

Tackling Youth Violence:

US's first rural prevention center created in NC county

North Carolina will be home to the nation's first rurally focused youth violence prevention center, with a federal grant worth nearly \$6.5 million to support a new project based in Robeson County and led by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill researchers.

The North Carolina Academic Center for Excellence in Youth Violence Prevention will also be the state's first center focused on conducting youth violence prevention research and providing community support and solutions.

It joins three similar U.S. centers in larger metropolitan areas. Funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the centers were established under the CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control following the 1999 tragedy at Columbine High School.

Robeson County is one of the nation's most ethnically diverse rural counties. More than 68 percent of its 129,000 residents are Native American, African American and Latino.

The five-year project is a collaborative partnership between the UNC School of Social Work, the UNC Injury Prevention Research Center and community agencies in Robeson County, including the Robeson County Health Department, the nonprofit Center for Community Action and Public Schools of Robeson County.

Paul Smokowski, Ph.D., professor in the School of Social Work and a core faculty member of the Injury Prevention Research Center, is the project's principal investigator. He will direct the new center with help from co-directors Natasha K. Bowen, Ph.D., associate professor of social work; the Rev. Mac Legerton, executive director and founder of the Center for Community Action; and Martica Bacallao, Ph.D., assistant professor in the social work department at UNC-Greensboro.

To assess the impact of the center's activities, researchers will track community and school rates of violence in Robeson County and across the state. The project will also follow 3,000 middle school students – about half of all middle school youth in Robeson County – over five years to compare the students' development to that of 2,000 similar students in a comparison group from a nearby county.

By focusing on middle school youth, Smokowski said the project can potentially help young people before problems become entrenched. Research has shown, for example, that dropout rates, alcohol use and aggressive behavior increase once students reach high school.

"Our goal ultimately is to promote the positive and successful development of middle school adolescents so that they can go on to have bright futures," Smokowski said.

In the 30 years with the Center for Community Action, Legerton said he had seen youth violence affect almost every family in his community. According to the N.C. Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Robeson's youth death rate of 123.6 per 100,000 people is nearly double the state's rate of 74.7; the county's homicide rate of 23.9 per 100,000 is more than triple the state's average of 7.2 for 2004-2008.

The researchers and community partners said such difficulties were largely a result of the county's ongoing economic struggles, which have long created significant hardships for individuals, families and children.

Legerton said the new center offered some long-awaited hope for Robeson County residents and community partners and was an example of civic engagement at its best.

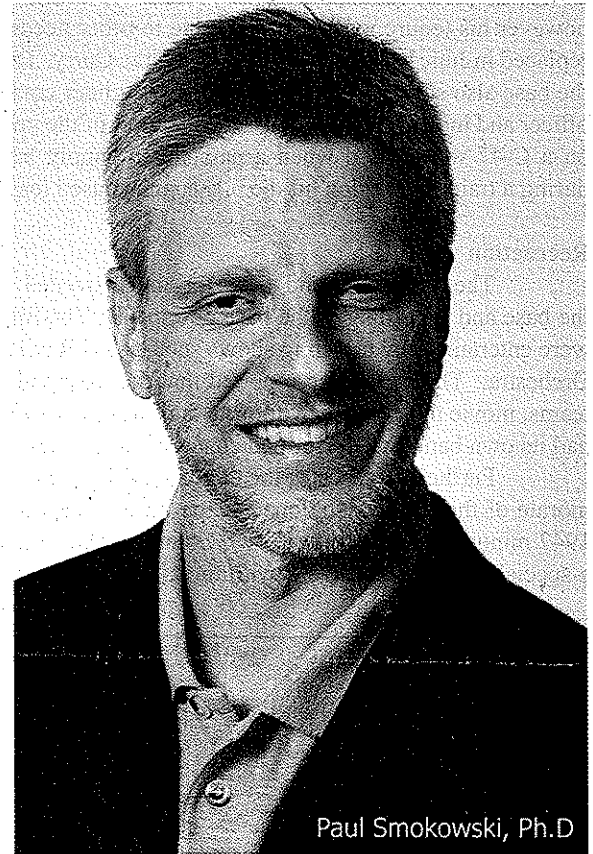
"This project will enable us to develop a deeper understanding of youth violence and to implement interventions that can be assessed so that we can develop successful ways to prevent and reduce youth violence," he said. The project will start by identifying the risks encountered by Robeson's adolescents and protective strengths that offer them support. Strategies and programs will then be put into place and evaluated over the remaining project period.

For more details, visit http://ssw.unc.edu/about/news/youth_violence_prevention_center.

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