

The effects of Positive Youth Development interventions on substance use, violence and inequalities: systematic review of theories of change, processes and outcomes

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†In memoriam. The report is dedicated to the memory of Katrina Lester, a very fine researcher and a kind and generous woman.

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Plain English summary

PYD interventions on substance use, violence and inequalities

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Plain English summary

Positive Youth Development (PYD) delivered outside school provides young people with additional education and leisure opportunities to promote overall personal development, for example in terms of self-esteem, confidence, skills and aspirations. PYD is presented as a way in which to reduce substance use (smoking, drinking alcohol and drug use) and violence. We reviewed existing research on this by examining how PYD is intended to reduce substance use and violence; how delivery is affected by context; and the impacts of PYD on substance use and violence. We explicitly defined what evidence we would include and how we would integrate it. We searched thoroughly for relevant research, finding 48 reports, of which 25 examined impacts, mostly in the USA.

Our review of PYD theory suggested that PYD aims to help young people identify their goals and how to achieve these. This should make them less likely to become involved in or harmed by violence and drug use in their neighbourhoods. Existing theories are not clear about exactly how this protection occurs.

Our review of evaluations of PYD delivery suggest that it is most successful when programmes engage with young people's families and communities to gain their trust and support. Providers of PYD need to be skilful, but recruiting and retaining such people can be hard when funding is short term. There are sometimes tensions in PYD programmes between letting young people choose what activities to pursue and ensuring that they participate in diverse activities, including education.

Our pooling of the results of evaluations of PYD impacts on young people found very small reductions in substance use and violence, most of which probably occurred by chance.

Currently, there is no good evidence to support investments in PYD delivered outside school to prevent substance use and violence. However, before any new evaluations are undertaken, PYD providers need to be clearer about how interventions are meant to work.

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This report

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