



Reducing Youth Violence:

Lessons from the Boston Youth Survey

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In Boston, as in many other cities, youth violence takes an unacceptably high toll. Reducing the burden of youth violence is a priority for the City's policymakers, civic leaders, and residents. To date, however, little information has been available about the prevalence, antecedents and impacts of youth violence in Boston.

The Boston Youth Survey (BYS) addresses this gap in knowledge. It is an in-school survey of Boston high school students conducted by the Harvard Youth Violence Prevention Research Center (HYVPC) in collaboration with the Mayor's Office, the Boston Public Health Commission, and Boston Public Schools. The BYS was first administered in 2004, and was subsequently administered in 2006 and 2008. (Administration of the 2008 survey was recently completed, data will be available in the fall of 2008.) This Policy Brief summarizes key findings from the 2006 BYS and discusses the practical and policy implications of those findings.

Methodology & Sample

Data for the 2006 BYS come from a random sample of students in 18 of the 38 high schools in the Boston Public Schools system. The BYS focused on youth violence, including

aggressive behavior, assault, weapon carrying, feelings of safety, and gang membership. It also inquired about risk and protective factors for violence (e.g., alcohol and drug use, depressive symptoms, family violence, developmental assets, academic performance, perceptions of collective efficacy within one's neighborhood), and health behaviors (e.g., nutrition and physical activity). Although 1,233 students took the survey, the analytical sample includes only the 1,215 who completed at least 80 percent of the items.

The respondents came from neighborhoods throughout Boston, and mirror the considerable racial and ethnic diversity of both the City and its schools (see Table 1). For example, 30 percent of the students were born outside the U.S., and 48 percent reported that one or both of their parents were born outside the U.S. Almost half (44 percent) of the foreign-born students were from the Caribbean countries of Haiti, Jamaica, or the Dominican Republic.

Results

Aggressive Behavior: Students were asked about their perpetration of aggressive behavior in the 30 days preceding the survey. This included

Rappaport Institute Policy Briefs are short overviews of new scholarly research on important issues facing the region. This brief reports on the results of the Boston Youth Survey 2006 (BYS), an in-school survey of Boston high school youth conducted biennially by the Harvard Youth Violence Prevention Center in collaboration with the City of Boston. More information is available at www.hsph.harvard.edu/hyvpc/research/.

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Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston

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Table 1: Description of the Study Sample (n = 1,215)

Gender	
Male	43.4%
Female	56.6%
Age, y	
≤ 14	6.4%
15	23.4%
16	27.2%
17	25.2%
≥ 18	17.8%
Grade	
9th	29.2%
10th	26.9%
11th	28.6%
12th	15.3%
Race	
White	13.3%
Black/African American	53.3%
Bi/Multi-Racial	3.2%
Asian	6.5%
Other	1.6%
Hispanic, No Race Specified	22.1%
Hispanic/Latino	29.9%

minor aggression (*e.g.*, pushing, shoving, or slapping someone), moderate aggression (*e.g.*, hitting, punching, kicking, or choking someone), and severe aggression (*e.g.*, attacking or threatening to attack someone with a weapon). Perpetration of minor and moderate aggression was common (49 percent and 37 percent, respectively), whereas the prevalence of severe aggression was much lower (10 percent). Somewhat surprisingly, males and females reported similar rates of minor and moderate aggressive behavior, a finding that highlights the growing trend of increased aggression among girls (see Table 2).¹

Victimization: Twenty percent of students reported having been physically assaulted (*e.g.*, punched, kicked, choked, or beaten up)

within the past year. A smaller proportion had been attacked with a firearm (9 percent), or with a weapon other than a firearm (9 percent). Although boys were significantly more likely

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to report having been assaulted or attacked with a firearm or other weapon, 16 percent of girls had been physically assaulted in the past year, and 5 percent had been attacked with a weapon. White students were more likely to have

Table 2: Prevalence of Aggressive Behavior in the Past Month, By Selected Characteristics, n = 1,215

	Minor Agression Pushed, shoved, or slapped someone	Moderate Physical Aggression Hit, punched, kicked or choked someone	Severe Aggression Attacked, or threatened to attack, someone
Total	48.8%	37.2%	10.1%
Age			
≤ 16 years	52.6%	39.4%	10.6%
≥ 17 years	43.5%	34.0%	9.6%
	P<0.05		
Sex			
Male	46.9%	39.0%	13.0%
Female	49.6%	35.7%	8.3%
			P<0.05
Race/Ethnicity			
Hispanic	46.9%	35.3%	10.9%
Black (Non-Hispanic)	52.5%	40.6%	11.3%
White (Non-Hispanic)	50.3%	33.8%	7.8%
Other*	36.0%	31.6%	6.3%
	P<0.05†		
Nativity			
U.S. Born	53.1%	39.5%	11.4%
Foreign Born	38.4%	31.6%	7.3%
	P<0.05	P<0.05	P<0.05

Note: Chi-square tests were computed to assess the statistical significance of associations.

* Includes bi- and multi-racial students, Asians, Native Americans, and students who were neither Hispanic/Latino nor were able to classify themselves into a race category.

† A multiple comparisons analysis showed that the “Other” category was significantly different from the other three groups; there were no other pairwise statistically significant differences.

been physically assaulted (29 percent) than Hispanics (15 percent), Blacks (18 percent), or those in the “Other” race category (22 percent).

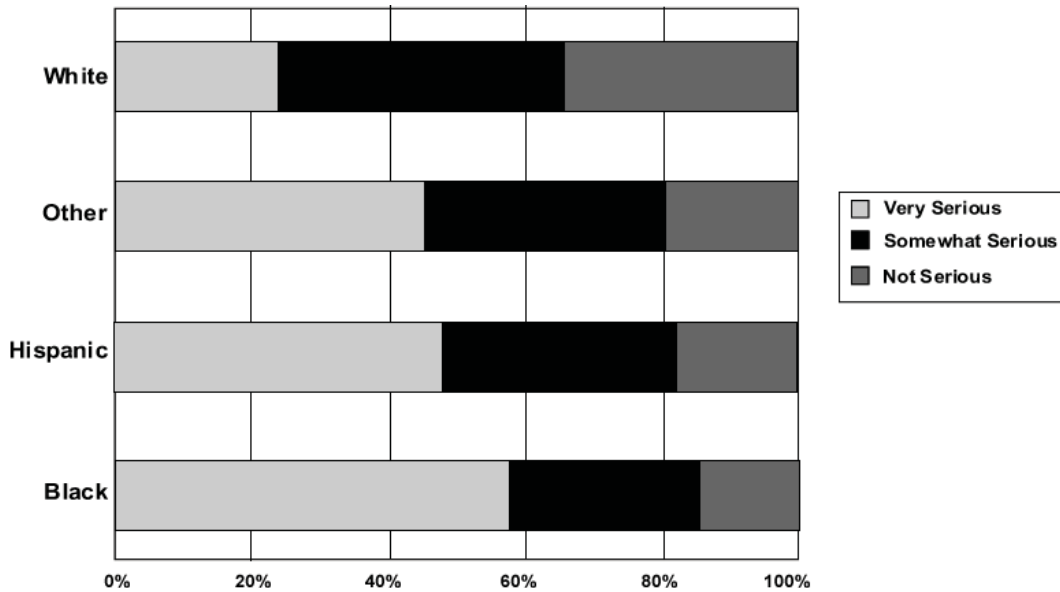
The high prevalence of minor and moderate aggression is not unexpected. Adolescent development theory identifies adolescence as a developmental period marked by heightened risk behavior, including aggressive behavior with peers, that begins to decline by young adulthood.² Our finding that the prevalence of aggressive behavior decreases as student age increases is consistent with this theory.

Weapon Carrying: Nearly one-third (31

Although males were substantially more likely than females to carry a knife or a gun, the proportion of armed young women was not insubstantial.

percent) of Boston youth reported having carried a knife in the past 12 months, and 6 percent reported having carried a gun over that same time period. U.S. born youth were more likely than immigrants to carry weapons. In

Figure 1: Perceptions About the Seriousness of Gang Violence



terms of race, Whites, Hispanics, and Blacks had similar rates of knife carrying (31 percent, 33 percent, 34 percent vs. 13 percent for those in the “Other” race category). Although males were substantially more likely than females to carry a knife (43 percent vs. 23 percent), or a gun (10 percent vs. 3 percent), the proportion of armed young women was not insubstantial.

Most students indicated that gang activities in their school or neighborhood were somewhat or very serious or dangerous.

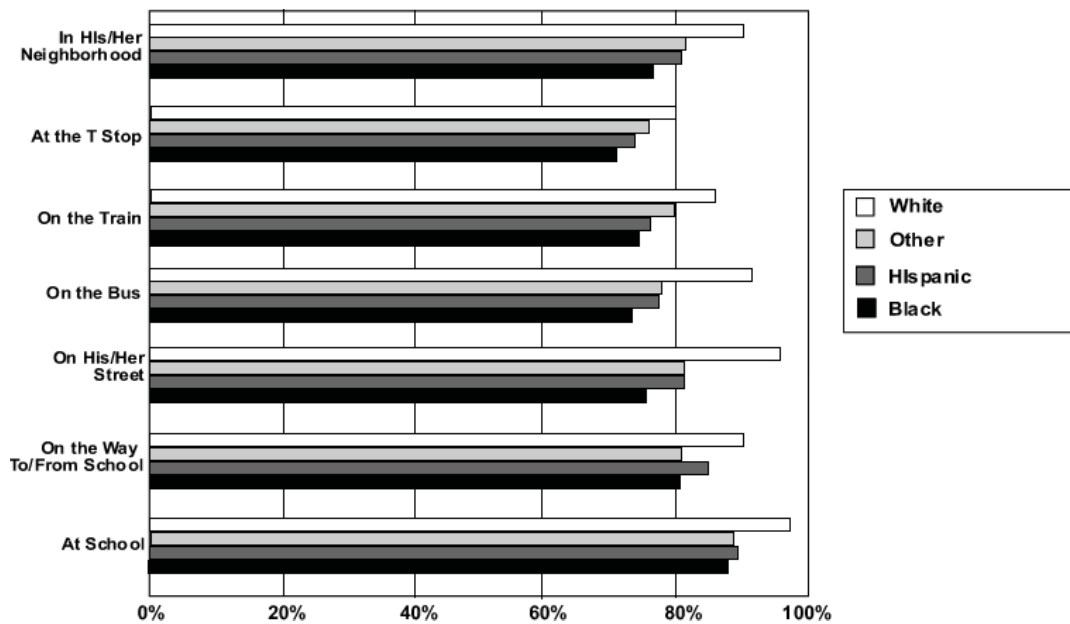
Among those students who had not carried a gun in the past year, 56 percent of boys and 36 percent of girls said that acquiring a gun would be fairly or very easy.

Gangs & Gang Membership: Gangs represent a source of fear and crime in neighborhoods. When asked, most students indicated that gang

activities in their school or neighborhood were somewhat (33 percent) or very (49 percent) serious/dangerous (see Figure 1). Compared to Hispanics (48 percent), Blacks (57 percent) and those in the “Other” race category (47 percent), Whites were less likely to perceive gangs as a serious problem. Despite perceptions of the seriousness of gangs, few students (10 percent of boys and 3 percent of girls) reported being a member of gang.

Fear of Violence: We asked students whether they felt safe in seven different types of public locations, including school, on the MBTA, and in their neighborhood (see Figure 2). Of these, school—where only 10 percent said they rarely or never felt safe—was reported to be among the safest places while buses, trains, and MBTA stops—where 28 percent said they rarely or never felt safe—were reported to be the least safe places. A higher percentage of girls than boys reported feeling unsafe when using the MBTA trains or buses. Twenty-seven percent of

Figure 2: Percent of Youth Who Usually Feel Safe, by Location



girls compared to 18 percent of boys said they rarely or never felt safe on the bus. Similarly, 28 percent of girls compared to 19 percent of boys said they rarely or never felt safe on the train. Across the seven types of locations, Black students were the least likely, and White students the most likely, to report feeling safe. For example, 91 percent of White students reported that they always or sometimes felt safe in their neighborhoods, compared to 75 percent of Black students.

Risk & Protective Factors: A substantial portion of youth who engaged in aggressive behavior reported using alcohol, tobacco, or marijuana (see Table 3). Somewhat surprisingly, those who had exhibited minor or moderate aggressive behavior were just as likely to participate in extracurricular activities and attend faith-based services as students who had not. Similarly, the prevalence of working was comparable among all students, regardless of whether they exhibited aggressive behavior.

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About one-fifth (19 percent) of youth who had attacked or threatened to attack someone in the past month had seriously considered suicide in the past year. This group was also highly likely to have experienced physical aggression at the hands of a caregiver (65 percent).

Table 3: Risk and Protective Factors for Aggressive Behavior within the Past Month

	Total Sample	Minor Aggression Pushed, shoved, or slapped someone	Moderate Physical Aggression Hit, punched, kicked, or choked someone	Severe Aggression Attacked, or threatened to attack, someone with a weapon
Any substance Use, Past Month				
Alcohol	30.0%	37.8%	41.4%	66.7%
Tobacco	11.1%	16.0%	18.3%	29.8%
Marijuana	17.7%	25.4%	28.9%	50.5%
Commitment to School				
Most grades in school last year were As and Bs	29.2%	23.6%	21.0%	11.8%
Spent an hour or more on homework daily	40.9%	34.4%	30.5%	24.3%
Ever truant, past month	66.1%	70.2%	71.2%	80.6%
Use of Time				
Participate in extra curricular activities (e.g., sports and clubs)	61.7%	61.9%	59.7%	51.9%
Attend faith-based services once a week or more	28.7%	28.9%	26.2%	21.2%
Work after school or on the weekend	36/1%	37.4%	35.5%	37.9%
Emotional Well-Being				
Often or always felt very sad over the past month	21.3%	24.5%	25.4%	26.3%
Often or always felt hopeless about the future over the past month	14.4%	16.2%	18.1%	16.5%
Seriously considered suicide in the past year	8.6%	11.2%	10.3%	19.4%
Peer Influence				
Most friends stay out of trouble	71.9%	66.1%	60.4%	44.7%
Most friends follow the rules their parents set for them	64.0%	57.0%	52.5%	42.4%
Family Support				
Has ever been pushed, grabbed, or shoved by a caregiver	37.6%	47.0%	51.0%	64.8%
Family sits down to dinners on most nights	35.1%	28.5%	29.0%	29.2%
A caregiver frequently expresses love and support	65.3%	62.6%	61.9%	53.0%

Summary and Conclusions

Policymakers, practitioners and researchers in the City are using the results from the Boston Youth Survey to better understand and address problems of youth violence. For example, in 2007, the Boston Public Health Commission highlighted data from the project in a series of Youth Forums, and the Boston Police Department used data from the survey to help plan summer programming.

Moving forward, data from other sources will enhance information from the BYS. One external data source is the Boston Neighborhood Survey (BNS), a random digital telephone survey of adults in Boston neighborhoods. The BNS is conducted biennially by HYVPC and inquires about perceptions of neighborhood and community well-being. The information available from the combined BYS/BNS datasets will allow policy makers and researchers to explore the impact of neighborhood-level characteristics, such as social capital and “collective efficacy,” on outcomes for youth.

Administering the Boston Youth Survey every two years will enable the City to monitor trends in adolescent well-being, youth violence, and related phenomena. For example, when we compared 2006 BYS data to 2004 BYS data, we found that the percentage of youth who felt unsafe on MBTA buses or trains decreased from 41 percent in 2004 to 28 percent in 2006. Similar decreases were reported by youth in their schools (21 percent in 2004 and 10 percent in 2006), neighborhoods (32 percent vs. 21 percent) and streets (26 percent to 20 percent). Trend analyses such as these will serve as an important way to assess the extent to which efforts to prevent youth violence affect youths’ attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. Finally, findings highlight the importance of providing resources to: (1) identify the determinants of youth violence, (2) design interventions to reduce its incidence and

severity, and (3) evaluate whether those efforts are achieving the goals of preventing violence from occurring and of preventing youth who engage in minor and moderate violence from becoming persistent offenders of crime and serious violence.

Endnotes

¹ Howard R. Spivak and Deborah Prothrow-Stith. *Sugar and Spice and No Longer Nice: How We Can Stop Girls’ Violence*. 2005. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

² Linda L. Dahlberg, Lloyd B. Potter. Youth violence: developmental pathways and prevention challenges. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 2001; 20(1S):3-14.

Acknowledgements

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