



Low Rider Bike Club: The Teen Alternative to Drugs and Violence

The health concern: In recent years, gangs, violence, and substance abuse have been among the greatest health concerns in a low-income Westside neighborhood of San Bernardino, CA. The Casa de San Bernardino's Westside Prevention Project, a countyfunded drug and youth violence prevention program, provided on-site counseling sessions to youth at high risk. Few students in this largely Chicano and Black community came for counseling because of the stigma associated with being in an "anti-drug and anti-violence" program, because program participation was perceived as not "cool." "We knew what we had wasn't working," says Sandra M. Bonilla, Westside Prevention Project manager.

The strategy: Casa looked to the community to help it identify ways to attract youth at high risk to the center. It held community potlucks to meet community members. Interaction from those potlucks led Casa to observe who the community's trusted authorities were, among them: Basilio, a father-like figure who rebuilt bikes; Bobby, a 40-plus-year-old youth advocate with over 15 years of experience working with gang youth members in the Westside barrio; and Jesse, a 22-year-old who was skilled in organizing baseball games and other activities for youth. Those individuals were, in turn, recruited to lead an advisory group, which eventually identified a symbol of the street culture that would attract youth at high risk and that crossed ethnic boundaries—low rider bikes, the two-wheel equivalents of the well-known cars, with gleaming handle bars and velvet seats. Together with Casa health professionals, the community advisory group created the Westside Prevention Project Low Rider Bike Club, a program that gives free low rider bike parts to youth for each weekly counseling session they attend, and requires regular attendance to keep club membership.

The action: Membership in the club, with the motto, "We don't need to get high to ride low," begins as a 20-week program. In this program on the basis of their individual assessments, youth attend sessions on any number of areas, for example, adolescent drug treatment, aggression replacement training, and life and leadership skills development. Participants must also attend special workshops. In November 2002, the project brought Low Rider Bike Club members to meet with college students at Cal State San Bernardino to discuss how youth programs help them. More than 200 youth have participated in the program since it was launched 2 years ago, and more continue to enroll in the program. Program officials find that as the young people's self-esteem, attitudes and schoolwork improve, they direct their energy toward more mainstream activities, such as playing on a baseball team and volunteering to become youth leaders, endeavors that youth at high risk rarely seek out.

Why it works: As a cultural broker, Bonilla became a liaison between the mental health providers and the community. She immersed herself in the community, talking with parents, teens, community leaders, and others and gained their trust to identify a strategy for attracting youth at high risk to counseling services. These community members—who became the project's community advisory group—in turn, acted as cultural brokers themselves, serving as cultural guides. They identified the low rider bike subculture as one to which teens in the neighborhood could readily relate. It was this effort—getting to know the community and choosing respected individuals in the neighborhood—that led to a community-driven initiative.



Westside Prevention Project Low Rider Bike Club
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