by Lynda Crawford
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We may all shiver when we hear of yet another report of youth and violence, with young people as the victims as well as the ones committing the violent acts. Why can't someone do something, we ask? And officials answer by offering yet another violence prevention program.

But many of these programs, even some of the best-known, simply don't work.

According to an article this month in the New York Times ("Scared Straight Takes a Detour; Despite National Recognition, the State Cuts Back Program, Saying It's 'Not Effective'"), the Scared Straight program that brought adolescents into prisons for a first-hand feel of the realities of prison life has not reduced violent crime among adolescent participants. In fact, some research indicates it may increase it. The Times story reports that New Jersey is phasing out the program.

In New York, however, it is still "up and running," according to the Department of Correctional Services in Albany. All that's different is its name, Youth Assistance Program.

This is not the only program still in existence that apparently does not work in preventing youth violence. A report by the **National Institute of Justice** on the subject includes:

- **Gun buyback programs**, operating without geographic limitations on the eligibility of people providing the guns for money, failed to reduce gun violence in cities;
- **Arrests of juvenile for minor offenses** caused youth to become more delinquent in the future than if police had exercised discretion and merely warned them or used alternatives to formal charging;
- **Correctional boot camps using traditional military basic training** failed to reduce repeat offending;
- **Summer job or subsidized work programs for at-risk youth** failed to reduce crime or arrests;
- **Individual counseling and peer counseling of students** failed to reduce substance abuse or delinquency and can increase delinquency;
- **Inner city community resident efforts against crime** failed to reduce crime.

This **report** , updated in July 1998, and based on a review of more than 500 crime prevention program evaluations, measured reductions in delinquency, juvenile crime, youth gang activity, youth substance abuse, and other high-risk factors related to youth violence. While a program

may have other beneficial effects, as surely a summer jobs program does, it is only rated here on the basis of preventing youth violence.

What does work? According to Dr. Gerald Landsberg, Director of the Institute Against Violence at NYU, early identification can make all the difference. "Many kids at risk could be identified in pre-school or elementary school by their bullying or aggressive behavior," explained Dr. Landsberg. "But there is little intervention at that age. By the time they become adolescents, the behavior is well ingrained."

Programs that do prevent violence, according to Dr. Landsberg, include:

- **Mentoring and the Big Brother/Big Sister Programs**. "The presence of a meaningful adult in the adolescent's life plays a key role in behavior change," says Landsberg;
- **Mental health treatment intervention**, if it is fairly intensive and long-term (as opposed to short-term individual counseling);
- **Workshops for parents** focusing on their behavior towards their children and what that teaches the children in terms of dealing with conflicts;
- **Community programs aimed at gang members**;
- **Conflict resolution programs**, such as those presented by FACES, a theatrical troupe that goes into 300 junior high and high schools in the city, and using role play scenarios, helps adolescents find words for their emotions and enact them in scenes, rather than acting them out with violence.

"But there's not a single magic bullet, like a polio vaccine, that will prevent violence," cautioned Dr. Landsberg. He recommends multiple intervention methods: mentoring, conflict resolution programs, parenting workshops. "The more you do, the greater the exposure to these programs, and the earlier the better, the more likely it will be to have an impact."

The National Institute of Justice study listed all the programs mentioned by Dr. Landsberg as either promising or proven to work, as well as a few others including:

- Police showing greater respect to arrested offenders;
- Training or coaching in thinking skills for high risk youth;
- Community based after-school recreation programs.

Efforts aimed at reducing domestic violence would also reduce youth violence, according to a

report by the **American Psychological Association** . A child that sees a parent of family member abused is more likely to see violence as a way to solve problems and likely to abuse others.

"Children are more aggressive and grow up more likely to become involved in violenceĂ‘either as victimizer or victimĂ‘if they witness violent acts," according to this 1997 report.

Heavy exposure to violence on television and in other media was also listed as an influence: "When violence and sexual aggression are combined in the media, in song lyrics, in computer games, and in the vernacular, the message of violence (including sexual assault) is reinforced."

Lynda Sounds Off:

According to Dr. Landsberg, there are few resources devoted to violence prevention programs. "In New York State, it's lousy. There is no systematic source of funding. Individual schools may or may not have a program in place," Landsberg explained. "The Board of Education has not made it a priority. Instead the emphasis is on metal detectors or security guards."

Even teacher training is lacking in terms of violence prevention. The United Federation of Teachers has a training program for teachers dealing with potential violence in the classroom. "It's an excellent training," said Landsberg, "and yet it is not required for new teachers by the Board of Education or by individual schools. How can this be, wonders Landsberg, when teachers can exacerbate or help the problem.

What's needed is a commitment by policy makers to violence prevention programs that work and a move away from spending so much on jails and prisons. "The issue is not having the money," says Dr. Landsberg, "but where the money is spent."