ indicates decrease in reported violence

Source: Kentucky Department of Education, Kentucky School Report Card.

<http://applications.education.ky.gov/SRC/Default.aspx>

At the end of each presentation students and teachers were asked to evaluate the YA! Which has resulted in 9,438 students and 119 teachers completed survey questionnaire. Multi-day presentation ranged from a one and one-half hours to three hours total presentation time. There were 3,371, 4,012, and 2,055 completed student's evaluation surveys in 2014-15, 2015-16, and 2016-17 respectively. Of the 9,438 students 66% were Male, 34 % Female, 72 % U.S. Minority, 28 % U.S. Non-Minority.

To further examine the effect of YA! students were subjected to pre-and post-tests about the main concept of the programme. This involved conducting a survey and quizzes before and after the programme. An eighty-six percent (86%) post-test correct responses compared to twelve percent in the pre-test were achieved. This indicates a significant increase in students' awareness of the issues associated with violence including bullying and suicide potentially due to YA!.

In depth analysis of the pre- and post-test evaluation/satisfaction surveys is ongoing and will be reported in a second paper in dues cours.

Discussion and conclusion

Although violence and bullying are very old phenomena preventing violence and/or bullying are fairly new (Olweus, 1994). One of the problems faced when attempting to eradicate violence is social acceptance and attitudes to violence. In the current social setting where violence is considered a high value entertainment, social perceptions and attitudes are conditioned to accept it, i.e. there will be no harm to the society as a result of too much exposure to violence disguised as entertainment.

As mentioned in the introduction, the negative effects of violence are long-term adverse impact on health, economic and social outcomes. Most anti bullying initiatives fail because, firstly, they often target the victims or potential victims while ignoring the impact of the social environment, and secondly, there are very few appropriately designed evaluation studies of violence prevention initiatives.

Social and economic forces controlling entertainment and media, including social media are exogenous to individuals' attempt to prevent violence in the society and must be integrated within government's social, health and economic policy formation. However, for prevention initiatives to reduce the impact of violence on human behaviour the initiatives must target youth at early stage in order to attenuate perceptions and attitudes to violence. In other words, prevention programmes must help build the youths' resilience to the effects of exposure to violence and hence changing behaviour. YA! is a programme that pertain to target youth.

By bringing YA! into the schools to promote healthy life styles, self reflection and proactive choices, the programme aims to provide a tool for the youths to help adolescents to make healthy choices.

Program provides some evidence to support that in-class violence prevention education at schools help change attitudes and perceptions. The programme also provide evidence that this change in attitudes are sustained even some months after the programme which lead to change in behaviour.

In this paper we demonstrated that such an approach not only works to reduce violent behaviour but also by changing students' attitude the reduction in violence can be maintained, i.e. the programme's impact may be long-lasting.

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