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Factors that Promote Engagement in a Youth Violence Prevention Program

Lyndsay Brattan '16

Community Partner: Compass Peacebuilders • Faculty Advisor: Dr. Laura Holt



Abstract

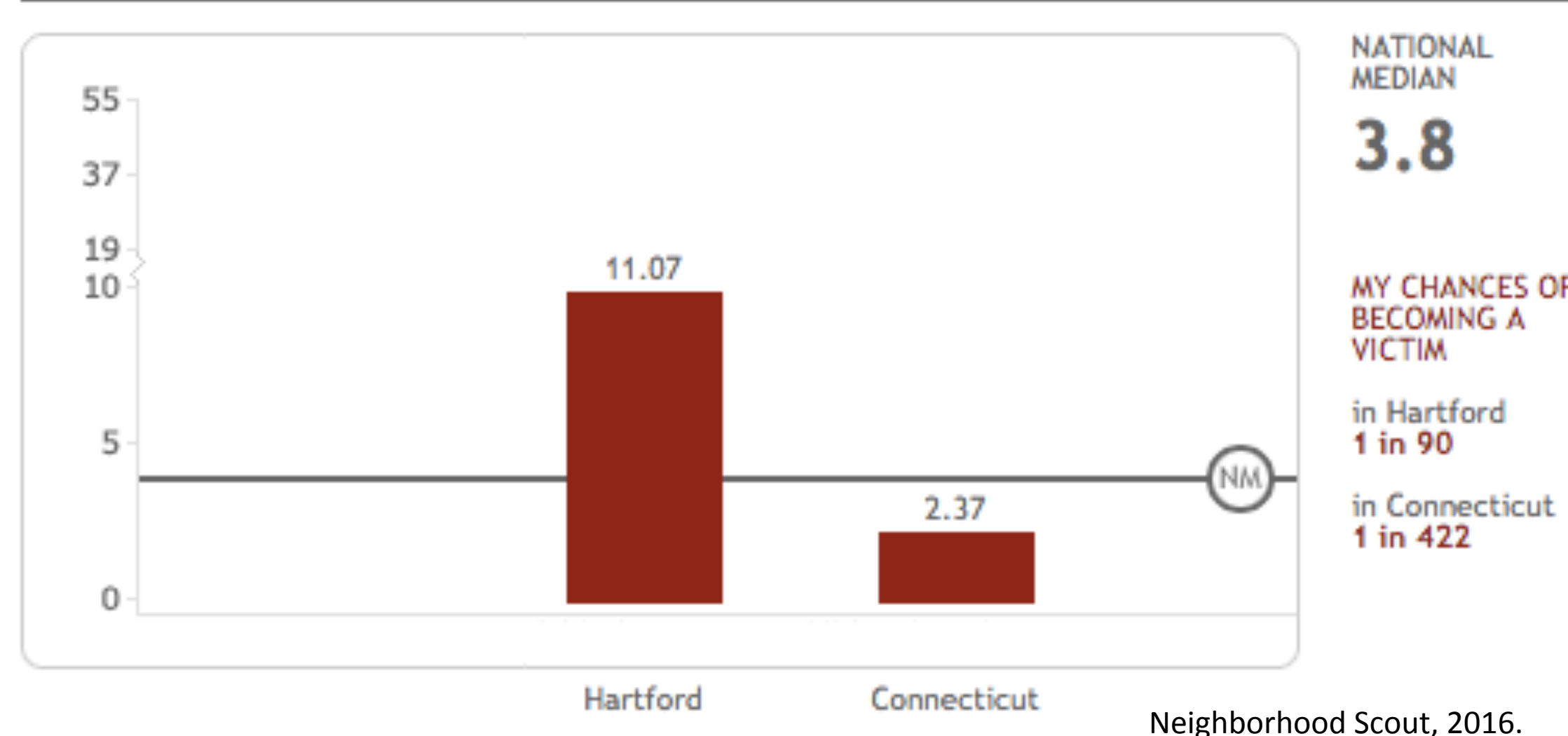
Youth in Hartford, CT are exposed to violence in their community at a disproportionately higher rate than youth residing in suburban and rural communities throughout the state. Within Connecticut, Hartford has a rating of five on the crime scale (100 meaning the safest) compared to West Hartford which is rated as 32 and Wethersfield, rated 54. Numerous school- and community-based programs have been established to confront this epidemic; however, less is known about the specific components of these programs that maximize youth engagement. My study seeks to understand the factors that affect participation in a youth violence prevention program. Findings are based on responses from a focus group with seven Peacebuilder facilitators in Hartford, Connecticut, in the spring of 2016. My research shows that factors such as mentor credibility and flexibility in implementing the curriculum may contribute to the success of engaging youth in a violence prevention program.

Research Question

From the perspective of the facilitators, what conditions in a youth violence prevention program promote the highest levels of youth engagement?

Background

Violent Crime Comparison per 1,000 residents



What Has Previous Research Shown?

- Principles that must be taken into account when implementing a successful prevention program include: fostering positive relationships, sociocultural relevance in the curriculum, and participant "buy-in" (Nation et al. 2003).
- Intervention programs that are "fully implemented" meaning that participants are receiving the intended content, have shown higher success rates compared to programs that are changed in some way or are only partially implemented (Orpinas et al., 2000).
- Having a mentor who has gone through some of the same hardships can allow for a stronger relationships and quicker development of trust (Anda, 2001).

Methodology

Who are the Peacebuilders?

The COMPASS Peacebuilders work to mediate individual and group conflicts among youth in the city of Hartford, Connecticut.

- Peacebuilders serve over 300 youth each year between 13-21 years
- They have walked in the paths of the youth
- They teach life lessons through after-school group sessions
- They undergo extensive training
- Youth are either court-appointed, recommended, or voluntarily join the program



Methodology

- Focus group with seven facilitators employed with COMPASS Peacebuilders
- On average, the seven facilitators have been involved with Peacebuilders for 4.14 years, for a total of 29 years.
- Results were coded using thematic analysis, which aims to identify main themes from a data source (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Curriculum

- "What topics, would you describe, are covered during group sessions?"
- "Are there any topics you think should be added to the curriculum?"

Reponsiveness

- "To which topics are the youth most/least responsive to? Why do you think?"
- "Are they positively influenced by what is being discussed?"

Engagement

- "How actively engaged are youth in group discussions?"
- "How does group environment impact engagement?"

Factors Affecting Youth Engagement

Culturally-Relevant Content

- "One of the goals is to get them to take a less heated approach to when they feel they have been disrespected."
- All topics regarding youth development are covered but there is a focus on those that are culturally relevant.
- Facilitators are aware of cultural differences and actively work with youth to mediate conflicts that some youth are more affected by.

Mentor-Mentee Relationship

- "What is different with us is that we share a lot of personal experiences, like a lot of trials and tribulations we went through in our lives."
- When topics arise that are sensitive to youth, the facilitators are able to intervene in the situation and neutralize it because of the respect gained from the youth.
- The availability of the facilitators outside of the program provides a constant sense of support for the youth.
- Mentors noted that serving in this role helps them to maintain their own high standards of how to conduct themselves in the community.

Implicit Curriculum

- "You know, they do sports, but he has a curriculum. He's teaching but they can't really tell that they're being taught something."
- Facilitators perceived youth as more engaged when they believed they were participating in recreational sports or activities when really, there was a hidden lesson being taught.

Gender

- "When girls are separated from guys you get to talk more about the feminine stuff, you know like being a woman, how to carry yourself as a lady and how to respect yourself."
- A majority of the facilitators agreed upon the fact that there is no difference in the effectiveness of the groups (all male groups, all female groups, and co-ed). The only difference is the way in which each group is run.
- Facilitators perceived all male groups as tending to fool around more before getting to the curriculum, whereas all female groups were viewed as having the ability to become more serious about the proposed topic compared to males.

Program Recommendations

The unique characteristics the Peacebuilders program brings to youth violence prevention is a true strength to the program. My research exposed the respect both mentees and mentors have for each other because of their similar past and ability to share personal experiences. The idea of teaching life lessons through recreational games and activities, such as basketball, was seen as having a positive impact on the youth participants. It may be beneficial to expand on these creative ways of teaching curriculum through alternative activities. This could mean field trips around Hartford to museums or historical sites, or interactive games within group sessions that have an implicit curriculum, such as board games that have the ability to teach life lessons.

Limitations & Future Research

Single Perspective

- My research findings, which show that there are several themes that impact engagement and participation in a youth violence prevention program, come from the responses of the facilitators in the program.

Need for Youth Input

- Due to unforeseen circumstances, youth participants in the program were not able to be interviewed. Future studies that include the options and remarks of youth in the program may allow another perspective into program engagement and success.

Motivation to Engage in Program

- In future research, should explore whether youth who are court-mandated to participate in Peacebuilders engage in the program differently compared to those who seek out the program voluntarily.

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