



## Safe and Secure Places to Live, Learn, and Play

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*“Schools, neighborhoods, and community settings can foster and support healthy adolescent development across the spectrum, including physical and mental health, social interactions, and cognitive growth. Adolescents also benefit from safe places to congregate, enjoy social, athletic and other recreational activities, and just be with their peers.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Adolescent Health: Think, Act, Grow<sup>®</sup> (TAG) Research Reviews highlight research, evaluation reports, and other publications that inform the field about key issues in, and effective practices for, fostering improved health, reducing risky behavior, and improving engagement and healthy development in young people. This Research Review focuses on the importance of Safe and Secure Places to Live, Learn, and Play for healthy adolescent development, one of TAG’s Five Essentials for Healthy Adolescents.*

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### **Creating safe and healthy futures: Michigan Youth Violence Prevention Center.<sup>2</sup>**

Youth violence in the United States has decreased over the last decade, yet it continues at high levels in communities dealing with unemployment, population loss, and neglected neighborhoods. For youth, the highest rate of gun violence in the nation is in Flint, MI. Based at the University of Michigan, School of Public Health and funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Michigan Youth Violence Prevention Center (MI-YVPC) works with community groups to strengthen connections among neighbors and address conditions that lead to conflicts. The MI-YVPC uses a multi-level strategy involving youth, families, neighborhood groups, law enforcement, child-serving organizations, and health care providers to address community needs to promote healthy youth outcomes. The authors recommend assessing the MI-YVPC model in other communities with the hypothesis that the intervention will lead to fewer police incidents (especially those involving youth), fewer cases of youth-violent injury, and less fear of crime. [Read more](#)

### **Creating spaces to support transgender youth.<sup>3</sup>**

Research has shown that over 80% of transgender students report some form of harassment at school, including at the hands of school personnel. Strategies to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students, such as teacher interventions in harassment, providing information about gender issues, and addressing sexual minority issues in the curriculum have been associated with safer environments for transgender students. For this study, the authors conducted focus groups at LGBT youth centers during the time of their weekly transgender youth support groups. Transgender youth were asked to reflect on the needs they have, the ways that the sexual minority youth centers had supported them, and specific experiences within the community centers. The transgender youth in this study noted the value of sexual minority community centers for connecting them to other resources such as housing assistance, medical care, and work opportunities. By providing support for transgender youth in community settings, the authors note that the other stressors that these youth may be facing at home or in school can be reduced. [Read more](#)

## **Evaluating a safe space training for school counselors and trainees using randomized control group design.<sup>4</sup>**

School counselors play an important role in advocating for all students and need the proper training to facilitate competency for working with and serving LGBTQ youth. Research has shown that LGBTQ youth are at a disproportionate risk for depression, suicide, psychiatric care and hospitalization, poor school performance, truancy, running away, substance abuse, and sexually risky behaviors. This study sought to evaluate the *GLSEN Safe Space: A How-to-Guide for starting an Allies Program*. The authors found a significant relationship between individuals who received the training and higher levels of LGBTQ knowledge, awareness, and skills. As a result, practicing school counselors and those in training, as well as guidance directors, and school counselor educators now have an evidence-based training for use in professional development for increasing LGBTQ competency and awareness of providing safer schools for their students. [Read more](#)

## **Intergenerational connections and neighborhood disorganization among urban and rural African American youth.<sup>5</sup>**

Disorganized neighborhoods, characterized by high crime rates, reduced employment opportunities, family disruption, and poor economic conditions is a significant barrier to positive social and behavioral outcomes among youth. For this study, the authors were interested in the perception of disorganized neighborhoods, as perceptions can serve as indicators of social problems. Specifically, they examined intergenerational connections, a cultural attribute found among some racial and ethnic groups, to see if the connections moderated the relationship between neighborhood type and adolescents' perceptions of the safety of their communities. The findings demonstrated that higher levels of intergenerational connections were associated with perceptions of less disorganized neighborhoods, particularly in urban neighborhoods. Future research is needed to more comprehensively address the topic intergenerational connections, including programmatic research on how to increase and promote these important connections. [Read more](#)

## **Invited Commentary: National Safe Place: Meeting the Immediate Needs of Runaway and Homeless Youth.<sup>6</sup>**

Approximately 1.6 million youth run away from home each year; these youth are vulnerable to exploitation, victimization, increased dangers and perpetration of criminal behavior. To help address the needs of runaway youth, National Safe Place (NSP) is a prevention and outreach program which connects youth experiencing a crisis situation to immediate help and support. NSP educates youth about alternatives to running away and homelessness and provides links to service providers. Early evaluations of NSP have been encouraging; in a sample of 145 youth, the majority reported that Safe Place interventions are effective. Specifically, 84% of youth completing the evaluation indicated that they felt safer upon entering a Safe Place site, 90% of youth would use the Safe Place program again if they needed help, and 90% would recommend the use of the program to friends who needed help. [Read more](#)

## **Perceived neighborhood safety and adolescent school functioning.<sup>7</sup>**

Previous research has demonstrated that children and youth generally do better in social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes when they view their neighborhoods as safe. The purpose of this study was to examine the association between adolescents perceived neighborhood safety and three dimensions of schooling: test scores, grades, school attachment. The authors found that perceived neighborhood safety was more

strongly associated with aspects of schooling that were more psychosocial in nature (e.g., increased school attachment) than those that were more cognitive (e.g., improved test scores). Few differences in grades were observed for youth in neighborhoods rated as being high in physical disorder. However, for youth living in neighborhoods rated as being low in physical disorder, perceiving their neighborhood as safe was associated with higher grades. [Read more](#)

## **Protective school climates and reduced risk for suicide ideation in sexual minority youths.<sup>8</sup>**

Among youth ages 15 to 24 years, suicide is the third leading cause of death. Research has shown that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adolescents are between two and seven times more likely to attempt suicide compared with their heterosexual counterparts. This study examined whether sexual minority students living in states and cities with more protective school climates were at lower risk of suicidal thoughts, plans, and attempts. The authors found that LGB youth living in states and cities with more protective school climates (e.g., prohibit harassment based on sexual orientation or gender identity; encourage staff to attend trainings on creating supportive environments for LGB youth) were significantly less likely to report past-year suicidal thoughts compared to LGB youth living in states and cities with less protective school climates. The authors recommend that comprehensive suicide prevention and interventions for sexual minority adolescents should address not only individual-level and family-level factors, but also the broader social-contextual influences, including school climate. [Read more](#)

## **Taking steps to promote safer schools.<sup>9</sup>**

There is a wealth of data regarding what works and does not in promoting school safety, particularly in the areas of bullying and media exposure. The author presents two low-cost, high-impact programs that have been shown to be effective in addressing media violence exposure and bullying: the SMART (Student Media Awareness to Reduce Television) curriculum and the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. The SMART curriculum, which focuses on reducing television, videotape, and video game use in elementary school-aged children, has been shown to be effective in reducing aggressive behavior in younger children. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is a whole-school approach, which has been implemented and studied in a variety of cultures in both Europe and the United States, and at all grade levels. Based on positive research findings of both programs, the author recommends pre-professional and continuing education training for teachers and administrators regarding the effects of bullying and how to prevent it. Both the SMART curriculum and the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program are two examples of interventions that can promote safer schools. [Read more](#)

## **The role of the residential neighborhood in linking youths' family poverty trajectory to decreased feelings of safety at school.<sup>10</sup>**

Youth experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage are at increased risk of overall poorer socioemotional adjustment, well-being and health and are also more likely to perceive the school environment as being unsafe. Feeling less safe at school is associated with several negative outcomes, such as psychological distress, somatization and lower academic achievement. This study sought to gain a better understanding of the determinants of feeling unsafe at school. The results showed that youth experiencing chronic and later-childhood poverty felt less safe at school, in part, because they lived in neighborhoods that their parents described as being disorderly (e.g., presence of garbage, drug use). These neighborhoods also tended to have less greenery (e.g., trees, parks) and more lone-parent households. The authors suggest utilizing residential neighborhood features that could improve feelings of safety at school, such as greenery and reducing signs of

disorder, and that those features could improve youth's felt safety at school. [Read more](#)

## **Youth's strategies for staying safe and coping with the stress of living in violent communities.<sup>11</sup>**

In west/southwest Philadelphia, over 25% of residents live below the federal poverty level and almost half of the population is younger than 25 years of age. Youth are especially at risk of violence, with the average annual youth (5 – 24 years of age) homicide rate five times higher than the national rate. For this study, three neighborhoods in west/southwest Philadelphia served as a site for a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Urban Partnership-Academic Center of Excellence (UPACE) in youth violence. Youth, aged 10–16 years, were interviewed to assess the stressors and assets of the three neighborhoods identified by CDC UPACE. They reported high levels of exposure to neighborhood violence. A theme of identifying and navigating safe (e.g., community pool during the day) and unsafe places (e.g., areas where drugs were sold) emerged. Youth used neighborhood and individual resources to cope with stressors, such as afterschool programs, sports and activities, recreation centers, schools, and parks as well as family members they could speak with about any concerns. [Read more](#)

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Adolescent Health. (April, 2016). Adolescent Health: Think, Act, Grow® 2016 playbook. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

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<sup>3</sup> McGuire, J. K., & Conover-Williams, M. (2010) Creating spaces to support transgender youth. *Prevention Researcher, 17*(4), 17-20.

<sup>4</sup> Byrd, R., & Hays, D. G. (2013). Evaluating a safe space training for school counselors and trainees using randomized control group design. *Professional School Counseling, 17*(1), 20-31.

<sup>5</sup> Brevard, J., Maxwell, M., Hood, K., & Belgrave, F. (2013). Feeling safe: Intergenerational connections and neighborhood disorganization among urban and rural African American youth. *Journal of Community Psychology, 41*(8), 992-1004. doi:10.1002/jcop.21588.

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<sup>7</sup> Martin-Storey, A., & Crosnoe, R. (2014). Perceived neighborhood safety and adolescent school functioning. *Applied Developmental Science, 18*(2), 61-75. doi:10.1080/10888691.2014.876276.

<sup>8</sup> Hatzenbuehler, M. L., Birkett, M., Van Wagenen, A., & Meyer, I. H. (2014). Protective school climates and reduced risk for suicide ideation in sexual minority youths. *American Journal of Public Health, 104*(2), 279-286. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2013.301508.

<sup>9</sup> Werle, G. D. (2006). Taking steps to promote safer schools. *Journal of School Health, 76*(4), 156-158. doi:10.1111/j.1746-1561.2006.00087.x.

<sup>10</sup> Côté-Lussier, C., Barnett, T. A., Kestens, Y., Tu, M. T., & Séguin, L. (2015). The role of the residential neighborhood in linking youths' family poverty trajectory to decreased feelings of safety at school. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 44*(6), 1194-1207. doi:10.1007/s10964-014-0214-8.

<sup>11</sup> Teitelman, A., McDonald, C. C., Wiebe, D. J., Thomas, N., Guerra, T., Kassam-Adams, N., & Richmond, T. S. (2010). Youth's strategies for staying safe and coping with the stress of living in violent communities. *Journal of Community Psychology, 38*(7), 874-885. doi:10.1002/jcop.20402.

