Every year, an estimated 46 million children in the United States are exposed to violence, abuse, crime or another form of psychological trauma. This is a widespread and persistent challenge in American life, effecting all ethnic and racial groups, as well as all cities, suburbs and rural areas.

However, childhood and adolescent exposure to violence is especially pronounced in Chicago, where the shooting of public school students is a regular occurrence, the Juvenile Temporary Detention Center has over 5,000 admissions annually, and 16% of teens report attempting suicide, the highest rate in the country. Importantly, similar challenges are growing in many Chicago suburbs, where poverty rates have been on the rise for over a decade. Amidst these challenges, the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago has made violence prevention one of its four mission anchors, along with academic readiness, character development, fitness and healthy living. We are actively leveraging our 23 centers, 46 human service sites, and 4,000 employees.

The Y’s commitment to violence prevention grows out of our driving concern with helping young people live more stable, fulfilling lives. Based on growing bodies of research, we know that chronic exposure to traumatic stress places thousands of Chicagoland youth at risk of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, sleep disturbance and somatization. Left untreated, these symptoms can lead to engagement in maladaptive coping mechanisms and behaviors such as drug use, academic failure, self-harm, bullying, gang involvement incarceration, and early death.

Our approach to violence prevention is designed to reduce this cycle of harm, mobilizing what Dr. Bruce Perry has called the fundamental power of rhythm and relationships. We move towards this vision by working to reduce adverse childhood experiences, building community protective factors and strengthening human resiliency. Importantly, the Y’s commitment to violence prevention represents an evolution of our decades-long work with those youth at the highest risk of both violent victimization and the perpetration of violent acts.

---

1 “Defending Childhood: Protect, Heal, Thrive.” Attorney General’s National Taskforce on Children Exposed to Violence.
The Y’s Youth Safety and Violence Prevention program (YSVP) is a comprehensive, trauma-informed approach to violence prevention that looks at past exposure to trauma as a main driver of future dangerous behaviors. We currently operate five main programs:

- **Urban Warriors** reduces the traumatic effects of violence on “American child soldiers” and supports youth participants through 16 weeks of structured Saturday programming. Sessions are facilitated by military veterans who are supported by YSVP staff and a coach from Adler. The curriculum consists of 5 thematic areas: belonging, positive identity development, cognitive restructuring, coping and community engagement.

- **Our Street and School Intervention Program (SIP)** is our baseline youth outreach program and has been in operation for more than 20 years. Working in both school and community settings, we provide supportive mentorship services to more than 200 youth each year from South Chicago, Little Village, Pilsen, Humboldt Park and Logan Square. We engage these youth through regular peace circles, sports events and creative arts programs.

- **Restoring Individual, Supporting Everyone (RISE)** is a leadership development program for youth who have been arrested. Our RISE outreach workers support small cohorts of youth to design and implement their own community leadership projects over a 6-month period.

- **The Parent Café and Leadership Program** supports parents of children and youth who face high levels of stress, isolation and exposure to trauma. Through regular parent cafes and peer group activities, we help participants to reduce their household stress and to expand the protective factors in their lives.

- **Bridging the Divide** helps build relationships between youth, law enforcement officials and other community members by offering opportunities for dialogue through cafes, peace circles, story sharing and more. We have also created a toolkit for safe youth-police conversations that other communities and institutions can use to expand this work.

For more information email ysvp@ymcachicago.org or visit our website at ymcachicago.org/ysvp.