



Seattle Youth Violence Prevention Initiative: Two Key Conclusions

City of Seattle
Office of City Auditor

October 14, 2015

Background: The Seattle Youth Violence Prevention Initiative (SYVPI) was established in 2009 to reduce youth violence in Seattle. The budget for SYVPI has grown from \$3.3 million in 2010 to \$5.7 million in 2015. The Mayor's proposed 2016 budget includes \$5,869,624 for SYVPI. In addition, the Seattle Police Department has budget authority for four School Emphasis Officers and a Sergeant who support SYVPI. Since its inception, SYVPI has had two stated goals:

- Reduce juvenile court referrals for violence by 50%.
- Reduce middle school suspensions and expulsions for violence by 50%.

The staff who designed SYVPI chose to address these goals by focusing on youth ages 12-17 in geographic focus areas of Central, Southeast, and Southwest Seattle. SYVPI indicates that its priority populations include:

1. "Youth convicted multiple times and released from supervision by the state or county or who are under minimal supervision and are considered to be at continued risk to re-offend.
2. Youth arrested for crimes that do not meet the juvenile detention intake criteria and are released back into the community.
3. Middle school youth at risk of multiple suspensions for incidences related to violence or chronic truancy.
4. Youth and their associates who are victims of violence and may seek retaliation.
5. Gang-involved youth."

Conclusions: In 2013, the Seattle City Council asked the Office of City Auditor to develop an overall evaluation strategy for SYVPI and to evaluate two of its components: Street Outreach and School Emphasis Officers. This paper briefly summarizes two key conclusions from the four reports on SYVPI that we have published since 2013:

1. **Changing adult-run systems can yield positive results for youth, and**
2. **Support from City leaders can help ensure that efforts are focused and effective.**

Our conclusions recognize that SYVPI's two stated goals are not direct indicators of youth violence. Rather, they are measures of penalties generated by the criminal justice system and schools. Nonetheless, research indicates that these penalties themselves can cause harm to youth and actually increase criminal offending over time. Therefore, it is important to reduce court referrals and suspensions/expulsions to reduce long-term harm to youth. For this reason, the City should consider an approach to reducing youth violence that includes addressing the institutional factors that contribute to school suspensions and court referrals. Additionally, it is important for the City to develop a more systematic approach to ensuring that the prevention services it provides actually reach the subset of Seattle youth who are the most vulnerable to violence, and that the City commits to rigorously evaluating its efforts to ensure that they are effective.

The four reports that we have published regarding SYVPI are available at <http://www.seattle.gov/cityauditor>.

- [Logic Model and Evaluation Strategy for the Seattle Youth Violence Prevention Initiative \(SYVPI\) - January 31, 2013](#)
- [Supporting a Future Evaluation of the Seattle Youth Violence Prevention Initiative \(SYVPI\) - October 24, 2014](#)
- [Process Evaluation of Seattle's School Emphasis Officer Program](#)
- [The City of Seattle Could Reduce Violent Crime and Victimization by Strengthening its Approach to Street Outreach](#)

1. Changing Adult-Run Systems Can Yield Positive Results for Youth

SYVPI focuses on individual youth, but its goals won't be realized without changes in the institutional systems that generate court referrals and school suspensions/expulsions.

SYVPI seeks to reduce juvenile court referrals and school suspensions/expulsions by attempting to change the behavior of individual youth. The approach does not address the impact of the adult-run systems that generate court referrals and school suspensions or expulsions. Our reports describe this misalignment of SYVPI goals and strategies. Further, recent presentations from the Oakland Unified School District show that changing the adult-run systems can result in significant positive outcomes.

SYVPI's current interventions are designed to connect youth with services that promote their development, including mentoring and jobs. While these services are important for youth who might otherwise have barriers to these opportunities, this strategy does not address issues with the criminal justice system or the schools.

In other words, this approach does not account for the institutional factors that contribute to school suspensions and criminal



City Councilmember Bruce Harrell introduces Oakland Unified School District representatives to a crowd at South Shore PK-8 School. Oakland has reduced suspensions by half since 2010. Photo: City of Seattle Office of City Auditor

justice referrals, factors which can, and frequently do, result in an inequitable application of these penalties. In fact, when last reported by SYVPI in 2013, suspensions/expulsions had increased in SYVPI's focus areas. And while court referrals have decreased, SYVPI has been unable to determine the effect that its individually-based approach has yielded toward systematically reducing court referrals or school suspensions/expulsions.

We noted this misalignment between SYVPI's goals (reductions in juvenile court referrals and middle school

suspensions or expulsions for violence) and the work that SYVPI actually does (providing youth with services) in our first paper to the City Council regarding SYVPI in January 2013

(<http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/CityAuditor/auditreports/SYVPILogicModeltoCouncil13113.pdf>).

Since then, we have identified an approach that is having much greater success. This is the systems-change approach to reducing suspensions used by the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). **Based on this approach, OUSD has reduced suspensions by 50 percent district-wide since 2010.**

During a special presentation in July 2015, hosted by the City Council Public Safety, Civil Rights, and Technology Committee

(<http://www.seattle.gov/city-auditor/special-presentations>),

OUSD officials described their approach. They began by having discussions within the school district about its institutional bias and the need for systems change.

Subsequently, they have implemented a four-pronged evidence-based approach that

includes: trauma-informed care, restorative justice, culturally relevant curriculum, and positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS). Further, Oakland has implemented data systems for rigorously tracking their progress and outcomes and for fostering continuous improvement.

Rather than trying to change youth one-by-one, Oakland is working on changing their schools' culture, reforming

district policies, and providing students and staff with new tools for resolving conflicts.

The Oakland model illustrates how making institutional changes can have a positive impact on youth. If the City is still interested in the SYVPI goals of reducing court referrals and school suspensions/expulsions, it should consider a similar systems-change approach.

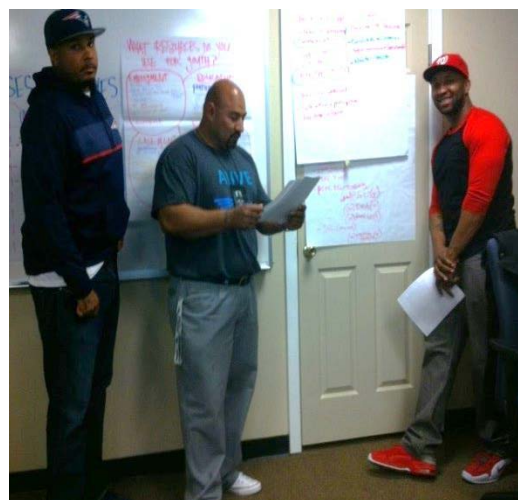
2. Support from City Leaders Can Help Ensure that Efforts are Focused and Effective

The City needs to take additional steps to ensure that services are provided to those who will benefit the most and that we can evaluate our results.

In 2014 and 2015, we published three reports on SYVPI. These reports all concluded that more work is needed to ensure that services are reaching those most vulnerable to violence, and more work is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of City programs. Our recommendations have been accepted by SYVPI and the Seattle Police Department. The work ahead will require strong City leadership support to strengthen youth violence prevention efforts and ensure that they are effective.

In October 2014, we published

an evaluability assessment for SYVPI (http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/CityAudit/or/auditreports/SYVPI-Published-Report-10_24_14.pdf). The report concluded that due to a number of issues with the design and implementation of SYVPI, including issues with their data system, a rigorous evaluation of SYVPI's effectiveness since 2009 is not possible. The report outlined a series of steps that SYVPI could take to get ready for a future evaluation.



SYVPI Street Outreach staff collaborated on the development of new systems and protocols to document their work and track outcomes. Photo: Office of City

Based on the report's recommendations, SYVPI began a youth violence needs assessment in January 2015 that should be completed by

the end of 2015. This needs assessment could help determine where services are most needed and serve as a baseline for a future evaluation.

At the City Council's request, in 2015 we also reviewed two components of SYVPI: Street Outreach(<http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/CityAuditor/auditreports/StreetOutreachFinalReport100615.pdf>) and the Seattle Police Department's (SPD's) School Emphasis Officers (<http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/CityAuditor/auditreports/SOFinalReport100615.pdf>).

Research from other jurisdictions (see our 2012 crime prevention review at <https://wayback.archive-it.org/3241/20131221183304/https://www.seattle.gov/audit/2012.htm#crimeprevention>) indicated that some

school officer programs and some street outreach programs had the effect of increasing crime rather than reducing crime. Therefore, proper program design and subsequent evaluation are the keys to ensuring that similar programs in Seattle are not unintentionally causing harm.

For both SPD's School Emphasis Officers and SYVPI's Street Outreach program, we worked collaboratively with staff and management to create standard protocols and develop more systematic ways to track and manage their work in preparation for a future evaluation. In addition, our reports contain recommendations that will strengthen the City's approach to youth violence prevention

efforts and ensure they are achieving their intended outcomes.

While initial steps have been taken, it will be up to City leaders to help sustain momentum for evaluating Seattle's youth violence prevention efforts.

All of the recommendations from our [SYVPI Evaluability Assessment](#), our [School Emphasis Officer Assessment](#), and [Street Outreach Assessment](#) have been accepted by SYVPI and the Seattle Police Department. The City Council, with its interest in whether the City's youth violence prevention efforts are effective, can also play an important role to ensure that the recommendations are implemented.

Office of City Auditor's Research & Evaluation Process



In 2009, the City Council asked the City Auditor to develop the capacity for program evaluation because it wanted to know whether City programs were accomplishing their intended goals. This question can be best answered through rigorous scientific program evaluation. Recognizing that program evaluation can be costly and may require specific expertise, our office has developed working partnerships with leading researchers and research institutions. We have also sought federally-funded sources of technical assistance from government agencies.

This research brief summarizes work that we have contracted with George Mason University, the University of Maryland, MEF and Associates, and Arizona State University. In addition, it reflects work that we have developed with free federal technical assistance from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Centers for Disease Control, the National Gang Center, and the Office of Justice Programs Diagnostic Center. We received additional input on draft materials from researchers at institutions including the University of Washington and John Jay College of Criminal Justice.