

# Violence Prevention and Reduction Initiatives in Milwaukee County

Prepared for the Medical College of Wisconsin  
Consortium on Community and Public Health

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**Planning Council**  
for Health and Human Services, Inc.



**VIOLENCE  
PREVENTION AND REDUCTION  
INITIATIVES  
IN  
MILWAUKEE COUNTY**

Prepared for:  
MEDICAL COLLEGE OF WISCONSIN  
CONSORTIUM ON PUBLIC AND COMMUNITY HEALTH

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*The Planning Council for Health and Human Services, Inc., is a non-profit organization serving Southeastern Wisconsin as an independent resource for information, education, research, and consulting on community issues.*



## Executive Summary

### Introduction

In 2005, the Planning Council for Health and Human Services, Inc., was asked by City of Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett's office to compile a directory of anti-violence initiatives within Milwaukee County. In January of 2008, the Medical College of Wisconsin's Consortium on Public and Community Health asked the Planning Council to update the information contained in the original directory, collect additional information, and conduct a series of focus groups.

### Key Findings from Focus Groups

#### *Defining violence*

There were common elements in the definitions of violence that people were asked to craft. Violence, they said, may be intentional or unintentional; physical, mental, or emotional. It is often illegal in nature. It can destroy lives, relationships, neighborhoods, or property. Violence can also be cultural in nature when it is directed at entire groups of people, e.g., racism or homophobia.

#### *Major causes of violence*

Most frequently mentioned were:

- Family dysfunction: The top contributing factor to violence across all five groups was "family dysfunction." Participants felt that children mimic what they see at home and, in essence, "learn" violence when it is commonplace in family dynamics.
- Poverty: Poverty was thought to contribute to violence because of the sense of hopelessness it produces when people feel they may not be able to achieve "the American dream." This may lead some to criminal behavior.
- The media and entertainment industry: Many blame the media and the entertainment industry for a constant barrage of violent words and images in movies, television, music, and games. All of this contributes to what some called a "culture of violence."

Other contributing factors cited by participants included disregard for human life, ease of obtaining guns, substance abuse/mental illness, low educational achievement and gangs.

#### **Anti-Violence Models Cited as Effective By Focus Group Participants**

- Safe Streets.
- Weed and Seed.
- Safe and Sound.
- Milwaukee Police Department's "summer police initiative" that floods police into high-crime areas.
- Milwaukee Violence Free Zone.
- The High Point Model being piloted in the Milwaukee Police Department's 5<sup>th</sup> District.
- D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education): Said to be effective in improving relations between young people and police.
- The "M.U.T.T." (Mobile Urgent Treatment Team): Currently a component of Milwaukee County's Wraparound Program, some thought it would be a good model to use in the domestic violence arena.

#### *Preventing/reducing violence*

Participants felt there is overlap between prevention and reduction. But, overall, they said prevention strategies are long-term in nature, should start when children are very young, and address root causes. Educational models, they said, are best suited to prevention efforts. Working with entire families is important – in a way that builds on strengths and assets. Reduction strategies, most agreed, tend to be "reactive" in nature, i.e., responding to violent activity that is already occurring. Reduction strategies are often implemented through law enforcement or government entities. Violence reduction strategies

suggested by participants included reducing access to guns, organizing neighborhoods, targeting the entire family for interventions, providing jobs, and reducing truancy.

***What's missing?***

When asked what is missing from current efforts to prevent and reduce violence, collaboration was at the top of the list. Following that was greater involvement of the business community and the faith-based community. Some also felt that we need to “add the voices of youth” and suggested that we convene focus groups with young people.

***Barriers encountered by anti-violence initiatives***

Although lack of funding was the top barrier cited by participants, there were others, such as the need for well-trained staff and professional development resources, and the ability to evaluate what's working and what isn't.

***School violence***

The youth-focused groups were not opposed to having police stationed at schools, but they felt that officers should like working with kids; be appropriately trained; have an unthreatening, positive presence; and blend in with the kids, e.g., eat lunch with them. Group members also felt it is important to give young people a real leadership role in the school environment, and to recognize that, while academics are important, trusting relationships between teachers and students can also help to deter students from violence.

***Gang violence***

While the public perception is that gangs are a huge problem, members of this group said that this is not the case: “The majority of kids are not in gangs.” For some kids, gangs provide “a sense of belonging” that they do not get anywhere else.

***Grass roots efforts***

Participants in the neighborhood-focused group said that block watches are always effective; however, some neighborhoods are very transient and people move a lot. They felt “people in neighborhoods are the experts” and that “every neighborhood has leaders.” Community-based organizations are good, but some felt their effectiveness can be diminished by time spent fund-raising and completing required paperwork.

***Police/community relations***

In neighborhoods where police have a more prominent presence, “the overall perception is that police are bad.” Participants said this can be counteracted when police employ strategies that allow them to connect with the community in non-threatening and positive ways. They added, “The new police chief brings opportunities for renewed discussion of strategies to bring police and neighborhoods together.”

***Reducing guns***

The law enforcement/guns group was pessimistic that meaningful gun reduction can be accomplished when “we live in a culture where many people feel they need guns to protect themselves.” They said background checks are not always done, despite the law. They also felt there should be background checks on all firearm transactions – both handguns and long guns – and that laws should be extended to private transactions. Most agreed that gun buy-backs have not been effective. Internet gun sales, they agreed, should also include background checks, be processed through licensed dealers, and require in-person pickup.



### ***Domestic violence***

Participants in the domestic violence group were asked why women return to abusive situations. One of the primary reasons is economic, they said: “Leaving the abuser can be a ‘recipe for instant poverty.’” Some women feel they cannot banish the “only father the children have ever known.” Others say that they still love the abuser, that the relationship was good once, and “we can get back there.” Participants agreed that women who allow abusers to return often lack self-esteem and feel that no one else will ever love them. The reasons for staying together may be a little different for same-sex couples. One participant noted: “Same-sex couples feel their unions represent safe havens from the outside world.”

To better support domestic violence survivors, participants recommended more services for the children who are exposed to this type of violence, more satellite services, and use of the M.U.T.T. (Mobile Urgent Treatment Team) approach that is used in the Milwaukee County Wraparound Program. It was also recommended that police receive better training in dealing with domestic violence situations in the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community.

### **Key Findings from the Database**

The anti-violence database now contains 69 anti-violence initiatives after adding together those from the Medical College’s original database and new ones that were identified during the course of this project. Each initiative in the original database was asked to verify, update and add to the information that had already been collected by the Medical College and the Planning Council. Of the 52 originally identified initiatives, 31 returned updated profile information, seven were found to be discontinued, one felt the request was not applicable to their initiative, and 13 did not update their profiles, despite numerous follow-up calls by Planning Council staff. Following are some preliminary observations from the updated profiles.

- 42% (13) said that they do employ evidence-based practices.
- One-third (10) stated that they do have an evaluation component.
- Twenty-four initiatives listed at least six partners – some listed as many as 30 or 40. Four initiatives said they had five or fewer partners.
- Fifteen organizations – or about half of those responding – said their major focus was on youth. Of those 15, eight served only persons in Milwaukee Public Schools.

### **Possible Next Steps**

As Planning Council staff compiled the database and conducted the focus groups, possible next steps emerged. These are summarized below:

- Collect information about – and conduct focus groups with – the newly identified initiatives.
- Explore why initiatives were discontinued.
- Identify the evidence-based practices that relate to violence prevention and reduction and tie them to existing initiatives. (The federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration lists 21 evidence-based practices related to violence prevention.)
- Explore in more depth the local models participants described as effective.
- Promote, as was requested by many participants, further collaboration.
- Conduct focus groups with youth.



# **SECTION ONE**

## **FOCUS GROUP REPORT**



## Introduction

In every country, to a greater or lesser extent, violence blights lives and undermines health. Acknowledging this, in 1996 the 49th World Health Assembly adopted a resolution (WHA49.25) declaring violence a major and growing public health problem across the world. The resolution ended by calling for a plan of action for progress towards a science based public health approach to preventing violence. The World Health Organization defines violence as the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or a group or community, that either results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in, injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.<sup>1</sup>

In 2005, the Planning Council for Health and Human Services, Inc. prepared a directory of anti-violence initiatives within Milwaukee County. The directory was updated in 2006. (Readers can access the directory at:

<http://www.planningcouncil.org/docs/reports/avi-mc.pdf>.) In January of 2008 the Medical College of Wisconsin's Consortium on Public and Community Health asked the Planning Council to update the information contained in the original directory, collect additional information, and conduct a series of focus groups with initiatives that are working to decrease and prevent violence.

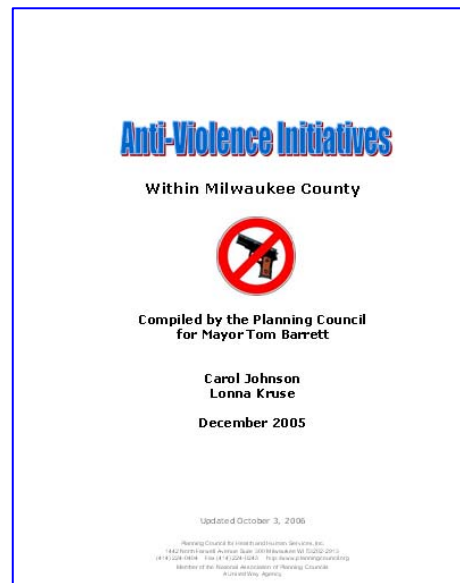
The Consortium is exploring funding a long-term initiative to:

- Decrease rates of violence in identified areas of Milwaukee and, possibly, beyond that into other areas of Wisconsin.
- Strengthen community capacity to prevent future violence.

The Medical College would employ a public health approach to reducing violence that places emphasis on preventing violence before it occurs, making science integral to identifying effective policies and programs, and integrating the efforts of diverse scientific disciplines, local organizations, and communities. The Consortium needs additional information to inform their efforts as they continue to explore the feasibility of a violence reduction initiative.

The report that follows contains information on individual anti-violence initiatives in Milwaukee County – as reported by the initiatives themselves – as well as a summary and analysis of focus groups conducted with representatives of these initiatives.

The report is organized into three major sections: Section One, which contains the methodology and focus group summary; Section Two, which contains the database report; and the Appendices.



<sup>1</sup> Treating violence as a public health problem *British Medical Journal*, 2002;325:726-727 (5 October)



## Summary of Focus Groups

Following is a summary of the responses to the questions asked of focus group participants. The “general” questions are presented here across the groups, rather than by each individual group. One of the reasons we decided to do this is because of the similarity of responses among the groups to the general questions. It allowed us to pull out “recurrent themes.” The “specialized questions” are presented according to the focus group in which they were asked. With respect to terminology, when we report that “many” said something, it means that the issue was mentioned in every focus group. “Some” means that the issue was discussed in at least two or more groups. Occasionally we include isolated comments that are interesting or thought-provoking, but most comments that were more “idiosyncratic” are generally not part of this discussion – but can be found in the complete focus group notes in the Appendices (G-1 through G-5). A content analysis was performed on the focus group data, and a coding system was developed to highlight distinct categories that emerged from analysis of the data.

### General Questions

#### Definition of Violence

Focus Group Question 1: “We would like to ask each of you to take five minutes and write down what the word ‘violence’ means to you.”

One participant stated: “Violence takes on many forms, many dimensions and components.” This is evident in the definitions that people crafted. But there were common elements in these definitions.

Many felt that violence can be mental, physical or sexual in nature. Physical violence can result in injury, harm or death, while mental violence can induce fear, cause emotional anguish, or be used as a tool of oppression and control.

Many said that violence can be intentional or unintentional, verbal as well as non-verbal.

Many also felt that disregard for human life is a major factor in today’s violence, and they said that violence can take aim at the culture, as well as individuals: “Institutional racism is violence. Poverty is violence.” Sexism, homophobia, and classism can also underlie violence.

*What participants said about:  
Definition of Violence*

- May be intentional or unintentional.
- Harm can be physical, mental, sexual – even cultural, e.g. racism, homophobia.
- Can be directed at individuals, groups of people – even animals.
- Induces fear.
- May result in physical injury, harm, death.
- May result in emotional anguish/injury.
- Can be used to control or oppress.
- May be verbal or nonverbal.
- Shows disregard for human life.
- Results in destruction - of human life, of relationships, of neighborhoods, of property.
- Often illegal in nature.

Violence can produce harm to individuals, damage and destruction to property, and deterioration of neighborhoods: “If someone shoots a gun at random, it may not hurt anyone, but it does deteriorate a community.” Violence can also result in destruction of relationships and lead to breakdown of families.

Some participants felt violence toward animals is escalating and is yet another indicator of what is referred to in the next section as a “culture of violence.”

Those in the Law Enforcement/Guns group noted that violence is often illegal in nature, often categorized by law enforcement in terms such as “homicide,” “aggravated assault,” “sexual assault,” or “armed robbery.”

## Causes of violence

Focus group question 2: *“In your opinion, what are the major causes of violence in Milwaukee?”*

### Family dysfunction

Family dysfunction was cited most often as a cause of violence. One participant said: “It all starts in the home. Children mimic what they see. They look at how adults act.” If the men in their lives hit women, they are more likely to regard this as the norm. If a child’s brother is in jail, this has a variety of ramifications. It may be viewed, for instance, as a “rite of passage.” When adults lack the skills to de-escalate violence, they are, in essence, “teaching” it to the children. The home is also where children acquire their perceptions of police and law enforcement. It is also the place where children learn how to respond to aggression. Some parents tell their kids to fight – to defend themselves. Child abuse is another issue. Some participants stated that “Children who have been abused are more likely to grow up to be violent adults.”

***What participants said about:  
Causes of Violence***

- Family dysfunction
- Poverty/hopelessness
- Media/entertainment industry
- “Culture of violence”
- Devalue/disregard for human life
- Ease of obtaining guns
- Substance abuse/ mental illness
- Low educational achievement
- Gangs

### Poverty/Hopelessness

Many participants felt poverty is a factor in producing violence because of the sense of hopelessness it creates in some: “Why is ‘so and so’ looking good and I’m working hard and I can’t make it?” Some called it a “poverty spirit” – “when you have nothing to lose and you know it.” For some who cannot even meet basic needs, crime may not be regarded as violence, but as a way “to feed and clothe my family.” Many jobs do not pay a livable wage, and it is especially difficult for persons who are re-entering the community from the corrections system to find employment. Another offshoot of this is that children may get into trouble not because they lack caring parents, but because some parents are so busy working to make ends meet that they are unable to properly supervise their children.

### Media/entertainment industry

Many participants said that violence permeates the entertainment industry. It is everywhere – in movies, music, television, cyberspace. The comment was made that violence is “pumped through the music.” However, “some people can listen and be unaffected, while others, given their situations, try to live by the words.” Many felt it will be difficult to do anything about violence in entertainment because of the money it generates.

### Culture of violence

Some participants felt we live in a “culture of violence” and that there is a certain acceptance/tolerance of violence: “People expect it to happen, and it becomes the norm.” It gets to a point where people have “faith in violence” accomplishing what they want. They also noted that “Bystander tolerance has increased, partly because they fear becoming victims themselves if they interfere.”

### Devaluation of human life

Closely related to the concept of a “culture of violence” is the sense that there has been erosion in the value placed on a human life: “People lose the capacity to empathize with human beings.” There is a lack of respect for others. Why? One reason given was: “They don’t recognize other people as a person of value, because they don’t recognize themselves that way.”



### **Ease of obtaining guns**

Many cited the link between guns and violence, adding that it is “so easy to get a gun.” Lax enforcement of background checks was mentioned frequently as a contributing factor to this problem (this will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections).

### **Substance abuse/mental illness**

Some participants cited the role of behavioral health problems in contributing to violence. They felt that addictions or mental illness can be a factor associated with the loss of control that results in violence.<sup>2</sup> People may also commit violent acts in order to obtain drugs, e.g. rob drug dealers. Retaliation for nonpayment of drugs can also lead to violence.

### **Low educational achievement**

Some participants felt that there is a connection between violence and low educational achievement. Few placed direct blame on the schools because the schools, they say, – particularly inner city schools – lack the resources to do all they would like to do: “The school system is overwhelmed. Schools often become the kids’ support system. Schools try to take an active role to decrease violence, but there is only so much they can do.” Participants called for “strong leadership in the schools. If schools put forth expectations (and many teachers do), students will rise, more often than not, to meet them.” This is critical, they say, because students who do not graduate are more likely to be involved in violence. But parental involvement is also crucial, and “It is often difficult to get parents involved with their kids and school activities.”

### **Gangs**

Gangs are not a new problem, nor are the problems associated with them. The birth of America’s gang problem can be traced to the dawn of the country ([www.knowgangs.com](http://www.knowgangs.com)). What is the allure? The top reason, according to participants in the Youth Focus Groups, seems to be that “for some kids, gang membership produces a ‘sense of belonging’ that they do not get anywhere else.” Gangs are “marketed” to young people – fill the niche of family belonging. Gangs allow kids to have power. But gangs can easily get out of control because “Kids do not have tools to deal with conflict.” Outsiders don’t understand the concept of “street respect.” As one participant explained: “A lot of us don’t understand this concept. Their world is so small. They have so little influence on their future. They have little capacity to negotiate – the slightest diss becomes a very big deal. Something as small as a dirty look can make a lunchroom break out into chaos.” It is interesting to note that “the top ten causes of violence” cited by children were also cited by our focus groups, although in a slightly different order. The children had “the media” at the top of their list, while our groups spoke more often of “family dysfunction.”

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<sup>2</sup> A study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* showed that patients with serious mental illness — those with schizophrenia, major depression, or bipolar disorder — were two to three times as likely as people without such an illness to be assaultive. In absolute terms, the lifetime prevalence of violence among people with serious mental illness was 16%, as compared with 7% among people without mental illness. Because serious mental illness is quite rare, it actually contributes very little to the overall rate of violence in the general population; the attributable risk has been estimated to be 3 to 5% — much lower than that associated with substance abuse, for example. People with no mental disorder who abuse alcohol or drugs are nearly seven times as likely as those without substance abuse to report violent behavior. But substance abuse among the mentally ill compounds the increased risk of violence. Richard A. Friedman, M.D. “Violence and Mental Illness — How Strong is the Link?” *New England Journal of Medicine*. Vol. 355: 2-64-2066. Nov. 16, 2006.

## Strategies for Violence Prevention and Reduction

Focus Group Question 3: “Please discuss the extent to which you feel there is a difference in strategies employed to prevent violence and strategies employed to reduce violence?”

Participants were asked to talk about strategies that work to prevent violence and strategies that are effective in reducing violence. At first, many participants had a difficult time conceptualizing and articulating the difference between prevention of violence and reduction of violence. But as discussion ensued, most were able to make the distinction between strategies that focus on prevention and those that are designed to reduce violence. While they felt there was overlap between the two, they also were able to make distinctions – as seen in the table to the right.

Generally, participants felt that in reduction, “something is already going on,” while “prevention helps everyone – those involved and those not.” There was consensus that prevention activities frequently involve education and training, and that activities designed to reduce violence are more often implemented through law enforcement channels. Prevention tries to get at the root cause and stop it from happening, while reduction seeks to intervene and reduce the crime statistics.

Some participants said there is a “tension” that occurs between prevention and reduction, i.e. “how we can do prevention when we need to react to what has already occurred.” In this “tug-of-war” prevention ends up as a lower priority, due to public pressure to deal with today’s violence.

<i>What participants said about:</i>	
Violence Prevention	Violence Reduction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Long Term</li> <li>▪ Proactive</li> <li>▪ Educational approach</li> <li>▪ Starts young</li> <li>▪ Gets at root causes</li> <li>▪ Involves the entire community</li> <li>▪ Prevention helps everyone</li> <li>▪ Often faith-based/ community-based</li> <li>▪ Stop violence from happening</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Shorter term</li> <li>▪ Reactive</li> <li>▪ Law enforcement approach: reduce guns, community policing</li> <li>▪ Intervention with those already involved</li> <li>▪ Reduction helps those already involved.</li> <li>▪ Often government-sponsored</li> <li>▪ Stop violence from escalating</li> </ul>

Focus Group Question 5a: “Name something currently being done to reduce violence that you feel is effective. Then name something currently being done to prevent violence that you feel is effective.”

### Effective Prevention Strategies

When groups were asked to discuss strategies they felt were effective in preventing violence, they generally agreed on the following:

- Work with the entire family [family dysfunction was most frequently cited as a major cause of violence].
- Address the root causes and start young. Schools are in a position to screen children who are at risk and may benefit from specialized interventions.
- Teach people conflict resolution, social and problem solving skills.
- Teach people how to make good choices.
- Apply consistent efforts and over a period of time (not once and done).

← Educational approaches were frequently cited as preferred prevention strategies.

- Build on strengths and assets that are already present within individuals, families, neighborhoods and social institutions.

Some added that it is important to be sure that basic needs are met, e.g. food; safe, affordable housing, the reason being that “people will not be ready to respond to prevention efforts until their basic needs are met.”

### **Effective Reduction Strategies**

Local programs cited as effective at reducing violence include:

- The approach taken in the Safe Streets grant (referred to as “suppression”).<sup>3</sup>
- The “Weed and Seed” approach: Some said it has resulted in “substantial crime reduction, higher property values, better police relations and community involvement.” Unfortunately, they said, it is not in the 2009 budget.
- The Milwaukee Police Department’s summer neighborhood initiative that flooded police into high crime areas: “If there was money, it should be done again.”
- Safe and Sound (based on Weed and Seed): “They do good work.”
- The High Point Model<sup>4</sup>: This is the model being used in Milwaukee’s 5th District community policing initiative. The comment was made that it “takes a lot of surveillance and man hours. Milwaukee is doing a great job. It is unfortunate that there might not be enough funding to continue.”

Other strategies felt to be effective at reducing violence include:

- Job skills before people leave jail.
- Restorative justice.<sup>5</sup>
- Taking more guns off the streets.
- Target the entire family when providing interventions.

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<sup>3</sup> Suppression works to enforce the message that must first be provided by the community (at the neighborhood level) that gangs, gang crime, and violence are not acceptable and will not be tolerated. The suppression strategy seeks to take gang members who are actively engaged in violence, substantial narcotics trafficking and/or leadership of gangs involved in these crimes off the street and end their negative influence in the community. Source: *Milwaukee Safe Streets Initiative Law Enforcement Projects Funding Announcement*. Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance, May 2007.

<sup>4</sup> The “High Point Initiative” is named for a small North Carolina city where it was developed. Instead of arresting all drug offenders, police select a few nonviolent suspects that are believed to be good prospects for rehabilitation and turn them over to community groups for supervision. Source: Ted Gest, “Community Policing In An Age of Guns, Gangs, and Violent Crime,” *Promising Approaches to Addressing Crime*, University of Pennsylvania, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Restorative justice is a framework which involves victims and community more broadly in the criminal justice system. In addition to offender accountability through taking responsibility and making amends, restorative justice seeks to address victim needs, offender competencies, and community responsibility in repairing the harm done by crime (Minnesota Department of Corrections. Can be accessed at: <http://www.doc.state.mn.us/rj/Default.htm>).

- Organize neighborhoods.
- [Send the message that] “crime will not be tolerated.”
- Find ways to keep students in school, i.e. reduce truancy rates: “Statistics show that kids that graduate from high school have lower rates of crime.”

Some felt that strategies are often implemented at the “micro level” and called for more “macro level” strategies. It was also suggested that the business community should share in the costs associated with violence prevention and reduction.

Focus Group Question 5b: “Name something that you feel is missing from current efforts to reduce violence. Name something that you feel is missing from current efforts to prevent violence.”

Participants tended to discuss this question without making the distinction between preventing and reducing. Mentioned most often as “missing” from current anti-violence efforts were:

### **Collaboration/connection among initiatives**

Collaboration among initiatives was a theme throughout all focus groups and in response to several different questions. Some people who attended the focus groups were meeting one another for the first time. Many business cards were exchanged. The comment was made: “We must all work together – connect and communicate. We need to know what others in the community are doing, so [we all] can come together.” There was also a call for “lawmakers and grassroots people to come together so they can be on the same page.”

### **Voices of young people**

The suggestion was made that “There should be some focus groups with young people. We can all sit around as adults and talk about youth violence. Why don’t we ask the kids? “We should talk to kids in middle, elementary and high schools – from all parts of town.”

### **Involvement of clergy/churches**

Some participants felt that “Milwaukee needs more involvement from clergy and churches. The Mayor has reached out to them to be more involved. MICAH (Milwaukee Inner-city Congregations Allied for Hope) is out there, but we need more. And we need all religions to be involved, not just those in the mainstream.” A church could, they suggested, “adopt a block” – and help with everything from taking kids to school, to teaching soft skills, to teaching how to recycle. Also, clergy and congregation members could act as mentors: “More youth need to have role models.” At the same time, there were participants who feel that the faith community has been asked to take on too much responsibility and that there is only so much churches can do.

### **Business involvement**

Many called for the business community to be more involved in efforts to prevent and reduce violence. Some felt businesses should also share in the cost of these efforts. Businesses also need to be encouraged and rewarded for giving employment to people who are re-entering the community from the corrections system.

**Community involvement**

Some felt that community “ownership” of the violence problem is lacking. One suggestion was that “perhaps we need a community liaison dedicated to violence prevention.”

The table below serves as a summary of the above discussion.

<i>What participants said about:</i>		
Effective violence prevention strategies	Effective violence reduction strategies	What’s missing or insufficient
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Start young.</li> <li>▪ Address root causes.</li> <li>▪ Work with entire family.</li> <li>▪ Use educational approaches.</li> <li>▪ Be consistent.</li> <li>▪ Build on strengths and assets.</li> <li>▪ Be sure basic needs are met.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Safe Streets “suppression” approach.</li> <li>▪ “Weed and Seed” approach.</li> <li>▪ “Safe and Sound.”</li> <li>▪ Summer police initiative</li> <li>▪ High Point Model.</li> <li>▪ Restorative justice.</li> <li>▪ Reduce guns.</li> <li>▪ Organize neighborhoods.</li> <li>▪ Interventions that target entire family.</li> <li>▪ Job skills.</li> <li>▪ Reduce truancy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Collaboration among initiatives.</li> <li>▪ Add voices of young people.</li> <li>▪ Clergy/church involvement.</li> <li>▪ Business involvement.</li> <li>▪ Community involvement/ownership.</li> </ul>

## Barriers to Violence Prevention and Reduction

Focus Group Question 4: “What barriers have you encountered in implementing your anti-violence initiative?”

### Funding

Insufficient funding was the first thing mentioned in all groups. Insufficient funding, it was noted, often means that not everyone can be served, and frequently prevention is the first thing to be cut. One participant lamented: “The demand is overwhelming the life out of the supply.” A closely related issue is sustainability. Many of these initiatives are operating with funds from grants that are time-limited. When a grant ends, the program may end because there are often few, if any, options for continued funding. Then, as one participant said: “They remove successful programs too early and violence comes back.”

### Lack of well-trained staff/ limited time and resources for professional development

Nearly everyone spoke of the need for dedicated, well-trained staff. They said: “Too often, staff in this field are not qualified, trained, informed, or ready to deal with this population. Some have simply not been taught how to work with kids.” In youth programs, we need “quality staff that know what they’re doing and enjoy working with kids.” They recommended that places like MATC (Milwaukee Area Technical College) or community centers offer classes to “teach adults how to work with kids” – especially how to engage the kids and build relationships. Many of the participants said their programs use volunteers, “but volunteers are spread thin and they need training too.”

Some participants felt that cultural competency needs to enter into any discussion of training: “There may be cultural issues between staff who are representative of the culture that is primarily being served and staff who do not have the same cultural background.”

The latter, they said, may need assistance in understanding differences that may exist in the experiences of urban, inner-city youth and the experiences of suburban youth.

#### *What participants said about:*

##### **Barriers they encounter**

- Funding.
- Need for well-trained staff/professional development.
- Insufficient collaboration.
- Lack of evaluation.
- Media overemphasizes violence.
- Ease of obtaining guns.
- Fear of getting involved.
- Employment barriers.
- Lack of community cohesiveness.
- Issues of trust.
- Meeting basic needs.

### Insufficient collaboration

Most participants felt that insufficient collaboration presents a barrier for all of them. This theme was present throughout the course of the focus groups. People welcomed the focus groups as a way of getting to know one another and felt that efforts such as this should continue: “We need people to share resources and what they know.” However, they also pointed out that “Collaborations don’t just happen. It doesn’t take a lot to get people at the table, but some resources are needed. It’s a myth that you don’t need money to collaborate.”

### Lack of evaluation

Some participants felt that the lack of widespread program evaluation presents a barrier. Without evaluation, they said, it is difficult to know what is really working. Some comments:

- “There is a need to evaluate effectiveness and toss out what doesn’t work.”
- “It is important to have a research base showing that the program works. If you do not have any research, it is difficult to convince funders to give you money.”
- But, “Just because a program works for some kids, does not mean it will work for all.”

### **Media overemphasizes violence**

Many participants said that the media is quick to highlight violent events – “If it bleeds, it leads” – and much less likely to highlight positive achievements of individuals and communities. They felt that this is a factor in promoting a feeling of hopelessness and the perception that “nothing is working.” One suggestion was that the media devote time to honor families that have not been engaged in acts of violence.

### **Ease of obtaining guns**

The ease of obtaining guns came up in every group, even though we had a group specifically dedicated to “law enforcement and guns.” Guns can be a polarizing issue: “People on both sides are unwilling to give any ground and it results in a stalemate.”

Some felt that the relative ease of obtaining guns thwarts efforts to prevent and reduce violence. They talked a great deal about the uneven application of background checks: “Background checks aren’t always done because of the expense - regardless of laws in place.” Some felt that legislators shy away from gun issues because they are afraid of the power of the gun lobby. Oversight and regulation of gun sales is said to be lacking: “Child’s pajamas are much more regulated than guns.” Most gun laws are statewide and cannot be modified at the local level.

The Law Enforcement/Guns group discussed the difficulty of people living in rural areas in understanding “what the big deal is about guns.” Work has been done around the state to educate in rural areas and help people understand that urban violence ultimately affects the state as a whole.

### **Fear of getting involved**

Some thought that “fear of getting involved” presents a barrier to their efforts. They said that people who are victims of crime are often afraid to testify or speak out, and this leaves the community vulnerable to repeat violence: “More than half of civilian witnesses will not testify [according to the participant who made this comment]; without witnesses, it is difficult to do anything with a case.” It may not always be fear. Sometimes people can’t afford to take time off from work to go to court.

There is often a perception, some said, that the law enforcement and judicial systems are not here to help people who are caught in the center of violence. Crime might not be reported – or reported by “default” when victims end up in the emergency room. A “vigilante” attitude may take over: “Shooting victims often know who shot them, and they decide to take care of it themselves. In the meantime, a 12-year-old girl might get hit in retaliatory crossfire.” Many who are affected by violence feel that the mainstream offers no protection. Some have the attitude that “I’ll create my own stream and that’s where I’m going to stay.”

### **Employment barriers**

Some felt that finding employment is key to preventing repeat crime by persons re-entering the community from the corrections system. However, some businesses reportedly cannot hire people with certain types of felony backgrounds – even youth serving agencies cannot hire persons who have committed certain categories of felonies [according to some focus group participants].

### **Lack of community cohesiveness**

Cohesive neighborhoods can work together to combat violence, but such cohesiveness does not always exist. Some of this stems from fear: “People are afraid to let their kids play outside.” It can also arise from isolation: “People do not know their neighbors.”

### **Issues of trust**

Issues of trust can present barriers when kids lack trust in adults, neighborhoods lose confidence in law enforcement, and parents lose faith in the educational system.

### **Meeting basic needs**

Some participants said that it is difficult for people who cannot meet basic needs to take advantage of their programs: “Hungry kids do not learn. We need money for refreshments at an event because the kids might not get another meal until lunch time the next day.” They also noted that “Many kids do not have extra money to come to programs. They need bus tickets to get there.”



## Most Successful Result

Focus Group Question 6: “What do you consider to be the most successful result of your anti-violence initiative?”

This was a difficult question for some to answer when asked to apply it to their own programs. Many talked about what they consider to be the necessary ingredients for successful results rather than actual results – which is evidenced in the responses that follow.

### From the youth focus groups

- A successful result is when young people are empowered to make critical decisions for themselves, in the areas of health, education, public safety and community justice. This empowers them to change communities for the better.
- Partnerships are long overdue. We cannot do it alone. All need to be involved – both the individual and community.
- Involving the families is the most important factor in a successful outcome. But they need a support system—many are isolated.
- Successful efforts integrate resiliency and nonviolence peace studies in to academic studies.

### From the law enforcement / guns focus group

- Incarceration can sometimes be regarded as a successful result when it gets violent people off the streets.
- Raising awareness about the problem of gun violence and coming up with solutions will lead to success. People must understand that policies around guns are influencing access to guns.
- Building relationships between police and community is crucial for success, as is strong collaboration among entities.

### From the domestic / interpersonal violence focus group

- We feel our anger management groups for teens were successful in helping teens realize that there are emotions other than anger.
- Individual clients being able to navigate the system is a success.
- Being at the table with other anti-violence organizations – like we are doing here today – and working together cooperatively is in and of itself a success.

***What participants said about:  
Ingredients of successful  
anti-violence initiatives***

- Empower young people to make critical decisions for themselves.
- Involve the entire family.
- Integrate teaching of nonviolence into academic studies.
- Partnerships/collaboration.
- Build relationships between police and community.
- Implement more rigorous gun control policies.
- Teach anger management/conflict resolution, nonviolent problem-solving.
- Provide information to consumers about available resources – teach them to navigate the system that can help them.
- Think comprehensively – strategies must be interwoven.

Being at the table with other anti-violence organizations – like we are doing here today – and working together cooperatively is in and of itself a success.

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- Part of our success lies in the long-term relationships we have built with clients and people understanding that you are there for them.
- When we go to neighborhood block parties/neighborhood resource fairs and are asked to return the next year, we feel we have been successful.

**From the neighborhood focus group**

- All strategies to prevent and or reduce violence must be interwoven. We need to think comprehensively about how to address this issue.
- Initiatives that provide social interaction and problem-solving opportunities contribute to success.

## **Specialized Questions**

### **Youth Focus Groups**

*Question: School violence is in the news and has prompted MPS to place armed officers in some schools. If you were a school principal, and your School Board gave you the authority to do one thing aimed at decreasing school violence, what would that one thing be?*

Participants were not opposed to having police officers in schools. But they want to see:

- **Police who like working with kids.** Some officers reportedly have established relationships with kids: “If the right police are in place, it can be a positive.”
- **Appropriate training:** Police, they said, don’t always have the tools they need to work with the kids. They need training.
- **An unthreatening, positive presence:** Many felt officers should not be uniformed: “Don’t make the schools seem like ‘jails.’” The image of law enforcement is often not positive, they said, and this needs to be changed. Someone said that the D.A.R.E. (Drug Awareness and Resistance Education) program was good at improving the image of police, even if it was not as effective at reducing drugs. Over time, perceptions can change. One participant noted that “perception surveys have been done with the result that kids and staff viewed police in a negative way at first; however, perceptions improved after the first semester.”
- **Officers that “blend in”:** Officers, they suggested, should try to “blend in” with the kids, e.g. eat lunch with them.

***What participants said about:  
Decreasing school violence***

- Police stationed at schools should:
  - Like working with kids.
  - Be appropriately trained.
  - Have an unthreatening, positive presence.
  - Blend in with the kids.
- Give young people a real leadership role in the school environment and with the administration.
- Recognize the importance of relationships between teachers and students – as well as academics.

In decreasing school violence, participants also felt it is important to give young people a real leadership role. “Have them address issues collectively with the administration. Ask how they would go about it.” Finally, they said relationships are just as important as the academics: “Kids remember teachers that connect with them and build relationships with them; they may not always be the best teachers, but the relationship is just as important.”

*Question: There is a public perception that gangs are responsible for much of the violence in neighborhoods. Are there recognizable gangs in your community that cause violence? We have also heard that the nature of gangs has changed. Do you find this to be true? If so, how do these changes affect the way we go about preventing gang violence?*

Interestingly, participants in this group thought gangs were a problem – “but not huge”: “The majority of kids I work with have not been in gangs, even though it was prevalent in their neighborhoods; they did not get involved.” The outside world, they said, may have the perception that a lot of kids are in gangs, based on their appearance – but it’s probably not true: “just a stereotype.”

Participants felt that it takes “a special kind of leader” to work with gangs: “it goes back to building relationships.” Some mentioned the Milwaukee Violence Free Zone as a successful gang reduction program: “Workers can relate, because they were involved in gangs themselves.”

**What participants said about:  
Gangs**

- Public perception is that gangs are a huge problem. They're a problem – but not huge.
- The majority of kids are not in gangs.
- Working with gangs requires a special kind of leader.
- Milwaukee Violence Free Zone is a successful gang reduction program.
- Gangs provide a sense of belonging for some kids.
- Some music fuels gangs and encourages violence.

As was mentioned earlier, gangs, for many kids, provide a sense of belonging and a way to stand out and achieve power: “Gangs are glorified among kids who want to be cool.” One participant tries to reduce and prevent it by removing visible identifiers: e.g. “not allowing kids to wear one earring or a red shirt.”

The comment was made that “the music industry enhances it and embraces it [violence].” Some felt that young people are easily influenced by lyrics that seem to condone and encourage violence.

## Neighborhood Focus Group

Question: *Violent acts often lead to neighborhood-based, grass roots efforts to “stop the violence.” How effective are these grass roots efforts and what could be done to*

*make them more effective?*

Block watches, said participants, are always effective: “They help keep the focus on issues and there is always a benefit when people in a neighborhood come together.” One problem with block clubs, they noted, is “people move so quickly” (some neighborhoods are very transient). Nevertheless, they felt that “every neighborhood has leaders” and “people in neighborhoods are the experts.” Once in awhile problems can arise with neighbors who act as “spies, rather than allies.”

They acknowledged community-based organizations, but said their effectiveness can be diminished because of “paper-chasing” and the need to spend a lot of time raising funds.

**What participants said about:  
Effective grass roots efforts**

- Block watches are always effective; however, some neighborhoods are very transient.
- People in neighborhoods are the experts.
- Every neighborhood has leaders.
- Community-based organizations are good, but effectiveness can be diminished by time spent fund-raising and completing required paperwork.

Question: *How would you describe the relationship in your neighborhood between law enforcement officials and residents? Talk about some ways that the two can work together to prevent and decrease violence.*

There tends to be an overall perception in the community that “police are bad.” Once again, like having officers stationed in schools, participants said it all goes back to the ability of officers to connect with the community and the youth of that community: “Some officers take advantage of the opportunity to connect – for other officers it is a just a part of their job.” People understand the need for officers, but many do not

**What participants said about:  
Police/community relations**

- Overall perception is that police are bad.
- But this can be counteracted when police employ strategies that allow them to connect with the community in non-threatening and positive ways.
- New police chief brings opportunities for renewed discussion of strategies to bring police and neighborhoods together.

want to appear to others as being personally connected to them. Once in awhile, given the right circumstances, kids may say: “I’m on this officer’s team.” We need to find out what would make them want to say this, and what would make them want to distance themselves.

Some said, “With a new chief, the future is bright.”

In the end, “residents and law enforcement will have to work hard to connect with each other.” There is a need, said participants, for further discussion of strategies to get the community and police connected.

## Law Enforcement / Gun Violence Focus Group

Question: *Gun violence is a major public health issue in this community. How are people coming into possession of guns? What strategies are effective in reducing illegal gun possession?*

There was an overall feeling of pessimism among group members regarding the potential for any significant reduction in guns: “Most guns are not legal. Gun laws would have zero impact.” They noted that we “have a culture where people think they need guns to protect themselves.”

Yet, some felt we “have to stem the flow of guns somewhere,” pointing out that people “can currently go to a gun show, buy a gun and then sell it in the city of Milwaukee – this is not an illegal transaction.” Making it illegal, they suggested, might make a difference. Others felt that while it is important to support laws like that, we “shouldn’t be overly optimistic – there is a market for guns, so there will be guns.”

***What participants said about:***

**Reducing illegal guns**

- Overall feeling of pessimism that this can be accomplished.
- Many people in this culture feel they need guns to protect themselves.
- However, small steps may make a difference, e.g. making it illegal to go to a gun show, buy a gun, and then sell it.

Question: *What changes would you make in how guns are sold? What is your opinion of guns being sold over the Internet?*

***What participants said about:***  
**Changing how guns are sold**

- Institute background checks on all firearm transactions – both handguns and long guns.
- Eliminate loopholes in laws.
- Extend laws to private transactions.
- Place restrictions on Internet sales – must do background checks, go through licensed dealers, pick up in person.
- Gun buy-backs not effective.

Participants said that background checks should apply to all firearm transactions – not only handguns, but long guns too. They said different types of guns are regulated differently, e.g. an assault weapon can be delivered to a house because it is a long gun. One participant questioned why anyone other than law enforcement or the military would need an assault weapon.

They want to see loopholes in gun laws eliminated and laws extended to private transactions. Some felt that there should be restrictions on those that are living with people that are prohibited from having guns, although they acknowledged this would be difficult to do.

Selling guns over the Internet, they said, contributes to easy availability and access. Internet sales should include background checks, go through licensed dealers, and require in-person pick up.

Most participants agreed that gun buy backs are not an effective strategy: “Most guns that are brought in are really old and don’t even work.”

## Domestic / Interpersonal Violence Focus Group

**Question:** *It is not uncommon for survivors of domestic violence to fear leaving - or to return to - abusive situations. What are the reasons for this?*

A primary reason that survivors of abuse return to abusive situations, according to group members, is that they feel they cannot make it on their own economically. The partner being gone is a “recipe for instant poverty.”

Women survivors may not want to take away from their children “the only father they have ever known.” Some also felt that families represent true success for many women, and to dismantle a family feels like a failure.

Many survivors will admit that they still love the abusive partner. They may feel “there was a time when the relationship was good and we can get back there.” Also, abusive partners often return, “asking for another chance.”

Participants said that a lack of self-esteem is very common in women who cannot disengage from abusive situations. They may feel no one else will ever love them, and they need help in learning how to value themselves. Some participants said that women from “previous generations” may encourage today’s women to stay with abusive partners because you “need to stand by your man, support him.”

Same sex partnerships are not immune from abuse, and there is an additional reason that the victim of abuse in this type of family would take the abuser back: “Because the outside world is against us (you and me against the world), we need to stay united.”

***What participants said about:***

**Why survivors return to abusive situations**

- Economic reasons.
- “Only father the children have ever known.”
- “Still love the person.”
- Families represent “success” for women.
- Abuser keeps coming back, asking for another chance.
- The relationship was good once – “we can get back there.”
- Self-esteem issues.
- Message from previous generation is “you need to take him back, stand by him.”
- Same sex couples feel their unions represent safe havens from the outside world.

**Question:** *What needs to be done to better support survivors of domestic violence and guide them toward safety and independence?*

The group wanted to see more services for children who are exposed to violence. This, they said, represents “early prevention.”

***What participants said about:***

**How to better support domestic violence survivors**

- More services for the children who are exposed to this type of violence.
- Employ MUTT approach.
- More satellite services in the community.
- Law enforcement needs to be consistent in handling domestic violence situations – need better training in this area. Claim that law enforcement is often “useless” with domestic violence situations in the LGBT\* community.

\*Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender.

Some felt it would be helpful to implement a “MUTT team” approach to working with victims and perpetrators (The Mobile Urgent Treatment Team provides crisis intervention services on a 24 hour basis to families enrolled in the Wraparound Milwaukee Program. The MUTT team goes to where the crisis is occurring, assesses the situation, and makes an immediate plan). They also felt that more satellite services in the community would improve access to assistance.

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The group expressed concerns with law enforcement in the domestic violence arena. They said law enforcement in domestic violence situations can be inconsistent and that there needs to be a better training process for law enforcement personnel. The comment was made that “Generally, law enforcement is useless with LGBT domestic violence issues.” (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender)





## Summary of Key Informant Interviews

Planning Council staff conducted key informant interviews with two individuals who wanted to attend the focus group to which they were assigned, but had conflicting engagements. So that their views could be included, telephone interviews were scheduled. Following is a summary of these conversations (to see notes from the two key informant interviews, go to Appendices G-6 and G-7).

Key informants' definitions of violence echoed the responses of focus group participants—violence takes on many forms (i.e. physical, emotional, sexual). They added, as did many focus group participants, that violence can be directed toward animals. They attributed the prevalence of violence to breakdown in family structure and economic barriers (family dysfunction was the top cause of violence cited in focus groups).

“Children are learning to be violent,” said one. Children observe relationships in their homes, particularly the dynamics in male and female relationships. They felt that being a victim of or witness to violence made a person more likely to be violent.

Informants said that stressors on families were linked to violence—single-parent family, or the lack of adult role models. Poverty, substance abuse, segregation and isolation, and the lack of skills to deal with conflict, were also viewed as contributing to violence.

One informant said that people are not taught how to raise children. (Educational approaches were often mentioned in focus groups as preferred prevention strategies.) Informants felt that prevention is usually directed toward dealing with violence “before it occurs” and mainly “focused on children.” In contrast, they said that reduction of violence is directed toward people affiliated with crime or criminal behavior, and has an emphasis on law enforcement. Both informants suggested that the reduction of violence deals with preventing something from “happening again.” Again, this is in keeping with views of the focus groups.

When asked about barriers to preventing and reducing violence, one informant said the lack of trust or confidence in government and police was a barrier. The other informant suggested that transportation to programs is an issue, especially for children.

One informant felt that violence is multifaceted and requires a variety of research-based strategies across a variety of systems. Some of the effective violence prevention strategies suggested by informants include: focusing the attention of our work on family violence, providing transportation, giving youth the opportunity to meet one-on-one or in small groups, and making jobs and other activities available to youth to occupy their time. Informants said the one of the best strategies for reducing violence is to have people in a community set standards about what will and what will not be tolerated. One informant suggested that case management needs to be more of a structured intervention and must be provided to people as they integrate back into the community from correctional facilities.

Informants believed (as did focus group participants) that the community could do a better job of engaging the business and faith communities to assist in violence prevention and reduction efforts. One said, “Have them [businesses] feel like they have a legitimate and important role to play. We need to make sure businesses are not tolerating neighborhood behavior that leads to crime.” Businesses, for instance, could stop the sale of blunts at gas stations, hire neighborhood kids, or do a better job of dealing with conflict in bars or taverns before it escalates.

One informant said, “Reality and the policy level of things do not connect.” Children need to be more closely linked to resources, but youth-serving agencies need more staff to do this. An informant also suggested there was a need for evaluation to “analyze the impact of our work on the community.” The High Point model was mentioned as a reduction strategy. Focus group participants also mentioned the High Point Model and the need for evaluation.

When discussing what constitutes a successful result for an initiative, one informant said that a major success was providing a safe place for youth that allows them to develop their own voices. Collaboration was also mentioned as a key to success. (Collaboration was a major recurrent theme in the focus groups). One of the informants informant stated that, [there is] “more collaboration than we give ourselves credit for.”

On the issue of having armed police officers in schools, one informant said it has risks and benefits. This person suggested that interpersonal conflict between school peers could also be handled by increasing the number of counselors available to work with students. This same informant reported that gangs are at a very low level and may be involved in drug trafficking.

With respect to guns, one informant said that people come into possession of guns because guns can easily be purchased, and that such decisions are reinforced by our “mentality” as a country.

## Next Steps / Recommendations

As Planning Council staff compiled the database and conducted the focus groups, possible next steps and recommendations began to emerge. These are summarized below:

- Public directory: Verify information with each initiative and ask for a release of information so that the information can be made public. Update the public Anti-Violence Directory that appears on the Planning Council's website.
- Mapping: Produce maps of Milwaukee County showing locations of initiatives and locations by category.
- Additional analysis: Do a more extensive analysis of database information, e.g. identify similarities and differences in goals, describe the nature of the partnerships that exist, summarize outcomes and accomplishments listed by respondents.
- New initiatives: Collect information about the newly identified initiatives. Identify "underground" and "grass roots" initiatives not identified in the first go-round. A survey of faith-based and community-based organizations might be one way of approaching this task.
- Continue to contact: Keep pursuing initiatives that did not respond to our initial update requests to obtain their information.
- Discontinued initiatives: Explore why initiatives were discontinued. Begin to describe the "life cycle" of an initiative. How does an initiative become a program? What are the factors that lead to its discontinuation?
- School resources: Conduct a deeper analysis of anti-violence resources available in school and university settings.
- "Successful models": Focus group participants mentioned a number of anti-violence models they felt were successful. What are the major components of these models and how can this information be used to inform continuing anti-violence planning efforts?
- Evidence-based practices: What are the evidence-based practices that relate to violence prevention? The federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) maintains a National Registry of Evidence-Based Practices. The Registry lists 21 interventions for violence prevention.
- Promote collaboration: One of the more "resounding" themes throughout the focus groups was the need for enhanced collaboration around anti-violence efforts. Some focus group participants were meeting one another for the first time. They welcomed the opportunity to connect with one another and felt this should continue.
- Mental illness: Many focus group participants felt that mental illness contributes to violence. This is a controversial topic. Further objective research would be helpful.
- Focus Groups:  
Conduct additional focus groups with:
  - MCW staff.
  - Youth – to get their perspective on violence-related issues.
  - Representatives of newly identified initiatives.