Battling teen violence: What works? UCSD gets grant to help it find out
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Author: Cheryl Clark

UCSD pediatrician Vivian Reznik remembers the kid who made her question her role in medicine.

His name was Anthony, a smart, motivated 12-year-old in foster care who needed a kidney transplant. But after he got one, he grew older, robbed a bank, went to prison and ignored his medication. He eventually lost the kidney.

"It broke my heart and got me thinking, is it enough to cure disease, give a kid perfect health, when instead he ends up in jail?" Reznik asked.

After dealing with several kids like Anthony, Reznik decided to use her spare time, which she spends in the dance arts, to find ways to reduce violence among San Diego youth, zeroing in on neighborhoods that have the highest rates of adolescent crime.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta is on a similar campaign, and this year for the first time handed out 10 grants to UCSD and nine other institutions for science-based research on violence prevention.

The goal: determine which programs work and which don't by tracking the kids in them, monitoring factors such as culture, economics and language in multi-ethnic areas such as San Diego's Mid-City.

"This is a medical/public health problem, with dire consequences for trauma and mortality, especially for young people," said James Mercy, associate director for science in the CDC's division of violence prevention, whose office is in charge of the grants. "But we have almost no idea what works and what doesn't."

Does showing teens gory pictures of their peers, shot and lying on hospital gurneys, reduce adolescent aggression? How about teaching anger management or negotiation skills?

These are among programs that have been tried, but no one knows if they really work.

One program called Scared Straight, implemented several years ago, sent teen-age visitors to prisons, exposing them to life inside. But it backfired when the teens saw the inmates' behavior as "cool" and identified with their bravado, Mercy said.

Hourlong videos shown in high school assemblies also didn't work because they were too short and too easily forgotten, he said.
Increasingly frustrated with carnage in their trauma units, doctors are starting to think of youth violence as a preventable disease.

At UCSD, Reznik's $1.1 million grant, which she will receive over the next three years, will be used for a new Academic Center for Excellence on Youth Violence. It will target City Heights, where Reznik and others from UCSD are already involved in dance and other after-school youth programs. They will continue to study strategies for preventing violence.

"It's got the second-highest rate of crime in San Diego, especially juvenile crime," Reznik said. "But it's also a place where people really want to work together, policing their community."

She plans to use computer statistics to identify types, times and locations of crimes and their victims to help community leaders battle specific crime trends. For example, drug dealers and petty thieves who target kids after school will be countered with a parent-run volunteer program that escorts students as they walk home.

Another program will explore domestic violence and how to overcome cultural values that discourage abused women from reporting incidents to police or social workers, Reznik said.

The project will also target violence in its early stages. Dr. David Hoyt, chief of UCSD's trauma department, will work with children who are victims of extreme violence, a group known to be at high risk of becoming perpetrators or victims of violence. He will try to determine if there are "teaching moments" in which health workers can get to teens who think they might die and change their behavior.

"We're not getting cynical, we're getting intellectual, and we're going to study this to design effective interventions," Hoyt said.

Reznik shares the UCSD grant with researchers at San Diego State University, Cal State San Marcos, the National Latino Research Center, California Western School of Law, the county Department of Health and Human Services and grass-roots organizations Mid-City for Youth and New Beginnings Collaborative.

The group will assemble a curriculum for medical and public health schools to teach violence prevention skills that have been found to work -- such as anger management -- much like one might teach nutrition or sex education, Reznik said.

"We're going to be asking, who are the people committing violence and who is it committed against; what works to control it and what is the role of guns, schools and the relationship of schools and hate crimes?" she said.

Some academic centers already have established violence prevention departments or
divisions, and five of those were awarded program grants. UCSD, which has no current program, received one of the remaining five grants to develop its own program, Mercy said.

Some of the work will involve studying the outcomes of programs such as City Moves!, an after-school program at the Urban Village that teaches self-esteem, team building, creative conflict prevention and communication to elementary and middle-school children.

The CDC is conducting its research during a relative lull in violence. Since the mid-1990s, when homicides and other violent crimes skyrocketed, numbers have fallen substantially.

Nationwide, serious crimes such as rape, robbery, murder, arson and aggravated assault dropped 7 percent last year over 1998, and the 11.6 million such offenses last year represented the lowest number since 1978, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. San Diego County has reported a similar trend.

Caption: 1 PIC
Dr. Vivian Reznik of UCSD watched youngsters in a dance class she helped develop at the Urban Village in San Diego's City Heights. (B-6) John R. McCutchen / Union-Tribune

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