



Original Research

# Adolescent perceptions of violence: Formative research findings from a social marketing campaign to reduce violence among middle school youth

G.P. Quinn<sup>a,\*</sup>, B.A. Bell-Ellison<sup>b</sup>, W. Loomis<sup>c</sup>, M. Tucci<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Interdisciplinary Oncology, University of South Florida College of Medicine, MDC 44, MRC-CANCONT, 12902 Magnolia Drive, Tampa, FL 33612, USA

<sup>b</sup>University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida, USA

<sup>c</sup>Pinellas County Health Department, Florida, USA

<sup>d</sup>University of South Carolina, South Carolina, USA

Received 21 March 2006; received in revised form 23 October 2006; accepted 5 November 2006  
Available online 1 March 2007

## KEYWORDS

Adolescents;  
Violence prevention;  
Middle school youth;  
Social marketing;  
Formative research

**Summary Objective:** To identify the specific barriers and benefits of violent behaviours as noted by middle school youth and to develop a social marketing campaign that attends to the needs and wants of the target audience.

**Study design:** A non-experimental, qualitative study design was used to assess youth perceptions of violence in a large, southeast urban school district.

**Methods:** Using a social marketing approach, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with middle school youths, to gain an understanding of perceived barriers and benefits of violent behaviours. Additionally, interviews assessed youth preferences for an effective spokesperson for an anti-violence campaign. Qualitative analysis of coded transcripts revealed key themes that were incorporated into a multi-media initiative.

**Results:** Critical themes of the research highlighted that the majority of violence occurs at school, during school hours and most of the youths believed the use of violence was necessary to defend themselves from other peers or to protect family members. Another key finding pertained to adolescent views on violent people; although the majority of respondents reported engaging in violent acts, they did not view themselves as violent. Results were used to inform the development of a social marketing campaign designed to reduce youth violence among middle school students in a large, urban central Florida school district.

**Conclusion:** Findings from the formative research led to the creation and pre-testing of five potential campaign brands. The campaign slogan that tested best with the target audience emphasized the choice youth have to either engage in violent

\*Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 813 632 1359; fax: +1 813 745 6525.

E-mail address: [gquinn@hsc.usf.edu](mailto:gquinn@hsc.usf.edu) (G.P. Quinn).

behaviour and suffer the consequences or to 'rise above' physical conflict and reap the benefits.

Published by Elsevier Ltd. The Royal Institute of Public Health.

## Introduction

### Overview of violent behaviour in the USA

Youth violence remains a significant problem in the United States. For instance, in 2005, 36% of high school students reported having been in a physical fight one or more times during the previous 12 months; 4% sustained injuries from a physical fight that required medical care one or more times in the previous 12 months; 19% reported carrying a weapon at least once during the past 30 days; 5% reported carrying a gun at least once in the last 30 days; 14% were involved in a physical fight on school property one or more times in the past year; 7% reported carrying a weapon on school property on one or more days in the month preceding the survey; 8% were threatened or injured with a weapon on school property at least one time in the year preceding the survey; and 30% had property stolen or intentionally damaged on school property one or more times during the 12 months prior to the survey.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in 2004, acts of violence caused more than 750 000 young Americans aged 10–24 to seek emergency department care for their sustained injuries.<sup>2</sup> Violence that occurs on school property results in problems at many levels. Not only are the students who engage in violence affected by in- and out-of-school suspension, but students who witness violence or are the target of violence are also negatively impacted.

The factors contributing to youth violence are multi-faceted and include both individual and community level characteristics. Commonly cited factors include, antisocial attitudes and beliefs, academic failure, aggression, single-parent families, weak social ties, poor parent–child relations, delinquent peers, poverty, neighbourhood crime, and neighbourhood disorganization.<sup>2</sup> The World Report on Violence and Health recommends several measures for decreasing the incidence of violence, many of which focus on the establishment of national policies and plans as well as improved data collection and monitoring systems.<sup>3</sup> The editors also suggest in Recommendation 4 the need to “Promote primary prevention responses... media campaigns to change attitudes, behaviour and social norms” (p. 32).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, they suggest these primary prevention programmes may have reinforcing effects at other levels.

Whereas the World Health Report examines the context of youth violence at an international level, in the USA the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have established goals and directives to decrease incidence rates. According to Healthy People 2010, youth focused violence prevention programmes need to incorporate strategies to reduce involvement in physical fighting and discourage weapon carrying on school property.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, such programmes should begin early in life and be tailored to youth of varying social, economic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> In an effort to follow the Healthy People 2010 violence prevention project recommendations, a county health department in central Florida used a social marketing approach to develop a campaign aimed at violence prevention among middle school youth in a large, urban school district. Results from the formative research phase of the project are presented.

### Overview of social marketing

Social marketing is the application of traditional marketing principles towards the promotion of health behaviour change.<sup>5</sup> It is based on the traditional marketing exchange theory, which states that consumers will adopt behaviour change when barriers are reduced and benefits highlighted, according to their specific needs.<sup>6</sup> Social marketing manages behaviour change by creating incentives or consequences that invite voluntary exchange. Specifically, social marketers seek to identify barriers to behaviour change and to highlight benefits that are relevant to the audience (e.g., some women breastfeed for the health benefits to the child, other women choose to breastfeed for the unique bond created between mother and child). Like education, marketing offers people a choice about behaviour but unlike education, it assists in altering the environment to make the recommended behaviour more advantageous by communicating the most favourable cost–benefit relation to the target audience.<sup>7,8</sup> One key feature of social marketing is its utilization of formative research. Before communication plans and interventions are developed, data are collected about consumer preferences regarding the health behaviour of interest. Formative research findings then guide the rest of the campaign development.

This paper reports youth perceptions of violence as discovered during the formative research stage of a youth violence prevention social marketing campaign, undertaken to address issues surrounding violent behaviours among middle school students in a large, urban school district in central Florida. The goal of the campaign was to identify the specific barriers and benefits of violent behaviours as noted by the target audience and to develop an intervention that attended to the needs and wants of the audience using a social marketing approach. The following sections provide details on adolescent perceived barriers and benefits of violent behaviours, as well as suggested spokespersons for delivering anti-violence messages, and a description of how this information was used to create an anti-violence social marketing campaign.

## Methods

The aim of this portion of the project was to assess the perceptions of middle school youth regarding issues of violence through implementation of the formative research phase of a social marketing campaign to reduce violence among middle school students in a large, southeast urban school district. Specific formative research objectives included: (1) gaining knowledge about perceptions of violence held by youths, such as influences, reasons for fighting, and typical behaviours demonstrated by those deemed 'violent youths'; (2) perceived consequences and benefits of violent behaviour; and (3) identifying spokespersons that would be most effective in marketing anti-violence behaviour towards youth.

To achieve these objectives, the participating county health department, in partnership with the National Training Collaborative for Social Marketing at the University of South Florida, enlisted summer youth programmes to participate. Signed parental consent forms were obtained from all guardians of youth participants. Written assent was also obtained from all youths before interviews were initiated. Eight youth organizations were visited by the University of South Florida interview team, which consisted of a graduate student and three undergraduate honours students. All members of the interview team were hired and trained in the area of social marketing, as its theories pertained to this project, as well as being trained in specific interviewing skills and conversational techniques helpful in eliciting information and establishing an acceptable rapport with the middle school youth. The interview team members were selected for their past experience working with the adolescent popu-

lation, as well as their varied gender and cultural backgrounds. The University of South Florida's Institutional Review Board approved this study.

The interview guide was developed by project directors in collaboration with the participating county's Youth Steering Committee—a committee created through the County Health Department to offer consultation on all aspects of the Youth Violence Prevention Project. The interview guide was piloted with 15 middle school youths in a neighbouring county prior to conducting interviews with the target audience—middle school youth in an urban southeast Florida county.

The community in which the youths reside is the fourth largest county in the state (population 905 000).<sup>9</sup> According to the 2005 U.S. Census Bureau, the county is primarily white (85%) and African-American (10%) and only 6% Hispanic.<sup>9</sup> Eighty-seven per cent of the adult population over 25 have graduated from high school and 9% of youth aged 16–19 are dropouts.<sup>9</sup> The median household income is \$40 694 and 16% of children live in poverty.<sup>9</sup> There are 24 public middle schools in the county, with children attending schools based on their zoned requirements (i.e., street address and zip code determine what school zone a child is in).<sup>10</sup> The state of Florida has the second highest violent crime rate in the country and Florida's violent juvenile crime rate is 48% higher than the national average.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the intervention county has the fifth highest incidence of juvenile arrests in the state of Florida, which has 67 counties.<sup>12</sup>

Each youth participant was told the nature and intent of the interview, that they could decline to answer any question, and that their identity would remain anonymous. Interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. Interview sessions lasted approximately 25 min. Table 1 shows the list of interview questions. Each participant was given two movie tickets as compensation for their time.

The data in this study, the verbatim texts of the participant interview responses, were managed and analysed with The Ethnograph<sup>®</sup> computer software program version 5.07.<sup>13</sup> Each interview was transcribed within 24 hours. To help determine when saturation occurred, data were collected and analysed concurrently. Content analysis, using a template analysis plan, was performed to identify major themes in the youths' beliefs and experiences with violence on their school campus.<sup>14</sup> Two coders used an initial code list (developed prior to data analysis based on themes included in interview questions) and open coding throughout the analysis process. Each coder independently reviewed the data twice. Final data analysis was conducted with an inter-rater reliability rate of 0.95. The following

**Table 1** Middle school youth interview questions.

1	What do you think violence is? How do violent kids act? Probe examples: bullying/fighting/homicide (killing someone else)
2	Have you ever been involved in a violent type incident? How did you feel?
3	What type of kid uses violence? How are they different from other people?
4	Why do you think kids fight? Why do you fight? (If applicable from Q2) Probe examples: attitude—afraid to be sissy? Social norms?
5	Are there consequences to being violent? Benefits? Explain
6	Are there times when violence is necessary? Why?
7	Are there consequences to being non-violent? Benefits?
8	Who would be a good spokesperson for an advertisement campaign to reduce violence? Who do you think kids your age would listen to?

section describes the formative research results obtained from youth interviews and a description of how the data were used to create a violence prevention social marketing campaign.

## Results

A total of 79 interviews were conducted, including 30 African-American females, 26 African-American males, 13 white males, nine white females, and one Hispanic male. All participants were in fifth through ninth grade, including 2 fifth-graders, 21 sixth-graders, 25 seventh-graders, 12 eighth-graders, and 9 ninth-graders. Ten youths did not specify their grade level, or the information was inaudible on the tape. Thirteen of the 27 middle schools in the county were represented among the youth participants. The following sections present summaries of key themes related to youth perceptions of violence. Illustrative examples of participant responses for each prominent area are presented in Table 2.

### Objective 1: Youth perceptions of violence

#### Definition of violence

When questioned about the definition of violence, the youths had varying definitions of violence or violent acts, but the common elements included descriptions of physically fighting or throwing punches, using profanity, arguing, or releasing frustration. A few participants mentioned the use of weapons in this definition. No significant differences were found according to the subgroups for gender, school, and grade level.

#### Reasons youth engage in violence

A majority of the youths identified two major reasons why they and their peers use violent behaviour—gossip and boyfriend and girlfriend situations. Other reasons the youths reported

included boredom, anger and to impress others. Most respondents identified these reasons as silly, even though they indicated that they often got into fights for similar reasons.

The negative influence of peers and the fear of a bad reputation are also considered major reasons for displaying violent behaviour. Many reported that fighting no longer occurs on a one-to-one basis, but involves groups of people. It seems that if one individual wants to fight another, they will bring a group of people to confront that person. Others believed that the friends you spend time with can influence your actions.

Each participant was asked to respond to a hypothetical scenario in which two eighth grade males were going to fight after school, and one decided to walk away or work the matter out using a different method. Participants were asked how others would have treated that individual. Almost all participants believed the youth who walked away would have been harassed and treated negatively by others. Others believed that the action of 'walking away' would anger the perpetrator more, and that the fight would ultimately continue.

Furthermore, the majority of youth reported their parents did talk to them about violence. About half of the respondents reported their parent's advice about fighting was to demand that they walk away and tell their parents about any teasing or bullying that happened at school. Despite the claim by this group that they take their parent's advice on these issues and attempt to be non-violent, these were the same youths who reported having been involved in violent incidents. The other half of the respondents reported their parents urged them to defend themselves if faced with a violent or potentially violent situation. These children quoted their parents as saying "if someone hits you, hit them back." Of the group who said their parents wanted them to defend themselves, more than half were male.

**Table 2** Key findings and illustrative quotes from in-depth interviews with middle school youths ( $N = 79$ ).

Definition of violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violence can be physical or mental. It is like when another person harms someone else by kicking them, pinching them, or yelling at them. That is even abuse too.</li> <li>• A conflict between two people.</li> <li>• It's not the right way, but a different way of handling things. In society what we do today is not... you don't act out verbally; violence is like when you choose to use your hands in a situation.</li> <li>• Something people want to do to let all their anger out when they know there's a different way but they don't want to do it.</li> </ul>
Reasons youths fight	
Gossip	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kids fight if someone talks about their mother.</li> <li>• If someone tells them something that is not true that the other person said, they will want to fight you.</li> </ul>
Boyfriends/girlfriends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She called my boyfriend last night to ask about the homework. She knows he's my boyfriend so I had to knock her down the next morning in front of everyone. If I didn't do it, kids would say 'she don't care about her man'.</li> </ul>
Boredom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They are bored and have no one to talk to about their problems.</li> </ul>
Anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They fight because they are mad and fighting comes naturally.</li> </ul>
Peer influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It depends who you hang out with. If you hang out with kids who like to fight, you will end up the same way.</li> <li>• If your guys solve their problems by spitting in someone face, you gotta do it too. Otherwise, you can't hang with them. Plus, you see it works. People don't mess with you if they know you are going to fight back.</li> </ul>
Reality of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I know they tell you that on the after-school specials—they tell you to just walk away. But that ain't real life. In real life if you walk away you can't get far without being called a wimp or a wuss and then the fight you walked away from it still waiting for you the next day.</li> </ul>
Parental influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My dad and my brother say you don't take it from no one. You don't start nothing for sure, but if someone gets up in your face you gotta defend your territory. Most of the time, you only need to do it once and then they don't bother you no more.</li> </ul>
Personal history of using violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This guy pushed me, so I punched him back.</li> <li>• She said my hair was old school. You can't let that slide.</li> <li>• I think someone was talking about me behind my back, and I just wanted to hit him, so I did.</li> <li>• I have been taught, hit me and I'll hit you back. So that's what I do.</li> <li>• Somebody talked about my dad because he is dead. At first I didn't do nothing, but if they keep on I will punch them.</li> <li>• I could have solved it differently, but the other person just wanted to fight instead of ask and work out the problem.</li> <li>• I could have told a teacher, but that wouldn't have worked at all.</li> <li>• Yeah, I know I could have told the teacher that she got into my locker. I could have proved she was the one that took my stuff out of my locker. But it's such a hassle to do that and then the whole world knows you go running to teachers with your personal problems. It was so much easier to just knock her across the head and take my stuff back from her locker.</li> <li>• At first I felt like fighting because the girl talked about me. By after I felt bad. Now we are probably not going to talk this year.</li> <li>• Everyone was like, 'Oh—that was a good fight.' But I felt real bad.</li> </ul>



Table 2. (continued)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If I would have had a gun I would have shot that kid for ripping my shirt. It was brand new.</li> <li>• When it was over and I stopped being mad I said a little prayer to the Lord to forgive me.</li> </ul>
Perceptions of violent youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent kids are more aggressive and get blown off really easily.</li> <li>• Kids who have a lot of time on their hands and the type of kids who don't talk about their problems.</li> <li>• Drug-users and kids who don't get good grades.</li> <li>• Kids with bad attitudes fight. They are bullies.</li> <li>• The ones that think they are big and bad and hang out with the coolest kids in school.</li> <li>• They act mean and stuff, like they are going to fight you over everything and stuff.</li> <li>• A violent kid is the kind your parents don't want you to hang around because he has anger management issues.</li> <li>• Kids who are violent don't have friends because they push everybody around. They aren't just mean to kids who do stuff to them, they are mean to everyone.</li> </ul>
Consequences of violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Somebody could get hurt really bad.</li> <li>• At my school, if you like fight someone then you go to JDC for like a day for a youth service.</li> <li>• Referrals—you could go to jail. You could do community service. You could be a very clean, nice person, but you get into a fight, you go to jail and your record is messed up.</li> <li>• You can go to jail, or you can get killed. And, um, if you bother the wrong person they could kill your family.</li> <li>• Well, you can get into trouble with your parents, but not a lot of kids get in trouble for that.</li> <li>• You might not set out to hurt someone but if you kill them or send them to the hospital, even if it's an accident, you might go to jail.</li> <li>• My uncle went to jail for throwing a chair at someone. It didn't hit the guy, but the chair broke and he destroyed property.</li> <li>• You can get in school suspension or out of school suspension or after school detention for being violent. The thing is, one kid could hit another and that kid would get a detention, which is nothing. The next day another kid could do the same thing and get out of school suspension. So you never know what will happen.</li> <li>• If my mom caught me or found out I was in a fight I would be in my room for my whole life. She is so against me fighting.</li> </ul>
Necessity/benefits of violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We have to defend ourselves. We can't be going around getting beat up and then they be going and talking we are soft.</li> <li>• You have to learn to stick up for yourself. If somebody is hitting you or whatever, you're not just going to sit there.</li> <li>• You have to fight if somebody big whip up on you or hit your little brother.</li> <li>• You shouldn't use violence, but if you tell the teacher and she doesn't do anything, you have to fight back.</li> <li>• She don't have any more money than we do so why she gotta say crap about my house? My mom does the best she can for us, and she don't deserve to have somebody dissing her cause our house is kinda old.</li> <li>• My brother has a bad stutter. He goes to therapy but kids tease him. If I catch the kids teasing him I knock them out. I lay them flat on the ground. Some people's parents didn't teach them any better, so I gotta teach them. It is so uncool to tease a kid with a disability.</li> </ul>
Effective spokesperson for an anti-violence campaign	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Like people who have been in fights and have gotten out of it.</li> <li>• Maybe one that has been in a gang or something and can tell them it is not right.</li> </ul>

Table 2. (continued)

- It should be someone that has gone through it and tell us of the bad things that have happened to them.
- I think Bill Cosby because you have never seen anything bad about him. He is a good person.
- Eminem. Kids listen to him. Even though he sings about violent stuff, he doesn't do it in real life.
- I would listen to anything Michael Jordan said because he is a God.
- I'd want to hear from a kid who went to jail and was sorry he went. A kid who came from jail and wanted to help other kids not have the same troubles as him.
- My dad is in jail. It wasn't cause he was violent but I know he sees a lot of violence in jail. Someone like my dad should tell other kids how awful it is to be in jail.

### Personal history of using violence

The majority of males and females in this study reported participating in violent acts at some time in the past. There were no distinct differences when this was compared according to race, grade level or school attended. The majority of students reported that the violent acts most often occurred as retaliation towards another student who had 'dissed' them or said something the student considered disrespectful. Often these verbal comments were focused on the student's appearance or aptitude. Thus, the student who often engaged in violent acts perceived that they were 'forced to fight back' after another person instigated the action or argument.

The majority of the youths reported that their fights occurred on school grounds, during school hours. Furthermore, most reported that they were aware of ways to solve their problems in a non-violent manner, but thought those solutions were not likely to work in their situations. When asked how they felt before and after a fight, the majority of respondents said they felt intense anger before the incident and feelings of sadness and guilt afterwards. Another data theme involved how the youths perceived their behaviour. Although, as previously stated, most had been involved in a violent type of incident, none of the respondents identified themselves as 'violent'. When asked if violent kids were different from others, a majority stated 'yes' and described them as aggressive, drug users and bullies.

### Objective 2: Perceived consequences and benefits of violent behaviour

#### Consequences of violence

The vast majority of the youths mentioned jail as one consequence of violent behaviour. Most youths

also noted school-related punishments, such as detention, suspension and referrals, as well as injury or death. Approximately one-fourth of the students mentioned getting into trouble with parents, whereas a few mentioned harming or hurting another individual as a consequence.

#### Necessity/benefits of violence

Over one-half of boys and more than one-half of girls believed that the use of violence was necessary to defend themselves from other peers, or to protect family members. Many of these youths reported that they would use violence if someone 'talked about' or insulted a family member.

### Objective 3: Effective spokesperson for an anti-violence campaign

The majority of the youths felt that a good spokesperson for an anti-violence campaign would be someone who had been violent before, but had changed their behaviour. When asked if this person should be an adult or youth, participants responded that either would be acceptable, reiterating that the person must have 'been there' and 'done that'. It seems the youth wanted someone who would speak in terms of their reality; who could portray experiences these youths are currently living through. Others mentioned that these reality-based spokespeople should talk about consequences they experienced as a result of violence. Some youths reported that they would listen to famous people; this included music groups, wrestlers and comedians. Most were named not only for their popularity, but also because they are good role models. Overall, the youths seemed to want a trustworthy spokesperson.

After analysing the data and compiling main themes regarding middle school youth perceptions of violence, the results were used to inform the

**Table 3** Anti-violence campaign messages pre-tested with middle school youth.

Raise Your Standards, Not Your Fists. Your Life. Your Choice.  
 Empower Your Mind, Not Your Fists: It's Your Life, Make it Work.  
 Youth Violence. What Does Your Future Look Like?: Positive Choices, Positive Life.  
 Fly with Friendship or Fall with Force. Take the Higher Ground.  
 Violence Can Take Something Away. Your Life. Your Choices Count.

development of a social marketing campaign designed to reduce youth violence among middle school students in a large, urban central Florida school district. Results from the formative research were shared with the county's Youth Steering Committee and a local advertising agency, who then developed several concepts that were pre-tested with the same target audience—middle school youth. Area high school youths worked with the advertising agency to create and test the campaign's market brand (i.e., slogan, logo/graphic, tagline). Of the five messages tested, '*Raise Your Standards, Not Your Fists. Your life. Your Choice.*' tested best with members of the target audience. See Table 3 for a list of the five messages that were developed and pre-tested.

After the campaign's market brand was selected, a multi-faceted media campaign was created. The '*Raise Your Standards, Not Your Fists. Your life. Your Choice.*' graphic was unveiled at a press conference, followed by 50 billboards countywide for one year. The campaign's message was also promoted through television and radio public service announcements (PSAs), posters and other promotional items (e.g., pens, t-shirts, mouse pads, stress balls). The early stages of the campaign included active involvement by the authors as collaborators, yet, subsequent to the formative research phase, the project was solely managed by the County Health Department; thus campaign evaluation data are not available.

## Discussion

Using a social marketing approach to address youth violence was in line with Mercy et al.'s recommendation that violence prevention programmes must be tailored to their target population.<sup>15</sup> We cannot begin to address the issue of youth violence without first understanding the cultural context of the violence. The nature of social marketing allowed just that. Through formative research, researchers were able to gather information regarding the culture surrounding the target population's percep-

tions and attitudes towards violence. More specifically, the results of this formative research campaign are illuminative on several levels. First, it is clear that middle school youth have specific and definitive perceptions about violence and perpetrators of violence. However, despite acknowledging the commission of violent acts, acts deemed violent by their own definitions, these youths did not internalize these actions and view themselves as 'violent'. This has significant implications for behaviour change especially in a social marketing context—it would be infeasible to market a campaign to an audience who did not perceive themselves to be a member. Another telling aspect of these results was the clear sense of right and wrong most youths had about violence and violent acts. The majority of respondents felt that initiating violence was wrong; however, when it came to their personal use of violence, the youth's perceptions of wrong and right were not clearly delineated. Although violence in response to another or in defence of one's self is not necessarily 'right' it is also not necessarily 'wrong'.

One element of common ground among the respondents was the acknowledgement of consequences for one's behaviour. The majority of participants described awareness of consequences for violent behaviour, primarily at the individual level, as opposed to other levels such as the community or society at large. The roots of violence are often presented in an ecological model or theoretical framework (cf. Krug et al.).<sup>3,16</sup> In ecological models, factors that impact violence are divided into four levels: individual, relationships, community, and society. Data from the present study reinforce the idea that youths are focused on and primarily view their environment on an individual level. Their descriptions of the consequences of violence focus on personal history. Perhaps it is the middle school student's inability to look at the impact of violence in the broader context of society that prevents them from examining the consequences of their own behaviour relative to societal norms and expectations. Whatever the reason, because the student's thoughts about violent behaviour are rooted at that level,



these data support the idea that interventions should focus on behaviour at the individual level.

In a classic behavioural model, the students indicate their primary motivation for remaining non-violent is also at the individual level, as they fear the consequences (negative reinforcement) rather than a sense of pride or external recognition for doing the right thing (positive reinforcement). Again in behaviourist terms, the threat of punishment (jail, suspension, parental retribution) appears to be the primary reinforcer. Thus, it is surprising that the slogans which were most appealing to the youth and tested the best, focused on the abstract concept of being a thinker (raise your standards) vs a fighter (not your fists). Based on the findings, one would expect the youth to identify with and select a slogan that focused on negative consequences for violent behaviour such as jail or school suspension. Instead, the focus of the most appealing and ultimately selected slogan, emphasized the choice youth have to engage in violent behaviour and suffer the consequences, as well as the choice to 'rise above' physical conflict and reap the benefits. Nonetheless, following traditional social marketing principles, the *Raise Your Standards, Not Your Fists* slogan is likely to be successful in creating awareness or changing behaviour as it was based on audience specific perceptions.

In keeping with the principles of social marketing, the audience made the final decision about the direction and end product of the campaign. It is possible that if health educators or school administration had made decisions about the campaign, a different direction might have been taken. It would be tempting to have created a campaign that focused on calling the audiences attention to their own behaviour; showing the youth that violent behaviour is in fact violent, and punishable as such, regardless of the impetus of the violence, but based on our findings, such a campaign would have 'missed the mark' with these middle school students. There was an underlying current of acceptance among these youths that certain violent acts were required in order to maintain status among their peers, regardless of the consequences from authorities, thus a campaign aimed at punishment and consequences would have likely been unsuccessful.

As noted in evidence-based public health paradigms, successful health promotion activities are often paired with multiple interventions (e.g., changing policy on domestic violence paired with improving access to women's shelters).<sup>17</sup> Little evidence exists about successful social marketing campaigns that focus on violence, except in the

area of domestic violence. The social marketing efforts that strive to convince perpetrators of violence that it is in fact a crime, and that such crime is often reported and punished, have been more successful than those that attempt to encourage perpetrators to consider alternative forms of expression, to seek counselling for their behaviour, or to consider how the victims might feel.<sup>18</sup> This perspective blends well with the basic tenant of social marketing in that we ask our audience to make an 'exchange' of one behaviour for another, while promising consequences for the behaviour change. We await the results of this social marketing campaign to determine if the *Raise Your Standards, Not Your Fists* campaign has had a positive effect or has prompted behaviour change among this group of middle school youth.

## References

1. Eaton DK, Kann L, Kinchen S, Ross J, Hawkins J, Harris WA, et al. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Youth risk behavior surveillance—United States, 2005. *Surveillance Summaries*, June 9, 2006. *MMWR Surveill Summ* 2006;55: 1–108.
2. US Department of Health and Human Services. *Youth violence: a report of the surgeon general*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office; 2001. Available at: <<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence/default.htm>> [accessed 4 October 2005].
3. Krug E, Dahlberg LL, Mercy JA, Zwi AB, Lozano R, editors. *World report on violence and health*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization; 2002. Available at: <[http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/world\\_report/en/summary\\_en.pdf](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/en/summary_en.pdf)> [accessed 4 October 2006].
4. Department of Health and Human Services. *Healthy people 2010: understanding and improving health*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office; 2000.
5. Andreasen AR. *Marketing social change: changing behavior to promote health, social development, and the environment*. San Francisco, USA: Jossey-Bass; 1989.
6. Kotler P, Armstrong G. *Principles of marketing*, 6th ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, USA: Prentice-Hall; 1994.
7. Coreil J, Bryant C, Henderson J, Forthofer M, Quinn G. *Social and behavioral foundations of public health*. Thousand Oak, CA, USA: Sage; 2001.
8. Rothschild M. Carrots, sticks and promises: a conceptual framework for the management of public health and social issues behaviours. *J Marketing* 1999;63:24–37.
9. US Census Bureau. *American Community Survey*, 2005. Available at: <[http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/NPTable?\\_bm=y&-geo\\_id=05000US12103&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2005\\_EST\\_G00\\_NP01&-ds\\_name=f-redoLog=false](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/NPTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=05000US12103&-qr_name=ACS_2005_EST_G00_NP01&-ds_name=f-redoLog=false)> [accessed 4 October 2006].
10. Pinellas County Schools. *Choice attendance area maps*, 2004. Available at: <[http://www.pinellas.k12.fl.us/choice/maps\\_choice.html](http://www.pinellas.k12.fl.us/choice/maps_choice.html)> [accessed 4 October 2006].
11. Schiraldi V, Ziedenberg J. *The Florida experiment: An Analysis of the Practice of Sending Kids to Adult Court*, 2000. Available at: <<http://www.cjcj.org/pubs/florida/florida.html>> [accessed 16 October 2006].

12. Florida Department of Law Enforcement. *County and municipal arrest data*, 2005. Available at: <[http://www.fdle.state.fl.us/FSAC/UCR/2006/2006SA\\_County\\_Municipal\\_Arr.pdf](http://www.fdle.state.fl.us/FSAC/UCR/2006/2006SA_County_Municipal_Arr.pdf)> [accessed 16 October 2006].
13. The Ethnograph for Windows [computer software]. Qualis Research Associates. Denver, CO, USA; 1998.
14. Miller WL, Crabtree BF. Clinical research. In: Denzin NK, Lincoln YS, editors. *Strategies of qualitative research*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: Sage; 2003. p. 397–434.
15. Mercy JA, Krug EG, Dahlberg LL, Zwi AB. Violence and health: the United States in a global perspective. *Am J Public Health* 2003;**92**:256–61.
16. Krug EG, Mercy JA, Dahlberg LL, Zwi AB. The world report on violence and health. *Lancet* 2002;**360**:1083–8.
17. Rychetnik L, Hawe P, Waters E, Barratt A, Frommer M. A glossary for evidence based public health. *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2004;**58**:538–45.
18. Donovan RJ, Vlais R. *VicHealth review of communication components of social marketing/public education campaigns focusing on violence against women*. Melbourne, Australia: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation; 2005. Available at: <[http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/assets/contentFiles/CAS\\_PaperZ\\_SocialMarketing.pdf](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/assets/contentFiles/CAS_PaperZ_SocialMarketing.pdf)> [accessed 16 October 2006].

Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

