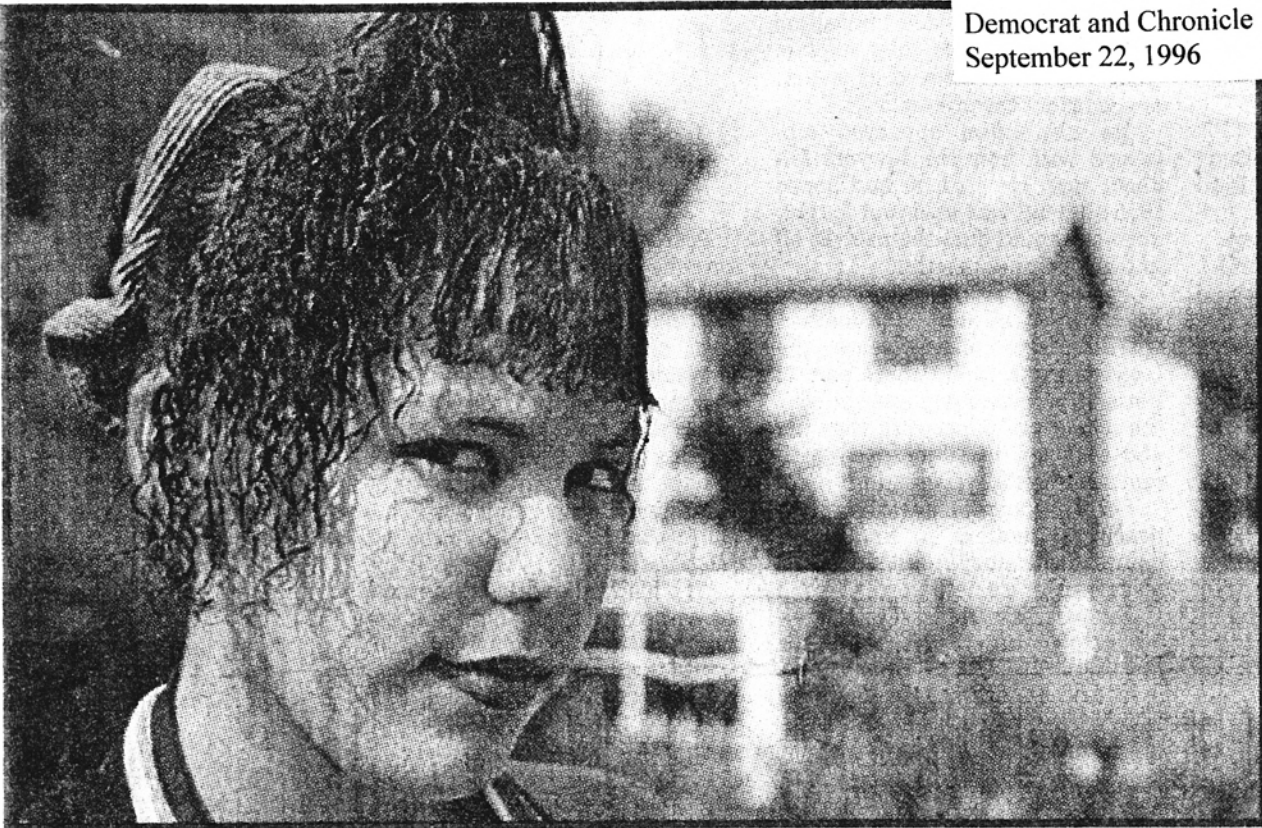


**make
us
SAFE**
TEENS TALK ABOUT VIOLENCE



"I had this thing for revenge. But I decided not to waste my time."

Veronica Vargas, an eighth-grader at Monroe Middle School, outside her Rochester home.

Violence can be beaten

It started over a necklace, a silver chain etched with the name Alex.

Veronica Vargas, 13, had a boyfriend named Alex. So did Yahaira Romero, 14.

At Monroe Middle School, where the two girls are classmates, rumors started flying that Yahaira had accused Veronica of wearing her boyfriend's necklace. Veronica heard that Yahaira wanted to jump her.

One morning in June, the tension escalated in a school hallway. Yahaira's sister called Veronica a name and slapped her. Seconds later, Yahaira joined in the fight until two teachers broke it up.

"I had this thing for revenge," said Veronica, an eighth-grader who carries a knife around her North Union Street neighborhood. "But I decided not to waste my time."

Veronica, whose cocaine-addicted father committed suicide in June, decided to end the conflict after going through a student-run mediation session at school two weeks ago.

The resolution worked out by her mediators stated: "Yahaira agrees to respect Veronica, and Veronica agrees to respect Yahaira."

Peer mediation, now used throughout Monroe County, is just one of the dozens of programs that schools, neighborhood groups, social service agencies

and governments have launched to stem the surge in youth violence.

Yet while nearly \$71 million in taxpayer dollars is spent annually in the community on programs for youth and children, the juvenile crime rate in Monroe County keeps climbing.

"We can't just think about single solutions," said J. David Hawkins, a professor of social work at the University of Washington in Seattle, where he helped develop a national model for preventing youth violence.

"The schools can't just do it. It requires a comprehensive effort of the whole community coming together to build protection for children." An array of anti-violence programs have cropped up over the last decade in an attempt to reduce juvenile crime.

Beginning today, the *Democrat and Chronicle* will examine some of the local efforts to combat the growing problem.

National studies have shown that the most promising approaches are based on prevention.

Starting today, the *Democrat and Chronicle* and *Times-Union* and our media collaborators will focus on solutions to the youth violence problem.

■ We look today at programs targeted specifically at children — independent of efforts to help troubled parents improve.

■ Last week, we brought four experts together to answer questions from parents about how they can raise nonviolent children.

■ In the week ahead, we'll look at what some Rochester businesses have done to help stressed-out families. We will examine the trend toward tougher penalties for violent youths, what area churches are doing to help families and how one troubled teen managed to straighten out his life.

In our poll of
1,771 area
teen-agers,

48.7%

said conflict
resolution
programs are
at least
somewhat
effective

SOLUTIONS, PAGE 12A

It is easier and more cost-effective to prevent a child from becoming violent than it is to change that behavior later on, experts say.

"You really must start dealing with children at a very young age if you're going to have success," said Alice Raymond, board president of the Webster Avenue Family Resource Center, which provides support services for parents and young children.

"By the time kids are into their teens and are into these anti-social behaviors — in many cases it's too late."

But that is the age where most of the funding for anti-violence programs is channeled. Last year, the state Division for Youth spent \$75,000 to care for each child in a secure detention facility. By contrast, Monroe County paid an average of \$2,200 for each child placed in a prevention program.

One of the most successful prevention programs in Rochester is Project TOUCH (True Openness Unity Courage and Hope), run by the Southwest Area Neighborhood Association. The program, serving 200 youths, combines recreational activities with sessions on topics such as conflict resolution — learning how to solve problems without using violence.

On a recent afternoon, Brittany Nelson, 12, was playing chess at the Frost Avenue Recreation Center, where the TOUCH program is based.

During the summer, Brittany and the other children in the program learned conflict resolution skills twice a week. And in August, Brittany used that training when another girl challenged her to a fight.

Brittany refused. "I told her I didn't want to fight her," she said, "because we used to be friends."

Studies tracking children in Project TOUCH showed that the participants were more involved in positive after-school activities than a control group.

The key is luring children into the program through fun activities and then teaching them social skills, said Sally Steinwachs, who leads Project TOUCH.

"You can't just hang a shingle that says 'conflict resolution' and expect kids to come into the door," Steinwachs said. "So you do something that they like to do, whether it's dancing, music, basketball or drama."

Another critical component to preventing youth violence is creating an attachment between children and their neighborhoods, families and schools. Without these links, research shows, children are vulnerable to joining gangs or selling drugs.

"The real war is bonding — the struggle to bond young people to positive groups in their community because gang members and drug dealers understand this model better than we do sometimes," Hawkins said.

'Another way to do things'

Because children spend much of their time at school, experts say that is an ideal place to focus on violence prevention.

Most schools in Monroe County teach students how to resolve conflicts without using violence, beginning in many districts at the elementary level.

But research has been inconclusive as to whether such training has had any effect.

"School-based conflict resolution programs held great promise and a lot of people were very attracted to them," said Larry Aber, director of the National Center for Children and Poverty at Columbia University. "But early evaluation results didn't show that they had the effects that they were supposed to have."

If conflict resolution is focused on specific behaviors and taught for many years, however, it can reduce violence, Aber said. In a two-year study of 8,000 students in New York City, Aber and other researchers have found that such training did have an impact.

Yet whether it helped the students who need it the most — the violent offenders — is still undetermined, Aber said.

The effectiveness of another school-based program — peer mediation — has also shown mixed results in national studies, even though school officials say it works.

A poll, done for the *Democrat and Chronicle* and *Times-Union*, WXXI radio and TV (Channel 21) and WOKR-TV (Channel 13), of Monroe County teenagers found only limited support for peer mediation and conflict resolution training. Only 8 percent of the 1,771 students interviewed said those programs are "very effective," while 41 percent said they are "somewhat effective."

School officials, however, insist that training students to resolve one another's disputes reduces fighting.

At Monroe Middle School in Rochester, the number of suspensions because of fighting has dropped by 55 percent since peer mediation started in 1989.

"It does help kids just to know that there's another way to do things," said Jeanne Carlivati, a counselor who runs the program.

Veronica Vargas, the 13-year-old girl who has been in mediation three times, is now assigned to talk to a school social worker if she feels she might become involved in a conflict.

But once she goes home, there is the constant reminder of violence in her northeast Rochester neighborhood, where gangs and drug dealers create a deadly combination.

"You see fighting and shooting every day," Veronica said. "Every day a gang is fighting each other."

After school and before dark

What is just as important as programs in school are programs after school, a time when many youths return to empty houses.

A 1995 national study showed that most juveniles commit violent crimes between 3 and 6 p.m., shattering the stereotype that youth violence occurs at night.

"Except for the small proportion of kids who run wild, a lot of kids still have to be home at a certain time," said Jeffrey Butts, senior research associate at the National Center for Juvenile Justice in Pittsburgh, which conducted the study. "Their free time is after school and before dark."

The obvious solution is to provide more afternoon programming for youth. And in Rochester, the number of city recreation programs has increased over the past decade, from 17 to 26.

But quantity may not be as important as quality. If the programs aren't attracting youths who are potential violent offenders, they may have little impact on juvenile crime.

"We can hold all the after-school programs we want," Butts said. "We may just be helping kids whose lives are good anyway."

Suburban communities, where many two-parent couples work, are not immune to the problem.

In Pittsford, for example, a collaboration of government and nonprofit agencies last year opened the Pitt Stop, an after-school program in Pittsford Plaza.

"What we wanted to do here is combat isolation," said Jennifer Dixon, the program's director. "This is a

community where people move into and people move out of. This is a transient community."

Yet while some teen-agers socialize at the Pitt Stop on weekend nights, it is not used heavily after school.

"I think a lot of teen-agers don't want to be very structured or observed and that's what that is," said Jason Suss, a 17-year-old Pittsford resident.

'I think about my future'

A more compelling move for some teen-agers is a job.

Enrique Ramirez, 16, spends most of his afternoons unloading boxes of produce at Wegmans Food Markets Inc. in Gates, where he has worked for four years.

In eighth grade, Enrique, who lives on Rochester's west side, was a troubled student who frequently lost his temper and got into fights. The same year, his father was found slain in a river in Puerto Rico.

But Enrique began to turn his life around after he signed up for the Work-Scholarship Connection, a private program that places students in jobs in Monroe County. In return, students must maintain at least a C average, attend workshops and do community service work.

"Before I got into the program, I used to think: 'What am I staying in school for? I'm not going to college. I don't have a job,'" Enrique said.

With the help of his program supervisor, however, Enrique learned that he could go to college. He now plans to apply to the Naval Academy in Annapolis.

"I think more about my future," Enrique says. "If I'm still getting in trouble and dropping out of school, I'm not going to have a future."

While preventing violence is not the main goal of the Work-Scholarship Connection, it is a byproduct. Of the 400 students in the program — designed for youth at risk of dropping out of school — only 2 percent had an encounter with the police last year.

Nearly half of the 100 graduates of the program have or are attending two- and four-year colleges.

"I think it helps them see the options in the world," said Allen Johnson, director of the program, now run by Hillside Children's Center. "These kids — they're very myopic."

'We can make a difference'

With the juvenile crime rate continuing to rise, officials in Rochester and other communities are considering new approaches to curb the problem.

One idea being studied is the establishment of a teen court in Rochester to handle minor juvenile offenses. A group of judges and city officials last year visited Galveston, Texas, where such a court is already operating.

Teen-agers would serve as both jurors and lawyers in the court, and a City Court judge would preside over the cases. The involvement of peers could produce sentences that would deal with the root causes of the problem, said Van White, the city's special counsel for crime and violence initiatives.

"That might mean he (the defendant) would have to get tutoring," White said. "That might mean he would have to come to school every day."

Another national approach is the prevention program called Communities That Care, developed by a private research firm in Seattle.

In 1994, the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention selected the program as the model for communities to adopt and offered federal funding.

Now used in 350 communities, the strategy calls for creating a coalition to identify risk factors that might be causing youths to turn to violence, such as family conflicts or academic failure. Drawing on national research, the group then develops programs to tackle such problems.

"If we can put together hard-headed research with a caring community and a commitment to end violence, then we can really make a difference," said Hawkins, who created the program with another professor.

What is clear is that reducing youth violence must be addressed by comprehensive solutions that target a range of social issues.

"You can't just focus on violence," said Chris Dandino, coordinator of youth projects for the Rochester-Monroe County Youth Bureau.

"To be successful in the arena of violence prevention," she said, "you also have to focus on the other issues going on in that youth's life." □