Evaluating Youth Violence Prevention Programs

In order to place animal assisted programs for youth in the larger context of youth violence prevention, the first session of the conference provided information on the causes of youth violence, key ingredients of youth violence prevention programs, and the state of evaluation research in the youth violence prevention field.

*A Public Health Paradigm for Youth Violence: Risk Factors and Protective Factors*
*Philip Leaf, Ph.D., Director, Center for Prevention of Youth Violence, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health*

Philip J. Leaf, Ph.D. is the Director of the Johns Hopkins Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence and a Professor in the Department of Mental Hygiene with joint appointments in the Department of Health Policy and Management at the Bloomberg School of Public Health, the Department of Psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, and the Graduate Division of Education at the Johns Hopkins School of Professional Studies in Business and Education. Dr. Leaf is the Director of the Pre- and Postdoctoral Mental Health Services Research Training Program, Co-Director of the NIMH/NIDA-funded Center for Prevention and Early Intervention. An expert in psychiatric epidemiology, mental health services research, and school-based interventions, Dr. Leaf is one of the nation’s most cited psychiatric researchers. He directed the consortium that developed the procedures currently in use by the Maryland Department of Juvenile Justice for screening youth for mental health, substance abuse, somatic health, educational, and family problems and currently serves as the Executive Director of the Child Development-Community Policing Program.

The major points from Dr. Leaf’s presentation are as follows:

- Youth violence is an important public health problem that results in deaths and injuries. It is important to focus on interventions other than police response.

- Risk factors that predict youth violence include individual factors (history of violent victimization or involvement, attention deficits, hyperactivity, or learning disorders, history of early aggressive behavior, involvement with drugs, alcohol, or tobacco, low IQ, and poor behavioral control); family risk factors (authoritarian childrearing attitudes, harsh, lax, or inconsistent disciplinary practices, low parental involvement, or low emotional attachment to parents or caregivers, low parental education and
income, parental substance abuse or criminality, poor family functioning, poor monitoring and supervision of children); peer/school risk factors (association with delinquent peers, involvement in gangs, social rejection by peers, lack of involvement in conventional activities, poor academic performance, low commitment to school and school failure), and community factors (diminished economic opportunities, high concentration of poor residents, high level of transiency, high levels of family disruption, low levels of community participation, and socially disorganized neighborhoods).

- Risk factors for violence are also risk factors for substance abuse, delinquency, teenage pregnancy, school dropout, and other youth problems. With animal assisted interventions, we might want to measure how interventions affect these problems as well as violence prevention.

- Protective factors that shield youth from violence include individual factors (intolerant attitude toward deviance, high IQ or grade point average, positive social orientation, religiosity); family factors (connectedness to adults outside of family, ability to discuss problems with parents, perceived parental expectations for high school performance, frequent shared activities with parents, consistent presence of parents when awakening, arriving home from school, in evening at mealtime, or when going to bed); and peer/school factors (commitment to school and involvement in school activities).

- Animal assisted programs need to identify which youth and which families would be most responsive to interventions and who is best positioned to sponsor and introduce programs.

- Since they are now held accountable for negative behaviors and suspensions as well as grades, schools are increasingly concerned about improving general social functioning, behavior and attitudes in the classroom, and student engagement. The greater focus on school climate issues may provide opportunities for introduction of low cost interventions that address these issues such as animal assisted programs.

- Community foundations may be interested in pilot studies on animal assisted interventions.

Dr. Leaf’s powerpoint presentation is in Appendix F.
The State of Evaluation in Youth Violence Prevention
Freya Sonenstein, Ph.D., Director, Center for Adolescent Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Freya Lund Sonenstein, Ph.D. is a professor in the Department of Population and Family Health Sciences at John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Since 2003 she has directed the Johns Hopkins Center for Adolescent Health. The Center is a prevention research center funded by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The Center for Adolescent Health’s mission is to work in partnership with youth serving agencies to conduct research that will promote healthy transitions to adulthood for Baltimore youth. The Center’s signature research project focuses on identifying and addressing the mental health needs of disconnected youth and young adults participating in a Baltimore employment and training program. Many of these youth engage in, witness or are victims of violent behavior. Dr. Sonenstein has focused her career conducting basic and applied research to inform family and children's policy. In 2004, Dr. Sonenstein was a member of an expert panel for NIH that reviewed the state of the science about “Preventing Violence and Related Health-Risking Social behaviors in Adolescents.”

The major points from Dr. Sonenstein’s presentation are as follows:

- Societal costs of youth violence include loss of educational opportunities, need for alternative schools and detention programs, increased demand on mental health, education and justice programs, and impact on victims, survivors, and families.

- A Baltimore survey of Youth Opportunities Program participants, who are 16-24 years old and out of school, found high levels of experience with violence. Many students report having been in a fight within the past year, carrying weapons, being forced to have sex, witnessing a homicide, and having been hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend.

- Measurement of program effectiveness requires comparison of equivalent groups who do and do not participate in the program. Studies must include measures before and after the intervention period. The evidence is stronger when individuals or schools are randomly assigned to receive the intervention or placebo, all participants are retained during study period, follow-up occurs after intervention, and findings have been replicated. The Center for the Study and Prevention of Youth Violence at University of Colorado reviewed more than 600 programs. The Center designated 11 model programs and 18 promising programs.

- Successful programs have a theoretical basis, address strong risk factors, involve long-term treatment, are often clinical, utilize cognitive behavioral strategies, are multi-modal and multi-contextual, focus on improving social competency and skills, are developmentally appropriate, are not delivered in coercive settings, and are delivered with fidelity.

- Programs can be harmful if they allow “contagion,” use “scare tactics,” or spend scarce resources on ineffective or harmful programs.
• Animal assisted interventions are at “proof of concept” stage in which you can demonstrate that a program can be implemented, that it is attractive to participants, and that you can see change occur from before to after an intervention.

• For some interventions, implementation of randomized controlled designs is very difficult. We need to develop better evaluation approaches since some of the most promising programs find it hard to meet gold standard research designs. Physiological measures may be useful to measure change.

Dr. Sonenstein's powerpoint presentation is in Appendix G.

David Altschuler, Ph.D., Principal Research Scientist, Institute for Policy Studies, Johns Hopkins University and Faculty, Center for Prevention of Youth Violence, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

David M. Altschuler, Ph.D. is Principal Research Scientist at The Johns Hopkins Institute for Policy Studies, Adjunct Associate Professor in the Department of Mental Health of the Bloomberg School of Public Health, Adjunct Associate Professor in Sociology, and a member of the faculty of the Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence. Dr. Altschuler has a doctorate in social service administration and a master's degree in urban studies from The University of Chicago. His work focuses on juvenile crime and justice system sanctioning, juvenile aftercare and parole, offender reentry, privatization in juvenile corrections, and drug involvement and crime among inner-city youth. Dr. Altschuler and a colleague started the Juvenile Reintegration and Aftercare Center (JRAC). He was Project Director and Co-Principal Investigator on an Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention funded project, which developed a model of intensive aftercare for the high-risk juvenile parolees. Most recently, he began working with the Department of Labor on evaluation of offender reentry programs.

The major points from Dr. Altschuler's presentation are as follows:

• Animal assisted programs need to think carefully about eligibility issues if they include “justice-involved” youth who may be on probation, parole, or supervised release. Decisions need to be made about who establishes selection criteria and who decides which youth participate.

• An important eligibility consideration is the level of risk posed by the youth to public safety and to the animal. Research shows that a young person who has been connected with or found guilty of a violent offense is no more at risk for re-offending than other youth.

• Participation in a program may make youth subject to sanctions or supervision unwarranted by their level of risk. Youth who do not cooperate or do well in a program can be subject to technical violations and sanctions from the justice
system. Inclusion of justice-involved youth also may entail supervision or monitoring from justice system personnel that may not be beneficial to the youth or program experience.

- Animal assisted programs will be more successful in seeking evaluation funding if they are multi-modal and recognize the contributions of animals, staff, and other aspects of programs. Powerful research designs examine the totality of factors and specify and examine each element.

Valerie Maholmes, Ph.D., CAS, Social and Affective Development/Child Maltreatment and Violence, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development

Valerie Maholmes, Ph.D., CAS, Program Director for the Social and Affective Development in Child and Family Processes/Child Maltreatment and Violence Research Program in the Child Development and Behavior Branch at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). She was a faculty member at the Yale University Child Study Center for 13 years where she served in numerous capacities with the School Development Program including Director of Research and Policy. In 1999, she was named the Irving B. Harris Assistant Professor of Child Psychiatry—an endowed professorial chair for child development and social policy. In 2003, Dr. Maholmes was awarded the prestigious Executive Branch Science Policy Fellowship sponsored by the Society for Research in Child Development and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Dr. Maholmes holds a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from Howard University.

The major points from Dr. Maholmes' presentation are as follows:

- Funding is available for process evaluation and model testing, methodology development and validation, and pilot studies of an intervention prior to large scale testing. More than half of NIH funding is distributed to external researchers and programs. NIH is interested in the interplay of developmental, psychological, environmental, and biological factors related to youth violence.

- Intervention studies target specific factors and test hypothesized mediational models on a range of anti-social behaviors, target larger units of intervention beyond the individual, study mechanisms of intervention at multiple levels of analysis such as individual, family, peer, community and neighborhood, and are based on youth
risk factor research. Pilot studies test feasibility of larger scale evaluations and focus on evaluation of procedures related to community cooperation, training and supervising staff, insuring implementation fidelity, and recruiting and retaining target population.

- Studies that tailor interventions to specific high risk or understudied population are a particular priority. Future research priorities include across program component analysis to understand mechanisms of successful and unsuccessful interventions, evaluation of programs in different contexts, and research to enhance role of neighborhoods.

- Collaboration between non-profit organizations and universities or research institutes provides opportunities to access funds for innovative projects.

Dr. Maholmes’ powerpoint presentation is in Appendix H.

Allan Cohen, Ph.D., Director, Center for Advanced Planning and Evaluation, Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation

Allan Y. Cohen, Ph.D. is the co-founder of PIRE (Pacific Institute for Research & Evaluation), an independent non-profit research and technical assistance organization headquartered in Calverton, Maryland, employing 400 staff in nine centers across the USA. He currently directs PIRE’s Center for Advanced Planning and Evaluation, served as Associate Editor of the Journal of Primary Prevention and has supervised over 50 major evaluation and consulting projects in behavioral health. As a licensed clinical psychologist, evaluation specialist, theoretician and substance abuse prevention expert, Dr. Cohen has long been interested in the role of animals and pets in human development.

The major points from Dr. Cohen’s presentation are as follows:

- Evaluation is a powerful tool for improving and advocating for programs. Program administrators need to be aware of requirements of different sponsors and develop strategies to communicate what you know to be effective in ways meaningful to the sponsor.

- Most of the real work is done in programs that cannot be scientifically validated.

- Program personnel are one of the most powerful drivers of program success.

- While behavioral outcomes are important, you also need to measure what is really happening in the programs. Programs may not reduce the negative as much as increasing positive outcomes such as love, compassion, self-sacrifice, creativity, and other transformational motivations.
Sara Hassan, MHS, Research Program Coordinator, Center for Prevention of Youth Violence, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Sara Hassan holds a masters degree of Health Sciences with a specialization in Mental Health. Ms. Hassan is the Research Program Coordinator of the Bloomberg School of Public Health’s Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence, where she coordinates and staffs various youth violence prevention programs. Ms. Hassan assisted in the production of a local teen violence prevention show produced by the Bloomberg School of Public Health, the Urban Leadership Institute and WMAR ABC Channel 2 and funded by the GOCCP and the CDC. Motivated by one of the television series entitled “Youth Violence Prevention”, Ms. Hassan and LaMarr Darnell Shields of the Urban Leadership Institute wrote Hands Off: Strategies to Combat Youth Violence, which focuses on bullying, gang violence, school violence, dating violence and self defense and provides a violence prevention vehicle that can be utilized in schools, after school programs and other youth organizations.

The major points from Ms. Hassan’s presentation are as follows:

• Youth should be involved in program development, implementation, and evaluation. Youth are effective trainers of other youth.

• Because what happens in school is reflected in communities and what happens in communities is reflected in schools, more youth violence prevention programs need to be directed at neighborhoods and communities.