

SHIFTING THE PARADIGM: UNITY'S IMPACT ON THE PRACTICE OF PREVENTION



An Overview of UNITY's 8 Year Effort to Prevent Violence Before it Occurs in US Cities

This [public health] approach works. It's working right here, right now, in my city, where we reduced violence by 40 percent in just two years—and then brought it down another 20 percent. And we didn't do it by increasing arrests. We did it by giving young people opportunities to thrive.

*Lieutenant Michael Sullivan
Minneapolis Police Department &
UNITY City Network member*

INTRODUCTION

UNITY was first funded in 2005 by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Over two consecutive cooperative agreements, CDC funded UNITY over 8 years. CDC resources were supplemented by two grants from The California Wellness Foundation (2006-2010) and the Kresge Foundation (2011-2014), specifically to develop tools and training in support of multi-sector collaboration. Over its 8 year period, UNITY helped change the landscape of how cities approach the problem violence.

UNITY's initial assessment was conducted by Southern California Injury Prevention Research Center (SCIPRC) at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health. The study included interviews with Mayors, Police Chiefs, Health Department Directors and School Superintendents in one-third of the largest US cities (populations of 400,000 or more). Major findings:¹

- Violence was viewed as a serious issue for cities
- Responses were not seen as highly effective or adequate
- Most cities lacked a comprehensive strategy
- Cities weren't implementing primary prevention strategies
- Approaches were primarily law enforcement and criminal justice oriented and driven
- Public health was not seen as part of the solution, nor did it see itself as part of the solution
- Cities with the greatest coordination across sectors had the lowest rates of youth violence.

By 2013, UNITY was working with more than 20 cities, including their health departments, to implement public health-based approaches to address violence. Emerging trends across the country include:

- The development of comprehensive plans,
- An emphasis on balanced approaches that include prevention and intervention in addition to enforcement and reentry,
- Commitments to multi-sector engagement and coordination,
- Implementation focused in neighborhoods that experience the most violence, and
- Increasing recognition of public health's role and contributions by city leaders and elected officials, people in the criminal justice sector, and by public health practitioners.

UNITY's five-year evaluation showed that UNITY was shifting the approach cities were taking to address violence and had successfully engaged multiple sectors in advancing a public health-based, prevention approach to violence, including, the judicial system, juvenile justice, public health, law enforcement, education, the academic sector, city government, and social service agencies.² UNITY's eight year evaluation showed that the initiative increased public health involvement in addressing violence, improved collaboration and engagement in the issue, enhanced strategic planning at the city level, and strengthened attention to prevention.³

Beginning in 2013, CDC has redirected its funding toward more research-based training and program implementation. However, the UNITY City Network remains vibrant and is a critical vehicle for advancing effective prevention and public health-based approaches to address this persistent and devastating problem in our urban centers. The foundation that UNITY has developed is at a cross-roads. The paradigm shift has begun and public health departments around the country now -- more than ever -- need support through training, technical assistance, peer learning, and tools to support their efforts to bring effective prevention strategies to scale.

ABOUT UNITY

Mission: UNITY builds support for effective, sustainable efforts to prevent violence before it occurs, so that urban youth can thrive in safe environments with ample opportunities and supportive relationships.

Lead Partners: UNITY is a partnership between Prevention Institute, the Harvard School of Public Health, the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, and UC San Francisco. UNITY's co-chairs are Larry Cohen, Deborah Prothrow-Stith, and Billie Weiss. Rachel Davis is UNITY's Project Director.

Approach: UNITY utilizes a public health approach to violence to emphasize the need for and to operationalize the prevention of violence before it occurs. A viable and critical component of a balanced approach that also includes intervention and enforcement / suppression, quality prevention involves data collection and analysis, identifying the populations and locations at greatest risk, identifying risk and resilience factors, and developing and utilizing effective strategies to prevent violence before it occurs, reduce the impact of risk factors, and reduce the

With UNITY's efforts, we have been able to show that violence prevention is a public health issue.

Paul Lopez
Denver City Councilman

Our Health Department is engaged in the National Forum for Youth Violence Prevention through the City of San Jose's participation. This connection underscores the value of UNITY and its promotion of practice-driven strategies incorporating science from the CDC and others that are important in our attempts to build a more robust prevention component to the comprehensive plan called for by the Forum.

Dan Peddycord
Santa Clara County Health Director

The Houston Department of Health and Human Services has elevated its work in violence prevention through its three year affiliation with UNITY.

Stephen L. Williams
Houston Public Health Director

reoccurrence of violence. Necessarily, this approach includes multiple sectors, working in coordination with each other and with community members.

UNITY efforts are two-fold: 1) to support cities in developing, implementing and evaluating effective and sustainable prevention efforts; 2) to build awareness of what is needed to prevent violence *in the first place* and momentum for such approaches so that urban communities can have peaceful streets and thriving youth.

Activities:

- ▷ *Coordinate the UNITY City Network:* UNITY works with more than 20 large US cities and their health departments. Committed to preventing violence before it occurs, these sites share successes, learn from one another, and inform UNITY tools and strategies. UNITY provides training and technical assistance (TA) and highlights local successes through publications, conferences, and web materials. UNITY also convenes the city network at least once a year. Past convenings have taken place in Oakland, Los Angeles and Minneapolis where participants enjoyed site visits to learn about local successes.
- ▷ *Guide Effective and Sustainable Practice:* UNITY develops tools, provides training and TA, and features national experts and model practices to enhance prevention efforts. The [UNITY RoadMap](#), for example, provides a framework for engaged communities to collaborate with high-level local leaders and multiple city government sectors to design effective prevention strategies grounded in research and practitioner wisdom. The [Guidebook to Strategy Evaluation](#) provides guidance on how to ensure that progress is on track. The [UNITY website](#) features all of our tools and materials.
- ▷ *Make the Case:* UNITY provides information that builds the case for including prevention in urban efforts to address violence. Through writing case studies about effective approaches, highlighting the cost-benefit, and providing language for use in press releases and press conferences, UNITY helps city and community leaders make the case. Our publication series, [City Voices and Perspectives](#) features prevention leaders and highlights local successes, and our [Making the Case](#) series includes fact sheets and other resources to build support for prevention approaches to community violence. Our commissioned paper, [Moving from Them to Us: Challenges in Reframing Violence Among Youth](#), provides specific recommendations to overcome challenges associated with building political and social will for preventing violence.
- ▷ *Educate Decision-makers and Inform National Strategies:* We provided information about what works in prevention and what works for cities. For example, in partnership with the UNITY City Network, we developed the [UNITY Urban Agenda](#), summarized in [The UNITY Policy Platform](#), which describes what cities need to prevent violence and sustain their successes. To educate decision makers, UNITY co-sponsored a Congressional Briefing on violence as a public health issue with the Congressional Black Caucus, Congressional Hispanic Caucus and the Congressional Asian-Pacific Islander Caucus. UNITY also presented, for example, at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's Annual Legislative Conference, the National Conference of State Legislators, the National Caucus of Black State Legislators, the California Latino Legislative Caucus, the National Forum for Youth Violence Prevention, the Florida Attorney General's annual conference on Preventing Crime in the Black Community and national conferences for the American Public Health Association, Children's Defense Fund, and the National Association of City and County Health Officials, and the National Forum for Black Public Administrators among others.

MAKING AN IMPACT: OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS FROM THE UNITY EVALUATION

UNITY has built a robust consortium of U.S. cities and their health departments, national partner organizations, and community groups/members dedicated to reducing youth violence. UNITY has helped to shift the paradigm regarding the issue of violence impacting youth by increasing awareness about the problem *among* this consortium, and throughout the country by hosting meetings and networking opportunities.

Moreover, UNITY has enhanced and built capacity by promoting collaboration between cities, national partners, community members, and intra-city agencies/departments, which has directly affected efforts to prevent youth violence. The initiative has improved collaboration and capacity by providing a variety of resources and tools as well as a forum for cities to work together on critical issues. Through these collaborative efforts, cities have been able to build capacity they did not previously have before joining UNITY. This includes greater engagement with city youth, community groups, and city leadership.

The 8 year evaluation measured UNITY's impact on efforts to prevent violence affecting youth and to determine its responsiveness to city needs. Findings indicate, as a whole, that UNITY has/is meeting its goals in the following ways:⁴

Increased Public Health Involvement Key Findings:

- Public health departments are much more involved in citywide youth violence prevention strategies and activities since UNITY's inception, and in some cities, are leading efforts.
- Nearly 90% of strategic plans to address youth violence reflected input of the local health department.
- 91% of city representatives said the health department was the lead sponsor of the local coalition to address violence.
- Besides the governance sector, health departments are the most likely to sponsor a youth advisory body.

Improved Collaboration and Engagement Key Findings:

- Cities collaborate with a variety of entities including each other, national partners, community partners, and internally between various agencies and departments.
- Engagement of leadership and community members has generally increased for cities since becoming involved with UNITY. For example: 93% of cities have formed a local coalition or other network that addresses violence.

UNITY is a vital training and technical assistance initiative that supports violence prevention in large cities. The Boston Public Health Commission has often drawn on UNITY resources. UNITY meetings have provided invaluable opportunities to share best practices and map out future directions. The UNITY initiative, through its documents, webinars, and other valuable resources, has supported our efforts, helped us articulate a shared framework, and provided clear language on the importance of going beyond a criminal justice lens to prevent violence before it happens.

Barbara Ferrer
Boston Public Health Commissioner

We are highly appreciative of the consultation that we have received from Prevention Institute that has helped us to advance our efforts.

Gretchen Musicant
Minneapolis Public Health Commissioner

We joined UNITY to network to with all of these excellent communities and learn all that we can, so we can become more effective at preventing youth violence.

Darrell Aniton
Louisville Metro Department of
Community Services and Revitalization

- Cities report increased collaboration among the mayor’s office, police department, schools and health department since joining UNITY.
- Nearly 3 in 4 cities said that collaboration with the local health department increased.
- 60% of cities reported that collaboration with community members and youth increased since joining UNITY. Community members and youth are involved in determining priorities and activities for preventing youth violence, and implementing activities.

Enhanced Strategic Planning Key Findings:

- All UNITY cities either have a city-wide plan to address youth violence or have discussed developing them.
- All cities reported developing their strategic plans in partnership with other sectors.
- Every city representative said that governance, education, community services, and justice sectors worked together with youth-serving organizations to develop the plan.

Strengthened Attention to Prevention Key Findings:

- Cities are starting to shift actions towards prevention of youth violence and not solely relying on intervention or suppression methods.
- Partner organizations and agencies report increased attention on and conversation about the youth violence problem nationwide.
- Two-thirds of cities either created plans or significantly modified existing plans since they joined UNITY. Modifications include incorporating primary prevention strategies and elements of the UNITY RoadMap.

Increased Use of UNITY Resources Key Findings:

- All cities reported using various UNITY resources and tools, with technical assistance and networking opportunities noted as particularly useful.
- 75% of cities reported that their efforts to prevent violence are more effective because of UNITY’s trainings, technical assistance, and tools.

Selected quotes from city representatives from UNITY ‘s 5 and 8 year evaluations

UNITY has helped us organize and plan, brought together interested volunteers to support a public health approach to youth violence, and gain the support of leadership.

It has been a catalyst for bringing multiple agencies to the table to begin work on a comprehensive plan.

The UNITY initiative has been integral in our efforts to enhance our youth violence strategies.

Our strategic plan was based on the UNITY RoadMap.

The issue of violence being high on the priorities is new. So... with UNITY, it’s allowed us to make prevention a higher priority in this city.

UNITY has been a significant part of our city’s plan. Because of UNITY, we have addressed violence differently. We now see it as a health issue as well as a social issue.

- All cities said that access to violence prevention experts through UNITY helped improve their strategic plans, as did UNITY events, networking with other cities, technical assistance on preventing violence affecting youth, and UNITY webinars and publications.
- 85% of cities report using the UNITY RoadMap.

Joining the UNITY initiative has directly resulted in increased collaboration among cities.

- City representatives value networking opportunities with other cities, and more than 85% of cities in the UNITY City Network communicate with other cities.
- Representatives know a point of contact, share information and communicate with an average of eight other cities.

MOVING FORWARD

Over 8 years, UNITY has established a unique and critical foundation for advancing violence prevention strategy in the US, created a mechanism for cities to work together and build on one another's work, elevated a public health approach and the critical need for public health engagement, and developed policy solutions at a local and national level which have the capacity to make American cities substantially safer. Without support, that platform and capacity will be lost.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Weiss, B. P. (June 2008). An Assessment of Youth Violence Prevention Activities in USA Cities. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Southern California Injury Prevention Research Center.
- ² Weiss BP, Hsu P, Healy D, Eaneff S, Murrakam F. A Five-Year Case Study: Evaluation of the Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth - City Project. October, 2010. Southern California Injury Prevention Research Center, UCLA School of Public Health, Department of Epidemiology
- ³ Weiss BP, Kelley MM. UNITY Assessment II: Results of an Innovative Initiative to Improve the Urban Response to Youth Violence. July 2013. UCLA Fielding School of Public Health
- ⁴ Weiss BP, Kelley MM. UNITY Assessment II: Results of an Innovative Initiative to Improve the Urban Response to Youth Violence. July 2013. UCLA Fielding School of Public Health

Minneapolis Blueprint for Action in Student Video

Students at TVbyGIRLS in Minneapolis produced a [short video](#) on the city's Blueprint for Action. Funded in part by UNITY, the 10-minute documentary includes remarks by Mayor Rybak, other local leaders, and UNITY Co-Chair Billie Weiss. Some of the filming took place at the UNITY City Network Convening in Minneapolis in October 2012. Congressman Keith Ellison remarks at the convening are featured in the video: "By saying that violence is a public health issue, we're saying there is something we can do about it."

Watch the video by clicking on the image below and read the [event summary](#).

