Using Data to Define Your Community's Boundaries and Begin Youth Violence Prevention Planning

STRYVE Online Data Tools

Striving To Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere

Youth violence affects all communities and all neighborhoods within communities. No place where youth live, learn, work, or play is immune, but the frequency and forms of youth violence may vary across a community's ZIP codes, neighborhood blocks, and school catchment areas. One neighborhood may experience higher rates of youth homicide and violent crime, while other communities may have relatively higher rates of in-school bullying and fighting. This variability means that different youth violence prevention strategies, resources, and partners may be required to meet each community's specific needs.

As you set out to do strategic planning for youth violence prevention, the initial task involves selecting a geographic area to focus your prevention efforts. Having data can help you narrow your focus and be more strategic in your prevention planning and implementation efforts. This tool will help you identify the sources of data that you need to consider in order to select the specific geographic area where you will focus your youth violence strategic planning efforts.

Even if you enter this process with a target neighborhood in mind, going through these steps may help refine your geographic boundaries and better focus your prevention efforts.

1. Getting Started with Readily Accessible Data

The first step in using data to inform strategic planning efforts is to compile data and use it to define the boundaries of the area where you will focus your prevention efforts. Where should the data that you will be using come from? Most communities have access to a wealth of administrative data from schools, the health sector, and criminal justice that provide data at the local level. Additionally, you will be using information about the unique resources and assets in the different communities, as well as your familiarity with the geographic layout of the communities. At this stage in your strategic planning, it is important to examine existing data and collecting new data is not necessary. Additionally, it is not critical at this stage to compile data on all factors that influence the likelihood of youth violence. There will be opportunities to gather more comprehensive data to inform strategic planning down the road.

Keep in mind that you want to identify sources of data that will begin to give you a picture of where in your community various forms of youth violence are occurring as well as other information about resources, assets, and other community characteristics. With this information, you can begin to map out where you are going to work and what forms of youth violence you will be seeking to prevent. These varieties of data can provide a comprehensive picture of the smaller communities within a larger geographical area. As the picture begins to take focus, you can use the information to define the geographic boundaries of the smaller community where you will focus your strategic planning and prevention efforts.

2. Compiling Data and Selecting an Area

In order to ensure that your prevention strategies are making a difference, it is important to match a geographically-defined neighborhood or community to available data sources within your area. Defining your community this way will help you set clear goals and plan prevention strategies that best meet that community's needs, assets, and resources. To define your community, you will need to gather some information about the different communities within your larger geographical area.

There are four types of information you should consider for the purpose of selecting geographic boundaries around the area you will focus your youth violence prevention activities. They include the following four types of information, which are described below:

1. Data on youth violence in the community

2. Data on the risk and protective factors for youth violence

3. Community resources, assets, and infrastructure

4. Natural geographic boundaries

Rates and types of youth violence provide information about the types and forms of youth violence in communities. This can give you information about the rates and trends in different types of youth violence in a community. It can also help you understand what forms of youth violence take place across neighborhoods. These data are essential to understand the specific needs of the different communities with respect to youth violence.

Rates of risk and protective factors for youth violence can tell you what some of the key issues are in the communities that need to be addressed through prevention efforts. These data provide critical information about the factors that may be driving rates of youth violence in each community. To determine geographic boundaries for your community, information about areas where poverty and disadvantage are concentrated, indicators of child welfare, and academic achievement data from schools are helpful.

Community resources, assets, and infrastructure tell you what is already in place in a community. Information about resources, assets, and infrastructure that helps at this stage includes data on school catchment areas and feeder patterns, location of key community organizations and service agencies, and the location of community assets such as parks and recreation centers. Data about resources, assets, and infrastructure help you to identify opportunities to embed prevention efforts within communities.

Natural geographic boundaries are also important to consider. Information about natural geographic boundaries helps you understand the way physical and social structures influence and define communities. Consider features such as major highways, traffic patterns, or bodies of water. Many communities are also defined by other boundaries, such as commercial districts or social and demographic characteristics of the residents.

Compile Youth Violence Data

Youth violence may take many forms in your community, such as in-school bullying, harassment, assaults, physical fights between youth in the community, and homicides. By looking at different sources of data, you can gain a fuller understanding of the many forms of youth violence that occur in your community. Take a look at Table 1. It provides examples of information about different indicators of youth violence that are routinely collected and published by schools, the health sector, and criminal justice system. Keep in mind that the different indicators provide complementary information about youth violence. Sometimes, data on all of the indicators will not be available. Just access what you can.

Table 1. Examples of Community Indicators and Data Sources for Rates and Location of Youth Violence

Indicator	Measure	Geographic Availability	Data Source
Community rates of violent crimes (homicide, assaults, and robbery) committed by youth	Incident reports for violent crimes (homicide, assault, robbery)	Neighborhoods or police districts	Law enforcement
Community arrest rates for juvenile violent crime	Arrests of juveniles for violent crimes (homicide, assault, robbery)	Neighborhoods or police districts	Law enforcement
Community rates of violent deaths among youth	Homicides with a victim who is 10 to 24 years old	Neighborhoods or police districts	Law enforcement
Injuries due to youth violence	Emergency department visits for youth violence injuries	Hospital catchment areas	Hospital emergency departments
School disciplinary actions for violent incidents	Numbers of suspensions or other disciplinary actions for violent incidents in schools	School catchment areas	School districts

Accessing this information can be easier when you have partners. For example, partnerships with police and the criminal justice system can help you gain access to and interpret arrest data. This works best when partners are part of your team and can work closely with you to understand your data needs. The STRYVE Data Request Tool provides some guidance on how to access and request data from the different sources.

Having data broken down to the community level for a few communities will help you compare rates and types of violence across communities and it will help you define the geographic boundaries for your prevention efforts. Therefore, it is not only helpful to have data about the rates of youth violence, it is also important to have information about where youth violence is occurring. The information about location can guide your thinking about selecting geographic boundaries.

Compile Risk and Protective Factor Data

In addition to youth violence data, it is also important to understand the factors that increase or decrease the risk for violence among youth. These risk and protective factors provide valuable information that can help contextualize the information you are getting about rates of youth violence. Data on risk and protective factors help to fill in a richer

picture of what is happening in different areas of your larger community. This information can then be used to identify the locations where opportunities to build prevention efforts exist. Data on risk and protective factors is thus combined with information about youth violence rates to inform your work to establish geographic boundaries for your community.

There are many risk and protective factors that have been associated with youth violence in research. For the purpose of delineating geographic boundaries for your prevention activities, it is important to identify the risk and protective factors for youth violence that are relatively easy to obtain, and that provide interpretable information about where different risk and protective factors are present throughout your larger area. Table 2 includes a list of risk and protective factors that fit this description. The risk and protective factors in Table 2 provide data at an aggregate level, such as a school catchment area or census tract. Also, the measures listed should be available within your community and do not require new data collection. While doing original data collection can provide valuable information about risk and protective factors unique to your community, for the purpose of identifying geographic boundaries the information that can be gathered through existing sources and administrative records is quite sufficient.

Table 2. Examples of Community Indicators and Data Sources for Risk and Protective Factors

Indicator	Measure	Geographic Availability	Data Source
Community disadvantage and poverty	Percent of families living below the poverty line	Census tract	Census data
Community disadvantage and poverty	Community unemployment rate	Census tract	Census data
Community disadvantage and poverty	Percent of students who participate in the free or reduced lunch program	School catchment areas	School districts
Juvenile substance and alcohol use	Arrests of juveniles related to the distribution or possession of illegal drugs	Neighborhoods or police districts	Law enforcement
School achievement	Academic performance on state standardized tests: percent of students meeting or exceeding standards	School catchment areas	School districts
Low school engagement	Percent of high school students who drop out of school	School catchment areas	School districts
Low school engagement	Truancy rates	School catchment areas	School districts

Gather Information About the Community's Assets, Resources, and Infrastructure

As you work to define the geographic boundaries for your community, it is also important to consider existing assets, resources, and infrastructure within the community. These are the elements within communities that provide a foundation for embedding prevention efforts. These foundational elements also highlight key partnerships to inform strategic prevention efforts. As you work to assemble a picture of the assets, resources, and infrastructure within your community, you will need to identify traditional assets and organizations, but you will also need to think creatively about opportunities for novel partnerships.

A good place to access this information is by locating the most common organizations across the community. Table 3 provides a list of the organizations that are typically located in communities. The organizations listed span public, private, and faith-based sectors, and have the potential to have broad reach within communities. It is not meant to be an exhaustive list, as the numbers and types of community assets and resources vary from community to community. The list will just help you get started in your thinking about locating key assets, resources, and infrastructure. As you begin to identify these, you may come across other organizations and assets that are potentially relevant. Table 3 also lists potential partnerships. Not all communities include agencies across every sector, and that does not mean that a particular community is not a good fit for prevention efforts. Remember, the information about assets, resources, and infrastructure at this stage is meant to help you draw geographic boundaries for your community. Thus, the location information should help inform that process.

Consider Geographic Characteristics

When considering all of this information, keep in mind what the natural geographic boundaries are within the community. For example, boulevards and major streets often define neighborhoods within communities. Bodies of water, such as rivers and lakes, also define neighborhoods. When selecting the geographic boundaries of your community, consider the environmental features and how they define smaller areas within the community. It is important to keep in mind how residents of the community use the locations in the community, as well. For example, traffic patterns, public transportation patterns, and retail locations inform the boundaries of communities, as well. Finally, historical and cultural factors that define residents' views of their neighborhoods should be considered when drawing geographic boundaries. Taking all of this information into account will help you select geographic boundaries that reflect realistic physical and social boundaries for the residents of your community.

Table 3. Examples of Community Assets, Resources, and Infrastructure Information

Asset/Resource Type	Geographic Information Needed	Partner Organization
Schools	School catchment areas, feeder patterns	School district
Public community agencies	Location of public agencies (community centers, recreation centers, etc.)	Public administrative offices (e.g., Parks and Recreation)
Non-profit community agencies	Location of non-profit service agencies and services/programs they administer (YMCAs, job training centers, etc.)	Non-profit agencies
Faith organizations	Locations of churches and other faith-based organizations and services/programs they administer	Faith-based organizations
Private industry	Location of commercial centers, businesses, etc.	Business partners
Transportation	Transportation routes, availability of public transport, and accessibility	N/A
Service agencies	Location of service providers and programs/services they administer (e.g., welfare offices, human services, mental health service providers, public childcare, etc.)	Public and private service agencies

3. Putting It All Together

Now that you have compiled the information about youth violence, risk and protective factors, community assets, and geographic characteristics, you are ready to put it all together. Use the information you collected to consider the geographic characteristics of your larger community, and think about boundaries that can delineate a neighborhood or smaller community within your larger area. The primary goal here is to draw the outline of the geographic area that will be the focus of your strategic planning and prevention efforts.

There is no information from the data you have compiled that can be singled out as the most important to draw geographic boundaries. All of the information, taken together, should be used to inform your decision. Likewise, there is no formula that can easily identify the geographic boundaries for your community. As you take all of the information into account, you will have to consider potential political and organizational pressures. These are the realities of making data-informed decisions.

When you are ready to draw out the geographic outlines of your community, pull together the information you have compiled about youth violence, risk and protective factors, community assets, and geographic characteristics.

- **Youth violence.** Consider the information about how and where different types of youth violence happen in your larger area. Where is youth violence and crime happening across your community? How does youth violence vary across neighborhoods within the area? As you consider youth violence data, it is informative to think about patterns of violence, as well as potential for prevention. It is not necessary to prioritize the neighborhood that has experienced the highest rates of youth violence. Information about risk and protective factors, assets, and geographic boundaries must be also weighed in to determine the community boundaries that are most feasible to work with in implementing prevention efforts.

- **Risk and protective factors.** Consider information about the patterns of risk and protection across your larger area. You can create geographic maps using youth violence data and the risk and protective factor indicators collected from partner agencies. These data are essential to understanding the levels of need and strength across neighborhoods.

- **Assets, resources, and infrastructure.** Consider the catchment areas, feeder patterns, and organizational boundaries for the key assets and organizations across the community. In order to effectively leverage partnerships, it will be critical to make sure that some patterns are left intact. For example, it is often critical to work with schools as key partners in prevention efforts. Geographic boundaries should therefore keep school catchment areas intact, so that the entire population of

a school has the potential to benefit from programmatic efforts, if possible. The information about assets must also be weighed with data about youth violence and risk and protective factors. In putting this information together, a picture may emerge about the areas with an optimal balance of need and opportunity. For example, working in communities with high levels of need that also lack assets and resources may incapacitate prevention efforts. These communities may need more foundational work before they can benefit from strategic planning efforts. It may be more optimally beneficial to focus on communities that have clear need but also have the capacity to engage in strategic planning efforts and carry out the work of prevention. Alternatively, other communities may have strong prevention plans and ongoing efforts that may limit the urgency of a strategic planning effort. There may also be benefits for demonstrating success in one community that is "ready for action" to help motivate foundational work in other communities that have greater need, but are at earlier stages of readiness.

- **Geographic characteristics.** Consider the information about natural geographic boundaries, as well as those that are socially defined. For example, are there historical neighborhoods within the area? How do the geographic characteristics map on to feeder patterns and the location of assets and infrastructure?

As you work to develop a clear picture of violence in your larger area, it will also be helpful to ask yourself some concrete questions about the characteristics and conditions in your community that will influence your work in youth violence prevention. These factors can help you think through some of the issues surrounding how to choose a community that presents promise and opportunity. The list of questions provided in Appendix 1 can provide you with additional guidance about these community conditions.

Once you have considered your youth violence and risk and protective factor data, information about community assets, and geographic characteristics, you will hopefully have complementary and nuanced information about youth violence and its influences across your community. Although choosing geographic boundaries for your community is rarely a straightforward or simple process, using data to inform your decisions can provide a sound foundation to guide your efforts. At the end of this step, you should have identified community boundaries that delineate a community that will be the focus of your youth violence prevention efforts. You are now ready to move to Step 2, collecting youth violence data to drive your strategic planning efforts.