

Contra Costa Youth Violence Survey: Findings

**Prepared by the Community Wellness & Prevention Program,
Contra Costa Health Services, as part of the
Violence Prevention Strategic Planning Project.**

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Executive Summary

As part of the Violence Prevention Strategic Planning Project (VPSP), Community Wellness and Prevention Program (CW&PP) Violence Prevention Project staff conducted a community-based needs assessment of strengths, challenges, opportunities, and threats related to violence prevention in Contra Costa. As a part of this needs assessment, the Youth Violence Survey provided a forum for some youth in Contra Costa to voice their feelings about the impact of violence on their lives and their ideas about how best to prevent violence.

Youth experiences with abuse

- Almost a third of the youth respondents said that someone has physically hurt them at some point in their lives, and roughly one out of ten said that someone has forced them to do something sexual they did not want to do.
- The proportion of youth disclosing physical abuse appears to be much higher in this survey than in comparable surveys nationwide. However, it appears that Contra Costa youth are slightly less likely than their nationwide counterparts to disclose sexual abuse.

Youth experiences with dating violence

- One out of five respondents said that they had been afraid of their boyfriend's or girlfriend's temper. One out of ten respondents said that they had been hit, kicked, shoved, or had things thrown at them by their boy/girlfriend. One out of twenty respondents said they had been forced by their boy/girlfriend to have sex.
- One-third of the youth said that they do not consider violence to be a big problem in teen dating relationships, yet more than half reported that they know a teen who has experienced one or more abusive behaviors in a dating relationship.

Youth experiences with hate-motivated violence

- Nine out of ten youth said that it is NOT okay to be mean to people who are lesbian, gay or of a different race.
- However, nearly two-thirds said that they had seen students at school get teased, called names and treated disrespectfully because others thought they were lesbian or gay, and more than half said that they had seen racially-motivated physical violence take place among young people within the last year.

Youth experiences with family violence

- Nearly a fourth of respondents said they have seen physical violence take place between their parents.
- Eight percent of the youth said that they have run away from home in order to escape violence in their families.

Youth experiences with self-inflicted abuse

- One in five youth said that they have hurt themselves by cutting or burning, and one in seven said that they have tried to kill themselves.
- A higher proportion of Contra Costa youth said they have tried to kill themselves, in comparison to similar surveys nationwide.

If youth were in a violent situation, whom would they tell?

Two out of three Contra Costa youth said that they would tell a friend if they were in a violent situation. Almost half of the respondents said that they would tell a close family member such as a parent or a sibling, and one in four said that they would tell the police.

Strategies for prevention

Though youth gave high rankings to each of the prevention strategies, they viewed “teen support groups” and “more activities for youth to do after school” as two of the most important strategies for preventing violence among young people. The results of the Youth Violence Survey also underscore the importance of combining diverse prevention strategies in order to address different aspects of youth violence in Contra Costa County.

It is vital that the Violence Prevention Action Plan implement diverse programs to promote safer schools and safer communities. Education regarding healthy versus violent relationships is needed among Contra Costa Youth, as is an increased awareness about homophobia and racially motivated violence. The high level of observed violence and fear that is experienced within the home setting indicates a need for violence prevention and intervention support services for families, and the comparatively high level of self-inflicted violence confirms the need for support groups and 24-hour hotlines that teens can turn to for help.

Introduction

The Contra Costa Health Services' Community Wellness & Prevention Program (CW&PP) received funding in the Summer/Fall of 1999 from the California Department of Health Services and the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors to undertake a year-long Violence Prevention Strategic Planning Project (VPSPP).

The goals of the VPSPP are to establish among key leaders, decision makers, government departments, community agencies and adult and youth residents in Contra Costa, an awareness of current violence prevention efforts in the county; a vision, in the form of an Action Plan for violence prevention; and a commitment of time and resources to make this vision a reality.

To achieve these goals, CW&PP Violence Prevention Project staff conducted a community-based needs assessment of strengths, challenges, opportunities and threats related to violence prevention in Contra Costa. The Youth Violence Survey represents one piece of this needs assessment.

In keeping with the mandate of the VPSPP, the Survey provided a forum through which youth in Contra Costa were able to voice their feelings about the impact of violence on their lives and put forward their ideas about how best to prevent violence. Findings from the survey will be incorporated into the Project's three-to-five year Violence Prevention Action Plan, which will be available in early 2001.

Demographics of Survey Respondents

A total of 129 youth between the ages of 12 and 20 completed the Youth Violence Survey. Respondents were from Richmond, Concord, Walnut Creek, San Pablo, Pittsburg and a number of other cities in Contra Costa. The majority (72%) of participants was between 15 and 18 years of age, and 75% were female. In terms of race, 36% of the youth were Caucasian, 25% were African American, 19% were Latino/a, 14% were Asian American/ Pacific Islander and 6% were of other ethnicities.

Attitudes towards Violence

To assess attitude towards violence, the youth participants were asked to rank eight statements about violence according to a five point scale ranging from "1 = Strongly Agree" to "5 = Strongly Disagree." Their responses to these questions are shown in Table 1.

Among the most startling findings, 49% of these youth said that it is easy for someone their age to get a hold of a gun, and only 25% of the youth said that gangs cause most of the violence in their neighborhoods. On a more positive note, over 90% said that it is NOT okay to be mean to people who are lesbian, gay, or of a different race although 53% said that they have seen racially motivated physical violence among young people in the last year. (Table 1)

Table 1: Youth Agreement with the Following Statements about Violence, by percent					
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Fights are common in my neighborhood. ¹	5%	22%	19%	31%	23%
2. It is easy for someone my age to get hold of a gun. ²	12%	37%	31%	11%	9%
3. Violence in the media makes people act violently. ³	8%	29%	21%	26%	16%
4. Gangs cause most of the violence in my community. ⁴	7%	17%	27%	35%	14%
5. It's OK to be mean to people who are lesbian, gay, or of a different race. ⁵	3%	2%	4%	13%	78%
6. I think violence is a big problem in teen dating relationships. ⁶	4%	27%	30%	31%	8%
7. Ideas about how men and women should be cause men to be violent to women. ⁷	3%	14%	42%	23%	18%
8. If two people are in a relationship, it's their business and others should stay out of it. ⁸	4%	7%	13%	46%	30%

¹Number of respondents = 128.

²Number of respondents = 129.

³Number of respondents = 128.

⁴Number of respondents = 128.

⁵Number of respondents = 127.

⁶Number of respondents = 127.

⁷Number of respondents = 127.

⁸Number of respondents = 128.

Almost 40% of the teen respondents said that violence in the media causes people to act violently, yet only 17% said that ideas about how men and women should be cause men to act violently towards women. Nearly a third (30%) of the youth think that violence is a problem in teen dating relationships, and 76% said that it's okay to intervene in other people's relationships.

In terms of gender differences, it appears that a greater proportion of males than females perceived their neighborhoods as violent. More than a third (37%) of the male respondents said that fights are common in their neighborhoods, versus 26% of female respondents. Examining youth access to guns, 53% of males said that it is easy for someone their age to get hold of a gun, versus 47% of females.

Access to guns is an important factor in teen homicides, teen suicides and accidental deaths among children and teens. From 1989-1998, firearms were the leading cause of death among Contra Costa youth age 15-24, and caused 63% of the deaths among African American youth aged 15 – 24 (Death Statistical Master File, 1989-1998). Young males are more likely to use a handgun on themselves or another person, and are more likely to be injured or killed by a handgun than young females. Many young men carry weapons, including handguns, to protect themselves in environments where they feel unsafe. A gun carried by a teen for protection often becomes a gun used in anger or fear to kill another teen. It is important that Contra Costa implement strategies to reduce the availability of handguns among youth, reduce unintentional deaths from legally owned firearms and promote safer schools and communities.

Looking at who/what is responsible for the violence in their communities, a greater proportion of female, than male, respondents said that gangs cause most of the violence in their neighborhoods (25% among females versus 17% among males).

The majority of the male and female respondents (95% of females and 77% of males) said that it is NOT okay to be mean to people who are gay, lesbian, or of a different race. However, when these same teens were asked if they had witnessed this type of abusive behavior, 43% of males and 57% of females said that they had seen racially motivated violence take place among young people in the past year. Seventy percent (70%) of males and 57% of females said that they had seen other students get treated disrespectfully because others thought they were lesbian or gay. This apparent discrepancy between youth attitudes, and the behaviors that youth observe among their peers, is deserving of future study.

A slightly higher proportion of females said that violence in the media causes people to act violently (38% among females versus 30% among males). Equal proportions of male and female respondents said that ideas about how men and women should be cause men to act violently towards women (18% of females and 17% of males).

Young people are often unaware of gender stereotypes, or consider themselves "individual" and not influenced by the stereotypes. Also, many of the "ideas about how men and women should be" are being challenged and discarded by today's teens. Fewer males than females (27% and 34%, respectively) said that violence is a big problem in teen dating relationships, and twice as many males as females (20% of males and 9% of females) said that if two people are in a relationship, it is their business and others should stay out of it.

Personal Experience with Violence

A number of questions were asked regarding youth experiences with violence. Respondents were asked about their personal experiences with violence, dating violence and the violent behaviors they have witnessed among their peers.

Experience with Abuse and Self-Inflicted Violence

Almost a third of the survey respondents said that someone has physically hurt them at some point in their lives, and 8% reported that someone has forced them to do something sexual they did not

want to do. More than a fifth (21%) of youth respondents said that they have hurt themselves by cutting or burning, and 14% said that they have tried to kill themselves.

The proportion of youth disclosing physical abuse appears to be much higher in this survey than in comparable surveys nationwide. In the Contra Costa Youth Violence Survey, 40% of male respondents and 28% of female respondents reported that someone has physically hurt them. Comparatively, in a national adolescent health survey conducted in 1997, only 12% of boys and 17% of girls disclosed physical abuse (Commonwealth Fund, 1997 and 1998). Differences between the two studies could be due to the different connotations that are carried by the word 'hurt,' used in the Contra Costa survey, versus the word 'abuse,' used in the Commonwealth Fund survey.

Conversely, the Contra Costa youth were slightly less likely than their nationwide counterparts to disclose sexual abuse. Among Contra Costa survey respondents, 10% of females and 0% of males said that someone has forced them to do something sexual that they did not want to do. This compares to the 12% of girls and 5% of boys that disclosed sexual abuse nationwide (Commonwealth Fund, 1997 and 1998).

In Contra Costa, nearly a fourth of Youth Violence Survey respondents (male and female) said that they have seen physical violence take place between their parents. Ten percent of males and 7% of females report that they have run away from home to escape violence in their families. Nationally, more than 25% of young males and females said that there has been a time when they wanted to leave home because of violence (Commonwealth Fund, 1997 and 1998).

Among Youth Violence Survey respondents, more than twice as many males as females reported that they have hurt themselves by cutting or burning (33% of males, 16% of females). Given the emphasis on body image for girls, it makes sense they would employ techniques that are not as negative on their bodies. Eating disorders, which certainly harm the body, are by far more prevalent in girls but are not labeled as self-abuse until they become life threatening. At the same time boys are encouraged to use their bodies in "combat" situations (sports, fighting, etc.) where scars are badges of courage and endurance. Girls are also more likely to have read or heard about the stigma surrounding self-abuse and are therefore less likely to disclose this behavior. Clearly, these issues of self-abuse among teens need to be studied more thoroughly

Roughly one in seven (14%) of the Contra Costa male and female respondents said that they have tried to kill themselves—a much higher figure than the 9% of youth nationwide who said they have tried to kill themselves (YRBS, 1997). From 1989 to 1998, there were 47 successful suicides among Contra Costa teenagers ages 15 to 19.

Experience with Dating Violence

Twenty-one percent (21%) of respondents said that they have ever been afraid of their boyfriend's or girlfriend's temper. Twelve percent (12%) said that they have been hit, kicked, shoved or had things thrown at them by their boy/ girlfriend, and 5% said that they have been forced by their boy/girlfriend to have sex. Almost half of the youth said that they know a teen girl who has experienced at least one of the above, and 4% said that they know a teen boy who has had at least one of the above happen to him. Ten percent (10%) of the respondents said that they have done one or more of the above to a boy or girlfriend.

In looking at reports of dating violence by gender, it is unusual that a greater percentage of males than females reported being victimized in several categories of dating violence. For example, a higher proportion of males than females said that they have been hit, kicked, shoved or had things thrown at them by their girl/boyfriend (17% among males; 10% among females), and a greater proportion of males than females reported they have been forced by their girl/boyfriend to have sex (10% among males; 3% among females). It is possible that some of the male reports are false (acting out) or misunderstanding of the statement. Conversely, some of the low reports by females can be explained by the belief of some girls that hitting is okay in certain situations and that "persistent seduction" is not "forced sex" even though they end up having sex when they originally said "no." Many girls don't understand what "date rape" is or if they do, don't report it because of possible repercussions. Many girls still feel that the guy is supposed to initiate and push a little, while boys often find that they are uncomfortable when girls take the initiative and push for more physical intimacy. It is also possible that girls are more likely to hit and throw things in response to anger while boys more often punch, threaten and control. Perhaps young girls are fighting back and the abuse is becoming more mutual.

A slightly higher proportion of females than males reported that they have been frightened of their boy or girlfriend's temper (21% among females; 17% among males), yet 60% of females said that none of the types of abuse listed in the previous paragraph has ever happened to them, as compared to 57% of males. The percentage of respondents who said that they have ever done any of the above to a girl/boyfriend was 10% among both males and females. It seems clear that education regarding healthy versus violent relationships is needed among young males and females.

In a national survey, one out of four (26%) adolescent females reported that they have been physically and/or sexually abused by a date or boyfriend (Commonwealth Fund, 1997 and 1998). This compares to the 12% of females who reported dating abuse in the Contra Costa survey. It may be important to note that the surveys were given in settings such as clinics, youth groups etc. Many teen girls in violent relationships are isolated and experience difficulty going to places, such as clinics, where people might ask questions. Such women would not appear on our survey.

Although the percentage of female respondents in this survey who reported they have been victims of relationship violence is less than the national average, it is important to note that more than half of the teens surveyed said they know a teen who has had at least one of the above types of abuse happen to her/him. Of those known to have abuse happen to them, 92% were female. Compared to national statistics, it appears that young females have underreported their dating abuse in the Contra Costa Youth Violence Survey.

One-third of the youth said they do not consider violence to be a big problem in teen dating relationships, yet more than half report that they know a teen who has experienced one or more abusive behaviors in a dating relationship. This suggests a strong need in Contra Costa for strategies to raise youth awareness about the problem of teen relationship violence.

Observation of Violent and Pre-Violent Behaviors

Many of the teens that completed this survey reported that they had witnessed pre-violent and violent behaviors. The percentage of youth who said that they have seen physical violence between their parents was significant (23%) among both male and female respondents. Eight percent of youth said that they had run away in the past to escape violence in their homes.

Within the past year, 53% of the youth reported that they have seen racially motivated physical violence among young people (43% of males; 57% of females). Nearly two-thirds of respondents (70% of males and 57% of females) reported that they have seen students at school get teased, called names, and treated disrespectfully because others thought they were lesbian or gay.

With regard to hate violence, in particular, what youth reported about their attitudes does not seem to match with what is happening around them. While 90% of respondents said they do not think it is okay to be mean to those who are gay, lesbian or of a different race, 53% of these same youth said they have seen racially motivated violence in the past year, and 57% said they have seen students in school get teased, called names or treated disrespectfully because others thought they were lesbian or gay. Adult role models and behavior may have some influence in this area. Clearly there is a need to raise awareness in the county about homophobia and racially motivated hate and violent behavior.

If Youth were in a Violent Situation, Whom Would They Tell?

Survey participants were given a list of nine options and asked to check off the people (they could check off more than one) that they felt they would turn to if they found themselves in a violent situation. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2: If I Were in a Violent Situation, I Would Tell ...								
Sister/ Brother	Parent	Friend	Teacher	Counselor	Police	Doctor	Other	No one
44%	47%	63%	16%	17%	26%	9%	5%	10%

As shown by the responses in Table 2, the majority of Contra Costa youth said that they would tell a friend if they were in a violent situation. This suggests a need for more support of peer education and training on violence-related issues.

Almost half of the respondents would tell a close family member such as a parent or sibling if they were in a violent situation. Interestingly, a fourth of the participants said that they would tell the police. This suggests a need for violence prevention and intervention support services for families, and the building of better relationships between youth and local police. Less than one in five youths said that they would tell a teacher, and a disturbing 10% said they would tell no one at all.

The breakdown of these responses is generally similar among males and females. However, a higher percentage of the male respondents (17% of males v. 9% of females) said that they would not tell anyone if they were in a violent situation. This is similar to national statistics that show that 29% of abused girls and 48% of abused boys have not told anyone about their abuse (Commonwealth Fund, 1997 and 1998).

Young people who do not disclose their abuse usually do not have the opportunity to heal. They have an increased chance of repeating the abuse or having it negatively affect their self-esteem, health and future. Strategies to encourage youth, particularly boys, to disclose the violence that is happening to them, are needed. Resources also need to be allocated for adequate follow-up of

reported abusive situations and treatment to help young people and perpetrators heal and end the cycle of violence.

Strategies for Prevention

From a list of 11 options, youth were asked to identify the best strategies for preventing youth violence. Table 3 shows their responses.

Although youth gave high rankings to each of the prevention strategies, they viewed ‘teen support groups’ and ‘more activities for youth to do after school’ as two of the most important strategies for preventing violence among young people. The support groups make sense, given earlier responses regarding whom youth would tell about a violent situation. The after-school activities speak to studies that show that most youth violence occurs in after-school hours, when teens are often on their own, from 2 – 7 p.m. Along with the 11 listed prevention strategies, a small percentage of the youth listed other prevention strategies. These other strategies included “a peer counselor,” “parents talking to kids,” “a youth educator-type program for violence,” and “places to anonymously report things.”

Table 3: Best Youth Violence Prevention Strategies as Identified by Youth.	
I THINK THAT THE BEST WAY TO PREVENT VIOLENCE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IS TO OFFER ...	Percent that Checked “Yes”
1. Special school instruction on how to have healthy relationships.	44%
2. Special school instruction about racism, sexism, and homophobia.	54%
3. Conflict resolution programs in schools.	54%
4. More activities for youth to do after school.	60%
5. More jobs for young people.	56%
6. Hotline for youth to call with questions about violence.	46%
7. Teen support groups.	64%
8. Free, individual counseling at schools or community agencies.	57%
9. Special assemblies or school-wide forums to promote violence prevention.	44%
10. Anti-violence messages and ads on the radio, billboards, and TV.	48%
11. Posters and information about violence prevention at school, youth centers, etc.	37%
12. Other.	9%

Data Collection

The data for the Youth Violence Survey was collected through a convenience sample of youth clients from agencies affiliated with the Contra Costa Violence Prevention Coalition. Eight agencies distributed surveys to their youth clients from January - February, 2000. The agencies that participated in the survey include: the Bay Point Youth Connection, the Center for Human Development, the Contra Costa Health Services Teenage Program, the Kaiser Permanente Richmond Teen Clinic, Planned Parenthood in Antioch, Planned Parenthood in Richmond, the Summit Center Boys Program, and the Youth Services Bureau. The surveys were self-administered and response information was confidential; no personal identifying information was included on the survey form.

Limitations

As a pilot project, the Youth Violence Survey provides adolescent providers and other concerned community members with important new information about self-reported youth violence within Contra Costa. There are, however, several important limitations to the data.

The small number of respondents in this project and the settings in which the survey was implemented limit CW&PP's ability to generalize the results to all Contra Costa youth. It may be that the youth who responded to this survey have different perceptions of youth violence as compared to youth in Contra Costa as a whole. The recruitment of agency clients versus a random sample of Contra Costa youth, and the voluntary basis of youth participation, are other factors that limit our ability to generalize the results of the project.

Due to the small number of respondents to the survey (129), it is also difficult to compare the responses according to different factors such as age, race, and city of residence. As an example, Contra Costa is a diverse community, and perspectives on youth violence may be very different between dissimilar communities such as Richmond and Walnut Creek. In this pilot project, CW&PP did not have a sufficient number of participants to stratify our analysis by city.

Finally, despite the important role that males play both as victims and perpetrators of youth violence, there were unfortunately only 30 male survey respondents (23% of total respondents). This small number limits CW&PP's ability to generalize the results and, additionally, makes it difficult to investigate idiosyncrasies in the data.

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