

The Role of Sport-Based Youth Development in Addressing Youth Violence:

An Impact Report of Laureus USA's Illinois Grant Program



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About Laureus Sport for Good USA

Laureus USA is a non-profit, grant-making organization that works to improve the lives of youth and unite communities through the power of sport.

Since 2012, we have impacted the lives of over one million youth by investing in hundreds of sports-based youth development organizations around the country that unleash the power of sport to enhance physical and mental health, improve educational and employment outcomes, and address critical social justice

issues. Laureus USA is a member of the global Laureus network, which includes 7 National Laureus Sport for Good Foundations, 1 Global Foundation, the Laureus World Sports Academy (and Ambassadors), and the Laureus World Sports Awards.

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“ Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport creates hope, where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination. ”

President Nelson Mandela

LETTER FROM LAUREUS USA

Just over 20 years ago, President Nelson Mandela shared these words at the inaugural Laureus World Sports Awards, an event that recognizes the greatest sporting achievements in the world. President Mandela deeply believed in the words that he was sharing, having only a few years earlier experienced the unique role that rugby played in unifying and healing his deeply divided nation of South Africa.

The Laureus Sport for Good Foundation was born on the heels of this speech, and for the past 22 years we have worked to improve the lives of youth and unite communities through the power of sport across the world. While we operate in many capacities, our flagship program in the United States is Sport for Good Cities – an initiative created to disrupt the typical power imbalances in philanthropy and support local organizations holistically by funding and building capacity towards community-driven collective solutions. This initiative was launched in New Orleans before expanding to Atlanta, New York, Chicago, London, Paris, Delhi, and Hong Kong.

From the moment Laureus USA launched Sport for Good Chicago in 2018, we knew we had tapped into something special. Chicago is a city made up of people who love sports and has a long history of organizing for the issues in which its people believe. Over the past five years, hundreds of leaders from organizations and agencies throughout Chicago have joined the Sport for Good Chicago Coalition, and together we have set aside our individual agendas to work collectively for the good of the young people in our city. In 2021, we launched our largest effort to date: a multi-year, coordinated campaign to draw attention to the important role that sport could play in disrupting youth and community violence.

While Chicago is a city with assets that far outweigh its challenges, it's undeniable that youth and community violence deeply impact the well-being of young people in Chicago and throughout the State of Illinois. Violence is systemic, nuanced, and intersectional, and cannot be overcome through individual programs or approaches alone. However, we believe that sport has been

a historically undervalued tool for the impact that it has on young people and communities in the midst of these challenges. Through sport, young people have the opportunity to make connections with friends and caring adults who help them build skills in support of their overall physical and mental wellness. Sport creates space for young people to experience empowerment, healing, and collective joy in the face of overwhelming stress and trauma.



Our collective efforts were successful! Over the past two years, the State of Illinois has invested \$10.5M into a collective grant program to support organizations using sport intentionally as a tool for violence prevention. To our knowledge, this is the largest investment in youth sport in the country, and serves as a model for other cities, counties, and states to follow suit. The following report captures evaluation activities, learnings, and recommendations from the 41 organizations included in Year One of this program.

We are grateful to every Leadership Council Member, Sport for Good Chicago participant, State official, and community member who has engaged in this process with us. We are excited to share and continue this work with all of you.

Ben Schornack, Grace Curtin and Amy Mummery
Laureus USA Chicago Team



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2022, Laureus Sport for Good Foundation USA (Laureus USA) received a one-year \$5 million legislative appropriation to build a grant program– the Illinois Violence Prevention through Sport Grant Program – for organizations working to increase access to and equity of sport-based youth development (SBYD) initiatives. Funds were appropriated through the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (ICJIA). Laureus USA provided funds to 41 sport-based youth development organizations based in Chicago and other areas of Illinois. This evaluation was conducted to shed light on the role of sport in addressing youth violence by understanding the activities, perspectives, and experiences of grantees.

Key findings include:

- The **complexities around youth violence** were underscored. Bullying/cyberbullying, gang and gun violence, and violence in the home were identified as the most common forms of violence affecting youth, with variation by gender identity.

- Grantees overwhelmingly agree that **sport-based initiatives have a role to play in youth violence prevention**. Roughly 90% or more of staff and coaches believe that: integrating sport into youth programming can support violence prevention efforts, their programs are effective in promoting youth development and addressing youth violence, their programs target the needs of youth in the community, youth enjoy their programs, and their programs offer a good approach for supporting youth in the community.
- **Grantees are using five main approaches to address youth violence:** 1) promote skill-building among youth participants (e.g., in social and emotional learning), 2) create safe spaces, 3) foster positive relationships, 4) reduce stress through healing-centered sport, physical activity, and play, and 5) facilitate connections to resources and services in the community and beyond. These activities span across the four levels of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)’s Framework for Youth Violence Prevention in addressing the individual, relationship, community, and society levels.

- **Implementation challenges** were identified across the following contexts:
 - **Family:** engaging family members of youth; ensuring messaging from the organizations and families are consistent;
 - **Organizational:** hiring staff; recruiting and retaining youth (especially girls); providing trauma-centered staff training; supporting staff with their own trauma; and ensuring youth have transportation to and from programs;
 - **School:** coordinating with over-burdened principals and school staff;
 - **Structural:** ensuring access to equipment and facilities (particularly for young people with different abilities); coordinating with other partners in the violence prevention sector; working in areas where violence and safety issues are prevalent.
- Three areas were highlighted concerning **SBYD organizations' greatest needs:** 1) funding for staff salaries, equipment, rent, and related expenses; 2) training and capacity-building for staff and coaches/mentors (e.g., in how to support youth who have

experienced or use violence); and 3) structural and policy issues to improve access to public spaces and support programs addressing youth at younger ages in addition to violence intervention/disruption approaches.

Areas identified for further research and evaluation include:

- Exploring the **different ways in which violence affects youth in SBYD programming** who are diverse in age, ethnicity, race, gender-identity, and ability;
- Expanding on the role of **coaches and direct service providers of SBYD organizations** in youth violence prevention efforts, including how best to address implementation and capacity-building challenges that affect them;
- Deepening our understanding of how **SBYD activities address violence across the four levels of the CDC's youth violence prevention framework**, especially activities at the community and society levels seeking to address root causes of youth violence;
- Employing **more rigorous study designs and longitudinal data** to formally assess program effects on youth violence and implementation outcomes.

Policy and practice recommendations are as follows:

For Practitioners	For Funders	For Policymakers
► Train staff and coaches on contexts of violence and how to support youth experiencing or using violence ► Provide support services for staff, coaches, and mentors who are themselves exposed to trauma ► Engage girls and non-binary youth in SBYD programming ► Prioritize lived experience when hiring staff ► Find creative ways to sustain programs	► Provide multi-year, unrestricted funding opportunities for SBYD organizations ► Prioritize research, monitoring, and evaluation initiatives for SBYD organizations as related to youth violence ► Fund and participate in collective movements, including supporting advocacy and lobbying efforts that allow for organizations to work together towards achieving scale in their area of change	► Create sharing agreements for organizations to access public spaces, equipment, and other resources ► Foster relationship-building across community organizations to help youth access needed resources (e.g., health clinics) ► Prioritize SBYD programming targeting youth at the cusp of committing violence in addition to disruption or intervention approaches



UCAN

INTRODUCTION

Youth Violence in the U.S. and Chicago

Youth violence is a significant issue in the United States that leads to death and injury of thousands of youth each year.¹ Violence affects youth in different ways, and certain populations of youth are at greater risk of being affected by violence. For example, among non-Hispanic Black or African American youth, homicide is the leading cause of death.² Females and gender – and sexual-minority youth are at a higher risk of violence, such as bullying or cyberbullying, than other groups.³ Youth with disabilities are three times more likely to experience violence, including emotional and physical violence and neglect, than youth without disabilities.⁴ Types of violence that affect youth include school-based violence (e.g., fights), bullying and cyber-bullying, gun violence, and community or gang-related violence.¹

In Chicago, violence remains a persistent issue and one that is linked with unaddressed broader challenges that particularly affect communities of color, including systemic racism, disinvestment, and poverty. The City of Chicago's violence prevention strategy has noted a "safety gap," i.e., the differences in violence victimization between Chicago's predominantly Black and Latinx West and South sides compared to the White North side.⁵ More than 60% of the city's homicides and non-fatal shootings

occurred in areas where less than a quarter of the city's population resides.⁶ As one example, in 2022, West Garfield Park on Chicago's west side had 98.1 fatal and non-fatal shooting victimization per 10,000 residents, whereas Lincoln Park on Chicago's north side had just 0.7 victimizations per 10,000 residents.⁶

Youth continue to be disproportionately affected by violence compared to other age groups. Since 2017, at least 55% of shooting victims are people 29 and younger. Yet, violence is an issue that goes beyond solely gun or community violence. Nearly 1 in 5 students in Chicago Public Schools report experiencing physical abuse or witnessing domestic violence.⁷

Given the negative effects of experiencing and witnessing violence, finding solutions to youth violence is of paramount importance. Experiences of violence can lead to chronic stress and trauma, which has negative long-term social and health impacts for the individual and the community. In Chicago, 66% of youth of color reported mental health challenges, which are often linked to experiences of violence and trauma.⁸ Furthermore, exposure to violence is associated with subsequent involvement in violence as a perpetrator or accomplice.⁹

Sport-Based Youth Development as a Viable Violence Prevention Intervention

"Sport has shown itself as a powerful tool for helping young people develop and grow. Organized physical activity and play can help young people heal from traumatic experiences, build important caring adult and peer relationships, and build skills that are translatable to other parts of their lives."

Dr. Cristina Pacione-Zayas, Illinois State Senator, 20th District

Sport-based youth development (SBYD)* offers positive outlets for youth to engage in physical activity and learn skills in a team environment with guidance from a caring adult mentor. For youth exposed to violence, there are mental and emotional benefits of participation in sports which include reduced rates of anxiety and depression, decreased stress levels, increased confidence and self-esteem, increased creativity, and increased cognitive performance. Additional long-term correlations include reduced substance abuse, lowered risky behaviors, and lowered risk of suicide. The physical health benefits of sport can combat some of the adversities affecting youth in under-resourced areas, such as reduced risk for diabetes and cancer, greater cardiovascular fitness, increased physical activity levels, greater bone health, and improved weight status.¹⁰ Participation in sports helps balance and regulate mood by improving focus and strengthening the mental fortitude necessary to block distracting "noise" that youth may experience in high-violence areas.¹¹ Furthermore, having at least one adult mentor in the life of a young person can lead to improved academic performance, increased graduation rates, reduced dropout rates, and improved higher educational aspirations.¹⁰

There remains limited evidence on the extent to which sport-based programs are linked directly with youth

violence prevention. Some studies have looked at the effectiveness of youth development plus sports interventions on violence prevention.^{12,13} For example, Chicago-based Youth Guidance's Becoming a Man Sports Edition found reductions in violent-crime arrests, significant improvements in school engagement and performance, and increased graduation rates among participants in the program compared to a control group.¹² Another study which evaluated the effectiveness of Coaching Boys into Men, an evidence-based program that trains and motivates high school coaches to teach young men healthy relationship and intimate partner violence prevention skills, found that athletes who participated in the program were significantly more likely to intervene when witnessing abusive or disrespectful behavior.¹³ Of note, these two sport-based examples engage male youth, highlighting an additional gap in the literature around how sport-based programs buffer the effects of violence on girls, non-binary youth, or youth with disabilities.



The promise of sport-based approaches is buoyed by strong evidence of mentoring and after-school programs — two types of programs that share overlapping characteristics with SBYD programs—on reducing violence perpetration and/or victimization.¹ SBYD programs, like mentoring, prioritize building strong relationships with a caring adult, which, in the case of SBYD, is the sports coach. These positive youth-adult relationships can have a protective effect on experiences of violence.^{14,15} Additionally, many SBYD programs are delivered in after-school settings when rates of violence among youth (ages 10–18) are likely to be the highest.¹⁶ In line with after-school programs, SBYD programs aim to create safe environments where youth can build and practice life skills that can help buffer against risks of violence, such as self-regulation, responsible decision-making, and social problem solving.^{17,18}

*Sport-based youth development (SBYD) programs intentionally pair the inherent benefits of playing a sport with an adoption of positive youth development principles. While some SBYD programs also participate in the competitive side of sports, all SBYD programs are committed to holistic youth development.

Laureus USA Grant Program

In 2022, Laureus Sport for Good Foundation USA (Laureus USA) received a one-year \$5 million legislative appropriation to build a grant program for organizations working to increase access to and equity of sport-based youth development initiatives. The appropriation of funds for this Illinois Violence Prevention through Sport Grant Program came through the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (ICJIA) and was prioritized for organizations that deliver programming in “R3 Zones,” which are areas that are designated for higher concentrations of violence.



This impact report aims to shed light on the ways in which Laureus USA’s SBYD Illinois Grant Program grantees address youth violence. The evaluation was conducted using a community-engaged research approach, whereby Laureus USA and grantees were heavily engaged in providing input on the design and methods to ensure that findings would be of greatest use to the funding body and organizations going forward. The report, which is intended for community members, SBYD practitioners and leaders, funders, and policy makers, presents findings, key takeaways, policy and practice recommendations, and evaluation limitations.

Grantee Organizations

- ▶ Alternative Schools Network
- ▶ America SCORES Chicago
- ▶ B.I.G. Academy
- ▶ Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council
- ▶ Beat the Streets
- ▶ Box United
- ▶ Boxing Out Negativity
- ▶ Boys & Girls Club of Rockford
- ▶ BUILD, Inc
- ▶ Center for Healing and Justice through Sport
- ▶ Chicago Lions Charitable Association
- ▶ Chicago Run
- ▶ Chicago Training Center
- ▶ Chicago Youth Boxing Club
- ▶ First Tee Greater Chicago
- ▶ FOUS Youth Development
- ▶ Generations for Peace
- ▶ Girls in the Game
- ▶ Girls on the Run of Central IL
- ▶ Girls on the Run of Chicago
- ▶ Grand Boulevard Prevention Services
- ▶ Heart of the City
- ▶ KEEN Chicago
- ▶ KT's Kids
- ▶ Lost Boyz inc
- ▶ MetroSquash
- ▶ PeacePlayers Chicago
- ▶ Play Like a Champion Today
- ▶ Playworks IL
- ▶ Project Education Plus
- ▶ Puerto Rican Cultural Center
- ▶ REACH
- ▶ The ACE Project
- ▶ The Bloc
- ▶ UCAN
- ▶ Urban Initiatives
- ▶ US Soccer Foundation
- ▶ USTA / Midwest Tennis
- ▶ Y.E.M.B.A.
- ▶ YMCA of Central IL
- ▶ YMCA of Metro Chicago



Generations for Peace / Gary Comer Youth Center

EVALUATION GOALS

This evaluation addressed the following questions:

1

What is the context of youth violence in the communities where grantees work?

2

What role can sports play in addressing youth violence?

3

How are grantees addressing violence through sport?

4

What are the implementation challenges facing grantees?

5

What would help grantees to better address youth violence going forward?



YMCA of Metro Chicago

METHODS

This evaluation began with a landscape assessment, which involved:

- ▶ **Reviewing the grant applications** submitted by organizations for the Illinois Violence Prevention through Sport Grant Program;
- ▶ **Carrying out a literature review** to understand how programs are addressing youth violence through sport across U.S. settings; and,
- ▶ **Conducting site visits** to a sample of grantees to gain insight into their operations to ensure that the evaluation would be grounded in their goals and implementation realities.

Learnings from the landscape assessment informed a mixed methods assessment.

Quantitative data collected included:

- ▶ A youth survey developed by Hello Insight** measuring social and emotional learning experiences (1,270 surveys);
- ▶ A survey completed by organizational staff, including leadership (e.g., executive directors) and programmatic staff (e.g., program directors) from 35 grantee organizations (55 surveys);
- ▶ A survey completed by coaches and program facilitators from 23 grantee organizations (38 surveys).

Qualitative data collected included four focus group discussions and six key informant interviews.

**Hello Insight is an online platform using artificial intelligence and research tools to help youth development organizations evaluate social and emotional learning among youth (www.helloinsight.org).

Summary of Qualitative Data Collected

Participants	Activities	Details
Youth	3 focus groups	21 youth from grantee organizations
Community members	3 focus groups	14 community members, including parents of youth, affiliated with grantee organizations
Executive leadership	1 focus group	Executive leaders representing 6 grantee organizations
Coaches	1 focus group	8 coaches from one grantee organization
Experts in violence and sport-based youth development	3 key informant interviews	Representatives from the City of Chicago's Department of Public Health, Chicago CRED, and State of Illinois Prisoner Review Board
Training organization grantees	3 key informant interviews	Representatives from 3 coach training organizations

Framework for Addressing Violence

This evaluation drew on the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) socio-ecological model for preventing youth violence. This model aims to understand violence and the effects of potential prevention strategies across four levels: individual, relationship, community, and society (Figure 1; see Appendix 1 for more detailed description of the levels of the framework). Using the available data, grantees' activities were categorized according to the levels of the CDC framework to understand the breadth of grantees' efforts to address youth violence.

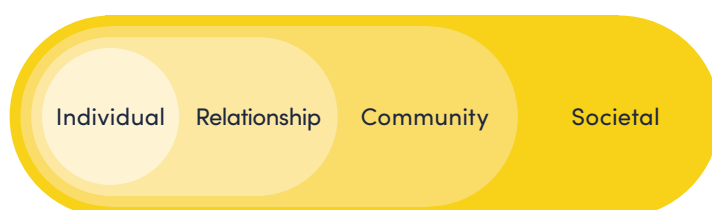


Figure 1: The CDC's socio-ecological model for youth violence prevention





GRANTEE OVERVIEW AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Laureus USA provided grants to 41 organizations throughout Illinois, all of which deliver programming in R3 Zones. A majority (n=27, 69%) of grantees delivered programs exclusively in the city of Chicago, with five grantees (13%) delivering programs in other parts of Illinois. Seven grantees (18%) delivered programs in both the Chicagoland area and elsewhere in Illinois (Figure 2).

Figure 3 shows the areas where grantees deliver programs in Illinois and the City of Chicago, based on zip codes provided by grantees.

Illinois Footprint Program Distribution

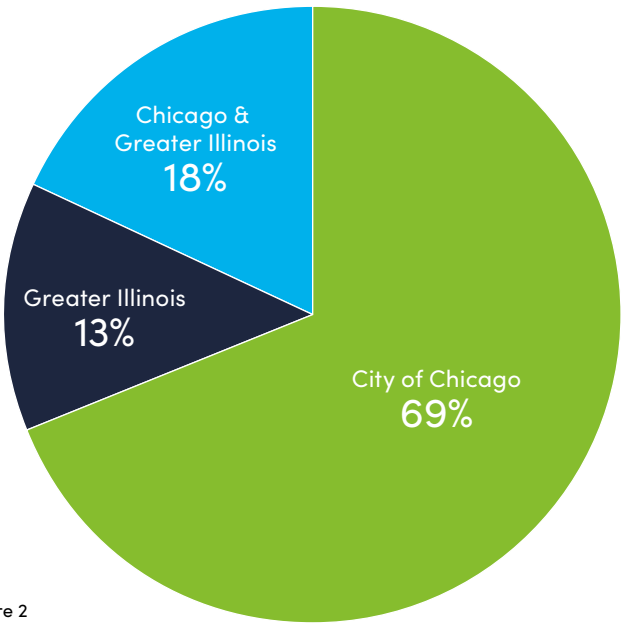


Figure 2

Areas Where Grantees Deliver Programs

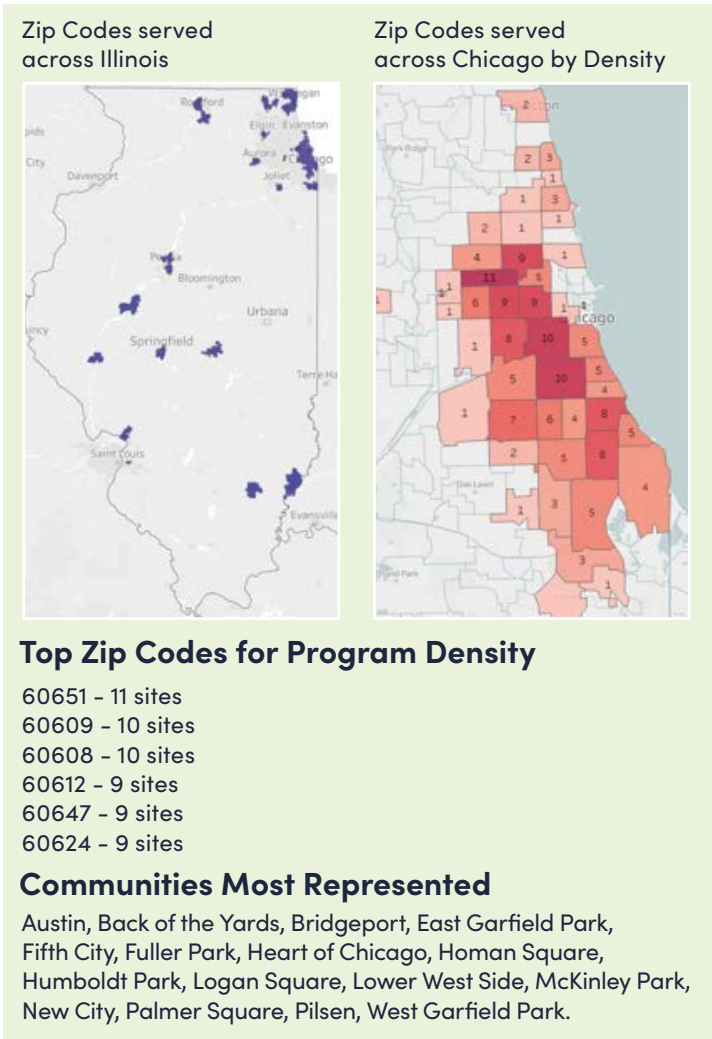


Figure 3: Zip codes served across Illinois and in Chicago

Grantee Outputs and Demographics

Through grant funds, organizations... Reached 10,447 youth and trained 747 coaches.

Grantees collectively reached 10,447 youth (ages 4–25 years) and trained 747 coaches through the funding provided by this grant program. Thirty-three organizations (85%) serve predominantly young people of color. On average, 55% of grantee staff and coaches live in the community where their organization’s programming is taking place, making them well-suited to deliver programs:

"A lot of us actually grew up with the youth’s parents and have relationships with their parents. We’re able to communicate with them because we come from the same streets that they come from."
Coach, UCAN



Sports Offered

The most common sports offered by grantees include soccer and basketball, with a wide range of sports represented (Figure 4).

Sports Offered by Grantees

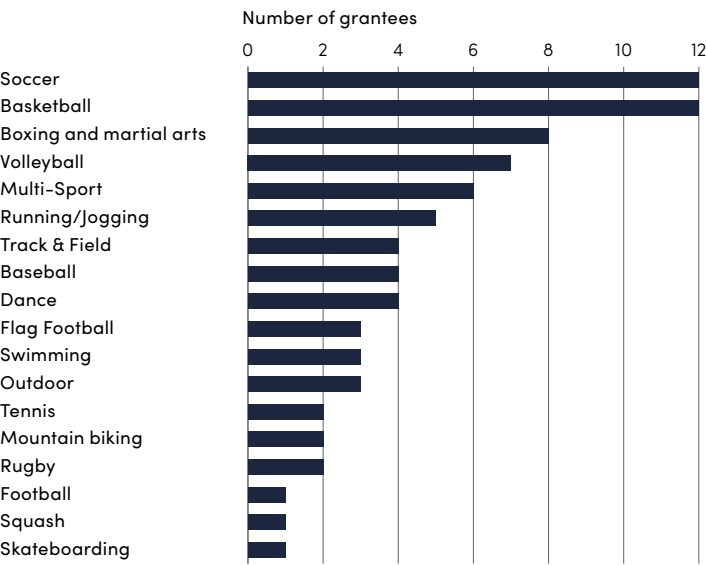


Figure 4

“ They talked about how safe they felt in that group – how they came into the program feeling shy or nervous, but having a mentor from the community allowed them to come out of their shell and be more authentic with different people.”

After School Coach, Girls in the Game



FINDINGS

The following sections provide a summary of findings as they relate to the five research questions.

Context of Youth Violence

On questionnaires, coaches and staff reported bullying/cyberbullying, gang and gun violence, and violence in the home as the three main types of violence that most affect youth, regardless of their gender identity (Figure 5). For all youth, bullying/cyberbullying and gang and gun violence were reported. For boys, gang and gun violence were reported most often, whereas for girls and non-binary youth, bullying/cyberbullying were reported most often.

Of note, 22% of respondents were unsure of the types of violence that affect non-binary youth.



Top 3 Forms of Violence Affecting Youth as Reported by Staff and Coaches (%)



Figure 5

Youth and community members expanded on these findings during focus group discussions by sharing their lived experience on the complexities and realities of violence they face. One young person shared first-hand experiences with gun and gang violence as follows:

“ We saw some gangsters, then they started shooting at me and my mom. Other women and men were running because we saw they were shooting.”

Young Person, Chicago Youth Boxing Club

Participants describe the long-term effects that exposure to regular violence can do to oneself:

“ When you’ve seen so much death, you give up hope and you start not caring.”

Key Informant, Chicago CRED

The Role of Sports in Youth Violence Prevention

Grantees overwhelmingly agreed that sport-based programs have a role to play in addressing youth violence. On questionnaires, over 90% of both staff and coaches reported that:

- ▶ Integrating sport into youth programming can support violence prevention efforts.
- ▶ Their programs are effective in promoting youth development.
- ▶ Their programs target the needs of youth in the community.
- ▶ Youth enjoy participating in their programs.
- ▶ Their programs offer a good approach for supporting youth in the community.

Additionally, 95% of coaches and 88% of staff believed that their programming is effective in addressing youth violence in the community (Figure 6).

Views on Sport and Youth Violence Prevention as Reported by Staff and Coaches

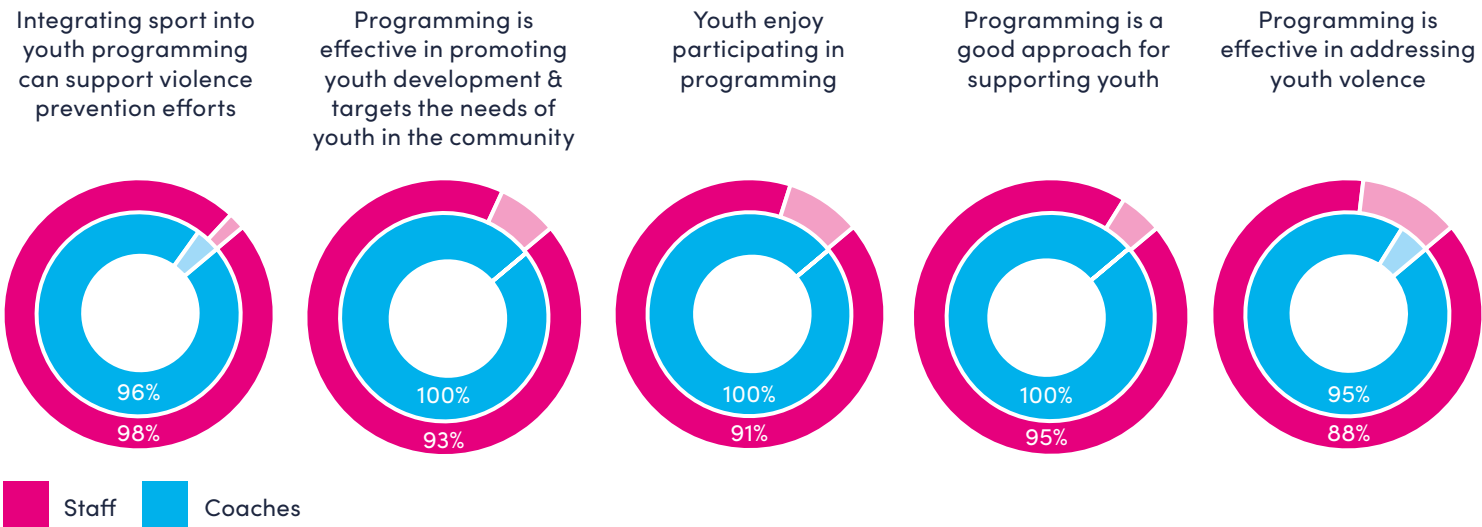


Figure 6

How Grantees are Addressing Youth Violence Through Sport

There were five approaches regularly cited in questionnaires, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews as core to violence prevention efforts of SBYD organizations:

- 1 Promoting skill-building
- 2 Creating safe spaces
- 3 Fostering positive relationships
- 4 Reducing stress through healing-centered sport, physical activity, and play
- 5 Facilitating connections to resources and services in the community and beyond

Promoting Skill-building

Evaluation participants described numerous ways in which grantees seek to build skills of youth participants in such areas as social and emotional learning, goal-setting, discipline, and employment and finance. Participants described grantees' efforts to instill confidence, teach life lessons, show youth how to navigate difficult situations, foster leadership skills, and resolve their own conflicts with each other. One youth participant explained:

“ I think CYBC really helps you with wanting to accomplish your goals. If you have any goals, you can just come here and ask for help to accomplish those goals.”

Youth participant, Chicago Youth Boxing Club (CYBC)

In the Hello Insight surveys, youth reported on a range of indicators relating to social and emotional learning. They expressed generally high agreement with programs' activities relating to authentic engagement, challenge growth, and the promotion of peer bonds (74–85% agreement) (Figure 7).

Youth report...

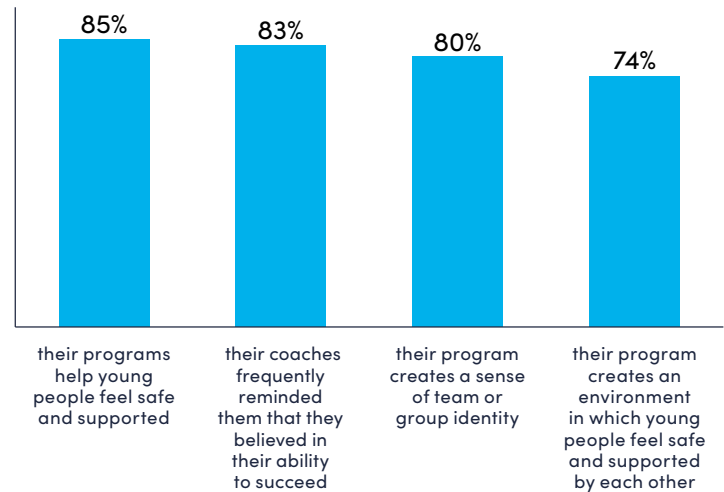


Figure 7



Creating Safe Spaces

To improve the perceived safety of young people and their families, grantees commit to providing safe passages to make it possible for youth to participate in their programs. One way grantees do this is by providing programming opportunities to youth in the after-school hours when violence and crime are at their peak for adolescents. Some programs provide transportation to and from programming to ensure the safety of their youth participants. Additionally, grantees seek to remove other financial barriers that might affect participation, including providing free or reduced-cost programming to low-income youth.

Grantees aim to cultivate a safe space through building trust with young people and their families. One of the main ways grantees do this is by hiring staff and coaches from within the community. As part of a site visit, one organization referenced the impact of creating an intentional pipeline for hiring former program participants.

"We work with young people and then they transition to college. They develop the skills, the confidence and the network to be successful. These young people then come back to coach and support a program that they love. There's a culture, a community and a love for young people that people want to keep participating in and building."

Program Coordinator, America SCORES Chicago

Beneficiaries of the program favorably comment on coaches and staff who are from the community being best suited to build trust and address issues relating to safety with young people, their families, and other community members.

Fostering Positive Relationships

Once youth are in the program, grantees aim to give youth a sense of belonging and enhance their relationships with adults (e.g., coaches) and peers.

"The girls were often heard encouraging one another if they had an unsuccessful attempt with one of the routines. This created a positive and safe environment. Positive relationships also grew between the older and younger students and were demonstrated by the older students coaching the younger ones."

Founder, FOUS Youth Development Services

Evaluation participants shared that the potential impact of sport participation and a coach's responsibilities extend beyond the typical scope of a youth sports coach, likened to someone closer to a social worker or school counselor.

"R is a 14-year-old who lost his older brother to gun violence four months ago – he was only 15. R took it hard, misbehaving, getting into trouble. We've been working with him, supporting him, and trying to get him into therapy, but he's been resistant to going.

That night in the gym, you could tell, he needed this. Based on what he's been going through he needed a new place to be, to have fun, to be a kid. I talked to him that night, 'Hey man, this is going to help, therapy – it makes you stronger, not weak, it's a good thing.' And he finally agreed to do therapy. He has a long road ahead of him, but that door is open now and sports played a big role in that. He didn't graduate with his class, but he's in summer school now and is going to do it. I'm proud of him. He's why we do this."

Sports & Fitness Manager, BUILD

Training organizations provide coaches with practical skills and tools to build trust and relationships.



"The biggest thing that I took away from the training that I will use moving forward is the importance of sharing power with young people; it gives them a sense of ownership and creativity in play."

Training Participant, CHJS

Evaluation participants also described how using methods, such as peace circles, can strengthen peer-to-peer relationships.

Reducing Negative Stress through Healing-centered Sport, Physical Activity, and Play

Evaluation participants spoke frequently about how sports, physical activity, and play offer numerous opportunities for young people to learn to regulate their emotions, manage their stress, and ultimately build resiliency. They described a programmatic setting where young people can make healthy connections.



between the mind and the body through rhythmic, repetitive, and patterned behavior (e.g., sports drills) – all of which facilitate the healing process. One executive director described a conversation with one of their youth participants who said:

“Coach, if you guys didn’t have me play rugby, I wouldn’t have made it through high school. Because I always knew I could go to practice and whatever happened at school or at home or on the street, I could deal with it at practice.”

Youth participant in the words of Executive Director, Chicago Lions Rugby Club

Additionally, grantees offer young people in their programs spaces to experience stress in manageable settings, which can help them build resilience over time. One evaluation participant described how sports drills in tandem with check-ins can support healing, relieve stress, and build resiliency, which in turn links to violence prevention over time:

"If you're teaching a layup, you teach the steps first and then you do one step further. You challenge them with the right-handed layup and then you challenge them with the left-handed layup. You don't start by just sending someone out to go do a layup with their non-dominant hand. You build up to that through small doses of stress. That's how resilience is built, through these patterned, predictable doses of stress that your body can then come back and recover from, and that over time builds the resilience towards stressful situations. That's also valuable when thinking about violence prevention, having someone who is resilient able to, again, regulate themselves, not be triggered, and have oversized reactions to things that happen to them is all part of a healing process and part of what our training is trying to address."

Executive Director, Center for Healing and Justice through Sports

Evaluation participants highlighted that SBYD programs commit to building young people's skills around stress regulation, suggesting that their programmatic practices reduce reactive behavior and conflicts both in and outside the program. Well-trained coaches are vital to creating environments where young people can begin to heal from the stress and trauma they have experienced. The training process involves building a coach's understanding and skills around how to structure drills and informal check-ins, as described by one evaluation participant:

"Coaches aim to be rhythmic with drills and provide quick check-ins on youth to baseline gauge where they are at. They are intentional with how to implement rhythm ... kids can feel empowered, and that becomes a consistent predictable experience for them."

Key Informant, City of Chicago Department of Public Health

Some organizations take their healing-centered approaches beyond the courts and fields by offering linkages to other types of therapy and counseling. One evaluation participant described a multi-level approach toward supporting their participants who have experienced trauma and stress:

"Our violence prevention and intervention program includes ongoing intensive trauma-informed care, which includes behavioral therapies such as art therapy, counseling, mindfulness, and role-playing, as well as service coordination and navigation, a strengths-based approach to service delivery, family centered programming, place based knowledge, and gender responsive services."

Organization representative, Puerto Rican Cultural Center

Facilitating Connections to Resources and Services in the Community and Beyond

Evaluation participants described many ways in which SBYD organizations seek to enrich the lives of youth and their families by fostering community networks and increasing access to resources. Many organizations offer academic support and tutoring, along with support for the college application process and other post-secondary opportunities. They host college trips and trips to other areas to increase youths' exposure and future orientation.

Organizations host community service events, such as cleaning up the neighborhood, planting gardens, and passing out food to unhoused members of the community. They provide social events, like cook-outs, movies, and family nights, seeking to bring together youth from different neighborhoods to break down barriers, increase exposure to other areas, and facilitate recognition of commonalities. One organization, for instance, described hosting "Light in the Night" and "Hoops in the Hood" events where they set up basketball hoops on neighborhood streets and "let the kids play ball" (staff member). Participants also described the value of community social events to help community members feel safe after shootings in the neighborhood: "You can still come out and go to the store, sit on your porch." (UCAN). One organization representative described the benefits of these enriching opportunities as follows:

“ Having community connections between parents, teachers, and coaches, means that there is minimal or no time throughout the day where the students are unsupervised. This additionally means that the kids experience the protective factors of connectedness to family or adults outside the family, ability to discuss problems with parents, and high socioemotional level through our curriculum."

Organization Representative, Chicago Lions

In addition to fostering academic opportunities and facilitating connections within communities, some SBYD organizations prioritize linking the families of their youth participants to services, such as social service organizations and workforce development centers, or providing families with basic necessities, such as temporary housing, clothing, and food. These activities speak to broader efforts to address root causes of challenges facing youth, including violence.

Grantee Activities According to the CDC Framework for Youth Violence Prevention

Data collected demonstrates that grantees are supporting violence prevention efforts through activities across all four levels of the CDC framework for youth violence prevention (see Figure 8 below for a list of grantee activities by level). A majority of activities center on the individual and relationship levels.



Grantee Activities According to the CDC’s Framework for Youth Violence Prevention



Figure 8



Implementation Challenges

Staff and coaches noted a range of implementation challenges that affect the delivery of their programs. On questionnaires, the most common challenges reported by staff include: hiring coaches, mentors, or staff (81%); keeping youth in programs (81%); and engaging the family members of youth (72%). Coaches/direct services providers most often reported challenges with ensuring youth have transportation to and from programs (66%) and recruiting youth to their programs (64%) (Figure 9).



Implementation Challenges Reported by Coaches & Staff



Figure 9

These challenges and others raised during focus group discussions stem from the various contexts which grantees need to navigate.

- ▶ Regarding the **family context** of youth participants, staff and coaches described difficulties with engaging family members and getting their buy-in to the program. Staff also noted difficulties where messaging conveyed during programs differ from the messaging youth receive at their homes.
- ▶ In the **organizational context**, staff described how staff shortages and turnover affect programming, hindering efforts to build long-term relationships with youth participants. Staff also described difficulties engaging girls in their sport-based programs. Some

individuals face limitations being hired at SBYD organizations given criminal convictions, but these individuals could be particularly powerful role models for youth participants. Furthermore, staff and coaches noted challenges with ensuring that all staff receive appropriate training—for instance, in trauma-informed approaches to engaging youth—and that staff themselves are given support for the psychologically taxing work they are doing:

"It's a lot of trauma that comes with this work. You have to do a lot of self-care to avoid taking these problems home to your own family, because of all the trauma you see."

Staff member, UCAN

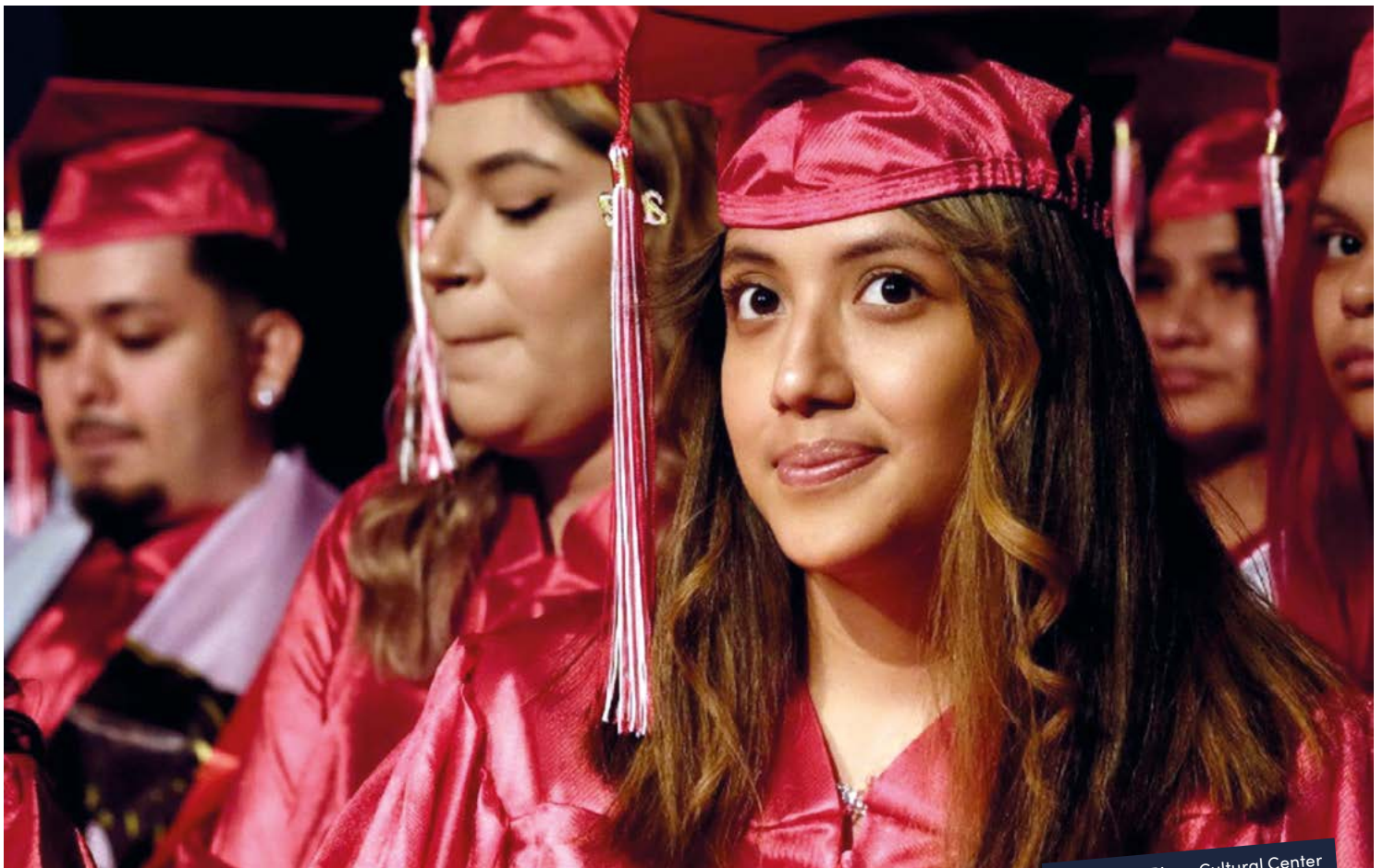
- ▶ For grantees operating in **school settings**, staff and coaches noted difficulties coordinating with principals and school staff who are often overloaded, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. This posed logistical challenges for program delivery.
- ▶ **Structural** challenges were also raised. A lack of resources prevents youth from getting access to appropriate equipment and facilities. This is especially true for young people with different abilities as noted by the parent of a program participant at KEEN Chicago.

"KEEN is very important for my daughters... Sessions and programs are accessible and close to our house. There are not a lot of programs prepared for youth with developmental disabilities."

Parent, KEEN Chicago

Staff and coaches also spoke about issues with coordinating efforts to address youth violence, given siloes in the violence prevention sector and a lack of swift response during violent incidents. Furthermore, staff and coaches underscored the difficulties of working in areas in which violence is common and safety is a constant concern.

Organizations use a range of strategies to address these implementation challenges, including: intentionally engaging families of youth to understand the value of sport as "what our families love...what binds them together" (Executive Director); hiring staff from the community to gain participant trust and promote relatability; incentivizing participation through stipends and the provision of free equipment; finding ways to partner with schools through avenues that are low-burden to school administrators; and promoting community collaboration and kinship.



The Puerto Rican Cultural Center

Greatest Needs Going Forward

Organizations highlighted several areas where they need support to grow, enhance, and sustain their violence prevention programming. On questionnaires, staff and coaches designated **funding** as the area of greatest need, particularly for staff salaries, as well as for equipment and rent. Only 65% of staff reported that their programs have sustained funding. In focus group discussions, multi-year grant opportunities were highlighted as potentially allowing for organizations to systematically plan and scale up their sports-based violence prevention programs.

Training and capacity-building opportunities for staff, coaches, and mentors was the next greatest need highlighted. Although a majority of grantees know the primary issues of violence being faced by the youth in their community (76%) and know where to refer these youth for additional support (71%), less than half (47%) of staff report having the skills internally to support youth who have experienced violence as victims and only about a third (29%) report having the skills internally to work with youth who have committed or are committing violence (Figure 11).

Staff Report...

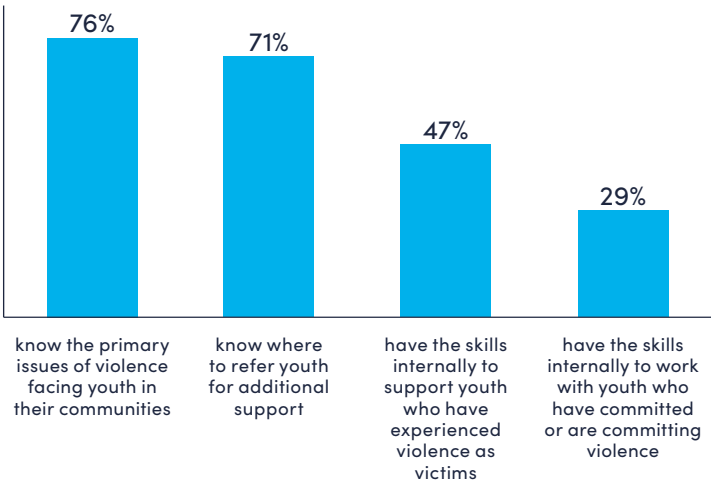
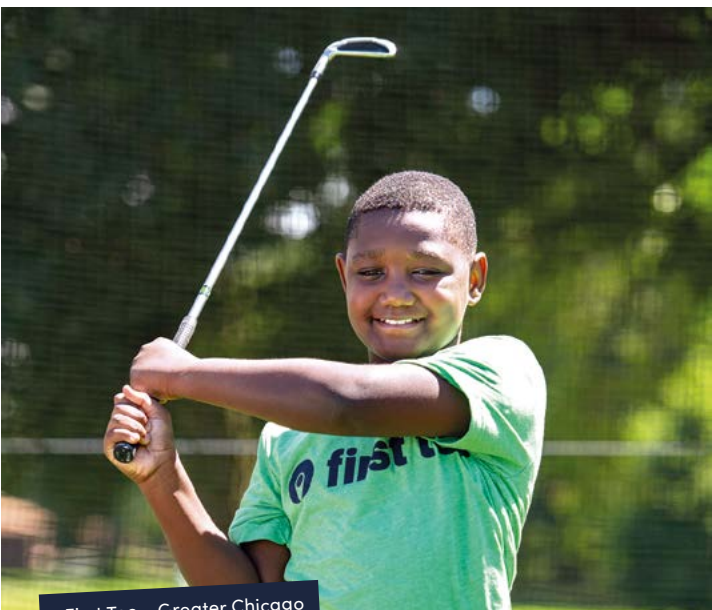


Figure 10



Other areas noted during focus group discussions spoke to **structural and policy issues**. To address the lack of physical spaces for play and ongoing challenges with finding spaces for programming, organizational leaders expressed the desire to have more cost-effective and efficient ways to reserve and use public spaces (e.g., schools, park spaces, etc.). One organizational leader shared:

"I think that well crafted space-use agreements can be really valuable for a lot of organizations. Many parks and schools are underutilized and space use agreements can help foster transparency around what space is available and how to obtain it for sport and play purposes. Additionally, these agreements can help eliminate economic barriers to space caused by fees and administrative structures that become obstacles for organizations with smaller operating budgets and limited staff capacity. Ultimately, our goal is to get youth and their families playing and well crafted space use agreements are one way to do just that."

Organization leadership, Urban Initiatives

Furthermore, organizational leaders discussed wanting to see a shift in support from more reactive violence intervention or disruption programs to proactive youth development programs that can support youth from a younger age.



CONCLUSIONS

Key Takeaways

This evaluation points to the following takeaways:

1. Violence is a complex issue facing youth participants of grantee organizations, with gang or gun violence and bullying or cyberbullying highlighted as being particularly common.

2. Sport-based programming has a role to play in addressing youth violence, with high agreement among evaluation participants that SBYD programs are promoting youth development and supporting youth, targeting youths' needs, and addressing youth violence while being enjoyable to youth participants.

3. SBYD organizations use numerous strategies to support youth development and prevent youth violence, including: a) promoting skill-building (e.g., in social and emotional learning); b) creating safe spaces; c) fostering positive relationships; d) reducing stress

through healing-centered sport, physical activity, and play; and c) facilitating connections to resources and services in the community and beyond. These approaches span across the four levels of the CDC Framework for Youth Violence Prevention.

4. Implementation challenges facing SBYD organizations include engaging families, recruiting and retaining youth, training and keeping staff, operating in challenging settings (e.g., in overburdened schools), and providing resources to youth and coordinating with partners in the violence prevention sector.

5. The greatest needs for SBYD organizations concern funding (e.g., for staff salaries, equipment, spaces to operate), training opportunities for staff and mentors, and structural and policy issues (e.g., focusing resources on engaging youth before they engage in violence).

Limitations

Limitations of this evaluation must be recognized:

- ▶ This evaluation aimed to shed light on the ways in which SBYD organizations are addressing youth violence, drawing on self-reported questionnaires administered at single time-points and qualitative data. The evaluation design used does not allow for a rigorous assessment of changes in youth violence outcomes over time resulting from SBYD programming.
- ▶ This evaluation only included the perspectives and data from the 41 organizations that were receiving funds through this grant program in addition to key informants. While these 41 organizations are broadly representative of the SBYD sector throughout the state, future evaluation could be expanded to include organizations that were not included in this specific funding program.
- ▶ While all staff and coaches from all grantees completed questionnaires and staff were invited to focus group discussions, not all staff participated in the focus group discussions, which may have limited the representativeness of the data collected. Focus group participants were also primarily from organizations within the City of Chicago which may limit the representativeness of the data from the State of Illinois as a whole.
- ▶ Although most grantees are direct service providers, four grantees are training organizations with a different model of program delivery. Their experiences were captured during key informant interviews but may not be fully represented in this report.



Avenues for Further Research and Evaluation

Opportunities for further exploration include:

- ▶ This evaluation highlighted that youth violence is intersectional and affects young people differently based on a variety of factors, such as age, ethnicity, race, gender-identity, and ability. **These intersections could be explored in further research or evaluation.**
- ▶ The importance of having well-trained coaches and direct service providers who can support youth in efforts to reduce youth violence was an underlying theme in this evaluation. However, implementation challenges around hiring, maintaining, and training these individuals were identified. Additionally, grantees reported some gaps in capacity to support youth who have experienced or used violence. **Future studies could expand on the role of coaches and direct service providers from SBYD organizations in addressing youth violence and how these implementation and capacity-building challenges can best be addressed.**
- ▶ This evaluation shed light on the numerous ways in which grantees are addressing youth violence across the four levels of the CDC's framework for youth violence prevention. **Future studies on how these activities—particularly those at the community and society levels of the framework—address root causes of youth violence would benefit the field.**
- ▶ In light of the limitations of this evaluation, **further research and monitoring & evaluation including using more rigorous study designs and longitudinal data would strengthen our understanding of the effects of SBYD programming on youth violence outcomes and implementation challenges they experience.**

Policy and Practice Recommendations

For practitioners:

- ▶ Organize training opportunities for staff and coaches to **facilitate learning about the issues of violence** affecting their diverse youth participants and better equip them to support youth who have experienced and who use violence.
- ▶ Ensure that **staff and coaches receive support services and counseling** needed given their heavy exposure to trauma.
- ▶ Prioritize **engaging girls and non-binary youth** in SBYD programming, who are often harder to reach but are affected by multiple forms of violence.
- ▶ Prioritize **lived experience while hiring staff**. Demonstrate flexibility, openness, and nuance in HR and hiring processes to ensure that staff share lived experiences and are able to relate to the young people that they serve.
- ▶ Identify **creative solutions for sustaining programming** by hiring previous participants as staff members or creating a channel between local schools and universities to serve as coaches.

For funders:

- ▶ Facilitate **multi-year, unrestricted funding opportunities** for SBYD organizations for long-term planning and growth.
- ▶ Support **research, monitoring & evaluation activities** so that SBYD organizations can better measure their impacts on youth violence across the four levels of the CDC's framework for youth violence prevention.
- ▶ Fund and participate in **collective movements**. Including supporting advocacy and lobbying efforts that allow for organizations to work together for scale in their area of change.

For policymakers:

- ▶ Establish **sharing agreements** between organizations for space (gyms, rooms, fields), equipment, and other participants and authors.
- ▶ Empower local organizations to **build relationships with other community organizations** for any referrals or resources of participants (i.e., health clinics, food banks, housing).
- ▶ Support sport-based violence prevention initiatives **working with youth who have not yet committed or are at the cusp of committing violence**, in addition to supporting disruption or intervention services.

US Soccer Foundation



APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Description of CDC Framework for Addressing Youth Violence

Level	Description	Examples of preventive activities
Individual	The first level identifies biological and personal history factors that increase the likelihood of becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence. Some of these factors are age, education, income, substance use, or history of abuse.	Prevention strategies at this level promote attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that prevent violence. Specific approaches may include conflict resolution and life skills training, social-emotional learning, and safe dating and healthy relationship skill programs.
Relationship	The second level examines close relationships that may increase the risk of experiencing violence as a victim or perpetrator. A person's closest social circle—peers, partners and family members—influences their behavior and contribute to their experience.	Prevention strategies at this level may include parenting or family-focused prevention programs and mentoring and peer programs designed to strengthen parent-child communication, promote positive peer norms, problem-solving skills and promote healthy relationships.
Community	The third level explores the settings, such as schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods, in which social relationships occur and seeks to identify the characteristics of these settings that are associated with becoming victims or perpetrators of violence.	Prevention strategies at this level focus on improving the physical and social environment in these settings (e.g., by creating safe places where people live, learn, work, and play) and by addressing other conditions that give rise to violence in communities (e.g., neighborhood poverty, residential segregation, and instability, high density of alcohol outlets).
Society	The fourth level looks at the broad societal factors that help create a climate in which violence is encouraged or inhibited. These factors include social and cultural norms that support violence as an acceptable way to resolve conflicts. Other large societal factors include the health, economic, educational, and social policies that help to maintain economic or social inequalities between groups in society.	Prevention strategies at this level include efforts to promote societal norms that protect against violence as well as efforts to strengthen household financial security, education and employment opportunities, and other policies that affect the structural determinants of health.

Appendix 2: List of Grantee Organizations



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