

Working at the Intersection of Healthy Eating, Active Living, and Violence Prevention

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Violence robs promise from our youth and undermines the quality of life in too many of our communities. Violence also presents a complicated set of challenges to obesity prevention funders and others seeking to address public health concerns. These challenges include sustaining communities' focus on ambitious long-term health goals in light of the real and present danger posed by violence, and adapting evidence-based obesity prevention strategies to account for ongoing safety concerns.

This field note describes Kaiser Permanente's work at the intersection of obesity prevention, violence prevention/reduction, and, increasingly, social and emotional health. It focuses on our experience in advancing multidimensional community-based prevention efforts in Northern California, one of seven regions where Kaiser Permanente is undertaking this work.

KAISER PERMANENTE'S HEAL WORK AND EARLY EXPERIENCE WITH VIOLENCE

As a nonprofit health care delivery system caring for a diverse member population, Kaiser Permanente doctors and caregivers have long understood the connection between violence and obesity. The clinical connection was brought to national attention by Dr. Vincent Felitti, a Kaiser Permanente physician, who observed that a large percentage of patients in his San Diego, California obesity clinic reported exposure to sexual abuse, domestic violence, and other traumatic experiences early in life. Dr. Felitti and colleagues at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention went on to design and conduct the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, which found a strong relationship between trauma and obesity, as well as a score of other chronic health problems.

Similarly, at a community-level, we have felt an imperative to understand and respond to the powerful role that violence plays in obesity prevention. In 2004 Kaiser Permanente launched our Community Health Initiatives for Healthy Eating and Active Living, or HEAL. Major tenets of the initiative, now in place in over 40 communities, include: support for multisectoral collaboratives; a focus on policy, systems, and

environmental change; and strong resident engagement.

The presence of gangs and street violence, along with the real and perceived threats to safety, pervaded the work of our HEAL collaboratives from the outset. Members of the collaborative frequently questioned the viability and appropriateness of strategies aiming to bring residents out of their homes and into local parks and playgrounds in the face of the safety risks. Some collaborative members also questioned the viability of strategies to bring healthier food to corner stores and other retail environments given the danger of walking and biking to, or shopping in, those establishments.

STRATEGIES AT THE NEXUS OF HEAL AND VIOLENCE

Because their mission and membership focused on HEAL, many Kaiser Permanente HEAL collaboratives have been hesitant to take on violence prevention directly within their scope of work; in many cases, they did not have the appropriate organizations at the table, or lacked the resources and expertise to work effectively. Nonetheless, where safety has been identified as a salient community issue and a barrier to achieving HEAL goals, the collaboratives have implemented strategies that live at the intersection of HEAL and violence prevention. These "nexus" strategies include:

- **streetscape changes and park renovations**, including landscaping and lighting to make residents feel safer;
- **park programming**, including the creation of sports leagues, exercise classes, and community-building events to push out gangs and illegal activity;
- **"walking school buses"** and other approaches to increase parents' confidence in their kids' safety while walking or biking to schools;
- **intensified collaboration with police departments** on neighborhood watch programs, community policing strategies, hot spots patrols, and, in some cases where police/community relations were strained, restorative relationship building;

- **permitting and code enforcement strategies** to limit or raze liquor stores, motels, and other establishments that attract crime;
- **economic development strategies** to transform blighted areas into places that create opportunities for physical activity, healthy food retail, or community building;
- **support for afterschool programs** to help keep kids engaged in healthy activities;
- **youth development** to engage at-risk youth as advocates and change agents; and
- **street outreach/conflict resolution**, often initiated by faith-based leaders or former offenders, to de-escalate tensions and engage young people in more productive activities.

In implementing these efforts, Kaiser Permanente’s HEAL collaboratives have been able to engage new partners with additional expertise and resources and expand the role of existing partners.

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA REGION’S GROWING VIOLENCE PREVENTION PORTFOLIO

As our HEAL grants portfolio and partnerships matured, and as violence and trauma continued to plague our communities, we began developing a violence prevention framework and investment approach. Our intention was to invest in strategies that specifically target violence reduction and prevention in low-income and underserved communities, as well as support nexus strategies identified by our HEAL collaboratives.

The Northern California region’s violence prevention portfolio now includes investments aimed at:

- **preventing violence** by engaging and supporting at-risk youth and families in afterschool programming, mentoring, skill building, and foster and homeless youth support;
- **reducing violence** with support for offender-oriented programs, street- and school-based conflict resolution, and community-law enforcement trust building; and
- **expanding the understanding of and attention to trauma** and its effects within the health care system and community-based agencies.

At the heart of our strategy is the proposition that violence is a public health issue. We believe violence is preventable and are pursuing solutions that reduce risk and support resiliency at the individual, family, community, systems, and societal levels.

A significant component of our violence prevention portfolio is the Sacramento Violence Intervention Program (SVIP). Based on the “Caught in the Crossfire” model developed by Youth Alive (an Oakland-based nonprofit), SVIP targets youth ages 15 to 24 who are admitted to Kaiser Permanente’s South Sacramento Trauma Center with severe injuries related to violence. With consent, youth are engaged by an “intervention specialist” from a local community clinic partner, WellSpace Health, which works with the youth and their family. This engagement starts at the hospital bedside and continues for up to six months post-recovery. In addition to

intervening in retaliation discussions, intervention specialists work with clients to develop a comprehensive case plan that includes mental health counseling, assistance with medical appointments and bills, school and/or employment connections, and other social and emotional wellness activities. By intervening at this vulnerable moment, SVIP aims to reduce re-injury, retaliation, and arrest by promoting positive life choices and alternatives to violence.

Since SVIP began in 2010, 173 youth have been referred to the program, the vast majority from Kaiser Permanente’s South Sacramento medical center. Of the total referrals, 140 agreed to participate in the program. The results have been impressive: 99 percent of program participants have not been re-hospitalized; 95 percent have not been arrested for a new offense; 40 percent have gained employment; and 47 percent have become enrolled or re-enrolled in an educational program. Plans are underway to replicate this approach in other Kaiser Permanente medical centers.

BRAIDING HEAL AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION: SOUTH SACRAMENTO

Violence prevention also continues to be an important focus for our place-based HEAL efforts in Northern California, including in the South Sacramento neighborhood surrounding our medical center. The South Sacramento “Valley Hi HEAL Zone” was purposefully located directly along the Mack Corridor, one of the highest crime areas of the city.

Valley Hi Park was identified as an unsafe place, both from the perspective of gang activity and traffic safety. This was underscored when the collaborative conducted a walk-audit of the park and gunshots were fired. Fortunately, no one was injured. The incident galvanized walk-audit participants to reach out urgently to community leaders and businesses to develop solutions.

Partners implemented a number of changes, including physical improvements to the park, regular police patrols and a neighborhood watch program, a basketball league that attracted participation of at-risk youth, and community-building efforts. The Valley Hi HEAL collaborative used community events as opportunities to engage residents in physical activity, and in a campaign to discourage consumption of sugary drinks.

The Valley Hi example clearly illustrates the power of nexus interventions in addressing HEAL and violence. In addition to increasing community cohesion, the community’s success taking back Valley Hi Park has nurtured stronger partnerships: representatives from various sectors attend each other’s meetings, advise each other’s work plans, and cross-pollinate each other’s efforts. This cohesion and increased community capacity will continue to advance community interests, including violence prevention, HEAL, and economic vitality, improving the quality of life for residents.

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