

Many Voices, One Priority: Prevent Youth Violence

Op-Ed Toolkit for members of the Striving To Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere (STRYVE) Action Council

National partners can use this kit to craft op-eds, blogs, letters to the editor, and other articles that educate about evidence-based strategies, the benefits of preventing youth violence before it occurs, and the role of a public health approach.

When and why to write an op-ed

- Op-eds are opinion articles which appear opposite the editorial page in a newspaper. They can be written by local citizens, organization leaders, experts, or others who are knowledgeable about an issue.
- An op-ed can raise awareness of an overlooked issue in your community, win support for a policy goal, propose evidence-based solutions, and help set the agenda for conversations happening at the local, state, and national level. Before you begin writing, define your goal. What is your primary communications objective for the op-ed? Identifying your primary objective will help you select the key points you need to make in the text.
- Op-eds are typically 500-600 words in length, though it is always important to check with the individual publication for specific length requirements (most have guidelines listed on their websites).
- Timing the submission of an op-ed to coincide with a news event or other timely hook can increase its relevance and improve the chances of publication.

Choosing a topic

Focus on the solutions, not the problem. Rather than trying to convince your audience of the problem of youth violence, instead focus on the ways violence has been successfully addressed by and in communities. You will need to state the problem as part of your op-ed, but make this a simple and short part of the article. Spend most of your piece outlining a step forward.

Focus on systems, not individuals. Make sure to explain the social and cultural factors that can contribute to youth violence and, if corrected, how they can reduce or prevent violence from happening. If you want to include an individual's story, be sure to place it in the context of the public systems that supported that individual and how they facilitated his or her success.

Here are some positive themes you can use to approach your op-ed:

1. **Highlight the ingenuity of local communities.** This tells the reader that “we can do this.” It helps overcome the feeling of powerlessness that many fall into when thinking about addressing youth violence. Select examples of local programs that have succeeded in addressing youth violence. Include first-hand examples of programs that you have been a part of.
 - **Example:** *Our community has a history of creating innovative solutions to address challenging problems. Adolescence is a time when kids are learning more complex skills and need supportive adults to help them through this critical period of development.*

When schools, law enforcement, and religious leaders learn from each other's successes, we can create programs that will help our kids succeed.

2. **Stress interdependence:** This helps readers understand that we all benefit from living in a stronger community. It helps to counter the idea that certain issues are only problems for “those communities.” Illustrate how you have seen this effect play out in your community, using specific examples.
 - **Example:** *Everyone wins when kids participate in summer jobs programs. Young people gain valuable experience and skills for their future. Employers fill needed positions and have the opportunity to mentor the next generation. Communities benefit from having a more robust and diverse workforce. Summer jobs programs are valuable for the whole community.*
3. **Highlight reciprocity.** This can help the reader understand that when we provide for young people's needs today, we increase the chances they will contribute to our communities in the future. This can help readers understand the long-term impact of youth programming, and can move people from thinking about their own community to thinking more broadly about social issues.
 - **Example:** *Today's adolescents will soon become our neighbors, workers and leaders. The future prosperity of our state depends on our ability to create the conditions for all of our children to succeed.*
4. **Talk about collective responsibility.** We all have a role to play in preventing violence before it occurs. This will allow the reader to recognize that they, too, can make an impact on youth violence prevention within their community.
 - **Example:** *Every person and every organization in our community plays a role in shaping the relationships and environments in which young people learn and develop. This includes public health and health care organizations, education, criminal justice, public safety, housing, labor, businesses, faith-based organizations, community leaders, decision and policy makers, and private and non-profit organizations.*

Finding and using data

Once you have selected the story your op-ed will tell, choose data that support that story. Embedding facts and data into a narrative will help your reader attach meaning to them and draw a conclusion that supports your arguments.

Be selective when citing violent crime statistics. One or two data points can help lend credibility to your argument. A flood of scary numbers, however, can instead persuade your readers that the problem is intractable.

Use “social math” to make statistics relatable. Social math is a tool to present numbers in real-life, familiar contexts in order to help people see the story behind your statistics. By using an analogy based on numbers, you can make large numbers easier to understand through relating that number to something we already understand.

The numbers for the social math examples below are from CDC's Youth Violence Facts at a Glance and CDC's 2016 WISQARS data set.

Find everyday reference numbers for complex data.

Common references:

- Standard school bus is 72 seats
- Standard 747-400 airplane holds 524 people
- Yankee Stadium hold 54,251 people
- Over 6 million people visit the Lincoln Memorial each year
- About 3.6 million students graduate high school each year in the US
- Average primary school classroom has 23.1 students in the US
- Average lower secondary school classroom has 24.3 students in the US

Use a landmark in own community

Example: Dunbar High School (in Washington, DC) has about 160 students per grade. In just 11 weeks, there will be enough homicides among youth aged 10-24 years to equal the entire graduating class.

How-to: Dunbar High School (pick your own high school or local community group) has 683 students, equaling about 160 students in each of its four grades. 5319 youth aged 10-24 years were victims of homicide in 2016, which is about 14.5 youth per day. It would take 11 weeks ($14.5 \times 11 = 159.5$) for the homicide burden for youth to equal one class of students at Dunbar High School. You can also use days, months, or years.

Example: Yankee Stadium holds 54,251 spectators. In 2015, over 520,000 young people were treated in emergency rooms for injuries sustained from physical assault. That is enough to fill nine and a half Yankee Stadiums.

How-to: Pick your local baseball stadium or concert hall. Find the total capacity (54,251). The total number of emergency room visits for youth with injuries sustained from physical assault was 520,000. Divided the total by the capacity of the local venue. $520,000/54,251=9.56$.

Example: In Washington DC, the 535 members of Congress meet on Capitol Hill. In 2015, over 520,000 young people were treated in emergency rooms for injuries sustained from physical assault. If the members of Congress were the young people being treated in emergency rooms for physical assault injuries, it would only take nine hours for every member of Congress to be at the hospital.

How-to: Congress (pick your own local group, or find out how many people visit or can fit in a local landmark) has 535 members. If there are 521,178 young people in emergency rooms in 2015 for physical assault injuries, it equals approximately 1,428 young people per day, and 59.5 young people per hour. It takes just under 9 hours (535 divided by 59.5 is 8.99) for the young people treated in emergency rooms to equal the members of Congress.

Use town's population

Example: More young people go to the emergency room every year for violence-related injuries than the entire population of Washington, DC.

How-to: Washington, DC has a population of 693,972 people, which is less than the nearly 740,000 young people who went to the emergency room in 2015 for violence-related injuries.

Use a school bus representation

Example: For every full school bus of 72 students that arrives at your school, more than 14 of those students have reported being bullied at school.

How-to: In 2011, 20% of high school student reported being bullied at school. An average school bus has 72 seats, and if 1 in 5 of students are being bullied at school, then more than 14 of those students (20% of 72 is 14.4) report being bullied in school.

Data Sources:

- [WISQARS™ — Your source for U.S. Injury Statistics](#)
- [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System \(YRBSS\)](#)
- [The National Violent Death Reporting System \(NVDRS\)](#)
- [School Health Policies and Practices Study](#)
- [OJJDP's Statistical Briefing Book](#)

Sample statistics:

Our young people are getting hurt and dying -- Homicide is the third leading cause of death among persons aged 10 to 24 years. The majority of the homicides are from firearms.ⁱ Nearly 740,000 young people were treated in an emergency department for violence-related injuries in 2015, and physical assault injuries made up 521,178 of these visits.ⁱⁱ

Youth are experiencing health disparities – Homicide rates vary across demographics: homicide has been the leading cause of death for non-Hispanic Black youth for more than three decades and is the second leading cause of death for Hispanic youth.ⁱ

Youth cannot grow into productive citizens who contribute to the workforce if they are unable to learn— In a 2015 nationally representative sample of youth in grades 9-12, it was found that 5.6% of students did not go to school one or more days in the 30 days preceding the survey because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to or from school. In the same survey, 6.0% reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property one or more times in the 12 months preceding the survey.ⁱ

Youth violence and crime hurts everyone— Juveniles accounted for 10.2% of all violent crime arrests and 14.3% crime arrests in 2015. Violence increases health care costs, decreases property value, disrupts social services, and threatens the viability of businesses.ⁱ

MI-YVPC developed successful community collaborations that resulted in the healthy development of youth in neighborhoods in Flint, MI. An evaluation of a comprehensive set of six preventive strategies found that youth in the intervention community were 90% less likely to be a victim of assault than those living in other communities. Their efforts also resulted in an 87% reduction in expected counts of assault-related injuries relative to youth in a comparison community.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Clark-Hill Institute for Positive Youth Development reduced youth violence and promoted the healthy development of youth in Richmond, VA through successful community collaborations. By coordinating and implementing a comprehensive set of school-based and family-focused programs, they demonstrated that, relative to areas of the community not receiving the intervention, areas receiving the intervention had a 13% lower risk of youth violence.ⁱⁱⁱ

The economic consequences of youth violence are substantial— Youth violence results in more than 500,000 medically treated physical injuries each year. Youth homicides and nonfatal physical assault-

related injuries result in an estimated \$18.2 billion annually in combined medical and lost productivity costs alone. In reality, these costs are likely higher, because this estimate does not account for criminal justice system costs, psychological or social consequences for victims, or costs incurred by communities where violence is perpetrated.¹

Writing tips

- **Identify your goal.** What is your primary communications objective for the op-ed? Identifying your primary objective will help you select the main points you need to make in the text.
- **Identify your audience and media outlet.** Identify your target audience and choose a media outlet that reaches them. Research the outlet guidelines for op-ed submissions, including length.
- **Hone your voice.** Your perspective is unique. What do you add to this debate that is distinctively yours? Including anecdotes or specific examples from your experiences can make the piece more engaging and persuasive. Local details and perspectives that make it relevant to a publication's audience are important.
- **Prepare your draft.** These are essential elements as you construct your op-ed:
 - **A lead that grabs attention.** Your opening line must draw the readers' notice and hold it. Remember you are competing for the reader's attention. You must engage and entertain them.
 - **Essential background information.** Determine what your readers need to understand to follow your argument; this should be a brief paragraph or two.
 - **Your thesis and main arguments.** What is your most important argument? Support your conclusion with two to three key points and devote one paragraph to each supporting point. This paragraph breakdown will help maintain your focus and organize your op-ed as a unified piece.
 - **Opposing arguments.** Identify the opposing side to your argument. Include a paragraph or two to counter these arguments with facts and point out other weaknesses to explain why your position is stronger.
 - **A strong conclusion.** The article should end with a bang, not a yawn. Drive your key point home and sum up your argument.
 - **Edit.** Once you have a draft, seek a second opinion. Ask your reviewer to spot any errors, but also for his or her advice on whether you presented your arguments persuasively. Double check that your lead is compelling. Sometimes writers "bury" their best elements; moving a paragraph up may improve the piece.

Getting published

Op-eds are published at the editor's discretion. To publish an op-ed, you need to "pitch" it. Write a brief cover letter that offers a persuasive argument about why your op-ed is timely and relevant to the outlet's readers. The letter should include brief biographical information about yourself and your contact information. Many newspapers have instructions on their websites for submitting an op-ed; if you don't find it, call the paper to learn where to send your submission.

Submit your op-ed to just one outlet at a time. If your op-ed is not accepted at the first outlet, you can submit it elsewhere. It is more difficult to place an op-ed in a national newspaper; these outlets receive

hundreds of submissions each week and accept only a handful. Don't discount local media outlets. Local publications are well-read by members of the community, including elected leaders and others who can influence policy at the local, state, and national level, and can be shared in social media to expand their reach.

When your op-ed is published, be sure to share it with other STRYVE partner organizations so they can share it with their audiences and social media platforms.

Examples of successful op-eds on youth violence

- A Powerful Idea on Youth Violence: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/05/opinion/05thu2.html>
- The Survivors of Youth Violence are Hurting, Too: <http://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/op-ed/article150693122.html>
- Preventing Youth Violence: The Chicago Study: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/13/opinion/preventing-youth-violence-the-chicago-study.html>
- How do we beat youth violence? Switch focus away from punishment: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/22/youth-violence-epidemic-punishment-knife-crime-public-health-scotland>
- Youth Violence: 'I Want Out Of My Gang Family': https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/06/youth-violence-i-want-out_n_1190312.html
- Ending the Epidemic of Youth Gun Violence: <https://health.usnews.com/health-news/patient-advice/articles/2015/10/19/ending-the-epidemic-of-youth-gun-violence>

ⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Youth Violence Facts at a Glance [online]. (2016). [cited 2018 Apr 3] Available from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/yv-datasheet.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS) [online]. (2016). [cited 2018 Apr 4] Available from www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/.

ⁱⁱⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. YVPC Accomplishments. [cited 2018 Apr 18] Available from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/yvpc/accomplishments.html>