CDC awards $6.5 million for study of youth violence in Denver's Montbello neighborhood

By Jordan Steffen

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The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will spend $6.5 million in Denver's Montbello neighborhood to learn about adolescent violence and test prevention strategies.

The grant was awarded to the University of Colorado's Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, named by the CDC as one of 10 National Academic Centers for Excellence in Youth Violence Prevention. It will be part of a five-year program to study youth violence and introduce prevention programs in the community.

Beginning Oct. 1, researchers will go into homes and schools in the southwest portion of Montbello, located northeast of Interstate 70 and Peoria Street, to collect data on violence among people 10 to 24 years old. After a year, that data will be turned into a neighborhood profile. During the following four years, a board of residents and community officials will decide which prevention programs to use, based on the profile.

"We are trying to build coalitions between residents and agencies providing services to the area," said Delbert Elliott, director of the CU center. "What we hope to do is improve the quality of the services being delivered."

Grant regulations required that the center find an area with high rates of gang violence and other related crimes. Statistics were pulled from clusters of Denver neighborhoods, and researchers found that Montbello, and the adjacent Northeast Park Hill neighborhood, had similar crime rates and demographics.

Elliott, the project's principal investigator, chose randomly between the two, and Montbello became the focus of the research. Northeast Park Hill will be used as a control to determine whether programs implemented in Montbello are making a difference.

Though Montbello is a neighborhood of many tidy suburban homes, gang violence and one-on-one fights have snarled adolescents for years in the area, which struggles with high unemployment rates and poverty.

"The thing about Denver neighborhoods is they don't always have the appearance of a city that struggles with youth violence," said Terrance Roberts, executive director of The Prodigal Son Initiative, a program that works with at-risk children.
Dr. Eric Sigel, associate professor of pediatrics at the UC Denver School of Medicine and co-investigator for the project, said that violence peaks in adolescents between the ages of 15 and 17.

Adolescents at risk for violent behavior are most easily identified in middle school. Screening children earlier could prevent them from becoming violent or more aggressive later.

Montbello youths often lack an outlet from pressure to act like an adult too soon, said Allen Smith, executive director of Denver Summit Schools Network.

"A program like this (study) certainly doesn't hurt a community like this, which has been entrenched with lower expectations and violence in the past," Smith said.

Denver Summit, an education turnaround program, is working with nine schools in the Montbello area. In the program's first year, disciplinary incidents at Montbello High School are down 43 percent from this time last year, Smith said.

Jordan Steffen: 303-954-1794 |or jsteffen@denverpost.com

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