Evaluation of the Charles E. Shannon Initiative in Haverhill and Methuen, MA
The impact of the VIP program: Results of qualitative data collection

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Executive summary

In the spring of 2008, an evaluation research team from the Boston University School of Public Health conducted two focus groups with high school student members of the Violence Intervention Prevention (VIP) program based at Haverhill High School. The VIP program is funded in part by a Charles E. Shannon Initiative (CSI) grant from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety, which also provided funding for the evaluation. The purpose of VIP is to reduce gang membership in Haverhill and to build resilience in youth who are at-risk for delinquency and school drop-out. The results of this qualitative investigation suggest that the VIP program has benefits for members. Reasons why the VIP program may be successful include: (1) VIP is viewed as more than just a school club; members feel it is a “lifestyle” and are committed to upholding its values of non-violence, academic achievement, and leadership; (2) VIP teaches students anger management and other conflict resolution techniques; (3) VIP provides students with social support; (4) VIP promotes academic achievement and may reduce school drop-out; and (5) VIP provides students with opportunities to develop leadership skills and build self-esteem. VIP’s primary gang membership prevention strategies are to use peer education to engage middle school youth, and to foster resilience among the high school membership. Participants in the focus groups recommended that VIP develop new intragroup systems (i.e., a phone tree) in order to improve communication about upcoming events and that VIP plan more school-based (as opposed to community-based) events. The results of this qualitative investigation should be paired with the results of quantitative outcome assessment. Additional research that explores whether VIP has a positive impact on the school community as a whole, and whether VIP’s probable success is personality driven (i.e., reflects unique characteristics of the adult organizers) or model-driven (i.e., could be transferred to new settings and new populations), is needed.
Background and Purpose

In 2007, the Massachusetts legislature allocated $11 million for gang membership prevention grants through the Senator Charles E. Shannon, Jr. Community Safety Initiative (CSI). Subsequently, 16 Massachusetts communities received funds from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety (MA-EOPS) in order to implement youth gang violence prevention strategies between July 2007 and December 2008. The Merrimack Valley cities of Haverhill and Methuen, located in Northeast Massachusetts, received one of the 16 Shannon CSI grants. An evaluation team from the Boston University School of Public Health received a supplementary grant from MA-EOPS to evaluate the Haverhill and Methuen initiative.

One of the key components of the Haverhill and Methuen CSI initiative is the implementation of a school-based violence prevention program called the Violence Intervention Prevention (VIP) program. The BUSPH evaluation team assessed the impact of VIP on students and on the community of Haverhill through quantitative and qualitative data collection. This report summarizes the results of the qualitative data collection.

Methods

Study Design

The qualitative data were collected via two one-hour focus groups with high school students who were VIP members. All qualitative data collection occurred in March 2008 and was approved by the Boston University School of Public Health Human Subjects Committee.

Sample

The evaluation team sought a diverse group of student VIP team members for participation in the two focus groups; students with varied length of involvement with VIP, varied levels of engagement in VIP, and from different grades were desired. Focus group participants were recruited through a two-stage process. First, the VIP program director (Ms. Carol Ireland) nominated 30 VIP members as possible focus group participants. The BU evaluation team requested that Ms. Ireland nominate students regardless of her perception of their enjoyment of VIP. The list of nominated students was forwarded to the BU evaluation team who randomly selected 15 to be invited to participate in the focus groups. Of the 15 invitees, 14 ultimately participated. Participants’ ages ranged from 13-18 years old. No other demographic information about focus group participants is available.

Protocol

Focus group questions were developed by the Boston University School of Public Health evaluation team with input from VIP program staff (Ms. Carol Ireland and Ms. Lori Curry). Open-ended questions were designed to elicit information about strong and weak elements of the VIP program, how the program affected members, and whether VIP
had had an impact on the school and neighborhood environment from a youth gang membership prevention perspective. Both focus groups were conducted by a master’s level, trained research assistant (Ms. Nicole Daley).

Analysis

Audio-recordings were transcribed by the research assistant who conducted the focus groups. The transcripts were then compiled, cleaned (to remove any inadvertently collected personally identifying information) and coded by hand. Codes were generated to reflect the focus group and interview questions, and additional codes were developed subsequent to an initial read-through of the transcripts. Codes were applied to chunks of text (i.e., phrases, sentences or paragraphs) by the research assistant. The code application was then checked by an additional rater (Dr. Rothman). Finally, coded text was grouped by theme and particularly illustrative quotations were selected for presentation.

Results

The qualitative data support the idea that VIP has had a strong, positive impact on student members. Several features of VIP that may contribute to its success emerged through this qualitative research. Specifically, it appears that students (both VIP members and non-members) view VIP as a “lifestyle” or code of conduct rather than simply an after school club. In addition, VIP membership may impart new and non-violent ways of handling interpersonal conflict, enhance leadership skills and improve self-esteem, provide social support, and strengthen academic goals. One challenge that VIP currently faces is communication about events between members. Student VIP members had suggestions about how intragroup communication could be improved.

VIP is a “lifestyle”

One of the most notable themes that emerged during focus groups was that members view VIP not only as a school club, but as a way of life, and can retain members for years past graduation. According to these members, joining VIP is tantamount to taking an oath of non-violence and represents an identity shift for many. In the words of one respondent, to be a VIP member means acquiring a level of “fame” in Haverhill. Interestingly, members who are unable to uphold the VIP code of conduct may prefer to drop out of VIP rather than “tarnish” VIP’s reputation. Many commented that VIP members enjoy a special social status within the school and in the community; they pointed out that VIP has a waiting list, that other students wish they could wear VIP tee-shirts and bracelets, that younger children treat them as though they are important, and that the Haverhill police recognize and appreciate VIP members. In their own words:

“I view VIP as a lifestyle...My world kind of revolves around VIP.”
“...we’ll have little kids come up to us and say ‘Hey, that was the kid that did the training with me this weekend’... We get a lot of respect from cops and stuff.”

“Last year, I dropped [out of VIP for a while] ...I did something that was kinda stupid and I didn’t want to tarnish the name of VIP so I dropped it.”

“A lot of us [drop out temporarily] because we don’t want to make VIP look like hypocrite [sic].”

“I am not going to lie—there are a bunch of people [in VIP] for the fame and such, because we are known so much.”

“Every kid in Haverhill High [comes] up to us saying, ‘I want a [VIP] shirt.’ ... or the bracelets.”

“There is a long waiting list to get into [VIP].”

“There are people who graduated two years ago, three years ago, that still come to our meetings, who still do activities with us, and that are just as active as people in this school.”

VIP promotes non-violent behavior

Students’ comments revealed that VIP may be helping to promote non-violence in at least two ways. First, students learn anger management and conflict resolution skills during VIP trainings, and these skills are continually modeled and reinforced by the VIP staff and VIP peers. Second, because VIP is viewed as a lifestyle with non-violence as its core value, members refrain from violent behavior in order to maintain the VIP membership culture:

“[VIP] taught me how to release my anger in a way that won’t hurt myself or others...using the techniques...those are the ways you can let out the anger in a way that won’t harm anyone or get anyone into trouble.”

“...the trainings...have taught us how to deal with our anger and approach things in a different manner. When I get angry instead of taking it out on a person, I go and figure out a way to take it out healthily.”
“I used to be a very angry person. But these [VIP] trainings what they’ve taught me…is how to cope with it.”

“Today…me and this other kid bumped into each other, so then he starts cursing and swearing at me. And then I looked back and this other kid from VIP was there and so we just started laughing at him and walked away. Just because of VIP I didn’t get loud. I didn’t swear at him. I just walked away.”

“Personally, I’ve changed a lot because before I joined VIP…I was a fighter, I used to fight a lot…I came from a place where it was a way of survival. I fought just as a hobby. I thought it was fun. Someone invited me to a [VIP] meeting and it definitely changed my life because it was the first time I was around people who actually cared about what they did with their lives.”

VIP builds leadership skills

Students spoke excitedly about being looked up to by younger children in the community, and about developing expertise and becoming sought-after public speakers. The positive attention is clearly important to some VIP members, and inspires them to continue on in VIP and to imagine future endeavors that will put them in similar positive leadership positions.

“Mondays I go to Neville Middle school with three other people and [after the meeting] the kids…always ask ‘Where are you going?’, ‘Can I get your number?’, ‘Do you have a MySpace page?’ And they are like ‘Don’t leave, we have to hang out. I don’t want this to end.’”

“We just recently started a youth VIP program in the middle schools and I can’t emphasize how exciting it is when they...meet with us every Monday. The kids are there waiting for us and they can’t wait to get going...”

“A lot of kids come into [VIP] just because they’re bored…and then before you know it, you’re a leader.”

“The thing about VIP is that it puts you out there. I’ve been asked to speak so many times, like 40 times.”

“[When I graduate], I want to be a leader.”
VIP provides social support

One of the most basic, but essential, benefits of VIP membership is the close camaraderie with peers. For some, belonging to the VIP “in-group” appears to be critically important because it provides emotional support that they are not receiving at home. The healthful, non-violent and positive social environment is remarkable to many students; VIP provides students with functional, safe, and nurturing interpersonal relationships:

“We brag about people’s skills...we brag about each other.”

“It’s not just a group as many would like to think. It’s a support for people who need a support. To me it’s a support. Family when they are not around, people who listen to you when you need someone there to listen."

“I bring my brother to VIP every now and then...to let him know that he doesn’t have to do violence to fit in. [VIP] helps me with my family.”

“See, VIP has been a family for me. My Mom...wasn’t prepared to have kids...”

“All VIP members are friends.”

VIP motivates students to stay in school and to apply to college

Many students stated that VIP prevented them from dropping out of high school or provided them with needed information or encouragement that enabled them to consider post-secondary education.

“...prior to VIP, when I was in high school, I didn’t think about college. I am a senior and I am going to be the first person in my whole entire family to graduate from high school. ...VIP has motivated me...they gave me a light.”

“I, for one, didn’t even think about college because in my family money is tight. Now I am beginning to learn through VIP...that there are other ways to get to college.”

“I always wanted to go to college, but being in VIP enforced the feeling. I wanted to go, but now I will fight for it.”

“[Before VIP] I didn’t even want to be in school. I was going to drop out.”
“I think that VIP gives you that push [to succeed], because sometimes people aren’t there to tell you to try and do better.”

VIP is focused on prevention: “We don’t want Haverhill to be the next Boston or New York”

When asked about the impact of VIP on the city of Haverhill and on gang membership, they acknowledged that Haverhill is a city with problems that include drug use, prostitution and violence. However, they pointed out that national gangs (e.g., Bloods, Crips) are not active in Haverhill. A more pressing concern, according to the students, is “gang imitation”: middle school youth forming groups, engaging in violent behavior, and adopting well-known gang names without formal connection to the national gangs. Members believe that their VIP-related outreach and training work can prevent the development of “real” gangs.

“I want you to hear it from someone who has lived here for 13 years... A lot of crime and violence goes on around Haverhill, but they keep it quiet.”

“We don’t want Haverhill to turn into a gang-related town, to be the next Boston, New York City or even California... So that is the whole thing VIP is here [to do]... we are trying to prevent that from happening.”

“Gangs nowadays are recruiting little kids because... they are so easily [manipulated]. You can convince them easily... we could have a huge impact because a lot of kids younger than us look [up to] us.”

“[In Haverhill, we have] people who wish they were in a gang but do not understand the real meaning of a gang. Lot of people claim to be a gang member or part of a gang, but the reality is that they have just heard the name of the gang but don’t know the history of the gang itself, which causes problems... In middle school, there has been an [increase] of kids saying they’re in a gang called Bloods, but in reality they don’t know the real meaning of being a Blood, and that causes tension and causes violence.”

VIP intragroup communications could be improved

When asked what kinds of improvements should be made to the program the majority of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the program. The VIP members had three recommendations for how VIP could be improved. They expressed a desire to know about VIP events with more advanced notice and to learn about them through a
more organized system (i.e., a phone tree). Two respondents had the following exchange:

“R1: There is a little issue with communication. They have a little problem getting [notification about] events out to us on time, or letting us know. There were a couple of times when I missed a few things because I didn’t hear about it. I’m a leader...then we find out about events from people who aren’t leaders when it should be the other way around. So sometimes the communication fails. I think we should have a phone tree. We have one for the wrestling team. So the leaders would call some people and they would call other people. So we can stop the last minute callings.

R2: Do you mean the last minute callings to say we have an event coming up tomorrow, can you come?

R1: Or even the same day.”

They also recommended that VIP continue to do outreach to the school community (i.e., other students) as well as in the community of Haverhill overall. Specifically, they suggested that more events be held in-school as opposed to in city buildings. According to participants the increased focus on workshops in the community has shifted attention away from the school. A few participants suggested that VIP do more inside the school, because there are still students at Haverhill High School who are unaware of the VIP program and its message.

Finally, one student suggested that communication about events in Room A4 could be made clearer with more fliers and/or a larger and frequently updated wall calendar.

Discussion

The results of this qualitative investigation suggest that the VIP program has benefits for members. Reasons why the VIP program may be successful include:

- VIP is viewed as more than just a school club; members feel it is a “lifestyle” and are committed to upholding its values of non-violence, academic achievement, and leadership
- VIP teaches students anger management and other conflict resolution techniques
- VIP provides students with social support
- VIP promotes academic achievement and may reduce school drop-out
- VIP provides students with opportunities to develop leadership skills and build self-esteem
• VIP is focused on prevention; its strategy is to reach youth through peers in order to prevent gang membership

It is important to note that it is not possible to determine from this investigation whether VIP membership actually reduces school drop-out, increases self-esteem, or reduces violent behavior. A quantitative outcome evaluation study, utilizing a comparison group of non-VIP members, is needed in order to assess VIP’s effectiveness.

While the results of this qualitative investigation are encouraging, questions remain about whether and to what extent the VIP program has benefits for the school community as a whole. In addition, it is not yet clear whether the VIP program model is transferable to new settings or to new populations (e.g., middle school students). One possibility is that the VIP program is successful because of the particular individuals who currently staff it—would the same strategy and activities be similarly successful if other adults were responsible? These questions are important to pursue through additional evaluation research.

Conclusion

The VIP program appears to appeal to and engage student members. According to their self-reports, VIP prevents members from using violence, enhances their commitment to academic goals, provides them with positive social support, and increases self-esteem and leadership capacity. These claims should be further investigated through quantitative research.