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Review paper

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## **EMPOWERING YOUTH: INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING TEEN VIOLENCE**

Violence is one of the most serious violations of human rights, as evidenced by its complexity and effects. Young people's violence is one of the most prominent types of violence in our culture. Adolescents who exhibit violent conduct are also more likely to engage in other harmful behaviours, such as chronic lying, drug addiction, reckless driving, high-risk sexually transmitted infections, and chronic absences from school. Emotional difficulties, such as a lack of emotional regulation skills, difficulty resolving conflict, or difficulties coping with feelings of rage, jealousy, or rejection, frequently lead to violence in young people. Since many teen conversations now take place in public on the internet, these difficulties have worsened as social media has grown in popularity. This heightens the teenagers' feelings of guilt, embarrassment, humiliation, and fear of others' judgment. Psychologists are shedding light on the matter with their research insights, highlighting the protective and risk factors in violent conduct and prevention strategies and initiatives. This paper attempts to propose a new approach to the prevention and disruption of violence among adolescents that puts an emphasis on developing strengths and abilities rather than standard psychoeducation. Some of the promising strategies that can assist in forecasting teens' risk for real-world violence include making meaning, developing interpersonal skills, regulating emotions and behaviour, training in communication skills, peer-led programs, digital monitoring, and bystander intervention, which includes peers, parents, and teachers. Not only can these interventions shield teenagers during a crucial developmental stage, but they can also lower their future risk of committing and experiencing intimate partner abuse.

**Key words:** teen violence; risk and protective factors; intervention; prevention

## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical stage in a person's life that marks the transition from childhood to maturity, from dependency to independence and autonomy, from family to peer groups. It is a period of rapid biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional development, characterized by heightened impulsivity, emotionality, and risk-taking tendencies. During this stage of life, adolescents undergo physical, emotional, psychological, social, or other changes and face lots of stress and challenges that may result in violence. Youth violence is a critical matter that has gathered significant attention from psychologists, educators, policymakers, and the public. While violence against children, in general, involves all sorts of parents, caregivers, peers, romantic partners, or strangers who perpetrate violence against those younger than 18, youth violence is understood as violence between peers involving both friends and strangers that is specifically defined based solely on the perpetrator's age, i.e., the victim's age is used to categorize and estimate its incidence and rates.

Youth violence occurs when children or young adults between the ages of 10 and 24 deliberately use physical force or power to threaten or harm their peers who are unrelated or whom they may or may not know. It encompasses a range of behaviours, such as bullying, cyberbullying, physical fights, dating violence, and more severe forms of aggression, such as gang violence, that can happen in or outside of school settings. Bullying whether verbal, physical, or relational, may appear in the form of repeated, unwanted, aggressive actions between peers where there is an imbalance of power. Dating violence may appear in various forms, including stalking, harassment, psychological aggression, physical and sexual violence, threats, insults, control attempts, and nonconsensual intimate photo sharing. When youth violence happens in the school setting, on the way to and from school, on the way to or from or during school-related activities, it's called school-based violence and it includes „a wide variety of acts, such as physical assault and battery, physical aggression, noncontact aggression (e.g., throwing things) and broadly defined externalizing behaviour, bullying, fighting, robbery, unwanted sexual contact, weapon possession and use, and verbal threats” (Turanovic & Siennick 2022: 3). Even though studies show that adolescents may engage in multiple forms of violence (Leemis et al. 2019), the most frequently studied forms of violence are bullying (Chu et al. 2018), cyberbullying (Khong et al. 2019), sexual harassment (Duncan et al. 2018), dating violence (Wincentak et al. 2017), and cyber dating violence (Sánchez-Jiménez et al. 2015). Musu-Gillette and colleagues (2018) conducted a study in the USA that revealed that over 20% of

schoolchildren experienced bullying, with nearly 7% experiencing online bullying in the same year. Violent dating relationships can have serious, long-term effects. A study of nearly 10,000 teenagers from the UK's Millennium Cohort Study found that those who experienced sexual abuse between the ages of 14 and 17 had worse mental health at 17, experienced greater psychological distress, and were more likely to report engaging in self-harm, including suicide attempts, in the previous year (Bentivegna & Patalay 2022).

The growing trend of youth violence presents challenges for all governments worldwide and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly for professionals in sectors of education and healthcare. Detailed and comprehensive studies on this topic in B&H are scarce, but some indicate changes in the prevalence of property, violent, and cyber-related delinquency (Maljevic 2020). For example, a study in the Federation of B&H on a nationally representative sample of adolescents indicates 69% of high school students experience some form of violence, with females being more often victims and perpetrators of psychological and physical peer violence (Kuralić-Čišić et al. 2017). Ybarra and colleagues (2016) found similar results, indicating a difference in both victimisation and perpetration of violence, with boys more likely to commit acts of sexual violence and girls more likely to commit acts of psychological abuse. A study reveals that psychological abuse can increase violence rates, with 51% of females and 43% of males experiencing dating violence and 50% of females and 35% of males perpetrating it (Ybarra 2016). Studies have indicated that social exclusion, including experiences like bullying, ostracism, and peer rejection, affects a substantial proportion of adolescents worldwide (Cheek et al. 2020). Bullying can lead to serious physical and psychological health issues, including somatization symptoms such as headaches, chronic abdominal or other pain, sleep disturbances, depression, anxiety, and alcohol use and abuse (Gini & Pozzoli 2013). Bullying perpetration or victimisation could be risk factors for perpetration or victimization in early romantic relationships (Zych et al. 2021) and occasionally be a symptom of aggressive or antisocial behaviour later in life (Goulter et al. 2020). And even more worrisome, as the findings of a comprehensive evaluation of 38 studies headed by Piolanti (2023) indicate, long-term engagement with dating violence in youth predicts intimate partner violence (IPV) in adulthood. These findings highlight not only the immediate and long-term detrimental impact of youth violence on adolescents' physical and mental health but also the different variables associated with it, indicating the complexity of the phenomenon.

Many theories from the major field of psychology, sociology, and criminology attempt to explain the phenomenon of youth violence, whose detailed elaboration is beyond the scope of this article. Early theories focused on a single individual, environmental, or integral antecedent of violence in a given population. To name a few, biological model for example, associates violence and aggression to hormones such as testosterone, cortisol or oxytocin (Frieze et al. 2020), or social learning theory, which posits that youth violence is learned behavior, influenced by observing and imitating others, particularly in environments where aggression is normalized (Bandura 1977), or, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), defined as stressful events that occur before the age of 18 that directly affect the child or environment they live in, and strain theory that suggests that societal pressures and the inability to achieve socially accepted goals can lead to frustration and aggression, which may manifest as violence (Agnew 1992). However, nowadays, most theorists, including the author of this article, agree that the interaction of individual characteristics, development, and environment influences youth behaviour and increases the risk factors for youth violence. For example, developmental psychopathology and life course theories consider dynamics and interactive aspects of biology, psychology, environment, and change over time, suggesting that early exposure to risk factors such as family violence, poverty, and peer rejection can increase the likelihood of violent behaviour in adolescence (Moffitt 1993, 2017) and increase or decrease an individual's risk of becoming a perpetrator or victim of violence. Similarly, systems theory maintains that violent behaviour is not typically caused by any one factor but rather by many factors that amplify each other. These theories collectively highlight the multifaceted nature of youth violence, underscoring the importance of addressing both individual and contextual risk and protective factors in prevention and intervention efforts.

Primary prevention strategies are defined as efforts directed at aiding youth to elude violent behaviour, while secondary prevention focuses on treating the harm resulting from violent incidents, and tertiary prevention programs address the long-term effects of violence, primarily in therapy and rehabilitation.

Even though violence in youth does not directly cause violence in adulthood, it is associated with it as a risk factor, commonly referred to as an aspect of one's biology, psychology, family, society, or culture. While a risk factor predates and links to a greater chance of undesirable consequences, a protective factor, stemming from primarily individual, family, peer, and neighbourhood factors, lessens the detrimental effect of a risk factor on undesirable outcomes such as youth violence perpetration and victimization (Antunes & Ahlin 2017).

Research also identifies several risk factors associated with youth violence, including individual, environmental, or community influences (family, peer, school, and societal influences). For example, individual risk factors include gender, aggressive behaviour in childhood, personality and emotion regulation, low self-control, impulsivity, and cognitive deficits (Bushman et al. 2018). Environmental or community risk factors, which include social exclusion and isolation, family, school, and neighbourhood characteristics such as exposure to violence, harsh parenting, bullying, substance use, and other adverse and stressful experiences, significantly contribute to youth violence (Bushman et al. 2018). Studies show that even in youth with low socio-economic family status and those with high levels of cumulative risk, protective factors seem to minimize violence in late adolescence and later in life (Kim et al. 2016). Similarly, research shows that children who experience trauma, poverty, or a range of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are more likely to be both victims and perpetrators of violence during adolescence (Taquette & Monteiro 2019; Spencer et al. 2019). The study also indicates not only that these issues frequently co-occur but that they are also interconnected; different types of violence share similar risk factors, predominantly family violence and other ACEs (Banyard and Hamby 2022) and observed community violence (Thulin et al. 2021). Thus, violence remains a significant public health concern, with detrimental impacts on individuals, families, and communities, and its consequences ought to be researched and addressed. The consequences of violence in adolescence, mainly dating violence, extend beyond immediate physical harm, encompassing psychological trauma, academic disruption, legal consequences, and long-term interpersonal difficulties (Taquette & Monteiro 2019). Also, victims of teen violence may experience lasting emotional scars and impaired social functioning, including poly-victimisation or exposure to multiple forms of violence (Turner et al. 2016), while perpetrators face an increased risk of incarceration, substance abuse, and future violence perpetration and aggression (David-Ferdon & Simon 2014).

Given this, this paper discusses innovative intervention approaches that focus primarily on building strengths and promoting a safe and healthy environment through individual and community-oriented prevention strategies.

## **DISCUSSION: INNOVATIVE VIOLENCE PREVENTION STRATEGIES**

Most of the conventional violence-related prevention programs focus on addressing the consequences of violence and aggression in secondary and tertiary prevention programs. For example, while acknowledged for their ability to enhance knowledge and attitudes, conventional psychoeducation programs are known to have minimal impact on behaviour change, primarily due to their focus on discussing warning flags during health classes (De La Rue 2017). Contrary to popular belief, innovative interventions focus on building assets and resources, and because of their strength-based approaches, they help youth avoid violence (primary prevention). Strength-based interventions are innovative because they aim to capacitate and empower young individuals with skills and resources, thus increasing their protective factors and diminishing the impact of risk factors. As such, innovative interventions safeguard and support youth mental health and can even change the trajectory of young people (Rizzo et al. 2021).

Nowadays, a growing number of psychologists and other professionals approach prevention and intervention from an individual strengths-based and community-oriented perspective. They incorporate techniques from mental health treatments for disorders like conduct and couples counselling to educate youth on how to manage their own emotional and relationship difficulties and how to intervene when others need assistance. In addition to building and enhancing individual young people's assets and resources (to increase individual protective factors), innovative interventions also incorporate collaborating with peers, families, schools, and entire communities to increase surrounding protective factors that have an impact on youth.

Studies show that young people may resort to violence because of individual risk factors such as lack of meaning, anger, frustration, and anxiety, poor emotion management and regulation, poor communication, and interpersonal skills (Banyard & Hamby 2022) that may be further amplified by environmental risk factors such as high levels of family conflict, (cyber)bullying, real-world and online harassment, social exclusion, popular violent media or an environment that does not properly sanction violence. Strength-based intervention strategies focus on helping youth develop strengths such as making meaning, regulating emotions and behaviour, and improving communication and interpersonal skills. For example, one strength-based intervention is teaching youth to find and use meaning, and using meaning-making techniques such as reframing or journaling can alter their perspective on an angry, frustrating

situation, alter their perception of it (increase assets and resources), and diminish their chances of acting on their frustration and anger (Banyard & Hamby 2022). Youth can also be taught to self-regulate and manage anger effectively by following these steps: identify where in the body a person feels the anger, label it, express the thought verbally (I am angry), determine the underlying message behind the angry feelings, and subsequently visualize oneself responding to those impulses mentally, as if watching a movie. By releasing some of the pent-up anger through these steps, a person may find it easier to decide the next course of action and thus be less aggressive. An awareness-based Learning to Breathe mindfulness program is one more strength-based intervention that teaches adolescents how to manage their frustration and anger in a six-week course. Research shows that this mindfulness, strength-based intervention may make youth less inclined to act out their anger towards other people in real life or on the Internet (Metz et al. 2013) and reduce youth aggression and violence in general (behavioural regulation) (Tao et al. 2021). This indicates mindfulness to be particularly effective for anger management and improving overall emotion regulation. Emotion regulatory strengths assist teenagers in learning how to manage and control emotions that surface in real life or online, particularly humiliation, jealousy, and rage (Banyard & Hamby 2022), and help them cope with stress and social exclusion, reduce aggressive behavior, and help maintain and improve interpersonal relationships (Holley et al. 2017). Research demonstrates that strength-based interventions overall can lead to greater resilience, coping abilities, and overall well-being (Ostafin 2020).

Adolescent violence might also be associated with poor interpersonal and communication skills. Strength-based interpersonal and communication skill-building focuses on effective ways to express thoughts and emotions, promoting healthy dialogue, and reducing misunderstandings that could escalate into conflicts and violence (Rueda et al. 2021). For instance, addressing the gender risk factor, the STRONG project (Rizzo et al. 2021) focuses on the relationship between health knowledge, emotion regulation, and communication of adolescent males, while the Date SMART intervention (Rizzo et al. 2018) aims to address the common underlying skills deficits associated with violence and sexual risk behaviour in adolescent females. The STRONG project and the Date SMART interventions by building relationship assets and resources enhance boys and girls' overall resilience helping them maintain and keep healthy relationships characterized by understanding, emotional intelligence, empathy, support, and assertiveness (Banyard and Humby 2022).

However, individual strength-based interventions are vital but insufficient for violence prevention. Therefore, innovative interventions also incorporate environmental or community approaches such as peer-led programs, digital monitoring, and bystander intervention (by parents, teachers, peers, and friends) into effective prevention strategies to address teenage violence. Peer-led programs have shown significant promise for engaging teenagers in positive behaviours and preventing violence. For example, the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program, initially developed in American universities and colleges, is one such initiative that employs a peer mentoring model and a bystander approach (Butler et al. 2024). Such programs often involve older students or trained peer educators who lead discussions, workshops, and activities focused on conflict resolution, empathy building, and violence prevention, thus creating a more relatable and comfortable environment for teenagers to learn about and discuss sensitive topics (Butler et al. 2024). Peer-led programs not only educate teens on recognizing signs of violence but also empower them to intervene when they witness concerning behaviours. Also, in today's digital age, monitoring online activities is crucial for identifying potential teenage risks. With the prevalence of social media and online communication, parents should monitor their teen's online activity responsibly and also discuss with teens appropriate online behaviour, recognize signs of cyberbullying, and intervene if necessary. Digital monitoring tools can track social media posts, online searches, and communication patterns for signs of cyberbullying, threats, or harmful behaviours. For example, the European Commission Social Networking Task Force developed 'Safer Social Networking Principles' in 2009, which outline safety strategies for social networking platforms, including educational messages, privacy protection, user empowerment, and reporting mechanisms to detect cyberbullying early (Van Royen et al. 2015). These tools, when used responsibly and transparently, enable parents and educators to intervene early and provide necessary support, thus safeguarding and protecting youth mental health and preventing violence.

Also, teaching bystander intervention is pivotal in empowering teenagers to act when they witness violence or risky behaviours. In line with social learning theory, bystander intervention programs assume, "When community members ignore or fail to respond to behaviours across this spectrum, they tacitly reinforce the behaviour" (Storer et al. 2016: 257). Their goal is to disrupt explicit occurrences of violence or abuse, foster a peer and public atmosphere that discourages aggressive or violent behaviour, and equip teens with the necessary skills and self-efficacy to intervene safely (Debham & Mauer 2021) safely.



Additionally, parents and teachers serve as role models for interpersonal relationships, communication, and navigating relationships. Their role involves demonstrating healthy communication, conflict resolution, and respectful behaviour at home and school, setting a powerful example for teens to follow in their interactions with others, hence increasing protective factors. Also, in addition to encouraging students to report any bullying, harassment, or violence and fostering a safe environment, teachers should incorporate lessons on conflict resolution, empathy, and bystander intervention into their curriculum to ensure timely intervention and support and be role models for youth.

## CONCLUSION

Adolescent violence is a complex phenomenon rooted in intersecting psychological, social, and environmental factors. Comprehensive innovative interventions are directed at youth individual strengths, assets, and resource building, such as making meaning techniques through reframing and journaling, emotion regulation and control through mindfulness and the Learning to Breathe program, and interpersonal and communication skill-building training such as SMART and STRONG projects to tackle frustrations, anger, and anxiety in the real-world and online resulting from an interplay of individual characteristics and environmental factors contributing to youth violence. These individual prevention strategies are further strengthened by environmental support in the form of peer-led programs such as The Mentors in Violence Prevention, digital monitoring like Safer Social Networking Principles, and bystander intervention. As such, these interventions can all collectively create healthier and more resourceful youth and supportive environment with less or no violence where teenagers can learn, grow, and thrive safely.

Even though innovative strength-based interventions seem to give promising results, acts of youth violence are influenced by multiple factors, often acting together, resulting in overlapping categorization of individual and environmental risk factors. Given this, the issue of youth violence remains challenging to research without getting enmeshed in different perspectives.

This article underscores the complexity and changing landscape of individual and environmental factors that may lead to youth violence nowadays. The rise of social media and digital communication has also introduced new avenues for social exclusion, such as cyberbullying and online harassment, further complicating the landscape of teen social dynamics and relationships associated with youth violence. Given these

complexities, this article's findings are rather exploratory. In association with strength-based intervention, future research should focus on one type of youth violence, examine the process by which youth violence perpetration and victimization occur, and hence tailor and explore prevention and intervention. This article can serve as a solid reference for parents, educators, and those working with youth.

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## OSNAŽIVANJE MLADIH: INOVATIVNE STRATEGIJE ZA SPREČAVANJE NASILJA MEĐU TINEJDŽERIMA

### Sažetak:

Nasilje je jedno od najtežih kršenja ljudskih prava, o čemu svjedoče njegova složenost i posljedice. Nasilje mladih jedna je od najistaknutijih vrsta nasilja u našoj kulturi. Adolescenti koji manifestiraju nasilno ponašanje također imaju veću vjerojatnost da će se uključiti u druga štetna ponašanja, kao što su kronično laganje, ovisnost o drogama, nesmotrena vožnja, visokorizične spolno prenosive infekcije i kronični izostanci iz škole. Emocionalne poteškoće, kao što su nedostatak vještina emocionalne regulacije, poteškoće u rješavanju konflikata ili poteškoće u suočavanju s osjećajima bijesa, ljubomore ili odbacivanja, često dovode do nasilja kod mladih ljudi. Budući da se mnogi tinejdžerski razgovori sada odvijaju javno na internetu, te su se poteškoće pogoršale kako društveni mediji postaju sve popularniji. To kod tinejdžera pojačava osjećaj krivnje, neugodnosti, poniženja i straha od osude. Psiholozi rasvjetljavaju to pitanje svojim istraživačkim uvidima, ističući zaštitne i rizične čimbenike u nasilnom ponašanju te preventivnim strategijama i inicijativama. Ovaj rad pokušava predložiti novi pristup prevenciji i prekidanju nasilja među adolescentima koji stavlja naglasak na razvoj snaga i sposobnosti, a ne na standardnu psihoedukaciju. Neke od obećavajućih strategija koje mogu pomoći u predviđanju rizika tinejdžera od nasilja u stvarnom svijetu uključuju stvaranje smisla, razvoj interpersonalnih vještina, reguliranje emocija i ponašanja, obuku komunikacijskih vještina, programe vođene od strane vršnjaka, digitalno praćenje i intervenciju promatrača, što uključuje vršnjaci, roditelji i učitelji. Ne samo da ove intervencije mogu zaštititi tinejdžere tijekom ključne razvojne faze, već mogu i smanjiti njihov budući rizik od počinjenja i doživljavanja zlostavljanja od strane intimnog partnera.

**Ključne riječi:** maloljetničko nasilje; rizični i zaštitni čimbenici; intervencija; prevencija

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