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Using Research to Understand Youth in High-Risk Urban Communities

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Abstract

Research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that nearly 1.5 million high school students a year are affected by dating violence and that youth who are physically hurt by a boyfriend/girlfriend are more likely to report binge drinking, suicide attempts, and other harmful behaviors. Dating violence may be more prevalent in economically and socially disadvantaged communities, especially in urban areas. Targeting youth with prevention messages before they start dating may avert teen dating violence and subsequent adult intimate partner violence; however, there is a dearth of materials available for youth in high-risk urban communities. This article reports on secondary analyses of market research databases and other sources, as well as on primary research (e.g., focus groups) conducted with youth in high-risk urban communities. This research is exploratory in nature and is limited by the fact that the qualitative findings cannot be generalized to the overall population of high-risk youth. While the focus groups included youth from various races/ethnicities and geographical areas, CDC is aware that the study samples were not representative of the entire parent population in the United States. This exploratory research was conducted to inform the development of a communication campaign designed to reach youth in high-risk urban communities. Key findings for high-risk youth are provided across a variety of constructs including demographics, media and technology usage and impact, daily life and time spent in relationships, peer relationships, and attitudes and approaches to relationships. Implications for reaching this audience are discussed. These include reaching youth in urban settings and using approaches that focus on their peers, the Internet, cell phones, television, and music venues. Communication approaches that utilize print media or organized sports and other youth-oriented clubs and groups as channels to reach high-risk youth may be less impactful.

Keywords

teen, audience, youth, research, best practices

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Introduction

Dating violence is a widespread issue among adolescents; about 1 in 11 high school students report that they have been hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend in the past year (Swahn, Simon, Arias, & Bossarte, 2008). However, the prevalence and severity of dating and sexual violence victimization are even higher among high-risk samples (Swahn, Simon, Arias, & Bossarte, 2008). Youth in high-risk, urban communities experience stresses and challenges similar to those of all young people who are progressing through adolescence. Still, challenges unique to youth in high-risk, urban communities such as concentrated poverty, lack of resources, exposure to violence, and other factors may put them at higher risk for a host of problems, including teen dating violence. Exposure to dating violence, which is problematic in itself, also has negative impacts on other life areas. Youth who are physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend are also more likely to be depressed and do poorly in school (Banyard & Cross, 2008), report alcohol or drug use (Banyard & Cross, 2008), have an eating disorder (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002), think about or attempt suicide attempts (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2006), be involved physical fighting, and report current sexual activity (Eisentstat & Bancroft, 1999).

Background

To address both the immediate and the long-term health, social, and economic problems that dating violence can cause, CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control is developing, *Dating Matters*^{TM}, an initiative to promote respectful nonviolent dating relationships to youth in poor, urban communities with high crime rates. Throughout the remainder of this article, these youth will be referred to as high-risk youth. Four key insights that are the impetus for the initiative are the following:

- Adolescents in abusive relationships often carry these unhealthy patterns of abuse into future relationships (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003);
- Exposure to dating violence and subsequent intimate partner and sexual violence has significant effects on the mental and physical health of girls and women (Eisentstat, & Bancroft, 1999);
- The prevalence of dating and sexual violence may be higher in economically and socially disadvantaged communities than their advantaged counterparts (CDC, 2006; Cunradi, Caetano, Clark, & Schafer, 2000); and
- Evidence is being developed about how to prevent dating violence, and this growing body of research can be expanded to address this important problem in an underresearched segment of the population.

Dating Matters will include a communication component designed to focus on promoting respectful intimate relationships among teens. This research was conducted to help inform campaign development, to ensure that campaign approaches are effective and culturally appropriate. To this end, the research aims to fully explore and understand not only the media usage patterns and preferences of youth in high-risk inner-city communities but also the key aspects of their lifestyle, their relationships with peers and parents, and more specifically, their attitudes and approaches to dating relationships, to help gain insight into how best to communicate with this audience.

Methods

Design. Little research on communications and teen dating violence among youth in high-risk, inner-city communities exists. Therefore, this project's overall research approach included both secondary and primary research structured in three phases. The first phase included a literature review of peer-reviewed journals, articles, and analyses. The second phase focused on the development of an

Table 1. Key Words Searched for Secondary Research

High-risk urban youth AND	population characteristics; media; media habits; music listening habits; Internet usage; television habits; magazine readership; cell phone usage; daily activities; leisure time; influencers; peer relationships; sexuality; dating
Urban youth AND	population characteristics; media; media habits; music listening habits; Internet usage; television habits; magazine readership; cell phone usage; daily activities; leisure time; influencers; peer relationships; sexuality; dating
At risk youth AND	population characteristics; media; media habits; music listening habits; Internet usage; television habits; magazine readership; cell phone usage; daily activities; leisure time; influencers; peer relationships; sexuality; dating

audience analysis of the initiative's primary audience, 11- to 14-year-old youth in high-risk, urban communities, across ethnicities, and secondary audience15- to 18-year-old youth in high-risk, urban communities, across ethnicities. Based on a comprehensive review of the available secondary data, the research covered audience demographics as well as an overview of their media habits, daily life, and mind-set. The third phase involved qualitative research (e.g., focus groups) with the younger and older youth audience groups in two communities. This research explored gaps in the existing research, particularly in the areas of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors toward dating relationships, perceptions around the prevalence of healthy versus unhealthy relationships, and the influence of older peers on younger youth. The focus of this article is based on the findings of both the second and third phases of research.

For the purposes of this article, we use the term high-risk youth to refer to boys and girls of all races/ethnicities who live in urban areas that have a higher crime rate than the rest of the surrounding city and fall within the lower third of median household income (defined as less than or equal to $30,000 per year, unless otherwise noted). When younger youth and older youth are mentioned, it is in reference to high-risk youth 11- to 14-year-old and 15- to 18-year-old, respectively.

Secondary Research Approach

Both publicly available and proprietary data were included in this analysis. Information was collected through market research, trend reports, publicly available data from entities such as the U.S. Census Bureau, Pew Research, and the Kaiser Family Foundation, and key word searches on Google, PubMed, and Factiva. Key words searched are listed in Table 1.

Three main sources used for this analysis include GfK MRI data, MEE Productions' Inner City Truth: An Urban Youth Lifestyle Study II, and the Kaiser Family Foundation's Generation M^2: GfK MRI. Data available from GfK MRI was particularly useful because these data sets can be analyzed by geography, household income, and predetermined age groups. Two nationally representative samples from GfK MRI data were used for this analysis: American youth of age 12–14 with a household income less than $30,000 and living in metropolitan areas (sample size: 1,115); and American youth of age 12–14 (Sample size: 1,225). The samples are based on findings from the 2010 GfK MRI Teenmark® Study, which collects data from teens of age 12 to 19 through in person, in-home, face-to-face interviews. Interviews are conducted for 3,600+ respondents recruited from households that participated in the *Survey of the American Consumer*™. Note that although the overall initiative's audience is 11- to 18-year-olds, the GfK MRI data did not include information on 11-year-olds. The GfK MRI data were used to conduct independent analyses (i.e., data runs) which are reported in this article.

The inner city truth. An Urban Youth Lifestyle Study II. This study, conducted by MEE Productions provided more detailed information on the habits of inner-city youth, which was particularly useful for

this analysis. The survey was conducted in six major U.S. cities (New York city, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles/Long Beach, and Washington, DC) by utilizing community-based organizations, high schools, alternative/charter schools, community recreation centers, and housing projects. In total, MEE conducted 28 survey sessions with 1,512 African American and Hispanic youth of age 15–20. Note that although the overall initiative's audience is 11- to 18-year-olds, the MEE Productions' data did not include information on 11- to 14-year-olds. The MEE study is referenced throughout this article and reflects statistics from their original analysis of the data, not secondary analysis as was the case with the GfK MRI data.

Generation M2. Media in the lives of 8- to 18-year-olds. This study was conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and provided data on media use for African American, Hispanic, and Native American youth. Given the lack of data available regarding media usage patterns for our specific audience, we relied on this report as one of the most comprehensive sources of information on media use among American youth, and used data broken out by race as a proxy for our audience. African American, Hispanic, and Native American youth are disproportionately represented in high-risk urban communities, and therefore race is the closest proxy measure available against which media usage data are available. This *Generation M2* report is based on 2,002 surveys and 702 seven-day media diaries from 3rd through 12th graders across the United States. The *Generation M2* report is referenced throughout this article and reflects statistics from their original analysis of the data, not secondary analysis as was the case with the GfK MRI data.

It is important to note that available research on high-risk youth is very limited. This underscores the importance of conducting primary research to further examine and understand this audience.

Primary Research Approach

The primary research portion of the study included focus groups with 13- to 18-year-old youth living in high-risk urban communities. While our primary audience includes 11- to 12-year-olds, we conducted focus groups with 13- to 14-year-olds. This approach was utilized because 11- to 12-year-olds aspire up to their 13- to 14-year-old peers, suggesting that the learnings from the 13- to 14-year-olds should resonate with the 11- to12-year-old youth as well. Further, 11- to 12-year-olds are much more literal than their slightly older peers and therefore are less able to provide rich, nuanced responses to questions in a group setting like focus groups. Finally, because 13- to 14-year-olds are more likely to have already experienced more relevant dating-related behaviors, they would be in a better position to share insight and feedback around how to communicate about this topic than their younger counterparts who may have to respond more hypothetically.

Group composition. A total of 20, six-person focus groups, comprising either 13- to 14-year-old or 15- to 18-year-old teens, were conducted in Atlanta, GA and Los Angeles, CA, yielding a total of 120 participants across all groups. Groups were segmented by gender and age. Focus groups consisting of both mixed race and groups segmented by race were conducted. We conducted 4 groups with African American youth, 4 groups with Hispanic youth, and 12 with mixed race groups. Segmented groups were conducted to explore any differences that may exist across ethnicity. Mixed race groups were conducted to be inclusive of other races beyond African American and Hispanic youth that are represented in urban, high-risk communities as well as to provide a more realistic sampling of the diversity present in the friend and peer groups of this audience. All youth who participated reported living in urban communities in households that fell into the lower third of median household income.

Recruitment process. A research vendor with specific expertise working with urban youth populations was contracted to manage recruiting, conduct actual focus group discussions, and provide initial topline reporting. Participants were recruited based on predetermined criteria including

Table 2. Additional Resources for Focus Group Testing

Greenbaum, T. *The handbook for focus group research*—United States, 1998.
Krueger, R.A. and Casey, M.A. *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*—United States, 2009.
National Cancer Institute. *Making health communication programs work*—United States, 1989. Available from http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/cancerlibrary/pinkbook
Rubin, R.J. and Rubin, I.S. *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*—United States, 2005.

Table 3. Breakdown of U.S. Population by Age and Ethnicity

	White	Black	Asian	American Indian/ Alaskan Native
10- to 14-year-olds	7,240,600	1,536,605	397,565	99,457
15- to 17-year-olds	4,618,187	1,018,201	247,549	66,464

Note. U.S. Census Bureau, 2006–2008.

demographics (age, gender, race, socioeconomic status, etc.) and personality traits (articulate, opinionated, etc.). The criteria were adapted into a question and answer format for screening. Participants were identified through our research vendor's established networks, such as relationships with community centers and other nonprofit organizations. Eight participants were recruited (or screened in) for each group, to ensure that at least 6 participants would arrive at the scheduled time to participate in the focus group. Active parental consent was obtained for each participant. Each recruited participant who arrived at the focus group facility was incentivized ($100) irrespective of whether they participated in the focus group or were excused.

Discussion guide development. A discussion guide was developed to guide the flow of the group discussions and ensure that all core topic areas were covered in each group. The core topic areas included (1) dating relationships—what do they look like and what language is used to describe them; (2) good and bad relationship—what kinds of behaviors are healthy versus unhealthy, how recognizable are they, how prevalent are they; (3) dealing with bad relationships—what are the signs of bad relationships and how to handle them; (4) key influences—who are they, who do you influence, and how might the influence be applied to dating situations. Note, the groups focused on influences, opposed to influencers, to capture not only people but entities (e.g., media). Detailed questions and activities surrounding each of these areas were developed and implemented in the context of the small group discussions.

Approach to group discussions. Each focus group session lasted approximately 90 min and was held in a nontraditional setting to create a relaxed environment and facilitate open conversations. Participants would arrive at the designated location, be welcomed, and sign in. All participants were invited to make themselves comfortable on sofas or chairs in the room where the discussion would be held. The moderator, who led all 20 focus groups, began with a general introduction, sharing with participants that the group was being audio recorded for reporting purposes, and that one or two observers/note takers were simultaneously viewing the group on closed-circuit television in an adjacent room. She assured all participants that the videos would be destroyed after the final reporting was conducted and that all their answers to questions would be confidential and reported on holistically and not identified with their name in the reporting process. She then initiated the discussion, following the questions and activities in the order provided on the discussion guide. While the discussion guide provided the overall structure for the discussion, it was vital that participants were able to answer freely, and the

moderator was at liberty to probe for more details when new directions were introduced by the respondent. Still, all topic areas were covered in all groups.

Analysis and reporting. Given the qualitative nature of the research, no quantitative analysis was conducted. Because the same two observers and note takers were present at all groups and audio/video tapes were used in report writing, the discussion format of the groups was not "coded" in any way to facilitate reporting. Rather, note takers captured themes, issues, and concerns across all groups. These notes informed summaries that were developed of the group discussions across groups and identified any overarching qualitative differences in response across geography, age, race, or gender. From these summary findings, implications were developed and included in the final report (Table 2).

Key Findings—Secondary Research

Demographics of High-Risk Youth

There are more than 37 million Americans of age 9 to 17, and more than 25 million Americans ranging in age from 12 to 17 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006–2008).[1] Of those, 11.8 million are White, 2.5 million are Black, and 0.65 million Asian. For a further breakdown, see Table 3.

Of the 25 million Americans who are 12 to 17 years old, approximately 4 million had a family income over the last 12 months that was below the Federal poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006–2008). In 2009, the Federal poverty level was defined as $22,050 or less, and the low-income level was defined as $44,100 or less for a family of four. Findings from another survey indicate that in 2007, about 35% of all U.S. adolescents (age 12–18) live in low-income families (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2009). In 2008, 51% of youth living in urban areas lived in low-income families (National Center for Children in Poverty, 1998–2008). More specifically, adolescents living in urban areas (46%) are more likely to live in low-income families than adolescents in rural (41%) and suburban (28%) areas (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2009). Racially/ethnically, Latino (56%), Black (55%), and American Indian (52%) adolescents are much more likely to live in low-income families than Asian (33%) and White (23%) adolescents (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2009).

Media and Technology

Media and technology are an influential force in the lives of all youth. Understanding the role they play in the daily lives of high-risk youth is vital to create effective communications and promoting healthy behaviors to this audience.

Over the past 5 years, there has been a significant increase in media use among all youth. Youth in general (8–18 years) typically spend more than 7.5 hr/day using media, however because they often use two or more media vehicles concurrently they are actually exposed to more than 10.5 hr of media content within those 7.5 hr. While considered heavy users of television, radio, the Internet, and cell phones, overall, youth are not considered heavy users of print media (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010).

Overall, media consumption by youth in high-risk urban communities generally mirrors that of the general population, with a few exceptions. Black and Hispanic youth consume even greater amounts of media, averaging 13 hr a day of media exposure, with the greatest increases coming from TV and Radio. Online media is actually very similar across all groups, with no significant ethnic differences (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010).

More specific data on each media vehicle, as available, is provided below.

Media

TV. Despite the changes and new developments in many forms of media, television continues to be the leading type of media consumed among teens in general (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). Moreover, TV programe is being consumed across various media platforms. On average, 8- to 18-year-olds are watching almost 1 hr of TV and movie content per day on non-TV platforms, including computers, cell phones, and iPods (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010).

TV consumption among high-risk youth is significantly higher than that of youth in general. The majority (74%) of older (15- to 18-year-olds) high-risk youth consumes at least 2 hr of television per day and a quarter (26%) watch 5 or more hr/day (MEE Productions, 2008). Data also show that Black youth watch television an average of 6 hr daily, and Hispanic youth watch an average of 5.21 hr daily, versus a daily average of 3.36 hr for White youth (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010).

In terms of content preferences, younger high-risk youth prefer watching sports and game shows, while in addition to sports older high-risk youth prefer comedy and sitcoms (MEE Productions, 2008: MRI, 2010).

The older group's favorite networks include FOX (65%), CW (29%), BET (36%), and HBO (28%; MEE Productions, 2008).

Music. Music is the second most popular media activity among all 8- to 18-year-olds, with an average of more than 2 hr a day spent listening music (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). Although radio is still important, listening to music on cell phones, computers, and TV programming allows teens more time with music than ever before.

High-risk youth are no exception and are considered heavy music listeners. Black and Hispanic youth listen to music an average of 1 hr or more a day than White youth (2:42, 2:52, and 1:48, respectively; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). And while 28% of older youth report listening for at least 4 hr/day, it is interesting to note that they report using MP3 players (61%) and CD players (17%) more frequently than radio (15%) as their primary way to listen to music (MEE Productions, 2008). Radio formats/genres preferred by the younger and older high-risk youth groups include contemporary hits (41.79% younger, 47.53% older) and urban songs (14% younger, 21.48% older; MRI, 2010).

Print. Consumption of print media is the only media activity that has not increased among young people in the past decade. Today, on average, Black youth consume 38 min daily of print material including books, magazines, and newspapers, while Hispanic youth consume only 34 min daily (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). Only 20% of older high-risk youth identify magazines as their favorite reading material, which was second to the group's preference for books and novels (60%; MEE Productions, 2008). Older high-risk youth who reported their favorite magazines most commonly listed *Vibe*, *Jet*, *Ebony*, and *Cosmopolitan* (MEE Productions, 2008).

Technology

Internet. Data show that the Internet is widely available to high-risk youth and that they use it frequently. Ninety-eight percent of these youth report having accessed the Internet in the past 30 days, whether at home, work, school/library, or elsewhere, with use occurring both at school (58.36% for younger; 64.03% for older) and at home (89.63% for younger; 92.31% for older; MRI, 2010). Both younger and older youth segments report frequent daily use, with about half (47.8%) of the younger group and slightly more than half of the older group (55%) reporting use for 1 to 5 hr/day (MRI, 2010). Their favorite online activities include downloading and/or listening to music (43.66–46% for younger; 58% for older), e-mailing (61.32% for younger; 77.16% for older), playing games

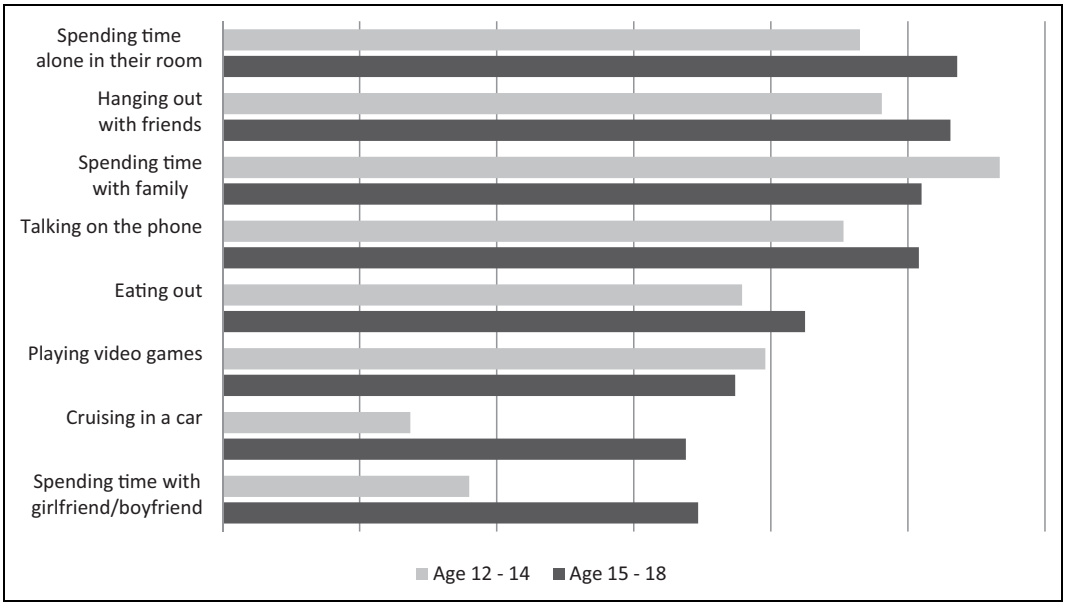

Figure 1. Most frequent leisure activities of youth in high-risk urban communities (MRI, 2010).

(60.76% for younger; 47.35 for older), and instant messaging (33.93% for younger; 49.6% for older; MRI, 2010).

High-risk youth use social media frequently, as do other youth. The more preferred social networking site for both age groups is Facebook, with 33.6% of the younger group and 54.7% of the older group utilizing Facebook versus MySpace (23.7% for younger; 36.6% for older; MRI, 2010).

Cell phones. Cell phone adoption and the use of cell phone technology to carry out a variety of functions have been growing at a dramatic pace among all teens. In addition, cell phone ownership among teens increases dramatically with age (Lenhart, 2009). Youth not only use their phones for calling and text messaging but also to access the Internet and to share photos and videos. Among high-risk youth, cell phone use is widespread; only 8% of older high-risk youth report *not* having a cell phone (MEE Productions, 2008). Text messaging is the most common activity for which cell phones are used, 54.1% for the younger group and 73.8% for the older group (MEE Productions, 2008; MRI, 2010). When asked about their leisure activities, 45.32% of younger youth and 50.76% of older youth listed talking on the phone (MRI, 2010). In addition, phones may also serve this audience as a way to access the Internet from home without a computer.

Daily Life and Free Time

Youth in general prefer spending free time with peers more than spending it in any other way (TRU, 2008). Peers, both in dating relationships and in friendships, are a major part of young people's daily lives. Friends are most often the sounding board for younger and older youth when it comes to music, fashion, video games and movies as well as relationship issues. The power of peers increases when youth are faced with abuse; teens overwhelmingly (80%) turn to peers to talk about experiences of abuse (TRU, 2009). The most common activities reported by this audience include spending time with family, hanging out with friends, spending time alone in one's room, and talking on the phone

(see Table 1). Spending time with a boyfriend/girlfriend is at the bottom of the list, which corresponds with the relatively large proportion of high-risk youth who say they do not have a girlfriend/boyfriend and do not date. In describing close peer relationships, only 14.59% of younger high-risk youth and 54.2% of older high-risk youth say that they have a girlfriend/boyfriend, and 54.2% of younger youth and 46% of older youth report that they never date or only date once every few months (MRI, 2010).

Figure 1 provides the types of activities that high-risk youth say they engage in most frequently (MRI, 2010).

Notably, the majority of the activities reported by this audience reflect unstructured activities, rather than time spent in organized activities. In general, Black and Hispanic youth and all low-income youth are less likely to participate in out-of-school activities than the overall population, and when they do, they participate less frequently (Bouffard et al., 2006). Data indicate that younger high-risk youth participate less frequently in school sports teams, school clubs, local civic organizations, religious groups, out-of-school hobby clubs, volunteer groups, and exercise groups than the general population youth of age 12–14 (MRI, 2010). Hispanic and lower income youth also report that they participate less frequently in religious activities (MRI, 2010).

The most popular sports activities for younger and older high-risk youth include basketball (39.2% and 30.6%), football (32.25% and 24.41%), jogging/running (24% and 22.8%), and skateboarding (9.47% and 7.16%; MRI, 2010). Overall, volunteerism is fairly low among this group. Of those who do volunteer, 30.2% of younger youth and 31% of older youth cite that they do so through religious groups (MRI, 2010).

Youth Mindset

Importance of peers. Teens in general, including high-risk youth, hold peer relationships in high esteem when making decisions. The overwhelming majority of all teens, including high-risk youth (84.78% of younger youth and 89.53% of older youth), agree that friends are important to their lives (MRI, 2010). When comparing peer versus parental influence, one study found that high-risk youth are more likely to conform to their peers' beliefs than their parents' beliefs (Taylor, 1991). However, it is important to note that when high-risk youth were asked "Who do you respect most?" respondents overwhelmingly (79%) indicated a parent or guardian (MEE Productions, 2008).

Future aspirations. When asked about their future goals, younger high-risk youth responded that they hope to go to college (87.6%), buy a house (84.7%), have a successful career (82.2%), make a lot of money (82%), and have a good relationship with family (74.8%; MRI, 2010).

Confidence and expression. Both 79.5% of older and 80.1% of younger high-risk youth somewhat agreed or agreed with the statement, "I usually speak my mind," although 63% of younger high-risk youth and 49.2% of older high-risk youth reported that they hold their feelings in and do not say much (MRI, 2010). In the same vein, 85% of younger high-risk youth and 90% of older high-risk youth reported that they agree or somewhat agree that they like to make their own decisions (MRI, 2010). On the other hand, 62.6% of younger high-risk youth and 71.8% of older high-risk youth report that they agree or somewhat agree that they like to get other people's opinions before making decisions (MRI, 2010). These statements may reflect the general desire of teens to assert independence while simultaneously looking to peers for approval.

Key Findings—Primary Research

Attitudes and Approach to Relationships[2]

Defining relationships. For high-risk youth, the term dating has many meanings. The types of behaviors that constitute "dating" appeared to fall along a continuum. On one end of the spectrum are

behaviors that are considered more casual, where there is less, if any, commitment; while on the other end of the spectrum, are behaviors that are considered more serious that mean you are "taken." In addition, teens also indicated that even on the more committed end of the spectrum there is typically a second person on the side—either who they are physically involved with or who is waiting to step into the existing relationship. The majority of teens reported seeing casual relationships more often in their daily lives than serious relationships.

It is important to note that the language and terms teens used to refer to dating varied greatly across the two cities, and also varied within each city, by age group. Overall, teens in Atlanta used more slang terms for dating (e.g. cuffing—defined as figuratively being "handcuffed' to someone; caking—defined as being sweet on someone; smashing), while teens in Los Angeles used more traditional terminology (e.g. dating, going steady). For example, a 16-year-old African American female in Atlanta, GA, stated, "Like you first start caking, and then you start calling him your boo-thing. Then you all maybe become friends with benefits, and you may become their babe or whatever. Then starts that wifey-hubby thing." The broad range of terms related to dating and the notion that the term dating itself can have such various meanings is an important consideration for communications planning.

Experience with relationships. High-risk youth experiences with relationships vary dramatically, even within age groups, gender, and schools. Substantial gaps existed, and there were many factors that lead to differences in experiences with relationships. For example, within one mixed ethnicity group of 13- to 14-year-old females in Los Angeles, one teen thought being too close, or holding hands at school, was too much. This teen was also unfamiliar with many of the relationship terms being used in the discussion, particularly the slang terms. Meanwhile, a teen, who was the same age and at a different school in Los Angeles, understood the definition of all terminologies and talked about teen girls at her school identifying boys who they want to be their 'baby daddy,' suggesting that girls their age often do get pregnant. Even though there was a broad spectrum of relationship experiences, most commonly, younger teens had fewer experiences and used limited terminology to describe dating relationships, while older teens had many experiences and used a vast amount of terms to describe dating relationships. Additionally, the participants in Atlanta had many more terms and experiences overall than the participants in Los Angeles.

Healthy versus unhealthy relationship behaviors. Almost all participants had a strong understanding of healthy versus unhealthy relationship behaviors. As stated from a 17-year-old Caucasian male from Atlanta, GA, "You should be treated with respect. Know what you want, and whatever doesn't meet your expectations probably isn't right for you." Negative or bad relationship behaviors were cited as more common than positive or good relationship behaviors. Many mentioned that it was most common to have short-term relationships that only last a few weeks. The participants explained that it was rare to see a good relationship at school, and when asked what they see more of among their peers at school, good or bad relationships, all groups responded as either bad or a mix. Not one group voiced that they mostly see good relationship aspects around them.

Relationship problems among high-risk youth were reported to stem largely from different expectations among partners. Because of the various stages of teen dating relationships, teens often discussed that having similar relationship expectations is important to a healthy relationship. This also speaks to being on the same page in regard to how much each partner "likes" the other. Relationships largely lean toward negative when these expectations are different or conflicting—most often because the girls expressed wanting a serious relationship while the boys expressed wanting relationships to be casual.

It is evident that technology plays a big part in youth relationships and dating. This area was the only 'gray' area where some confusion existed for youth about what types of technology-related behaviors may be healthy versus unhealthy. Technology is incorporated into how high-risk youth

"date," by offering them an avenue to flirt, connect, and communicate. Texting "a lot" or writing on a Facebook wall incessantly was not always considered an unhealthy behavior with these youth. Many participants expressed that it can be perceived as a positive action because it means someone really likes you. Whereas in reality incessant texting or posting can definitely be a controlling or stalking behavior. Conversely, we also heard teens acknowledge that technology is something that can create problems, such as spreading rumors and intimate relationship details (e.g., cheating, photos, etc.). The older youth were well aware of how fast technology can circulate information, such as a photo.

Jealousy was reported to be prevalent in teen relationships and confusing for them, especially among the younger youth. It was evident that jealousy is a common issue and is the source of many arguments and problems in youth relationships. "Jealousy is underlined in every color (on the board) because that is like the biggest problem . . . when you get jealous, then that is what leads to accusations and assumptions," stated a 16-year-old Hispanic male from Los Angeles, CA. When asked what were the biggest problems they see in relationships, jealously was consistently the number one problem cited; however, some teens, especially the younger teens, were confused by jealousy. On one hand, they felt it started fights and caused problems, but on the other hand, a significant number of teens reported that they felt that experiencing jealousy meant that they really liked or cared about someone, and someone 'jealous' was often perceived as flattering.

Physical abuse was the most common type of dating violence identified by participants, but it was not considered prevalent in their everyday lives. If physical abuse is more common among the participants than they let on, it would seem that it is not something they want to talk about or know how to talk about. It is also possible that they do not yet know the signs of physical abuse clearly and believe that it is just something that occurs among older people.

Differences in relationship desires. Throughout the focus groups, a disparity among the girl and boy participants in their desired outcome of a relationship became clear. Teenage girl participants mostly spoke of wanting a boy to be in a serious relationship with them, while teenage boys expressed that they see this time in their life as an opportunity to have fun and not become too serious in a relationship. In general, girls expressed that they want a more exclusive, one-on-one relationship, but feel that their male counterparts only want to "hook up." A number of girls mentioned that while they would like to go on a real date (e.g., to a movie, to a restaurant) it was not something that happened regularly, if ever. Some teenage boy participants, especially in Atlanta, mentioned that taking a girl on a date was expensive, not a good use of money, and a waste of time. In addition, many male participants expressed a fear of being tied down.

Another difference that emerged between the teen boys and girls stemmed from the notion of having someone on the "sidelines" of a relationship. Teens explained that even when they are in a serious relationship, there is frequently another person on the side—whether it is someone who tries to break up the relationship or who is physically involved with a partner in the relationship. While both teen boys and girls acknowledged this as a common occurrence, it was much more acceptable among the teen boys. A good number of teen boys, especially among African Americans, thought that having a "sideline" while you are in a relationship is a necessary backup plan for when things are not working out and, in some cases, to make sure you are not getting too serious with one person. While none of the girls talked about being a person on the sideline themselves, many spoke of how it was very common for females to participate in being the girl on the side and often commented that this girl could be a friend.

Teen boys also expressed that they want to appear that they can "get" girls easily. Boasting about how you can get girls with little effort was prevalent among teen boys across both age groups. They thought it was looked down upon for them to make the effort to go on a one-on-one date, or show that they spent a lot of time pursing a girl. Many felt that it was bad to reveal their feelings too much or to like a girl more than she liked them. Often it was explained that the avoidance of being

with one person exclusively created fewer problems than being in a more serious relationship, and that "hooking up" with different people was a way to avoid a serious relationship and appear cooler to friends and peers.

Influence and information on relationships. Teens reported that the media has a negative effect on teen relationships. They cited numerous song lyrics that depicted females in bad ways and talked about sex as a very casual thing. Teens brought up that some of the reality television programes (e.g., Jersey Shore, 16 and Pregnant) reinforced negative relationship behaviors. For many teens, it appears that the message that bad decisions can have consequences is often times overshadowed by the fame or popularity gained by the stars on the show, especially in regard to shows about pregnancy. Several teens stated that pregnancy sometimes feels like a trend because of the shows, and a few participants spoke of girls they knew at school getting or trying to get pregnant in hopes of getting cast on these shows. Interestingly, while they appeared to be aware of the negative portrayals of relationships in the media, teens seemed unaware of how these media might be impacting their attitudes toward relationships, as evidenced by the acceptance of sideline relationships discussed earlier.

Throughout the focus group discussions, teens often emphasized the importance of asking someone who has experience for relationship advice, and the idea of the older teens offering relationship advice to younger teens appealed to some of the younger teens. In regard to dating and sexuality, surveys indicate that children and teens want information about sex (Painter, 1997) but feel that they do not get enough (The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994). If parents do not provide adolescents with information about sex, they may turn to peers for it (Whitaker, & Miller, 2000). Studies have found that among high-risk youth, peers are a significant source of information about sexuality, relationships, and dating behaviors (Harper, Gannon, Watson, Catania, & Dolcini, 2004). For instance, in Los Angeles, CA, a 17-year-old Caucasian male said, "They are going through it right now, or they just finished it, so they are like the most recent perspective of it, other than the older people."

While most teens felt it made sense for older teens, such as a close friend or relative, to be a source of advice, some older teens did not see themselves in this role. Teens expressed that getting advice from an older teen made sense, because their older counterparts had likely been through similar situations and experiences. However, many of the younger teens felt this would only be helpful if you had such a trusted older teen in your life (and not all did) and that it did not necessarily make sense with just any older teen that they may not know closely. Conversely, some older teens had trouble seeing how they could help the younger teens, even though many had themselves experienced good advice from an older teen when they were younger. Older participants felt that younger teens are different than they were at that age, experiencing and doing different things. They also thought these younger teens might need to figure things out for themselves to actually learn from their experiences and were unsure of how what they know would help younger teens.

Many participants are hesitant to talk to their peers about relationship issues. Most teens felt it was important to talk to someone you trust, and that it would be much better if this person were not someone involved so immediately in his or her life. These teens stressed the importance to have someone who could not only relate to their situation but also someone they had some separation from on a day-to-day basis.

Along these same lines, a majority of participants said they are hesitant to get involved if they see their friends or peers in a bad relationship situation. This often extended to close friends. Teens felt that their friends should figure it on their own, thought it was a private matter, had concerns about causing more trouble or losing a friend, or that it was a waste of time to get involved because friends would not listen.

Parents were trusted advisors for some participants. Some participants cited their parents as being helpful, understanding, and people they trust. Talking to parents worked for some teens, while for others, this was not an option.

Insights and Implications

Although many similarities exist between youth in general and the high-risk youth audiences, the differences are substantial. Both groups are "getting older" at a younger age and juggle competing priorities in various aspects of their life. However, because of the additional stresses that high-risk youth face, including concentrated poverty, lack of resources, and exposure to violence, everyday challenges are often magnified. Findings from this research, which underscore both the similarities and the differences between high-risk youth and general population youth, lead to a variety of implications for future communication campaigns, including the Dating Matters program, particularly those focused on the sensitive topic of promoting healthy relationships. The key implications for reaching and engaging high-risk youth on this topic include the following:

- Intervention sites. Research indicates that inner city and urban areas are good settings for reaching low-income teens.
- Media impact. Media in many forms has a substantial impact on high-risk youth. Spending more than 7½ hr each day consuming media, this audience can be reached through well-targeted media strategies, and they may be particularly attentive to mass media messages. Research suggests that these youth have more limited exposure to life experiences than youth in general and thus depend more on media for information about the world and all kinds of knowledge (Steele, 1999). However, they also may lack alternative information which would help them counter negative messages relayed by the media. This is especially disconcerting because of the proliferation of disrespectful dating messages present in pop culture. Many high-risk youth are immersed in hip-hop culture where traditional gender roles—a known risk factor for dating violence—are often reinforced (Harper, Gannon, Watson, Catania, & Dolcini, 2004).
- Internet and social media. Nearly all high-risk youth have access to the Internet. However, unlike the general population youth, the majority of high-risk youth report accessing the Internet at school rather than at home. It will be important to conduct qualitative research to better understand how this pattern of Internet usage affects the strategies for engaging high-risk youth online.
- Other media influences. Both television and music play a large role in high-risk youth's media habits. Almost three quarters of this audience watch TV at least 2 hr daily, and listening to music is a close second. Thus, television as well as various venues for listening to music—including radio, cell phones, and computers—can be useful channels for reaching and communicating with high-risk youth.
- Cell phones. Cell phone use among high-risk youth is widespread. Virtually all (92%) of the older high-risk youth group have cell phones; and even in the younger group, a substantial portion have adopted this technology. As with other youth, text messaging is the most common cell phone activity. Cell phones may also be one way that high-risk youth are accessing the Internet away from school. High-risk youth's nearly universal access to cell phones makes this channel highly attractive as a campaign communications vehicle, especially for text-message strategies. Furthermore, keeping in mind that high-risk youth's access to the Internet is often via cell phone, it will be important to emphasize mobile capabilities when developing a campaign Internet component.
- Peer relationships. Peer relationships are highly influential for high-risk youth, as they are for teens in general. And while high-risk youth report spending more time with family than peers, it is important to note that frequency and influence are not synonymous. Not only are high-risk youth more likely to discuss dating and relationships with their peers than with their parents, but they also feel that they are more likely to be influenced by the behaviors of their peers than those of their parents (Taylor, 1991). In view of the strong influence of peers on sexuality, relationships, and dating behaviors, as well as the limited time high-risk youth spend discussing these topics with parents and other adults, it will be important to engage high-risk youth through peers and/or near peers.

- Organized sports and other youth activities. Clubs, sports, and other organized activities are often a good avenue to reach young people. However, in general, high-risk youth are less likely than other youth to participate in activities such as team sports and clubs, whether in school or outside of school. This difference suggests using caution and doing further research before investing in strategies to reach high-risk youth that depend on organized youth groups and activities.
- Relationship attitudes and experience. Knowing that both relationship knowledge and experiences differ greatly among these teens, focusing the communications initiative on a more limited age range might allow for greater impact. In addition, as high-risk youth were able to communicate a clear understanding of healthy versus unhealthy relationship behaviors, it may prove to be more effective to focus communications components on empowering youth to better align their knowledge with practice. Furthermore, while most of the younger participants noted the need for more guidance with relationships, they lacked a place to seek this guidance. Empowering older youth in their role as leaders and influencers could fill this gap for younger youth.

Applying Data to the Dating Matters Program

The Dating Matters program will be implemented in four urban communities, with each community divided into standard practice and comprehensive schools. Comprehensive schools will receive a variety of components across Grades 6–8, including the communications program, while standard practice schools will only receive a youth curricula in eighth grade. Because of the design of the program, specifically the proximity of control schools to comprehensive schools, mass media channels (e.g., radio advertising, billboards, PSAs) cannot be used as part of the communications program since they would reach a broader audience than intended. As such, we applied the learnings from this review in a very targeted way as detailed below.

Based on the study design and findings from this review, the communications component of the Dating Matters program will include traditional materials (e.g., toolkit) as well as social media and mobile components. All communications will employ an authentic teen voice that takes into consideration the spectrum of dating relationship teens' experience at this age while aiming to counteract negative pop-culture influences (e.g., using lyrics or TV scenarios as examples of what not to do/accept in a relationship). With social media and mobile becoming ever present in the primary audience's daily life, each community will host a Facebook page to promote program messages that will be reinforced through an SMS program. To capitalize on the importance of and influence of older youth (15- to18-year-olds) on their younger teen counterparts (11- to 14-year-olds), the communications program will include a brand ambassador program, comprising 15- to 18-year-old youth. These brand ambassadors will be a vital communication vehicle for spreading Dating Matters messages via word of mouth. Specifically, these brand ambassadors will take on leadership roles in community events that are planned in the participating communities and moderate the community Facebook pages.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Although research on high-risk youth is limited, the available information indicates that the majority of high-risk youth are eminently reachable through well-targeted approaches and channels. Further, this audience is in need of communication approaches that help them to align their actions with their clear knowledge of what is and is not healthy in terms of dating behaviors. Customized messages that help link teen's knowledge with information about how to best align their actions related to dating behaviors might best be delivered through such channels as near peers (slightly older teens), the Internet, cell phones, television, and music venues. It may be less advantageous to reach them through their parents, print media, or organized youth groups and sports.

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Notes

1. U.S. Census age segments do not correspond to those that are being used for the purposes of this initiative
2. Unless noted otherwise, the findings in this section are solely based on the primary research portion of this study (e.g., focus groups).

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