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Community-Based Violence Prevention

An Assessment of Pittsburgh's
One Vision One Life Program

Jeremy M. Wilson, Steven Chermak, Edmund F. McGarrell

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Summary

In 2003, a record 125 homicides in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, including 70 in the city of Pittsburgh, raised concerns among community leaders regarding the level of violence in the area. In response, local leaders created the Allegheny County Violence Prevention Initiative, later called One Vision One Life.

One Vision was similar to violence-prevention programs in Boston, Chicago, Baltimore, and other cities. Among other strategies, these problem-solving approaches use street-level work and intelligence to become aware of and intervene in potentially violent disputes. One Vision was modeled on successful initiatives in other cities, with staff meeting with those on a similar Chicago project to learn how best to implement the program.

Programs such as One Vision seek to address the violent “code of the street” prevalent among many inner-city youth, a code developed in response to a lack of legitimate, successful role models. One Vision’s basic focus was a six-point plan to stop local shootings, including mediation and intervention in conflicts, provision of alternatives for persons most at risk for violence, strong community coalitions, a unified message of no shooting, a rapid response to all shootings, and programs for youths at risk for violence. One Vision work is conducted by an executive director, a program director, five area managers, and more than 40 community coordinators, and supported by a data manager. Most staff members were raised in the inner city and therefore are intimate with inner-city street life and the “code of the street.”

RAND and Michigan State University researchers assessed the effects of the program in three areas of Pittsburgh: Northside, the Hill District, and Southside. All three have per capita incomes below the national average, and two of the three have homicide rates above the city average (Table S.1). Northside is the largest of the three and features a critical hub of legal and illegal activities in the city. It is also undergoing gentrification, a process leading to some community conflict. The Hill District, once a thriving, prosperous, and influential black neighborhood, has suffered a precipitous decline, and now has issues with guns, drugs, and individual or group disputes. Southside

Table S.1
Characteristics of One Vision One Life Target Neighborhoods

Characteristic	Northside	Hill District	Southside ^a	Nontarget	City
Total population	48,102	18,276	27,054	233,555	331,223
Population density per square mile (average %)	8	11	7	6	7
Black (%)	36	71	12	22	27
Per capita income (average)	15,901	11,072	12,771	17,353	15,775
Households on public assistance (average %)	11	14	6	7	8
Female head of household with children under 18 (average %)	14	19	12	9	12
Vacant housing (average %)	17	22	19	12	15
Homicides	15	8	1	33	59
Homicide rate per 100,000 residents	31	44	4	14	18

^a Excludes Beltzhoover and Saint Clair Village.

NOTE: All figures are 2000 estimates except for homicide, which is 2003. The homicide rate reflected here is four less than what was reported in the Uniform Crime Report figures illustrated in Figure 1.1 in Chapter One.

does not have a homicide rate as high as those of Northside and the Hill District, but its geography and topography help shelter many illegal activities, including drug dealing.

Within the target communities, community coordinators worked with clients who were typically male, black, about 18 years old, and in need of a wide variety of assistance and services. Fifty percent did not have a job and 30 percent had a substance-abuse problem, but most were not at high risk for violence, having not been violent recently, in a gang, or in the criminal justice system. In response to their perceptions of community risk for violence, community coordinators would undertake actions ranging from conflict mediation to outreach to community rallies against violence.

To measure the effect of the program on local violence, the research team used a propensity-score analysis enabling team members to compare One Vision neighborhoods with others in the city. They also compared the effects of the program with neighborhoods suggested by One Vision staff members as being most similar to the analysis areas. Finally, they tested for any “spillover” effects of the program, either displacing violence or extending crime-suppression benefits from the target communities to surrounding ones. (Because Northside is largely isolated within the city by the Ohio and Allegheny Rivers, the researchers did not test for spillover effects there.)

One Vision had two primary goals: to reduce homicides and shootings in its areas. Because the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police changed how it tabulated shooting incidents, the researchers were not able to assess program effects on the number of shootings over time. Rather, they measured changes in homicide, aggravated assaults, and gun assaults before and after the intervention.

Following implementation of the program, the average monthly number of homicides increased in Northside but not in the Hill District or Southside. The average number of aggravated assaults and gun assaults also increased in all three areas (Table S.2).

These effects were also evident in a propensity-score analysis of One Vision effects controlling for neighborhood attributes, seasonal effects, and trends over time. Specifically, the propensity-score analysis found no significant change in homicide rates but statistically signifi-

Table S.2
Homicide, Aggravated Assault, and Gun Assault Frequencies Pre- and Postimplementation of One Vision One Life

Neighborhood	Homicide			Aggravated Assault			Gun Assault		
	Pre	Post	Change	Pre	Post	Change	Pre	Post	Change
Northside	0.04	0.06	0.02	1.10	1.59	0.48	0.33	0.62	0.29
Hill District	0.09	0.09	0.00	1.72	2.02	0.30	0.55	0.94	0.39
Southside	0.02	0.02	0.00	1.12	1.66	0.55	0.29	0.46	0.17

SOURCE: Incident data provided by the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police.

cant changes in aggravated assault and gun assault rates in Northside, the Hill District, and Southside (Table S.3).

The researchers also found that One Vision had some “spillover” effects into areas bordering the Hill District and Southside. (Because Northside is largely isolated within the city, the researchers did not conduct spillover analysis in the areas bordering it.) Specifically, they found, controlling for neighborhood characteristics, no effect on homicide rates in neighboring areas but a statistically significant increase in gun assaults in the Hill District spillover area, a statistically significant decrease in aggravated assault in the Hill District spillover area, and a statistically significant increase in the Southside spillover area (Table S.4).

Table S.3
Test of One Vision One Life Intervention Effects, Propensity Score–Weighted Counterfactual Neighborhoods

Outcome	Predicted Monthly Rate Change	P-Value
Northside		
Homicide	0.0219	0.7432
Aggravated assault	25.2095	0.0000
Gun assault	9.2824	0.0000
Hill District		
Homicide	-0.6710	0.3374
Aggravated assault	7.7365	0.0255
Gun assault	5.2893	0.0012
Southside		
Homicide	-0.2540	0.6976
Aggravated assault	25.3953	0.0000
Gun assault	4.9865	0.0015

NOTE: The counterfactual neighborhoods comprised nearly all other Pittsburgh neighborhoods, with characteristics weighted to reflect One Vision neighborhoods.

Table S.4
Test of Spillover Effects, Propensity Score–Weighted
Counterfactual Neighborhoods

Outcome	Predicted Monthly Rate Change	P-Value
Hill District		
Homicide	-0.5546	0.6483
Aggravated assault	-14.2040	0.03785
Gun assault	6.1647	0.0979
Southside		
Homicide	-0.8695	0.8012
Aggravated assault	28.7132	0.0000
Gun assault	5.5715	0.0072

It is difficult to explain why a program did not have desired effects, much less effects opposite of those intended. Nevertheless, the researchers offer some explanations why the program might not have had its intended effect, or at least why there is no quantitative evidence of its intended effect.

First, all evaluations of this sort face difficulties in identifying best comparison areas, measuring program delivery and performance, and isolating program effects. Truly random design and analysis is generally not possible for such analyses. Quasi-experimental design can approach the rigor of random design but cannot control for all variables that might affect levels of violence.

Second, the implementation of One Vision deviated in several ways from ideal implementation. One Vision lacked consistent documentation, and its staff rarely used the documentation it had in any systematic way to guide program actions. Community coordinators focused more on persons in need of services than those at risk of violence. This and the difficulties in program and evaluation design might be related. One Vision, by providing youth programming, might have some long-term success by helping youths avoid violence. The program design and evaluation, however, were focused on a more immediate reduction of violence, a reduction the researchers did not observe.

Third, the program did not do much to address any group or gang structure generating violence. The Chicago program on which the Pittsburgh program was partially modeled explicitly focused on gangs. The Boston program and similar programs in several other cities had a group accountability component lacking in the Pittsburgh program. It might be the case that the gang structure in Pittsburgh is more fluid and would in any case require a different approach from that used in Chicago. It also might be the case that difficulties in comparing the degree to which individuals are at risk for violent behavior in these cities limits analyses such as this.

Still other study limitations might have affected these findings. While One Vision's focus, as noted, is on reducing homicides and shootings, only direct measures of homicides were available. Homicide itself is a rare occurrence; detecting measurable changes in it is therefore difficult, as measuring gang-related and non-gang-related incidents would also be. The control measures, based on 2000 census data, cannot measure demographic and socioeconomic changes that have occurred in the neighborhoods in recent years.

Nevertheless, these findings raise several critical issues for similar and future initiatives. Among others, these include the transferability of success in programs elsewhere and elements missing in the Pittsburgh implementation. Successful results from Chicago and Baltimore programs suggest the promise of these programs, while the Pittsburgh results suggest the need for continued rigorous evaluation.