

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 cultivating resilience and empowering youths' sociopolitical digital literacy

# 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**

(Dr. Shabnam Javdani, Corianna E. Sichel)

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.

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## **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 and outline preliminary findings.

# WHAT



# PROMOTING SOCIOPOLITICAL AWARENESS AND RESILIENCE IN YOUTH



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.

While the majority of youths' online interactions are innocuous, sometimes real-world violent behavior is initiated or intensified on social media, creating new opportunities for risk. This is especially true for youth involved in "crews." 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 many teens, crew-involved youth use social media frequently. However, their use can cross from developmentally appropriate behaviors into those that exacerbate their involvement in violence. For example, youth involved in violence 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. This risky online behavior has serious consequences for youth, including disciplinary actions at school or work, arrest, violent victimization, and exposure to violence.

Crew-involved youth also use social media to express emotional distress, trauma, and grief. Many youth profiles include, for example:

- "Rest in peace" messages to lost loved ones
- Pleas to free incarcerated friends
- Expressions of loneliness
- Depictions of past traumas
- Statements about accepting death at a young age
- Threats of seeking revenge against rivals

However, discussions of the impacts of trauma and grief, and the possibility of fostering

positive online behavior by leveraging youths' strengths, are often absent from conversations about risky behavior among crew-involved youth.

Youths' social media behavior is incredibly diverse and offers providers insights into youths' experiences, as well as opportunities for intervention. The online posting of both threats and emotional distress among crew-involved youth show that violence is complex; violence poses both individual (for example, physical harm and death), and systemic (for example, involvement in the legal system) risks for youth. Therefore, interventions that emphasize growth, resilience, healthy coping, and awareness of systemic oppression and inequality are needed.

The current brief is the third and final in a series addressing the impacts of E-Responder, an intervention developed to holistically prevent and intervene in youths' risky behavior online. The present brief explores the combined effect of all E-Responder components, showing that social media can play an important role in preventing the escalation of real-world violence. Additionally, social media can be used to boost youth resilience and increase sociopolitical awareness, preventing violence.

E-Responder was developed to reach youth in new, virtual spaces of conflict. E-Responder takes an evidence-based approach to address three key goals:

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

# RISKS RELATED TO VIOLENCE & THE E-RESPONDER MODEL



Research demonstrates that areas of concentrated disadvantage experience the most gun violence. In communities where violence may be the rule, rather than the exception, people can become accustomed to violence as a part of daily life, viewing it as an acceptable way to respond to injustice, disadvantage, and conflict. Violence norms such as these contribute to youth being pessimistic about change, and believing that using violence will prevent them from being victimized in the future. Thus, systems of oppression and inequality undergird much of the violence we observe in high-risk communities.

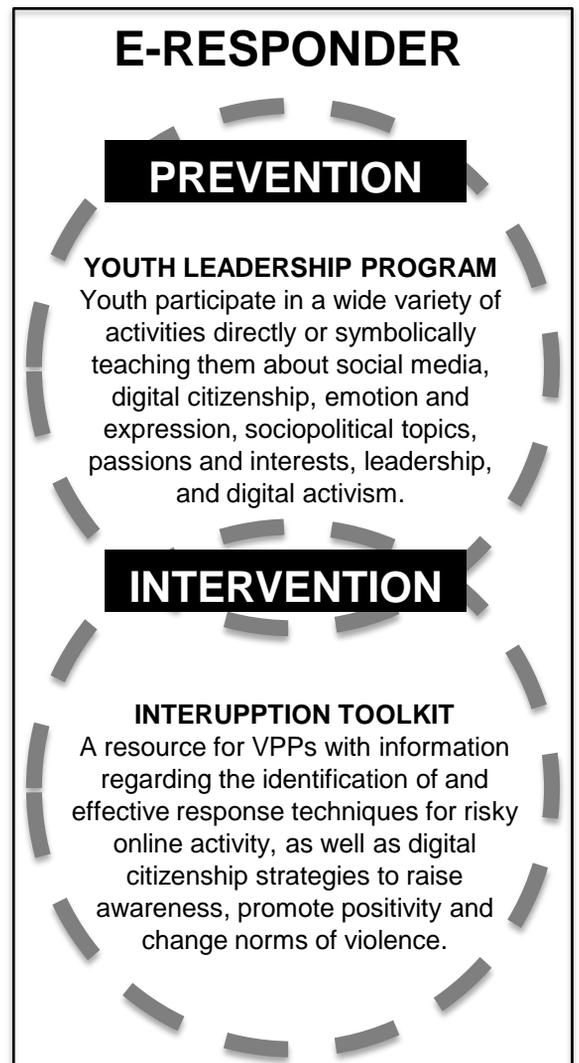
Youth involved in crews are likely to have had multiple experiences resulting in trauma and grief. Research shows that most crew-involved youth report being jumped, assaulted, shot at, and robbed before committing violence themselves. These experiences can have significant consequences for youth development and mental health, and research shows that symptoms associated with trauma are related to many risk factors for violence and crew membership. Thus, there is a serious and significant need for interventions that focus on prevention by addressing the individual and systemic risks associated with violence.

The E-Responder program responds to this need and takes a rights based, strengths based, and context centered approach to prevention. E-Responder is specifically designed to empower youth, build on their existing strengths, and target the different systems and unique experiences that impact high-risk youth. Further, E-Responder interventions are anchored in evidence-based strategies that promote healthy coping, build on youths' strengths, help youth regain control, and support youth in exploring healthy, effective paths forward.

Leveraging evidence-based practices from Sociopolitical Development, Trauma Informed Care, Violence Prevention, and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), E-Responder does more than de-escalate and intervene in risky behavior; it encourages prosocial behavior by providing youth an opportunity to explore, practice, and build important skills. The E-Responder intervention is delivered through an Interruption Toolkit and a

Youth Leadership Program (YLP), described in detail in the first research brief, and summarized below.

In this way, both the Interruption Toolkit and YLP utilize evidence-based strategies to increase youths' awareness of the sociopolitical systems of oppression and provide opportunities to build positive coping skills that support resilience. Research suggests that augmenting youth resilience through social support and coping skills can protect youth from symptoms of trauma. Research also demonstrates that when youth are aware of systems of oppression they are more likely to reject violence as normal. Additionally, these youth are more likely to engage in their communities and society to work towards social change these systems.



# 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 implemented both of the E-Responder program components, one Cure Violence site served as a control site, and the high school implemented only the YLP. In total, 72 youth participated in the YLP and 12 VPPs implemented the Interruption Toolkit.
- As evidenced in the first two research briefs, the E-Responder Interruption Toolkit was effective at interrupting risky behavior online, and the YLP was effective at fostering youths' skills, including empathic concern, perspective taking, and confidence in using social media responsibly. Below we discuss how the E-Responder addresses two additional outcomes, which are predicted to facilitate positive long-term results for youth:

(1) Resilience, by building on youths' existing strengths, coping skills, and empowering them to face adversity and grief; and

(2) Sociopolitical awareness, by providing youth with the vocabulary and opportunity to discuss topics such as inequality, oppression, privilege, and race.

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

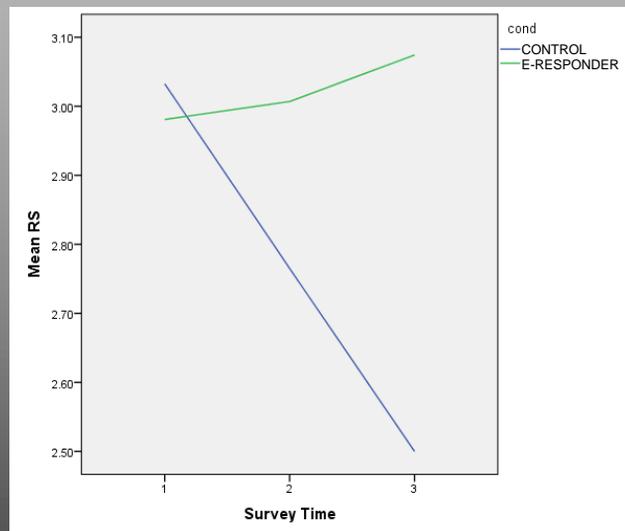
VPPs reported 145 instances of risky behavior online. VPPs reported that:

- 39% of the interventions resulted in youth feeling empowered
- 23% of the interventions resulted in youth utilizing social support
- 97% of the interventions resulted in youth engaging in healthy coping

### R E S I L I E N C E

According to youth's self-reports, E-Responder had a significant effect for youths' resilience ( $t(162) = 2.35, p < 0.05$ ).

As seen in the graph, youth who participated in E-Responder showed increases in resilience, while the youth in the control decreased in their reported resilience.



According to one participant, "I try not to get to angry online, now I know what to do when someone is being crazy on social media... I think a lot before I post. I used to have a lot of bad social media behavior, but now I control it a lot better. I can look back on [my old social media behavior] now and it makes more sense why I did [what I did]."

# THE PILOT



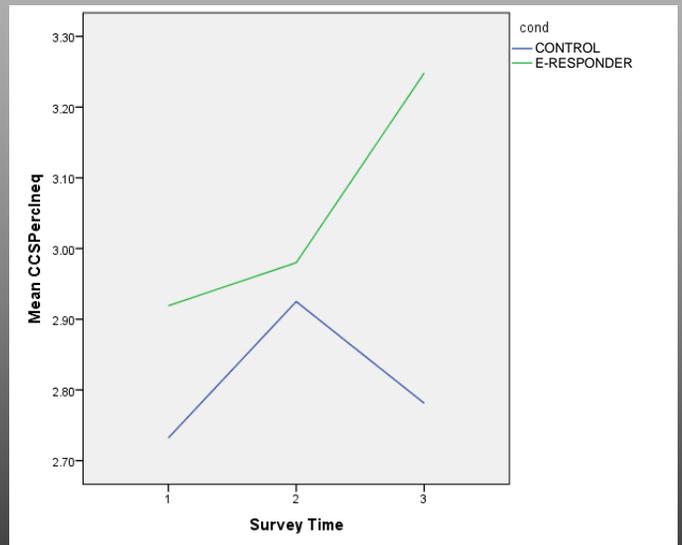
## SOCIOPOLITICAL AWARENESS

Discussions of oppression, power, and privilege emerged as a dominant themes in feedback sessions with youth and staff.

As seen in the graph, youth who participated in E-Responder reported an increased ability to recognize inequality in society, which is a critical predictor of future productive social action.

As seen in the graph, youth who participated in E-Responder reported an increased ability to recognize inequality in society, a critical component of becoming engaged in productive social action.

According to one participant, “There was a lot of ‘oh snap’ moments. It forced us to think a lot deeper about what is going on around us and what were in the [YLP videos]...I knew a lot of this stuff, but learned the vocabulary that made it easier to talk about and express our opinions.”



In addition, another participant reported that the YLP opened their eyes to different social issues: “I learned a lot about transgender issues. I wasn’t really aware of the issues they faced and also was never challenged to take their perspective. Now I think transgendered people shouldn’t be treated so badly.”

## CONCLUSION

- The findings from the three research briefs demonstrate the effectiveness of E-Responder as an intervention engaging youth online, where they are highly involved and literate. Additionally, the evidence presented highlights the importance of E-Responder as an intervention that supports youth in a variety of ways.
- As demonstrated, E-Responder is effective in de-escalating conflicts online and fostering important skills for youth. Indeed, equipped with E-Responder, VPPs were able to impact youth sociopolitical awareness and resilience, two key targets for addressing risks associated with involvement in violence. E-Responder gave VPPs a variety of tools to make a difference in the lives of crew-involved youth, showing that an online intervention can indeed be both comprehensive and effective. E-Responder is more than an intervention model; it is an early-prevention strategy.