

The effects of Positive Youth Development interventions on substance use, violence and inequalities: systematic review of theories of change, processes and outcomes

EVIDENCE BRIEF

About this brief

This brief summarises evidence from a National Institute of Health research funded project on: The effects of Positive Youth Development interventions on substance use, violence and inequalities: systematic review of theories of change, processes and outcome.

Background and rationale

Substance use and violence are highly prevalent and damaging to young people's health. There are calls for interventions to address multiple rather than single risk behaviours because these behaviours cluster together^{31,32} and can potentially be more efficient. Positive youth development (PYD) is one such intervention to address inter-clustered risk behaviours among young people. The UK's National Youth Agency (NYA) defines such interventions as voluntary educational activities aiming to bring about generalised youth development in terms of positive assets such as skills and confidence, rather than merely remedying 'problem behaviours'. Non-systematic review of PYD effects on violence and drug use^{30,50} suggest benefits as well as variability, but must be treated with caution given these are unsystematic and quite old.

Aim and review questions

This systematic review aimed to systematically search for, appraise the quality of and synthesise evidence on PYD interventions addressing substance use or violence, asking the following review questions:

1. What **theories of change** inform PYD interventions delivered to young people aged 11-18 addressing substance use and violence?
2. What **characteristics of participants and contexts are identified as barriers and facilitators** of implementation and receipt in process evaluations of PYD?
3. What is the **effectiveness** and cost-effectiveness **of PYD** when compared to usual or no treatment in **reducing substance use** (smoking, alcohol, drugs), and **violence** (perpetration and victimization)?
4. What **characteristics of participants and contexts** appear to **moderate/are necessary and sufficient for PYD effectiveness**?

Key findings

Included studies

A total of 48 reports and **30** distinct **studies** (i.e. a distinct description of theory of change or empirical evaluation) were included in the review. **Sixteen** reports described **theories of change**; 12 reports, from **ten** distinct studies **evaluated processes**; and 26 reports, from **ten** distinct studies **evaluated outcomes**. Five reports combined theories of change, process evaluation and/or outcome evaluation. **No economic evaluations** or studies with cost data were identified.

RQ1. Theories of change for PYD effects on substance use and violence

Sixteen reports were included. We aimed to assess the quality of these theories drawing on criteria used previously but found that these were challenging to apply consistently to the PYD theoretical literature. There was insufficient information to develop a comprehensive theory of change for the effects of PYD interventions on substance use and violence. However, by filling in some of the gaps we succeeded in generating the following theory of change:



However, the theoretical literature synthesised here offers only **limited insights about how accruing particular positive assets**, via reducing the impact on individuals of environmental risk, or ameliorating the impact of individuals engaging in risks, **might reduce health risks, such as substance use or violence**

RQ2. Characteristics of participants and contexts that affect implementation and receipt of PYD

Eight of the 10 process evaluations were conducted in the USA, the remaining two were conducted in Australia and England. Study quality ranged from high reliability and usefulness (n=3) to low reliability and usefulness (n=3).

A number of themes emerged from process evaluation synthesis:

- **Community engagement** was a **key** to ensuring programmes were **culturally sensitive, accessible and appealing** to young people and their parents, and the wider community.
- **Employing community members** could be **pivotal to successful implementation** and providing role models. However, volunteers could be unreliable for example in acting as mentors.
- **Collaboration with other community agencies** could be **important** particularly in expanding the range of activities offered but could lead to drift from original approaches where other agencies e.g. schools had other goals.
- Evidence on **young people's relationships with providers and peers** suggest that: i) providers should relate to young people in a **calm, nurturing yet authoritative way** and ii) skilled providers could **bridge social differences between participants such as those involved in gangs**, but this could be undermined by poor training or retention.
- **Staff retention was challenging** where programmes could not offer full time positions.
- Providers found it **challenging to empower young people to make decisions about engagement in programme activities** while also requiring them to **engage in diverse activities** including vocational or academic activities.

RQ3. Effectiveness and cost-effectiveness in reducing substance use and violence

We included 12 study reports of 9 distinct outcome evaluations in our meta-analyses.

- **Nine** studies were conducted in the **USA**; and **one** in the **UK**.
- **Three intervention types** were identified: after-school; multi-component; and mentoring-driven interventions.
- **Four** studies were **randomised controlled trials**; **five** were **non-randomised trials with prospectively matched control groups**; and one included both randomised trial and non-randomised components
- Overall **quality of evidence** for our analyses of substance use and violence outcomes was rated '**very low**'

Meta-analysis of outcomes found:

- **Small**, statistically significant **short-term effects** (0-4 months post-intervention) for an omnibus measure of **substance use and violence**.
- However, no significant effects for alcohol, illicit drugs or smoking

We **could not** undertake meta-regression to **assess socio-demographic moderators** but narrative synthesis suggested no clear pattern of effects by sex.

RQ4. Characteristics of participants and contexts that determine effectiveness

We aimed to examine what characteristics of participants and contexts appear to moderate/are necessary and sufficient for PYD effectiveness. Synthesis of PYD theories of change and process evaluations suggested several hypotheses:

- interventions which offer and breadth of activities may be more effective for younger adolescents while those which emphasise depth may be more effective for older adolescents;
- interventions which combine prevention and positive development may be less effective than those which only focus on positive development;
- interventions of more than one year's duration may be more effective than those of shorter duration;
- interventions may be more effective for participants with low or moderate levels of baseline risk since there is more scope for stimulating "intentional self-regulation"¹²⁴
- interventions that have specific methods to engage communities will be more effective;
- projects that engage with schools will achieve better recruitment;
- interventions that are delivered by well trained staff will be more effective;
- interventions that have better staff retention will be more effective; and
- interventions that offer some choices but require some engagement with educational components will be more effective.

However the limited number of studies and very low level of statistical heterogeneity precluded examination of these hypotheses via meta-regression or qualitative comparative analyses.

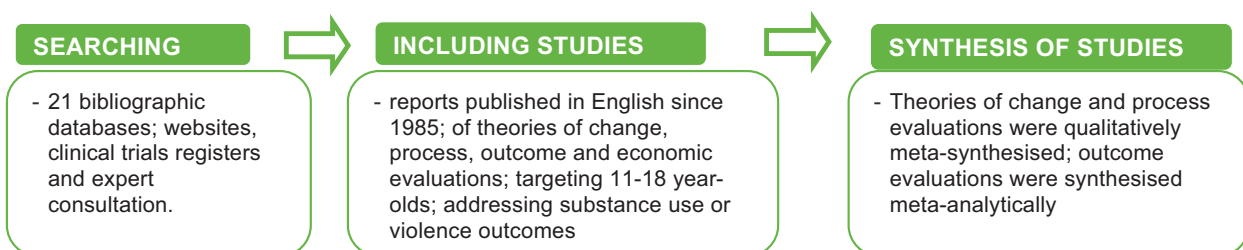
Conclusions

The health effects of PYD are currently under-theorised. Implementation can be challenging. We found no evidence that PYD interventions currently being evaluated achieve reductions in substance use or violence of public health significance. However, these may not constitute a test of the effectiveness of all aspect of the PYD model since the interventions evaluated, though meeting our inclusion criteria, may not be exemplars of PYD.

Implications

- ✓ Any investment in PYD as a strategy to reduce substance use and violence outcomes should occur only within the context of evaluation studies
- ✓ Future evaluations of the effects of PYD interventions on these outcomes must clarify intended mechanisms of action, and describe their theory of change and intervention characteristics in more detail.
- ✓ When delivering PYD programme, further attention must be given to resolving the tensions between enabling YP to choose which activities to participate in and in ensuring YP engage in sufficient breadth of intervention activities
- ✓ PYD providers need sufficient capacity in terms of staff and resources for successful implementation.

Methodology





**How can we enable
Positive Youth Development?
The research says...**

**1. Provide a positive environment
through.**

- Positive expectations
- Real relationships with adults
- Diverse activities and settings
- Active participation

**2. Positive Youth Development
approach aims to offer**

- Breadth, depth and duration in programmes
- Focus on positive development not just risk behaviour
- Opportunities for YP contribute to or challenge society

3. Young people change through

Reflecting on and learning from behaviour
Selecting activities that help meet goals
Changing behaviour if not successful

4. Young people gain positive assets:

- * Competence * Confidence *
- * Connection * Character *Caring *

**The effects of
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**How might PYD decrease
smoking, drinking, drug use & violence?
The research says...**

Seeing positive behaviours;
having links to adults, peers and institutions ↓peer influence on substance use

Learning how to resolve conflict from youth projects ↓violence violence

Feeling a part of society, connected to people and believing in yourself protects against behaviour

Young people learn to make choices based on internal values rather than due to peer influence

Does PYD decrease drug use, drinking, smoking & violence? The research says...

Positive youth development programmes:

- ❖ **Do have** a small **effect** on whether young people's **drug use**.
- ❖ **Do not** have an **effect** on whether young people drink **alcohol**.
- ❖ **Do not** influence whether young people **smoke**.
- ❖ **Do have** a beneficial **influence** on **violence** in

When considering the findings Young people

Agreed that PYD programmes

- ❖ **can** have an **effect** on their **drug use**
- ❖ **and not** on their **alcohol consumption** unless programmes provide an alternative social venue as drinking

Agreed and disagreed that PYD programmes

- ❖ **can** influence **smoking** and
- ❖ have a **beneficial influence** on **violence**



Young people views on 5 themes from the synthesis on delivering PYD

- **Theme 1: Collaboration with the community to ensure cultural sensitivity; appeal to YP and employing community members. *Young people said:***
 - Mix of external & community members is best as external people bring other experiences agreed that cultural sensitivity is important;
- **Theme 2: Collaborate with other community agencies to expand range of activities and liaising with schools critical *Young people said***
 - Focusing on one public health topic is better than having different sessions
 - Good to be on-site (school and youth club) but needs to be separate otherwise they will worry about confidentiality.
- **Theme 3: Focus on YP's relationship with PYD providers and peers**
 - Agreed that providers need to relate in a calm and nurturing but authoritative way and for skilled providers to bridge social differences with peers
 - Relationship with workers need to balance between friend and teacher and leader
- **Theme 4: Retain programme staff**
 - Staff retention need to increase trust and to build relationship, their loss affects the attendance of young people and their focus when they do attend
 - Agree that job instability causes workers to move on, and that this is not their fault.
 - Need to ensure that there is always senior staff and younger staff who are relatable.
- **Theme 5: Youth-led empowerment**
 - Need to give YP lots of options to choose between, but also impose certain limits within budget possibilities while taking into consideration what YP want to learn.
 - And allow for some recreational time to talk to friends
 - Some schools put on youth activities after school, which are different to youth clubs. However the YP normally choose to go to youth services.