

'At 16 years old, I went to three funerals': how an urban county in the Midwest can be its own solution to youth violence

In November 2020, in Wyandotte County, Kansas, a 19th year old was murdered, less than a month prior, another 20 year old young man was killed. In September, 15 year old was fatally shot and killed. On August 25th, an 18 year old was fatally shot where a previous shooting had taken place just 5 hours earlier. Another minor, age 16, was killed July 21st in the county. Just in the past three months, in addition to these murders, there have been numerous other homicides that involved older adult victims.

Our community is traumatized and hurting from the murders of our classmates, friends, and family. It is time for the state of Kansas to allow counties like Wyandotte to address these horrific events from an evidence-based, community-lead approach.

Youth Violence in Wyandotte

At the border of Kansas City, Missouri, Wyandotte County encompasses the lesser-known Kansas City, Kansas among other townships. According to Wyandotte County Vital Statistics Data, 104 youth between ages 1 to 24 were murdered between 2010 and 2019ⁱ. Out of those 104 homicides, 92 involved a firearmⁱⁱ. Wyandotte County has the highest homicide rate in the state with a murder rate of over 18 per 100,000 individuals, and it leads the other counties by at least doubleⁱⁱⁱ.

No one can deny that what is happening in Wyandotte is unacceptable, and the community is aware and passionate about changing this reality for its population. According to the recent Wyandotte Community Health Assessment^{iv}, violence was voted as one of the top four issues in the community. To truly treat child and youth violence, we have to view it through a public health lens — one that situates the issue as a preventable disease. Punitive action against violent youth and perpetrators of child violence will not address the root cause of what lead them to act violently in the first place.

Review Boards Can Make an Impact

To determine community action, each child and youth death must be studied to find common patterns. This is what is known as a fatality review board, and it is recommended by the CDC and National Center for Fatality Review as an effective way to build community-led interventions to prevent tragedy^v. As part of the Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP)^{vi}, the Unified Government Public Health Department, the local public health department of Wyandotte County, has placed the implementation of a Youth Fatality Review Board (YFRB) as a top priority.

Review board teams are confidential, multidisciplinary teams that conduct an in-depth review of an individual's death. There is no interest in placing blame on a community agency or the victim; the purpose is to understand circumstances and risk factors so that future death can be prevented. That is what Wyandotte County, Kansas wants to achieve by establishing a youth fatality review board to include all child and youth deaths ages 1 to 24 years old. Forming a youth fatality review board is an initiative supported by over 134 organizations and individuals across the county.

Let Us Help Ourselves

To even begin addressing these tragedies in children and youth of Wyandotte County, there must be access to data about these deaths. How can community leaders discuss interventions without knowing an individual's risk factors and life events that lead to them falling victim to violence?

Currently as it stands in Kansas state law, there is not any legislation that explicitly allows or disallows counties access to their own data about the minors and young adults that had died in their counties. If a county in Kansas wanted to study the death of children and youth, they would have to refer to the state child death review board^{vii}. However, the Kansas Child Death Review Board does not show Wyandotte County specific data except for sleep-related infant deaths due to the high-level nature of being a state-wide review.

This is where state legislation from Kansas government officials is necessary. If a youth fatality review board in Wyandotte County is established, it will be the first county-level child and youth death review in the state. Yet, data sharing from law enforcement, hospitals, schools, Department of Children & Families (Child Protective Services), and other agencies is severely limited without state mandate.

A solution to this data-sharing obstacle is state legislation that explicitly allows for the data sharing between county health departments and necessary agencies. Simply allowing Kansas counties to access their own data is the first step to empowering the community leaders of Wyandotte County to address the issue of youth violence.

This request is not outlandish. According to the National Center for Fatality Review Child Death Review report from 2020, 37% of all US states and territories either allow or mandate a local level review of child deaths^{viii}. In Kansas, there is already state legislation to have local-level Fetal and Infant Mortality Review. By extending this to include children and youth, Wyandotte County would be able to conduct its own data analysis on these deaths.

Wyandotte County's Vision for the Future

With this legislation, core review team agencies such as hospitals, law enforcement, schools, and child welfare will then be able to provide adequate records and files on the individual child or youth who died. Other review board members such as pediatricians, educators, the coroner/medical examiner, first responders, suicide prevention professionals, and more are able to digest the case materials on the individual and pinpoint system gaps, protective factors, and root causes. Each meeting ends with recommendations for policy and systems change, and review board members are intentionally community leaders and advocates with influence who

can enact this change. This information will then catalyze prevention actions at the local and possibly state level to prevent similar deaths in Wyandotte County moving forward.

Your Call to Action

The general public and local and state legislators *must* consider child and youth violence as larger systemic issues rather than individual tragedies. Kansas state legislators and policymakers *must* allow counties to access their own data on child and youth deaths so that public health interventions can be discussed. By doing so, child and youth violence and fatality can be approached more appropriately as a predictable, and therefore preventable, event in Wyandotte County.

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ⁱ Kansas Department of Health and Environment, "Vital Statistics Death Report. Kansas 2010-2019," 2020.

ⁱⁱ Kansas Department of Health and Environment.

ⁱⁱⁱ University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, "County Health Rankings & Roadmaps 2019," County Health Rankings & Roadmaps 2019: Building a Culture of Health, County by County, 2019, <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/kansas/2020/rankings/wyandotte/county/outcomes/overall/snapshot>

^{iv} Vicki Collie-Akers, "Wyandotte County Community Health Assessment," March 2018, 80.

^v Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, "Preventing Youth Violence Issue Brief" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020), www.cdc.gov/injury.; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "National Action Plan for Child Injury Prevention," *Atlanta, GA* 10 (2012); National Center for Fatality Review and Prevention, "Keeping Kids Alive: A Report on the Status of Child Death Review in the United States 2018" (Michigan Public Health Institute, June 2020), https://www.ncfrp.org/wp-content/uploads/NCRPCD-Docs/CDRinUS_2017.pdf.

^{vi} Unified Government Health Department, "Wyandotte County Community Health Improvement Plan: Year 2," C.H.I.P Report (Wyandotte County, December 2019), https://www.wycokck.org/WycoKCK/media/Health-Department/Documents/CHIP-Booklet-Year-2_final.pdf.

^{vii} Sara Hortenstine, "Kansas State Child Death Review Board 2019 Annual Report (2017 Data)" (Office of the Kansas Attorney General, 2019), https://ag.ks.gov/docs/default-source/reports/scdrb/2019-scdrb-annual-report.pdf?sfvrsn=f78dd21a_3.

^{viii} National Center for Fatality Review and Prevention, "Keeping Kids Alive: A Report on the Status of Child Death Review in the United States 2018."