

# Strategies for Sustaining Quality Youth-Adult Partnerships in Organizational Decision Making: *Multiple Perspectives*

By Shepherd Zeldin, Ph.D., Julie Petrokubi, M.S., Stoney McCart, Nishad Khanna, M.A., Jessica Collura, M.S., and Brian Christens, Ph.D.

**E**ditor's Note: This article is unique in that it consists of five separate parts, each written by its own author(s). This unusual approach has allowed us to show how youth-adult partnerships are being implemented in four very different environments with different functions. Yet across these environments common themes, strategies, and lessons can be learned about the practices that are most effective in implementing and maintaining youth-adult partnership.

## OVERVIEW

By Shepherd Zeldin

Adolescence has long been a social construct with a negative stereotype. Most adults consider adolescence to be a phase, a developmental period filled with storm, stress, and alienation. Youth are potential problems waiting to happen. Consequently, youth policy has traditionally embraced the goals of protection, with a double meaning of protection of young people and from young people. Conventional policy seeks to isolate youth from civic life and the "important" work of organizations and communities.

This old construct is out of date and inaccurate. Adolescence is now being seen as a time for role exploration, relationships and belonging, and preparation for an unpredictable future. It is true that far too many youth are vulnerable and face serious challenges. It is also true that these same young people are willing and able to contribute to others. All youth want to be a part of something larger than themselves. They deserve the opportunity.

Consistent with this new perspective, many organizations are championing practices that engage youth in shared decision making and collective action with program staff and community leaders. These partnerships exist in the context of organizational change,

voluntary service, local governance, and community organizing. Youth-adult partnerships are potent, not only for youth, but for the participating adults as well. When implemented in a quality manner, research demonstrates that these partnerships lead to: 1) increased competence, connections, and confidence among youth; 2) enhanced skills among adults who work with youth; 3) reduced stereotypes and greater commitment among organizational and community leaders; and 4) more collaboration and inclusive policies across municipalities (see Ginwright, 2010; Zeldin, Larson, & Camino, 2005).

Nonetheless, the practice of youth and adults working together on things that matter the most sits outside of the mainstream in the United States and Canada. It is strange and unfamiliar to many. For some, it represents a scheme that threatens the present order. For others, the practice is rife with conceptual uncertainty. It sometimes feels beyond our reach. Organizational change is daunting, emotionally and operationally. Fortunately, there are many exemplary practitioners and applied researchers who have demonstrated how the practice can be infused, with quality, into organizations and communities. Consequently, the field has begun to synthesize the requisite knowledge on how to bring youth and adults together as partners, how to build a sense of community among them, and most importantly, how to take this collective spirit and translate it into effective collective action (National League of Cities, 2010; Zeldin & Collura, 2010).

This article addresses the question: *What are the most fundamental strategies that organizations can take to sustain quality partnerships among youth and adults?* Below, five authors provide their answers. Each author has personally engaged in community practice, and as researchers, all have directly observed a variety of youth-adult partnerships. In the sections that follow, Julie Petrokubi examines a policy-oriented youth commission, Stoney McCart and Nishad Khanna focus on organizational improvement efforts, Jessica Collura explores youth and elected officials, and Brian Christens considers youth and community organizing. Looking across the analyses, three common lessons emerge:

- A foundation for action has to be put in place. This foundation is one of organizational intent, not procedure. Whether it is a charter, a set of values, or a shared framework, it must set forth an explicit purpose for partnership. The foundation speaks not only to how youth and adults will work together, but more importantly, it details completely *why* it is important to work together to achieve common aims.
- The first days are the hardest days. When implementing an innovative practice, youth and adults can easily get confused as to their roles and responsibilities. Taking the time to establish duties is necessary. Orientations and trainings are critical for allowing stakeholders to get comfortable with their roles and to negotiate their priorities.
- Organizations transform over time. This is particularly true when youth are invited to partner in core functions. It is often



necessary for stakeholders—youth and staff alike—to release prior assumptions and be willing to ponder new strategies. This process can only occur when the organization values and implements ongoing mechanisms for collective dialogue and problem solving.

The remainder of this article—with each section written from a unique perspective—provides more detailed and practical strategies regarding these fundamental organizational design features which will sustain quality youth-adult partnerships.

## ESTABLISH A COMMON PURPOSE: GROUNDING YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIP

By Julie Petrokubi

Youth-Adult Partnership (Y-AP) subverts conventional norms; the fact that this is not “business as usual” makes intergenerational collaboration both promising and challenging. As youth and adult partners negotiate this new territory together, they need to engage in ongoing dialogue around their *common purpose*. This section draws lessons learned from studying Y-AP in local government, coalitions, and nonprofits. Each partnership was organized around a common purpose: policy advising, organizational governance, prevention education, or issue advocacy. The term “common purpose” is used to highlight the collective and action-oriented nature of Y-AP as a group of youth and adults coming together over time to address issues of importance to a larger community. Sustained attention to common purpose is important to: 1) mitigate potential misunderstandings regarding the group’s mission that may serve to marginalize youth, 2) provide a foundation for establishing shared expectations and goals, and 3) keep the group on track towards organizational/community outcomes.

### Many organizations are championing practices that engage youth in shared decision making and collective action with program staff and community leaders.

One Y-AP that endeavors to maintain attention to common purpose is the Multnomah Youth Commission (MYC), which engages youth between the ages of 13–21 in local government in Portland, Oregon. The MYC provides a real-world example of how common purpose guides the work of a youth-adult partnership in a policy setting.

Within the larger Y-AP setting, common purpose may be formalized in a document such as a mission statement or group charter. The MYC is guided by two such documents: By-Laws address the structure and function of the group, and a Youth Bill of Rights outlines policy priorities. Created by youth-adult teams and adopted by the MYC, the city, and the county, these documents articulate the group’s core responsibilities, policy priorities, and role. MYC uses these documents to organize subcommittees and group processes, and as a “filter” for taking on new projects.

These official documents provide the MYC with a guiding framework. However, it is important to note that the By-Laws and Youth Bill of Rights are “living documents” with room for interpretation and negotiation over time. While engaging in common purpose, new issues and opportunities emerge. New partners join the group while others leave. Priorities shift and strategies are reassessed. Therefore, the MYC promotes on-going dialogue around common purpose by: 1) revisiting group norms as new partners join, 2) youth-to-youth training on the guiding documents, 3) community dialogues around the Youth Bill of Rights, and 4) Y-AP training workshops using a Youth Engagement Manual created by youth planners.



Especially during the early phases of youth-adult collaboration, it is important to help adult leaders grow in their capacities to collaborate with younger people.

All Y-APs are established with a common purpose in mind, whether explicit or implicit. Yet the different life experience of youth and adults influences how they approach their collective work. There is widespread recognition of the value in creating space for youth-adult partners to examine assumptions about each other. Additional attention is needed on how youth-adult partners may build upon this foundation to also check assumptions around other aspects of collaboration such as: scope of work, group processes, timeframes and strategies for action, and indicators of success.

Below are three recommendations for how to use common purpose as a guide for effective Y-AP practice. This is not a step-by-step process, as conversations around common purpose may be revisited at multiple points in the partnership. For example, while the MYC has a solid foundation for conversations around power and issues, they are currently grappling with how to effectively carry this focus through to all aspects of the group’s work, such as subcommittees.

1. *Engage in dialogue around both collective and individual expectations.* Youth and adults bring diverse motivations to Y-AP, yet most partnerships have an official or unofficial mandate. Therefore, they need space to negotiate how personal goals fit within the common purpose, and adjust this frame, if possible, to establish a shared vision for the group.
2. *Identify and document roles and responsibilities for all group members.* Using the common purpose as a guide, groups work together to develop a roadmap for action. Clear articulation of roles, linked to a long-term goal, is essential for effective engagement of all partners.
3. *Establish systems for accountability and reflection.* Youth and adults need to set realistic criteria for success based on the common purpose. Promote mutual learning and accountability by celebrating successes and reflecting on lessons learned.

While these recommendations may seem like just good group process, Y-AP requires special attention to these issues. If youth and adults are not on the same page around their common purpose and roles therein, the Y-AP may default to “business as usual” where youth voices are marginalized or tokenized. Adult professionals often come into Y-AP with strong notions of what is possible or strategic to do. While Y-AP presents a chance to rethink these perceptions, adult transparency around potential opportunities and constraints helps to level the foundation for partnership. Our research (Zeldin & Petrokubi, 2008; Zeldin, Petrokubi, & Camino, 2008) suggests that quality Y-AP generates positive results for youth, adults, organizations, and communities. Ongoing attention

to common purpose fosters positive youth-adult relationships, while helping the group accomplish big-picture organization and community outcomes.

## IMPROVE RESPONSIVENESS AND RELEVANCE IN ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICE

By **Stoney McCart and Nishad Khanna**

The Students Commission, a national Canadian charitable organization, leads The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, a collaborating network of youth organizations, academics, and youth, who advance knowledge and practice of youth engagement, primarily in Canada. Based on 20 years of experience partnering with young people, the Students Commission is frequently asked to assist other organizations, researchers, program developers, and policy makers at municipal, provincial (state), and federal levels to engage youth in research, program, and policy efforts. We sponsor conferences, round-table discussions, and workshops to exchange information, build networks, and create a sense of momentum. Our consulting and evaluation of organizations and institutions aims to improve the responsiveness and relevance of youth engagement initiatives.

### *Make a Cultural Shift*

The Students Commission's approach focuses on assisting adults to make a cultural shift to a new public idea of youth-adult partnership. This requires adults to understand a nuanced difference between older vocabulary, such as consult, mentor, service, coach, help, train; and the new use of words such as collaborator, colleague, and partner in the context of engaging youth in meaningfully contributing to their society. These differences become clear as we ask questions about values and principles that underlie different ways of engaging (e.g., What types of knowledge and expertise, and whose, are valued?). It takes more than reading and training; youth and adults need to experience working together in ways that are very different than the conventional interactions described by older vocabulary. This cultural shift is further supported when youth-adult partnership becomes an idea embedded within and across organizations and communities.

### *Articulate Shared Principles and Values*

To authentically initiate and sustain this cultural shift to youth-adult partnership, our experience points to the importance of articulating and living shared principles and values. These guide our partnerships and serve as the touchstone for every unique situation; youth-adult partnerships are flexible and responsive, but grounded. Embedded in the Students Commission's corporate objects and in all our processes and partnerships from micro- to macro-levels are the Four Pillars: Respect, Listen, Understand and Communicate™. We send out descriptions of the Four Pillars prior to every workshop and event, and review them at the start, often in the form of a youth-developed skit, spoken word, or rap. During an event, and also on an everyday basis in our offices, the Four Pillars are displayed on walls and we continuously refer to them throughout the day. Then, we use them as a framework to debrief and reflect on incidents and events. The degree to which shared principles and values are genuine and enacted shapes the experience.

### *Understand Multiple Levels of Involvement*

Quite often, we work with groups that are interested in youth-adult partnerships, but don't know how to begin or maintain the momentum. Our Centre's Youth Engagement Framework provides a structure for understanding the multiple levels at which changes must occur. Organizations are encouraged to understand the factors influencing relationships and the experience of engagement at the individual level (for both youth and adult), at the social level (youth to youth, youth to adult), and finally at the systems level (organization, school, government, etc).

Thinking about initiating and sustaining factors helps organizations sequence their efforts. Important initiators include a common vision for youth involvement and a rationale for why it is important at individual and organizational levels. Key sustaining factors—the reasons that youth (and adults) stay involved—are often related to developing a sense of community, building social relationships, and having a legitimate chance to shape their communities. In addition, sustaining factors involve removing multiple barriers to participation at all levels.

Our work has shown that there are several key components that, if aligned at all three levels (individual, social, system), produce effective partnerships. First among these are principles, which start as values at the individual level, move through shared values in a group (social level), to principles that become adapted into policies and procedures in sustained organizational and governmental initiatives (system level). From shared principles, it becomes easier to develop a shared sense of purpose among partners.

### *Create a Common Goal*

The notion of partnership is rooted in the concept of win-win; it includes notions of a common goal: that together partners are more likely to achieve both their individual goals and the collaborative goal. This establishes a precondition of respect for the partnership to work—a genuine respect for what the other partner brings to the table. Partners do consult, mentor, serve, coach, help, and train *each other*, but as secondary activities to the overall purpose of working together to achieve a common purpose. The common goal, and moving towards achieving concrete results, is action-oriented, which is developmentally appropriate for young people. The common goal creates solidarity, while allowing for diversity of participation styles, roles, and interests. Success breeds success and the regeneration of new partnerships and goals.

## PROVIDE CONTEXTUAL SUPPORTS TO ENGAGE YOUTH ON BOARDS WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS

By **Jessica Collura**

Engaging youth on boards with elected officials—such as county boards, school boards, and city councils—presents a distinct context for youth-adult partnerships. In this setting, young people serve *directly* on the board, as opposed to an advisory council or commission. There are, however, barriers to youth participation in this context. First, there are legal restrictions. Because these boards are publicly funded, they operate under strict legal parameters. Since young people are not publicly elected to serve on the board, they typically are only permitted to cast advisory votes. Such



Youth-adult partnerships are potent, not only for youth but for the participating adults as well.

restrictions reinforce power imbalances, making youth-adult partnerships more challenging to establish. Time constraints also present barriers to establishing partnerships in this setting. Elected officials often have full-time jobs in addition to their public responsibilities. This limits the amount of time they have to interact with youth and form partnerships.

Program staff who support these initiatives play a critical role in facilitating youth-adult interactions on public boards. Yet many are initially uncertain how to mitigate the barriers and provide support in this setting. Recognizing this uncertainty, Shepherd Zeldin and I conducted a case study of a local county board to identify the contextual supports youth workers provided to facilitate youth-adult interactions. In order to identify these supports, we conducted interviews with youth participants, elected officials, and youth workers. We also observed committee meetings and trainings, and reviewed program documents, such as the orientation manual. The recommendations provided below are based on this research (Collura & Zeldin, 2010). The insights are also informed by the current literature and previous research on this topic.

#### **Create a Position Description Sheet**

Since many youth and adults have never worked together on a public board, role expectations must be made explicit. A critical first step is to develop both a youth and elected official position description sheet. It is not enough to just create these sheets and mail them to program participants. Conversations must occur between youth and elected officials about their understandings and interpretations of role expectations.

---

Ongoing attention to common purpose fosters positive youth-adult relationships, while helping the group accomplish big-picture organization and community outcomes.

---

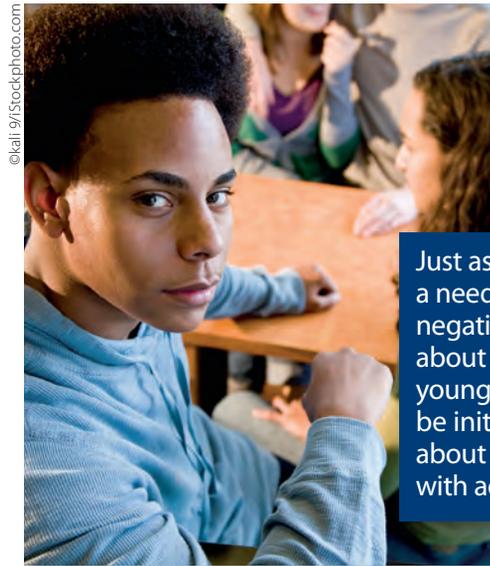
Engaging elected officials in developing the position description sheets is also a useful activity. This allows elected officials to participate in critical conversations about how much responsibility they want to, and legally can, grant to youth. It also allows adults the opportunity to discuss their role and how they might assist youth in acclimating to the board.

#### **Host Youth and Adult Trainings**

Both youth and adults need to receive training before participating together on the board. Youth training should focus on providing young people with the background knowledge needed to participate, such as parliamentary procedures and current board issues. Youth also need the opportunity to practice these skills and participate in mock meetings. If possible, it is also useful to distribute a photo roster of current elected officials so young people can begin associating names and faces.

Elected officials' training should focus on strategies for encouraging youth participation. Often, elected officials assume the young people on the board will automatically feel comfortable participating. Elected officials should be reminded that youth are initially intimidated and it is the adults' collective responsibility to help young people acclimate.

Elected officials should also be informed of simple, yet effective, assistance strategies. *Soliciting youth input* during meetings is an important strategy because it demonstrates respect for youth voice. It is also critical to seek youth input when the board is casting votes. Youth should cast their advisory votes prior to adult



Just as there is often a need to overcome negative stereotypes about young people, young people can be initially wary about collaborating with adults.

board members. This small gesture acknowledges the importance of the youth vote, albeit advisory, and helps to mitigate power imbalances. Youth are also encouraged to participate when elected officials *meaningfully engage with their ideas*. That is, when a young person provides a valuable comment, board members should seriously consider and discuss the idea.

#### **Allow Time for Relationship Building**

Youth and adults need opportunities to interact outside the board setting. Finding time for this to occur may be challenging because both youth and adults have hectic schedules. One solution is to host meals before board meetings. This allows youth and adults to interact informally and get to know one another. Youth workers should also encourage elected officials to engage with youth before or after board meetings. This allows time for informal conversations and relationship building to occur. It also allows youth time to ask specific questions about the meeting agenda, board issues, or terminology.

### **ADAPT TO YOUTH WHILE WORKING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

**By Brian Christens**

Young people offer a potential wellspring of insights, ideas, passion, and energy to community organizations working for social change (Christens & Dolan, 2011). In order to realize this potential, organizations working for social change need to adapt to youth. In some cases, small alterations in an adult-focused organization's recruitment efforts, meeting agendas, trainings, and events can accommodate the interests and concerns of younger people. These modifications can often be devised and implemented by younger leaders in the organization. Adults can also become more adept at working with younger people through acquiring several basic skills and perspectives.

At the organizational level, a key to initiating youth involvement is to provide space, resources, and support (e.g., a paid youth organizer) to allow young people to build their own organization in affiliation with the adult organization. The organizations can develop in tandem, joining forces when they are working on issues of common concern. One promising structure involves forming a sub-committee of the adult organizing effort to provide support for the youth organizing, and perhaps inviting leaders from the youth organizing effort to become part of the committee structure of the adult organizing initiative. This parallel organizational structure creates the opportunity for more people to take on meaningful leadership roles.

Especially during the early phases of youth-adult collaboration, it is important to help adult leaders grow in their capacities to collaborate with younger people. Adults often have misconceptions about teenagers. For example, they may assume that young people lack a respect for older people, or that they lack a sense of personal responsibility. Demonstrating that young people and adults can work together successfully can help to combat these negative stereotypes about young people. This can be accomplished in several ways. One promising strategy is to identify several adults in the organization who work well with youth and have them serve as models for collaboration with younger people. Then, these adults and youth leaders can reflect together on the principles that should guide other youth-adult collaborations, and present these principles to the larger group.

## Both youth and adults need to receive training before participating together on the board.

Just as there is often a need to overcome negative stereotypes about young people, young people can be initially wary about collaborating with adults. Young people respond to certain types of adults; they are more likely to respond positively to adults who value their insights and perspectives, take a genuine interest in them, and show them respect. Particularly in the context of working toward social change, young people will be eager to build connections with adult leaders who are themselves dedicated to transforming society, and will likely be critical of adults who seem to prefer preservation of the status quo.

In my own research, I have heard from youth organizers who make clear distinctions between the adults that they collaborate with in organizing, and other adults in their communities. For instance, adult decision-makers are sometimes referred to as “adults in power.” One simple way to make sure that adult leaders in the organization are sending the right message to young people is to have adults engage in a “listening session” in which young people are invited to share their perspectives and concerns, and adults simply ask questions to make sure that they are understanding. This type of a meeting can help to clarify the community issues on which the organization could be working, and it also lets young

people know that their contributions are likely to be valued within this organization.

Sometimes, bridging generational gaps happens less formally. Adult leaders in social change organizations that are growing toward more intergenerational work should look for opportunities to support the work of young people and build interpersonal connections in the process. Simple ways that adults can initiate contact and show their support include giving young people rides to meetings or providing the snacks for a meeting. Asking young people questions about their lives and their interests not only demonstrates curiosity and openness, but can also lead to understandings of shared self-interest and issues of common concern, laying the groundwork for collaborative action. →



Shepherd Zeldin

**Shepherd Zeldin, Ph.D.**, (rszeldin@wisc.edu) is the Rothermel Bascom Professor of Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He also serves as a Youth Development Specialist for Wisconsin Cooperative Extension. He is currently creating a website full of Y-AP practice-oriented material at <http://fyi.uwex.edu/youthadultpartnership>



Julie Petrokubi

**Julie Petrokubi, M.S.**, is pursuing doctoral studies in Youth, Organization and Community Development with the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In order to provide insight into the potential for youth-adult partnership to impact local government, Julie recently completed a year-long case study of the Multnomah Youth Commission in Portland, Oregon ([web.multco.us/ccfc/Multnomah-youth-commission](http://web.multco.us/ccfc/Multnomah-youth-commission)). Julie is also an experienced practitioner who currently oversees evaluation and policy projects for a youth development nonprofit in Portland.



Stoney McCart

**Stoney McCart** is the Executive Director of the Students Commission of Canada ([www.StudentsCommission.ca](http://www.StudentsCommission.ca)) and the Director of the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement. Through youth-adult partnerships and driven by our core pillars, the Students Commission assists young people to put their ideas into action.



Nishad Khanna

**Nishad Khanna, M.A.**, is the research coordinator of the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement and has been working with the Students Commission since 2002. The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement ([www.YouthEngagementCentre.ca](http://www.YouthEngagementCentre.ca)) is a collaborative network of youth, youth service providers, academic researchers, and policy makers that finds, describes and builds models of effective strategies for engaging youth in meaningful participation.



Jessica Collura

**Jessica Collura, M.S.**, is a doctoral student in Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. A former Teach for America corps member, her interests include community research, youth engagement in community networks, and youth organizing.



Brian Christens

**Brian Christens, Ph.D.**, is Assistant Professor of Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His research is on participation and empowerment in different community and organizational settings, with applications to youth development, community development, and health promotion.

Copyright © 2011, Integrated Research Services, Inc.

## → References →

- Christens, B.D., & Dolan, T. (2011). Interweaving youth development, community development, and social change through youth organizing. *Youth & Society*, 42(3), 528–548. Available online: <http://www.thecyberhood.net/documents/papers/christens.pdf>
- Collura, J., & Zeldin, S. (2010). *Involving Youth on Boards with Elected Officials: Core Elements of Program Design*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Extension Practice Brief. Retrieved September 23, 2011 from <http://fyi.uwex.edu/youthadultpartnership/files/2011/07/INVOLVINGYOUTHONBOARDS.pdf>
- Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (2003). Occasional papers on youth organizing. Available online: <http://www.whatkidscando.org/archives/whatslearned/YOpapers.html>
- Ginwright, S. (2010). Peace out to revolution. Activism among African American youth: An argument for radical healing. *Young*, 18(1), 77–96, doi: 10.1177/1103308809018000106
- National League of Cities. (2010). *Authentic Youth Civic Engagement: A Guide for Municipal Leaders*. Washington DC: author. Available online at <http://www.nlc.org/find-city-solutions/iyef/youth-civic-engagement>
- Zeldin, S., & Collura, J. (2010). *Being Y-AP Savvy: A Primer on Creating and Sustaining Youth-Adult Partnerships*. Available at: <http://fyi.uwex.edu/youthadultpartnership/2011/07/13/being-y-ap-savvy-a-primer-on-creating-sustaining-youth-adult-partnerships/>
- Zeldin, S., Larson, R., & Camino, L. (2005). Intergenerational relationships and partnerships in community programs: Purpose, practice, and directions for research: Introduction to the special issue. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 1–10. Doi:10.1002/jcop.20042
- Zeldin, S., & Petrokubi, J. (2008). Youth-adult partnership: Impacting individuals and communities. *The Prevention Researcher*, 15(2), 16–20.
- Zeldin, S., Petrokubi, L., & Camino, L. (2008). *Youth-Adult Partnerships in Public Action: Principles, Organizational Culture, and Outcomes*. Available at: [http://fyi.uwex.edu/youthadultpartnership/2011/07/13/creating\\_a\\_supportive\\_organizational\\_culture/](http://fyi.uwex.edu/youthadultpartnership/2011/07/13/creating_a_supportive_organizational_culture/)



**NETWORK • LEARN • SAVE**  
[www.facebook.com/ThePreventionResearcher](http://www.facebook.com/ThePreventionResearcher)

Copyright of Prevention Researcher is the property of Prevention Researcher and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.