



A strengths-based approach to youth violence

What is this research about?

Positive psychology is the study of traits and institutions that can improve one's well-being. It often ignores the difficult outcomes that people encounter in everyday life. For example, youth violence is one topic that has been largely absent from positive psychology research. Positive psychology methods can be used to address youth violence and can extend our understanding of the issue. This approach may also balance positive psychology so that it supports both creating positive goals and avoiding negative ones.

What did the researcher do?

The researchers wanted to explore how positive psychology can actively address youth violence. They based their recommendations on their own research with community partners who sought to reduce youth violence. Community partners wanted research that could help end youth violence. But they were wary about research that might malign local communities or mislabel youth as mainly "violent". The researchers also noted the barriers that emerge when youth encounter deficit-based programs.

A strengths-based focus was used from positive psychology. It allows youth to develop goals that move them away from violent settings or outcomes. The researchers looked at 3 groups of strengths that should be used to address youth violence: external social strengths, internal strengths of character and virtue, and internal strengths of belief.

What did the researcher find?

What you need to know:

Positive psychology offers important insights to address youth violence. Building internal and external strengths in youth may help reduce violence. This approach has advantages over a focus mainly on youth deficits. Practitioners, policymakers, and researchers should work together to implement research findings and reduce youth violence.

The 3 groups of strengths from positive psychology that can support youth violence research and reduction are:

External Strengths:

External strengths are social assets that can promote positive development for youth. These include social relations between youth and community partners like peers, school personnel, family, and community groups or members. These can help build internal strengths.

Internal Strengths: Character and Virtue-based

Character strengths and virtues can be increased, can help youth, and may help reduce youth violence:

- **Forgiveness:** In appropriate circumstances, helping youth practice forgiveness can benefit them and reduce the risk of becoming violent;
- **Humility:** Humility means viewing others as of equal worth as oneself. It can co-exist with high self-esteem. It is associated with low violence;

- Altruism and civic values: Youth can engage in activities that serve others and reduce the time the youth might use for violent activities;
- Other esteem: Having esteem for others may increase their ability to be kind, to forgive, and to be grateful;
- Prudence: learning the ability to control oneself in the face of negative opportunities;
- Sense of meaning: creating a sense of purpose, especially for youth who encounter hardship, so that they can practice goal making and avoid violent behaviours;
- Frequent positive affect: By activating these character strengths, youth can develop more positive emotions, and youth can be encouraged toward pro social behaviours and away from risks of future violence.

Internal Strengths: Beliefs-based

A strengths-based approach can also uncover beliefs that keep youth away from violence. It is important to learn which ideas persuade kids to avoid violence. Reminding youth of these can protect youth.

The researchers noted some concerns for using positive psychology to address youth violence:

- Research should still address the causes of youth violence.
- Social sensitivity is needed. Focusing only on strengths would be insensitive to people's struggles.
- Parents, teachers, community leaders and members should nonetheless engage in strengths-building efforts.
- Culturally relevant needs and differences that pertain to youth violence should be addressed.
- Social and environmental factors that shape or reduce youth violence should be noted.
- The strengths-potential within youth and communities is not fixed to these traits alone.

How can you use this research?

This research may support the collaboration of multiple partners seeking to reduce youth violence. Practitioners in psychology should use research that

can influence practice. Psychology researchers should also listen to needs of practitioners. The partnership of practitioners and policymakers can also increase the usefulness of and action from research findings. Valuable actions include community forums, steering committees and longitudinal studies on violence and the strengths that protect youth.

About the Researchers

Roger G. Tweed and Gira Bhatt are Core Faculty members of the Psychology Department at Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

roger.tweed@kpu.ca gira.bhatt@kpu.ca

Stephen Dooley is Executive Director of the Surrey Campus of Simon Fraser University.

stephen.dooley@kwantlen.ca

Andrea Spindler is a Senior Investigative Analyst – Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner, BC.

Kevin S. Douglas is Associate Professor and Associate Chair, and Jody L. Viljoen is Associate Professor and Michael Smith Scholar for the Department of Psychology at Simon Fraser University.

Citation

Tweed, R.G., Bhatt, G., Dooley, S., Spindler, A., Douglas, K.S., & Viljoen, J.L. (2011). Youth violence and positive psychology: Research potential through integration. *Canadian Psychology Association, 52* (2), 111-121. Available online at: psycnet.apa.org/journals/cap/52/2/111/

Keywords

Positive psychology, Violence, Youth, Character strengths

Research Impact

ResearchImpact, Canada's knowledge mobilization network, provides knowledge mobilization services to universities, communities and government agencies. Knowledge mobilization connects research and researchers with people and organizations seeking to develop sustainable solutions to social, environmental, economic and cultural challenges.

