

Presentation title:

Exploring benefits of mentoring for high-school students at-risk for gang recruitment

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Objective: Peer mentoring programs often use “credible messengers” to support individuals who are involved in shootings in criminal environments. Credible messengers are in later stages of desistance, and often have roots in high-risk communities and experiences living in criminal environments with elevated levels of violence. While peer mentoring programs such as Cure Violence and Safe Streets have shown positive results in reducing adult street violence, it is less known how, or if, peer mentoring is suitable for high-school aged youth and to prevent youth delinquency. This study explored at-risk high-school students experiences of peer mentoring and the perspectives of school personnel to support at-risk youth away from gang and street activities.

Methods: We interviewed 20 at-risk high school students and conducted 3 focus groups with school personnel (counselors, teachers, social workers, and security personnel) at an inner-city Philadelphia high school. Thematic analysis was used to examine (1) how at-risk young people perceived peer mentoring, and (2) school personnel’s perspectives on the needs of at-risk students and how to best use peer mentoring to prevent youths involvement in gangs and street activities.

Results: The interviews with at-risk students identified several themes around group belonging and alienation, suggesting at-risk students struggles with peer pressure and sustaining healthy self-esteem. The focus groups highlighted how students benefits from mentors who have experienced similar social challenges and hardships, especially considering that students often come from “broken homes” with few opportunities to engage with “positive role-models.”

Implications: This analysis suggests peer mentors may have distinct (and probably unique) opportunities to reach, engage, and motivate at-risk high school students away from gang recruitment and street activities.