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Youth Report Favorable Impressions of Community Street Outreach Workers

Two-thirds feel that working with a street worker has made a difference in their life

A new study by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Center for Injury Research and Policy finds that youth generally perceive community street outreach workers positively, regardless of whether they have personally worked with one. Street outreach workers are typically members of the community who intervene to prevent conflict and retaliation, and in some programs, also connect individuals with needed services, such as housing, health care and job training. While communities across the United States are increasingly using street workers as a strategy to connect at-risk youth to services and prevent gang-related violence, little is known about how they are viewed by the youth in their communities, particularly among youth who have not yet worked with one. This study, available online in advance of publication in the *Journal of Community Health*, is the first peer-reviewed study to include the perceptions of youth who are not former or current clients of community street workers.

Researchers from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health surveyed 159 individuals ages 13 to 23 in Lowell, Massachusetts to assess their perceptions of local street workers. Lowell is a city of 105,167 residents north of Boston. The United Teen Equality Center (UTEC), in Lowell was established in 1999 in response to local gang violence and houses a community street worker program that was the focus of the evaluation. The majority (63 percent) of survey respondents indicated they knew first hand of fights in which the street workers intervened and/or prevented them from occurring. Eighty-two percent of respondents who reported having participated in street worker-led mediation activities said their conflicts had successfully been resolved.

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“These results support the value of communities using street workers to help meet the needs of their youth and in mediating disputes,” said Keshia Pollack, PhD, MPH, an assistant professor with the Bloomberg School’s Department of Health Policy and Management and lead author of the paper. “Even youth who haven’t directly benefited from working one-on-one with street outreach workers are telling us their presence makes their own community a better place.”

Respondents were also asked about their employment, education and health care needs. Close to 60 percent reported needing help finding and securing a job, and approximately one-third needed assistance with resume writing. The number one health need expressed by youth was access to health care, followed by drug rehabilitation and treatment services, and birth control. Importantly, over 50 percent of the respondents said they could not have connected with the services they received without the help of the street workers.

“Young people have needs beyond conflict resolution strategies, and it is important that communities consider this point when thinking about how best to keep their young people moving in the right direction,” said co-author Shannon Frattaroli, PhD, MPH, also an assistant professor with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health’s Department of Health Policy and Management. “At the end of the day, teens know that the factors necessary for a successful transition to adulthood include education, employment, and health care,” Frattaroli said.

Additional authors of “Youth Perspectives on Street Outreach Workers: Results from a Community-Based Survey” are Jennifer M. Whitehill (Johns Hopkins Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence) and Karen Jonsberg (Johns Hopkins Center for Injury Research and Policy).

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