

National *Academic Centers of Excellence* on Youth Violence Prevention

VCU Clark-Hill Institute for Positive Youth Development

History

The Academic Centers of Excellence (ACEs) were established soon after the tragedy at Columbine High School. Each ACE works with the communities it serves to encourage participation and partnership, mobilizing residents and researchers to craft effective solutions for violence prevention tailored to their specific community. The ACE Centers research youth violence prevention approaches, collect and analyze surveillance data, and foster relationships with local community partners to help develop, implement, and evaluate promising prevention efforts.

Established in 2000, the Virginia Commonwealth University Clark-Hill Institute for Positive Youth Development (Clark-Hill Institute) is a collaboration of faculty from Virginia Commonwealth University, community leaders and residents, and state and local partners. The Clark-Hill Institute works primarily with Richmond youth, as youth violence presents a particularly serious problem in the Richmond community. Thanks to a multidisciplinary staff and an extensive community network, the Institute has established itself as a national leader in youth violence prevention research. The Institute is engaged in activities that further its mission to promote healthy and safe youth development through individual and community empowerment.

The Institute's overall mission is to empower youth, schools, families, and other stakeholders to promote the healthy, safe, and positive development of youth in the Richmond community from early adolescence through emerging adulthood. This mission

is pursued through research, education, and outreach. The mission, work, and logic model of the Institute are grounded in a framework that addresses multiple levels of influence on youth behavior and developmental outcomes.

Research

The Clark-Hill Institute's research agenda builds on previous work, including a 13-year collaborative effort to develop and evaluate effective youth violence prevention programs. It is driven by the assumption that current prevention efforts provide excellent starting points, but further research is needed to improve the effectiveness of programs. This work is accomplished through an action-research cycle in which current prevention efforts are refined, implemented, and then re-evaluated. An example of such an approach is the Institute's *Expressive Writing Study*, a unique project evaluating the effectiveness of middle school students' self-regulation of emotions and aggressive behaviors through mediated writing exercises.

The Institute is also actively involved in studying the relevance of a violence prevention program to local middle school students. Researchers reviewed promising and effective anti-violence curricula (Responding in Peaceful and Positive ways, or RIPP, and Second Step) and modified ways these curricula are implemented to meet the needs of youth with and without disabilities.

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The researchers are now examining the effectiveness of a revised curriculum to determine whether the curriculum can be used as a practical template for the replication of health promotion efforts in other schools and systems. These results will prove valuable to prevention program developers and other communities hoping to make adaptations to universally available curricula.

The Institute is also involved in other research projects, including

- Identifying obstructive and supportive factors critical for successful community-level prevention impact and programming;
- Identifying situations that place urban adolescents at risk for dating violence and the protective factors and risk factors that help them or hinder them in handling these situations effectively; and
- Evaluating a community-based intervention that supports youth and families by building supportive relationships among neighbors in high-risk communities and providing information about resources that promote positive youth development.

Surveillance

Surveillance activities at the Clark-Hill Institute involve collaboration with community and local agencies in the collection of surveillance data. The Institute continues to build and expand youth violence surveillance systems by combining statistical data from numerous sources, including justice, school, and medical databases. Analysis and compilation of these sources has helped to synthesize a local system ca-

pable of monitoring youth violence and identifying the greatest areas of need. The Institute distributes surveillance findings to partners and local communities via quarterly fact sheets and an annual report.

Training

Community partners and residents are encouraged to expand their understanding of positive youth development and youth violence prevention by participating in trainings and conferences hosted by the Clark-Hill Institute. These activities help community leaders and residents learn skills for sustaining research and surveillance projects in their neighborhoods.

In addition to community-level training, the Institute also provides training and professional development opportunities for VCU students at both the undergraduate and the graduate level. Formalized training and mentoring opportunities offer future researchers the hands-on experiences necessary to develop and implement successful preventative community-based research.

Community Mobilization

Alongside the Institute's coordinated surveillance, research, and training activities, outreach projects empower local individuals and groups to action through collaboration. This partnership includes a broad team of members from governmental, educational, and judicial departments; faith-based organizations; youth councils; ethnic interest groups; and community advocates. The unified presence of diverse interests helps to coordinate and support many of the Institute's activities and facilitates long-term and sustainable solutions to youth violence in the Richmond area.

For more information, please contact:

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