

Introduction

The city of Boston has been showcased by many politicians, criminal justice professionals, the media, and others, as the premier example of success in youth violence prevention. Compared to much of the rest of the country, Boston has experienced a dramatic reduction in juvenile murder rates. The city went for almost three years during the mid- to late 1990s without a juvenile homicide, whereas in previous years it experienced almost one juvenile murder per month. Since then the rates have remained quite low.

We take credit for this, as do many others. President Clinton claimed credit, as did Attorney General Janet Reno. Boston police commissioner William Bratton did too. So did the U.S. federal prosecutor located in Boston, the Boston Police Department, a number of academicians and criminologists, religious leaders, the Ten Point Coalition of Boston, the last three mayors of Boston, and a number of superintendents of the Boston Public Schools. And this is just the short list. In fact all of these individuals and groups, as well as many, many others, do deserve the credit.

Our Reasons for Writing This Book

We go into detail later about our personal stories and our motivations for writing this book, but in brief, both of us are physicians and public health practitioners who came to the issue of youth violence through personal and professional experiences. We were struck and appalled by the toll that violence was taking on the children and youth of this nation and on the nation as a whole. We

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had learned in our professional training that many health problems were preventable and yet in all of our training had heard nothing about violence, its consequences, or approaches to address it. Many of our colleagues challenged our efforts to focus on this issue in our careers and tried to discourage us from doing so. But violence was one of the leading causes of death and disability for American youth, and we could not ignore it.

Our work together started in Boston. We were among the first in the health field to apply public health perspectives and strategies to the issue of violence at the community level. Consequently we had little background information and few to consult and to guide us. We learned by trial and error and experienced a range of successes and failures. We at times made false starts and at times took huge jumps forward. We wrote this book to share our experience in the hope that it would provide guidance or even a road map for others. We also hope that our story and the stories of others that we share in this book contribute to the advancement of the violence prevention movement in this country and around the world. It helps to know that you are not going into uncharted territory. Most of all, it helps to know that you are not alone in taking on such a huge and complex problem.

We strongly believe that violence is preventable. There is much evidence to support that belief. We share our experiences to help others understand this and use this information to contribute to the prevention effort.

The Boston Model

So, what did happen in Boston? Can you simply follow the “Boston Model” to reduce violence in your community? Many funders, public health officials, government representatives, and legal and criminal justice professionals believe that you can. We want to tell you that there is no single model to replicate. What happened in Boston is a broad community process that led to changes in attitudes and beliefs and to the development of a wide spectrum of

programs throughout the city. We believe it is this process that is responsible for Boston's success. You can use this process to change your community. In fact we're sure that you already have some of the programs in place, but you may need the connections, synergy, the professional-community partnerships and information dissemination to pull it all together—the *process*.

The secret behind the Boston story is very simple: straightforward strategies and hard work. In 1982 we started the Boston Violence Prevention Program. The program provided a wealth of information—research, stories, cases, examples—to as many people as possible, who then used that information to organize their communities and create the programs that would work in their neighborhoods. Program staff provided the data on violence in Boston's neighborhoods, the city, and the nation (especially compared to other countries) in such a way that others could use them. This was information that challenged a fundamental assumption in U.S. society—in its justice system, school system, health care system. That assumption is that violence is inevitable.

If you assume that violence is inevitable then rather than try to prevent it you are left only with the option of trying to respond aggressively when it occurs, as many U.S. institutions do. The aggressive response is usually some form of severe punishment. Actual prevention isn't a priority unless you believe violence is preventable. Our information shows that violence is (1) not inevitable and (2) eminently preventable.

Challenging the Status Quo

In this book we provide you with the same information so that you too can go out and build the connections and create the process that will work in your community. We stress connections and process because a single program will not turn violence around. A few programs won't turn violence around. You need a critical mass of people and programs. In Boston that critical mass consisted of several thousand individuals and scores of community-based

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programs that developed and evolved over a ten-year period. How do you create this critical mass? You need to provide information to as many people as possible in as many venues as possible and galvanize those people so that they go out and pass the information on and create solutions. This is what happened in Boston. The Boston Violence Prevention Program provided a simple, but profound message, “violence is preventable,” and the evidence to support the message.

Although we used Deborah’s school-based violence prevention curriculum (as a starting point) to create the Boston Violence Prevention Program and to illustrate possible responses, we did not expect people to exactly replicate the curriculum in their programs and settings. We told them to use the curriculum as an example of what could be done and to adapt it, change it, add to it, and leave out parts as they saw fit. We asked them to not use it if they had another approach that excited them. We are not against replicating successful programs. But we are against a cookie-cutter, franchisee kind of approach that ignores the process and the need for a movement.

In this book we challenge the following common assumptions about the best way to approach a problem like violence:

- *Communities need prescriptive solutions to their problems.* On the contrary, we believe that communities need information from which they can create the approaches that fit into their community context. The talent and skills to solve problems exist in most communities once the information for understanding those problems becomes available. Often the prescriptive approach dampens the motivation and energy of a community effort.
- *Limited time and resources are best used replicating a single program or “best practices,” rather than developing an understanding of the problem and devising strategies that reflect the community culture and available resources.* The program examples we offer here are not intended to tell you what to do but to give you a sense of what can and has been tried in other

places. Some of these may fit your community and contribute to the larger success. Some may need to be modified, and some may not be appropriate. Furthermore, you may come up with new ideas that others have not attempted and thus create an opportunity for others to learn from you.

- *Problems that evolve over a long period of time can be solved in three to five years (that is, within the typical time frame of a public sector or private foundation grant).* In fact almost all success stories in public health (reducing tobacco use, improving automobile safety, and preventing childhood poisoning, among others) have required decades and multiple strategies.
- *Complex problems can be solved with a single program.* For example, a single Boston program, the Cease Fire Program, has been touted and replicated as such an intervention. Some have even subtitled it the “Boston Strategy.” Yet this program began after the start of the decline in juvenile murder rates in the city, and it is hard to believe that any program could show even modest effects that quickly. Complex problems require multifaceted approaches that grow out of an understanding of the various components of the problem.
- *Mean-spirited and punitive after-the-fact strategies, such as “zero tolerance” policies, are effective prevention approaches.* There is no evidence that this is the case. We know that it is often hurt children who hurt other children. Knee-jerk punishing of hurt and traumatized children may make things worse. Also, by definition, prevention means proactive not reactive efforts.

We believe that these and similar assumptions must be challenged, because if communities do the same things the same old way, they will get the same old nonresults. The status quo makes no sense and can no longer be tolerated when children’s lives are at stake.

We want you to do more than merely start or replicate a program. We want you to join and contribute to a movement. To do this you need good information, opportunities for collaboration with others, and a larger vision for your work. We want you to do

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more than replicate a program others created. We want you to create the process that will achieve real sustained success.

Acknowledgments

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First and foremost we want to acknowledge and thank the army of violence prevention workers across the nation who on a daily basis talk the talk and walk the walk of the violence prevention movement. They are all heroes and sheroes who are consistently both swimming upstream and maintaining and building the energy level necessary to keep communities moving forward. Coming from all walks of life, they are professionals, community activists, politicians, academicians, youth, parents, survivors, and representatives of communities of all types. They are the heart and soul of the movement, and this book is in good part their story. We want to give a special thanks to survivors of violence, because they struggle daily to turn pain into prevention power and have inspired us both.

We certainly want to thank our families, who have put up with both the time it has taken to get this book done and the mood swings brought on by the process. They have been there for us throughout the two decades we have been involved in violence prevention, as cheerleaders, advisers, friends, and nurturers. We have also had the support of staff in preparing the manuscript and in organizing our lives to get this writing completed—specifically our administrative assistants, CatAshleigh Jackson-Mead and Micki Diegel. Cat also made many changes to the manuscript to reflect our revisions and edits along the way and assisted with the initial editing. In this list also belong Kristen Wainwright, our agent and a friend and cheerleader supreme, and Alan Rinzler, our editor at Jossey-Bass, who recognized the importance of telling this story and understood the need to share it.

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Finally, we are grateful to the many people and groups whose stories we tell in this book. Their contributions to the process of preventing violence have enriched our lives and taught us important lessons. We encourage you to read on and discover these contributions and lessons for yourself.

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