

THE CITIZENS CRIME COMMISSION OF NEW YORK AND NYU STEINHARDT'S
RESEARCHING INEQUITY IN SOCIETY ECOLOGICALLY (R.I.S.E.) TEAM



E-
RESPONDER

a brief about preventing real-world violence through sociopolitical, digital education

WHO

CITIZENS CRIME COMMISSION OF NEW YORK CITY

The Citizens Crime Commission of New York City (CCC) is a leading nonpartisan nonprofit organization with multidisciplinary expertise that works to improve public safety through innovation.

NYU STEINHARDT'S COMMUNITY AND OPPRESSION RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT TEAM

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A research team that serves traditionally marginalized populations, focusing on health and mental health disparities in women and youth who are involved, or at risk of involvement, with the legal system.

E-RESPONDER

A three-pronged approach to promoting youths' healthy online engagement, building life skills, and targeting risky online behaviors.

This report will summarize the problem of social media and violence, present the E-Responder model, outline preliminary findings, and detail future directions.

WHAT



PREVENTING ONLINE ALTERCATIONS & PROMOTING HEALTHY BEHAVIOR



Social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are popular among young people and serve as a natural extension of their social lives. However, online platforms are emerging as places where youth also engage in risky behaviors and express distress.

Characteristics of social media, such as access to a wide audience and perceived anonymity, contribute to an environment conducive to risky behaviors and low empathy. For example, social media users communicate through a screen, where the absence of eye-contact can decrease the likelihood of perspective taking (i.e., viewing a situation from another's point of view), increasing arguments and bullying. Indeed, while the majority of youths' online interactions are innocuous, sometimes real-world violent behavior is initiated or intensified through social media use, creating new opportunities for risk.

The risks are further exacerbated for youth involved in real world violence. In NYC, youth involved in gun violence are usually a part of a "crew." Crews are fluid, geographically based groups of youth between the ages of 16 and 25 who engage in violent turf rivalries, but lack the structure and profit schemes of traditional gangs. In New York City crews are involved in nearly half of all shootings.

Like most teens, crew-involved youth use social media frequently. However, their use can cross from developmentally appropriate behaviors into behaviors that exacerbate their involvement in violence. For example, youth involved in violence frequently use social media to taunt and threaten each other, buy and sell guns, coordinate shootings, discuss and argue about previous shootings, post pictures with guns, and post videos of fights involving firearms.

In recent years law enforcement and community-based organizations have noted that many firearm-related deaths and injuries began as taunts or threats on social media. This risky online behavior can also have other consequences for youth, including disciplinary actions at school or work, arrest, and exposure to violence.

The take-home message is clear. In violent contexts altercations online quickly turn from virtual to violent. As such, interventions aiming to prevent the escalation of risky behaviors into physical violence need to meet youth where they are experiencing conflict: social media.

EXAMPLES OF RISKY SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Affiliation & Self-Promotion (Lower Risk for Violence):

- Bragging about gang/crew affiliation
- Posting about criminal justice involvement
- Posting videos of "mobbing"

General Threats & Arguments (Medium Risk for Violence)

- Talking and bragging about past violence
- Uploading or sharing fight videos
- General threats against rivals
- Arguments in comments
- Loose plans for revenge
- "Stop snitching" posts

Weapons and Specific Threats (High Risk for Violence)

- Taunting and call outs to rivals
- Naming or tagging specific individuals in threats for violence
- Naming or tagging a location for violence
- Pictures with guns
- Sale of guns or bullets
- Bragging about serious violence

Grief & Emotional Distress (Varied Risk Levels for Violence)

- Troubling posts about youths' uncertain future
- Posts about death, dying, fear and loneliness
- Thoughts of suicide
- Thoughts of revenge and anger in response to loss

YOUTH LEADERSHIP



E-Responder was developed to reach youth in new, virtual spaces of conflict. The goal of E-Responder is to prevent the escalation of violence on social media and to facilitate healthy expression by building on youths' strengths and skills to promote long-term growth and development. E-Responder takes an evidence-based approach to address three key goals:

- Preventing the escalation of online provocation that can lead to in-person violence
- Supporting youth in developing life skills such as leadership, emotion regulation, empathy, perspective taking, and sociopolitical development
- Supporting Violence Prevention Professionals (VPPs) in effectively using social media to promote digital citizenship and raise awareness about social media violence

This brief is the second in a series of three and details findings from the pilot implementation of E-Responder. The current brief focuses on youths' skill development; for additional information about how E-Responder addresses the escalation of online violence, please see the first brief in the series, E-Responder Evaluation: Interruption Toolkit Results.

CULTIVATING YOUTHS' SKILLS

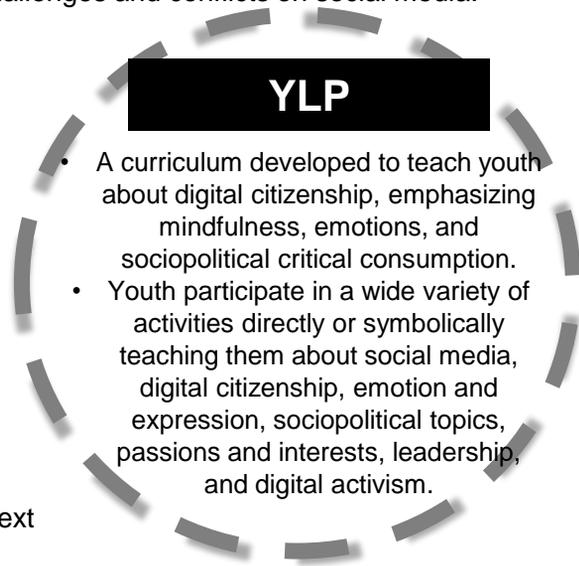
Adolescence is marked by important developmental milestones impacting identity development and relationships. For many teens, social media offers an opportunity to discover and explore interests and build positive social relationships. Youth can also encounter social challenges and conflicts on social media.

The Youth Leadership Program (YLP) responds to these risks by equipping youth with skills to help them build positive relationships and navigate conflict, when it can't be avoided. To do this, the YLP leverages evidence-based practices from Sociopolitical Development, Trauma Informed Care, Violence Prevention, and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Consistent with the most recent research, theory, and best practice, the YLP has three foundational pillars:

1. **Rights Based:** The YLP is grounded in the belief that every youth has a right to safety and self-expression.
2. **Strengths Based:** The YLP focuses on acknowledging and discovering youths' strengths. As such, the YLP creates opportunities to build on these strengths and create new ones.
3. **Context Centered:** All YLP lessons are anchored in the context of youths' lives and experiences.

The YLP is a 24-lesson program that promotes positive digital citizenship, building on youths' strengths and preventing risky behavior. The youth who participate in E-Responder typically face challenges including a dearth of resources and employment opportunities. As such, the YLP is trauma-informed and tailored to address the needs of urban youth, impacted by violence and oppression. The YLP is also designed to support youth in critically analyzing the media they consume and encourages them to develop skills that can help them avoid violence and thrive.

YLP activities include discussions and critical analysis of media focusing on themes of oppression, privilege, gender, race and power. For example, youth are encouraged to explore media narratives around violence and self-esteem in Black and Latino adolescents. The YLP uses evidence-based methods to challenge internalization of oppression by encouraging critical thinking, cognitive reframing, and youth empowerment. The YLP also incorporates activities that teach mindfulness and healthy coping strategies for grief. As such, the YLP moves youth away from risky posting behavior and towards social activism, using social media for positive social change. In this way the YLP aims to empower youth and facilitate healthy development, interrupting the cycle of violence and cultivating skills for de-escalation, emotion regulation, and leadership.



THE PILOT



In order to assess the efficacy of the E-Responder intervention, the CCC and NYU RISE Team conducted a six-month pilot study. The pilot utilized a quasi-experimental design, allowing for the assessment of intervention effects across four NYC Cure Violence sites and one high school. Three of the four Cure Violence sites and the high school received the Youth Leadership Program (YLP) and data were collected from 81 youth, 72 of whom participated in the YLP. The YLP is a bi-weekly, 24-session intervention, focusing on empathy and perspective taking, digital citizenship, peer leadership, self-efficacy, and sociopolitical critical consumption. As such, the YLP aims to build skills in three key areas predicted to reduce risky posting behavior:

- Empathy, by cultivating the ability to take the perspective of others
- Digital citizenship, by building on youths' technical capabilities and fluency in a way that is socially responsible and promotes peace
- Sociopolitical critical consumption, by increasing awareness of the systems of oppression and privilege that impact the cycle of violence, and empowering youth to take action

Youth completed a Social Action Survey before, during, and after the intervention to assess for changes in empathy, perspective taking, critical consciousness, resilience, and their propensity to use social media to promote peace.

P R E L I M I N A R Y R E S U L T S

On average, attendance was strong. Most youth attended the majority of the offered lessons, with one-third having perfect attendance.

Data from the pilot YLP intervention suggest that intervention participation positively impacts:

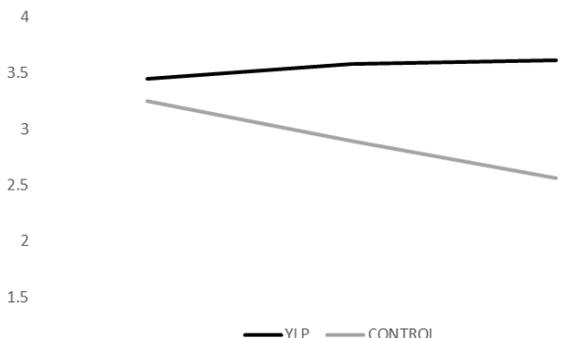
- Youths' confidence in their own abilities to use social media in healthy ways that promote peace (social justice social media self-efficacy)
- Youths' empathic concern for the wellbeing of others
- Youths' ability to take the perspective of others

According to youth's self-reports, E-Responder had a significant effect for both youths' empathic concern ($t(167) = 2.41, p < 0.05$), as well as their ability to engage in perspective taking ($t(167) = 1.93, p = .056$).

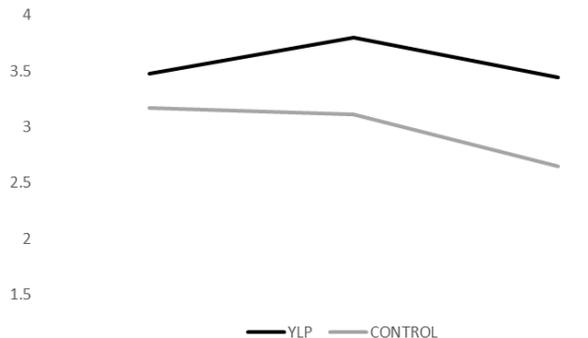
- As seen in the graphs, youth who participated in the YLP showed increases in both empathic concern and perspective taking, while the youth in the control decreased in their reported empathic concern and perspective taking over the course of the intervention.

As one participant said, "[The YLP] made me realize that I look at stuff differently than other people... it is really important to take other people's perspective and to see how other people think... [the YLP] made me think a lot about my own behavior and how I treat other people... my feelings aren't the only ones that exist, it is important to be conscious of other people's feelings."

Comparing empathic concern: YLP vs. Control



Comparing perspective taking: YLP vs. Control



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THE PILOT

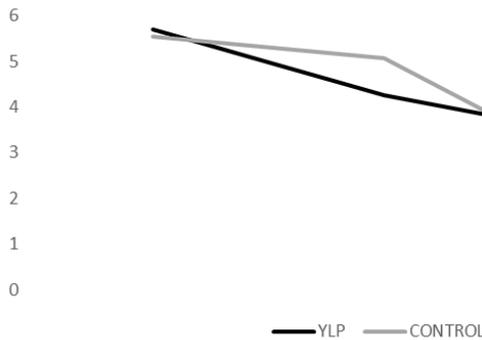


P R O S O C I A L I T Y

According to youths' self-reports, youths' likelihood for pro-social online behavior also trended differently based on intervention condition. In the control group, youths' likelihood for pro-social behavior decreased markedly. Youth in the intervention group were protected from this; their likelihood for pro-social behavior was stable, and some reported an increased likelihood to act pro-socially online.

In one participant's words, "I am more social media conscious... I think we can all change things going on in the world. It comes from modeling good behavior. That way we are always influencing the next generation."

Comparing likelihood for pro-social online behavior: YLP vs. Control



SOCIOPOLITICAL CRITICAL CONSUMPTION

Increased sociopolitical critical consumption and awareness about oppression, power, and privilege emerged as a dominant theme in feedback focus groups with youth and staff.

According to one YLP facilitator, "Every class it felt like we had a new break through with one of the kids. There was no space to talk about these things [before], and the YLP provided the space and examples they needed to get it started." In this way, the YLP was able to generate impactful conversations around sociopolitical critical consumption, marking an important step towards activism and empowerment.

These findings strongly support the effectiveness of the YLP in reducing youth aggression and the increasing positive social media use. In addition, feedback highlights the ways in which youth began to critically think about media and the sociopolitical climate around them.ⁱ

ⁱvan Langen, M. A. M., Wissink, I. B., van Vugt, E. S., van der Stouwe, T., & Stams, G. J. J. J. M. (2014). The relation between empathy and offending: A meta-analysis. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 19*, 179-189. ; Castillo, R., Salguero, J. M., Fernandez-Berrocal, P., & Balluerka, N. (2013). Effects of an emotional intelligence intervention on aggression and empathy among adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence, 36*, 883-892. ; Dishion, T. J., Veronneau, M. H., & Myers, M. W. (2010). Cascading peer dynamics underlying the progression from problem behavior to violence in early to late adolescence. *Development and Psychopathology, 22*, 603-619.