



# SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SERVICE

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**CITIZENS CRIME COMMISSION**  
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social media platforms are popular and serve as a natural extension of our social lives. However, online platforms are emerging as places where people also engage in risky behaviors and express trauma, grief, and emotional distress. This is particularly striking among youth involved in gun violence, whose social media activity often escalates and amplifies real-world violence and illuminates their experiences with grief and trauma.

The high visibility of harmful behavior, trauma, grief, and emotional distress on social media gives service providers the opportunity to know exactly who is at the highest risk for committing or being victimized by violence and in greatest need of service. We need to capitalize on this opportunity by giving anti-violence professionals a new method of responding to risky social media use. As modes of communication have changed to favor online spaces, so too must our interventions.

Partnering with NYC Cure Violence and researchers from NYU, the Crime Commission developed a multi-tiered intervention model called E-Responder, which aims to intervene with youth on social media, connect them to additional services, de-escalate conflict, and instill long-term life skills in critical areas.

Programs like E-Responder are designed to reach out to youth within these virtual spaces of conflict in order to prevent violence. Additional interventions that seek to promote skills and reduce risks with others should capitalize on the opportunity to use social media in their work. In this way we can all ensure that the best strategies and resources are available to young people in the places where they are actively engaged and expressing themselves.

## Recommendations

- **Continue to engage with youth in digital spaces**
- **Additional fields should analyze how social media plays a role in their area of expertise, how services could be delivered on social media, and how to incorporate social media as a form of intervention and outreach**
- **Additional stakeholders should build partnerships with major platforms in order to create a network of intervention services that work together to share innovations, resources, and information**

# SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SERVICE

Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow individuals to connect with others and serves as a natural extension of their social lives. Although many interactions on social media can be positive, it is also a space in which people experience distress, engage in troubling behavior, and experience conflict. This is especially true for youth involved in gun violence.

As highlighted in the Crime Commission report *Social Media and Real World Consequences*, youth involved in crews—fluid, building-based groups of youth (16-25 years old) that engage in violent turf rivalries, but lack the structure and profit schemes of traditional gangs—use social media to taunt and threaten rivals, share criminal activity, freely discuss shootings and past violence, buy and sell weapons, grieve, talk about emotional distress, and engage in arguments. This behavior massively accelerates and amplifies violence, often leading to real-world shootings and murders, as well as causes other consequences for youth, such as monitoring by police, arrest, and work and school discipline.

Furthermore, characteristics of social media can fuel harmful behavior on social media. As previously stated in the Crime Commission report *Social Media Impacts Behaviors and Norms*, features such as publishing to a wide audience<sup>ii</sup>, unlimited access to social media for emotional release<sup>iii</sup>, and perceived anonymity online<sup>iv</sup> all contribute to an environment of low empathy and impulsive behavior<sup>v</sup>. Also, social media users communicate through a screen, where lack of eye-contact can decrease users' ability to take the perspective of others, making it easier to argue, threaten, and taunt others.



Since platforms rarely enforce their community standards without third-party reporting<sup>vi</sup>, much of this behavior is unmonitored and unaddressed, and positive social norms that would protect against this behavior are not present<sup>vii</sup>. In this way, interventions that aim to prevent the escalation of risky behaviors into physical violence and support positive behavior online need to meet youth in this new space of conflict.

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# Social Media as an Opportunity for Service

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The high visibility of harmful behavior, trauma, grief, and emotional distress on social media gives service providers the opportunity to know exactly who is at the highest risk for committing or being victimized by violence and in greatest need of service. We need to capitalize on this opportunity by giving anti-violence professionals a new method of responding to risky social media use. As modes of communication have changed to favor online spaces, so too must our interventions.

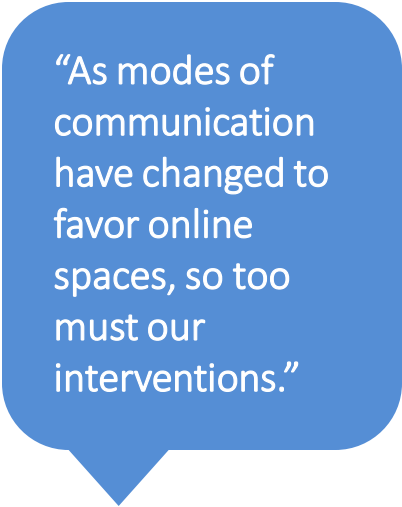
Currently, there are a myriad of online interventions aiming to address issues including mood disorders, anxiety, suicide prevention, and crisis intervention. Studies investigating the effectiveness of online interventions have found that online interventions are as effective at reducing distress as services provided in-person<sup>viii</sup>. Further, participants in online interventions demonstrate long term treatment effects across many studies, showing no statistical difference between online and in-person interventions.<sup>ix,x,xi</sup> These studies conducted follow-up ranging from four weeks to a year after treatment. This lack of difference demonstrates that the positive effects of online interventions last for a longer time than just to the end of therapy, as should be expected of an effective treatment intervention.<sup>xii</sup>

Research has also shown that youth spend a lot of time online, prefer to get anonymous help, and report a need for information and help through the internet.<sup>xiii</sup> Therefore, the best method to deliver an intervention to address behaviors online is via the internet. Further, online interventions do not require individuals to travel to a physical location to retrieve care, are less expensive to deliver, and maintain privacy for those sensitive to perceived stigma.<sup>xiv</sup>

Social media is a space ripe for intervention because youth are freely sharing grievances, violent intentions, emotions, and arguments on a public platform. Furthermore, social media allows public and private modes to reach out to those experiencing conflict, making it a natural place to facilitate conversation, mentorship, and growth.

## Building on Effective Solutions

Violence intervention programs are numerous and diverse in their approaches. Parsing out the components that lead to the most positive behavior change is important to creating a holistic intervention strategy. Many evidence-based violence intervention programs share common features: empathy training, self-control training, and emotional management.<sup>xv</sup> These different components need to work together in an intervention targeted at reducing violence, as all these skill sets are negatively impacted in youth who are exposed to violence.<sup>xvi,xvii</sup>



“As modes of communication have changed to favor online spaces, so too must our interventions.”





Anti-violence professionals from Bronx Connect's Release the Grip conduct street outreach and engage with the community.



Anti-violence professionals from True 2 Life manage a case-load of high-risk youth, connecting them to much needed services.



Anti-violence professionals from Bronx Connect's Release the Grip change community norms around violence.

One violence prevention model is Cure Violence. Cure Violence is an evidence-based program that uses a public health approach to reduce shootings and killings. Cure Violence treats violence as a disease by interrupting conflicts, working with high-risk individuals and changing social norms.<sup>xviii</sup>

Cure Violence programs employ credible messengers—people with street credibility—who have previous involvement with violence or other high-risk street activity and have reformed their lives and want to make a difference in their community. This experience allows credible messengers to create trusting relationships with high-risk youth, giving them access to a hard-to-reach population and the ability to influence change through behavior modeling and connections to service. Credible messengers serve as violence interrupters, hospital responders, and outreach workers whom actively deescalate conflicts in the community, respond to trauma in hospitals, and manage caseloads of high-risk participants.

Partnering with anti-violence professionals from NYC Cure Violence and researchers from New York University Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, the Crime Commission developed an intervention model, called E-Responder, which aims to intervene with youth on social media, connect them to additional services, de-escalate conflict, and instill long-term life skills in critical areas. As such, E-Responder was designed to enhance the valuable work NYC Cure Violence staff perform, as well as expand the strategies available to staff that will improve youth's emotional regulation, movement through healthy grieving, critical thinking, effective communication, leadership skills, empathy, personal social media use, and ability to de-escalate conflict.

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# STOPPING GUN VIOLENCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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E-Responder is a multi-pronged approach developed to reach youth in new, virtual spaces of conflict. Leveraging the research literature on Sociopolitical Development, Violence Prevention, and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), E-Responder has three major components: violence interruption, digital citizenship, and youth leadership. All strategies and activities in E-Responder facilitate skill development with youth around empathy, self-control, and emotional management. As such, E-Responder includes key intervention anchors such as validation, building on youth strengths, helping youth regain control through cognitive reframing, and exploring realistic options. The three E-Responder components are operationalized through two resources:



Anti-violence professionals from Bronx Connect's Release the Grip program interrupting violence on social media.

The **Youth Leadership Program (YLP)** is a 24-session program promoting positive digital citizenship by building on youth strengths and preventing risky behavior. The YLP builds on youths' existing strengths and talents by engaging youth in twice-weekly sessions addressing personal social media use, emotion and expression, understanding oppression and privilege, self care, discovering passions, leadership, and activism.. Throughout the program particular emphasis is placed on the development of mindfulness and emotion regulation skills, as well as the development of youths' sociopolitical critical consumption of online content.

The **Interruption Toolkit** is a comprehensive resource for anti-violence professionals engaging in interventions targeting youths' risky online behaviors. The Toolkit is composed of two elements: an *interruption component* that trains anti-violence professionals on evidence-based intervention strategies for the assessment and identification of risky posts and how to respond, and a *digital citizenship component*, which includes strategies for anti-violence professionals to use social media to respond to tragedies, change violence norms, raise awareness about social media and violence, and promote positivity.



The True 2 Life program in Staten Island conducts the E-Responder Youth Leadership Program.

E-Responder was piloted for six months with four NYC Cure Violence sites and one high school in Brooklyn in order to test its effectiveness. The results of this pilot are featured in a series of briefs on the Crime Commission website and shows that trained Cure Violence staff were significantly more likely to identify a risky post online and intervene, leading to significantly more positive outcomes for their participants, such as de-escalation of the conflict and building emotional management skills. Furthermore, additional analyses show that youth engaged in the YLP were significantly more confident in their ability to use social media responsibly and use their online activity to promote peace than youth who did not complete the YLP. After the intervention, YLP youth also showed more empathic concern for others than the youth who did not complete the YLP. This is important because the ability to show empathic concern for others is highly correlated with reductions in violence and increases in pro-social development.<sup>xix</sup>

The success of E-Responder highlights the value of reaching out to young people in the spaces where they are most engaged and also experiencing distress. Further, it highlights important dynamics of violence around grief and emotional distress and how intervening in real-time can help increase access to support and critical life skills needed by young people to cope.

## **The Facebook Analytical Scanning Tool (FAST) Application**

The E-Responder pilot study illuminated a common need among Cure Violence staff for a technological advancement in how they were alerted to risky social media posts. Staff reported that young people post constantly to social media and caused staff to become overwhelmed and concerned that they were missing or lagging in responding to a risky post. Therefore, the Crime Commission developed the Facebook Analytical Scanning Tool (FAST™) as a natural extension of the E-Responder program. FAST™ is a web-based application that scans Facebook posts, and alerts staff to posts in their network that contain language shown to indicate a risk for violence. In this way, trained E-Responders are alerted to social media violence in real-time, reducing the time spent monitoring their participants' social media activity and increasing their ability to use E-Responder strategies to intervene with youth.

Analysis of FAST™ application data will allow the Crime Commission to quantitatively understand the dynamics of gun violence by illuminating the ways social media is used by gang-involved youth, assess patterns in their social media behavior and communication, understand how their network impacts their social media behavior, and discover additional needs and risks. Such information would allow service providers to give the best services and resources to help these young people move away from violence and towards healthy lifestyles.

The FAST™ application will be piloted for three months with three Cure Violence sites in order to assess the functioning of FAST™. This FAST™ pilot will allow the Crime Commission to finalize a database of terms associated with violence, improve FAST™ functioning, expand FAST™ access to additional Cure Violence sites, and provide valuable data on the ways high-risk youth use social media. All of these products will allow the Crime Commission to integrate more intelligent technology into FAST™ as well as adapt it into an updated mobile app.



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# CONCLUSION

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In order to prevent gun violence we need to meet youth in the space where conflicts are occurring, and prevent them from escalating into real-world violence. Social media creates a new dynamic in which youth can communicate and share information freely and publically, giving service providers valuable information related to their mental health, violence risk, emotional state, and needs. Service providers need to capitalize on this opportunity by using technology to teach youth important life skills in the space of conflict and in real time.

Programs like E-Responder and FAST™ are designed to reach out to youth within these virtual spaces of conflict in order to prevent violence. Additional interventions that seek to promote skills and reduce risks with others should capitalize on the opportunity to use social media in their work. In this way we can all ensure that the best strategies and resources are available to young people in the places where they are actively engaged and expressing themselves.

## Recommendations:

- Continue to engage with youth in digital spaces
- Gain youth's perspective on how social media impacts their lives
- Create tools that increase positive norms and digital citizenship among users
- Social media platforms should integrate technology and training to identify and intervene on risk factors for violence against self and others, including gun violence, threats, domestic violence, suicide, and sexual violence
  - Social media platforms should include these risk factors in reporting criteria for users, and offer solutions that do not solely place the burden of intervention on the user, but on technology
- Additional fields should analyze how social media plays a role in their area of expertise, how services could be delivered on social media, and how to incorporate social media as a form of intervention and outreach
- Additional stakeholders should build partnerships with major platforms in order to create a network of intervention services that work together to share innovations, resources, and information
- Since social media has become an active place for displaying grief, we should advocate for social media platforms to provide services exclusively related to grief, such as national hotlines, referral pages, coping strategies, and advice for peers of someone grieving

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[www.nycrimecommission.org](http://www.nycrimecommission.org)

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