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# Teen Empowerment Program Evaluation Empowering Youth and Adults as Agents of Positive Change

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# Teen Empowerment Program Evaluation Empowering Youth and Adults as Agents of Positive Change

Russell Schutt, PhD - UMass Boston Sociology Department

## Overview

Teen Empowerment has succeeded in developing and maintaining a program design for engaging at-risk youth and reducing youth violence that can serve as a model for other communities. Its systematic approach to selection, engagement, and transformation provide the foundation for individual achievement and community change.

While the study contains substantial evidence of Teen Empowerment's ability to produce positive results for youth at risk and for community wide change in patterns of adolescent behavior, there is a need to implement a more ambitious evaluation design to conduct the longitudinal and controlled studies needed to better understand the Model's mechanisms of effectiveness and to further quantify its capacity to achieve outcomes for individuals and community-wide transformation.

## Study Methodology

Students in Foundations of Applied Sociology, conducted an exploratory study of the process by which Teen Empowerment seeks to achieve its goals in 2011 - 2012.

### Data collection methods included:

- observations of Teen Empowerment exercises and community events
- coding of TE records about community events and review of data on youth crime, suicide attempts, and drug overdoses
- semi-structured interviews with program staff and community leaders involved with the program
- a structured survey of current and former Youth Organizers and a comparison group of unsuccessful applicants

## Program Impacts

### Impact on Community Wide Behavior Patterns

- A marked reduction in youth violence (an approximately 50% reduction in serious (Part I) crimes occurred during the six years since Teen Empowerment began its work in Somerville. The most dramatic reduction in the youth crime rate occurred after Teen Empowerment closed its office in West Somerville and focused almost all of its community events in the East Somerville, where most youth crime occurs.
- Teen Empowerment began to work in Somerville at a time of an unusual number of youth overdoses and suicides (between 2000-2005). No youth deaths due to overdoses or suicides have occurred since 2005, while the number of youth suicide attempts and drug overdoses has not varied appreciably since then.
- Community leaders uniformly praised Teen Empowerment's staff and saw evidence of its impact in the community and on Youth Organizers.

### Evidence of Impact On Individuals

- Teen Empowerment Youth Organizers were similar in many respects to applicants who were not accepted—including similar levels of criminal propensity, and exposure to violence, but they came from families with more financial problems, had poorer psychological health, and more drinking problems.
- Youth Organizers appeared to have longer-term ties to the community and more pro-social orientations than unsuccessful applicants.
  - Involvement in Teen Empowerment also made Youth Organizers much more likely to be working and to be involved in community activities.
  - Former Youth Organizers appeared to have had improved psychological health and continued advantages in terms of working for pay and participating in community activities.

## Study Recommendations

- Maintain basic program model
- Infuse program elements in other programs
- Increase publicity about community events
- Heighten training about substance abuse hazards
- Support connections for mental health counseling
- Develop strategy for engaging Hispanic youth
- Increase collaborations with other community-based organizations



Melissa Pearrow, Russell Schutt, Stanley Pollack, Chancellor Motley, and Craig McClay take a photo together at a group presentation at UMass Boston.

## Partnership Information

**Russell K. Schutt**, Ph.D., Chair of Sociology Department at UMass Boston

**Whitney Gecker**, former UMass Boston Sociology Student

**Stanley Pollack**, Executive Director of Teen Empowerment | <http://www.teenempowerment.org>

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