



Implications for Extension

Empower Yourself Through Self-Defense: Enhancing Personal Safety Through Self-Defense Education

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Abstract

The *Empower Yourself Through Self-Defense* program addresses rising violent crime by equipping participants with essential self-defense knowledge and skills. Through interactive training, over 737 individuals learned to recognize threats, de-escalate conflicts, and respond effectively. Evaluation results indicate significant improvements ($p < 0.001$) in confidence, awareness, and self-defense abilities. Participants reported reduced fear, increased preparedness, and strong interest in continued training. Given its success, future efforts will focus on expanding accessibility, incorporating non-physical defense strategies, and offering specialized courses. The program continues to enhance public safety by empowering individuals with practical skills for self-protection.

Introduction

Violent crime, including aggravated assault, rape, robbery, and homicide, remains a pressing public health and safety concern. In 2023, the national violent crime rate in the United States declined to approximately 364 offenses per 100,000 people, marking a 3.0% decrease from the previous year, but still impacting over 1.2 million people (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). In 2023, Utah's violent crime rate was 232 per 100,000 people, approximately one-third lower than national averages (Utah Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice, 2024). Utah's reported rape rate was 55.5 per 100,000 people, significantly exceeding the national average of 42.6 per 100,000 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). While sexual violence can impact individuals of any gender, women and girls face the highest risk accounting for approximately 90% of rape victims in the United States between 2019 and 2023 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). Youth are particularly vulnerable, with individuals aged 10–19 comprising 42% of reported cases and those aged 20–29 comprising 21% during the same period (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.).

The impact of violent crime extends far beyond the act itself for victims, often resulting in chronic psychological, emotional, and financial hardship. Victims may experience stress, anxiety, post-traumatic

stress disorder (PTSD), depression, substance use, and long-term health complications (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022; Alliance for Safety and Justice, 2022). Families of victims often face emotional distress, financial strain, and disrupted family dynamics (Alliance for Safety and Justice, 2023). The broader economic burden of violent crime is enormous as it accounts for 85% of all costs, with an estimated annual cost of \$2.6 trillion (McCollister et al., 2022).

Given these challenges, preventive strategies are crucial for individual and community well-being. One promising approach is self-defense training, which not only provides individuals with physical protection skills, but also enhances psychological resilience and awareness. A recent integrative review found strong evidence that self-defense training is associated with reduced risk of attempted and completed rape, lower rates of nonconsensual sexual contact, and significantly fewer PTSD symptoms among participants (Johnson & Cole, 2024). Self-defense courses have also been shown to improve risk recognition, boundary-setting, and self-efficacy, which are critical components of violence prevention (Katz, Fortune, & Naclerio, 2023; Sabri, Pitter, & Campbell, 2024).

In response to the lack of accessible research-based resources to address crime prevention and provide self-defense training, the *Empower Yourself Through Self-Defense* program was developed by Utah State University faculty. This program, developed in collaboration with martial arts professionals, provides participants with the essential knowledge and skills to better protect themselves and others against violent crime.

Purpose

The *Empower Yourself Through Self-Defense* is a comprehensive program designed to educate individuals of all genders and abilities about violent crime while teaching effective strategies for prevention, avoidance, and conflict resolution. Its primary goal is to equip participants with the knowledge to recognize potential threats,

de-escalate conflicts, and respond effectively. The program also emphasizes the development of practical self-defense skills to enhance participants' ability to protect themselves and others in the event of a physical attack.

Method

The Empower Yourself Through Self-Defense program was delivered as a 90-minute workshop that integrated an educational presentation with a hands-on training component to equip participants with fundamental self-defense skills. The program is based on a structured curriculum which includes a 49-slide PowerPoint presentation, a 39-page corresponding instructor guide with corresponding notes, and various handouts summarizing key content and additional resources, such as information on bullying prevention and domestic violence support services.

The curriculum serves as an introductory self-defense course for individuals aged 18 and older who are in generally healthy relationships. It does not address in-depth responses to domestic violence, as such situations are best handled by trained professionals. To ensure both safety and relevance, a domestic violence support professional reviewed the curriculum, while martial arts experts assessed the hands-on training component for effectiveness and safety.

Participants

Since its inception, the Empower Yourself Through Self-Defense program has provided in-person training to over 737 individuals through 90-minute sessions conducted at 26 locations across Utah. The sessions were taught by Extension professionals, who attended a comprehensive training held by the authors of the curriculum, one of whom has an extensive background in martial arts.

Participants self-selected to attend, and were recruited through collaborations with local organizations, as well as social media outreach, flyers, and county Extension newsletters. The majority of participants were female (84.98%), with 35.32% between the ages of 12 and 17. While the program was

originally designed for individuals 18 and older, the inclusion of participants aged 12 to 17 was part of a pilot initiative to assess its effectiveness for younger individuals. Most participants identified as Caucasian/White (92.64%), with smaller representations from other racial and ethnic groups. The demographic distribution of participants closely reflected the census data for the areas served.

Procedures

At the beginning of the workshop, Extension professionals delivered a 30-minute PowerPoint presentation covering key topics related to violent crime and personal safety. Topics included risk avoidance strategies, enhancing situational awareness, trusting one's instincts, and understanding the fight-flight-freeze response. Participants were also introduced to self-defense laws, including rights and legal limitations when defending themselves and others.

Following the educational presentation, participants engaged in a hands-on training session designed to prepare them for responding to physical confrontations, where participants had a chance to both observe and practice techniques. This session included instruction on utilizing sound and distance strategically, forming a proper fist to prevent self-injury, blocking punches, executing effective strikes and kicks, and escaping from an assailant's grasp.

Findings

The program was evaluated using a retrospective pre-post survey administered on paper at the conclusion of the workshop. Participants rated pre-workshop and post-workshop levels of self-defense knowledge, confidence, and perceived ability to protect themselves on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

A total of 242 individuals completed the evaluation across 26 workshops statewide. Participation was voluntary, and all surveys were completed anonymously.

The IRB approved evaluation consisted of two primary components, a quantitative assessment and a qualitative assessment

(see Table 1). The quantitative assessment (Q1-Q10) measured changes in self-defense confidence and knowledge, and a post-only question (Q11) that assessed intent to apply the knowledge (“I will use this information to protect myself and others”). Demographic data were also collected. The qualitative questions (Q12-15) captured key learnings, planned behavior changes, interest in additional training, and overall workshop feedback.

Quantitative Findings

Paired t-tests revealed statically significant improvements ($p < 0.001$) across all measured self-defense competencies (see Table 2). The largest gains were observed in participants’ confidence and knowledge, particularly in knowing what actions to take during a confrontation (Mean change = 1.37, $t = -21.70$, $p < 0.001$), ways to avoid becoming a victim (Mean change = 1.25, $t = -18.14$, $p < 0.001$, and identifying targets on the body to hurt or disable an attacker (Mean change = 1.23, $t = -17.34$, $p < 0.001$). These findings indicate that participants left the workshop better prepared to recognize threats and apply effective self-defense techniques. Additionally, participants strongly agreed that they would apply what they learned (Q11) ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 0.74$).

Age Group Differences

While the target audience of the curriculum is 18 and older, 35% of those who completed an evaluation were age 12-17. The largest gains in evaluation were observed in this group, likely due to lower baseline knowledge. Adults (18–54) exhibited consistent improvements, though less dramatic than younger participants. Older adults (65+) showed the smallest gains, particularly in physically demanding techniques, suggesting a need for modified training approaches.

Qualitative Findings

Qualitative responses indicated moderate interest in additional self-defense training, particularly in defense against weapons and advanced escape techniques. Participants also reported plans to adopt proactive safety behaviors and practice techniques regularly. Overall, feedback on the workshops was positive, with requests for longer or more frequent training sessions.

Open-ended responses underscored the program’s personal value, with participants especially appreciating the practical self-defense techniques including escape strategies and situational awareness. One elderly woman shared, “I learned that even though I am older and not physically able, I can defend myself.” Another participant stated, “The information and practice are empowering.” These responses highlight the program’s effectiveness in building confidence and equipping individuals with essential self-defense skills regardless of age or physical ability.

Discussion and Summary

Statistically significant improvements across all self-defense evaluation measures support the effectiveness of the Empower Yourself Through Self-Defense program. Similar to other research findings, (Brekin, 2008; Katz, et al., 2023; Sabri, et al, 2024, Thompson, 2023), the results of this study indicate that the Empower Yourself Through Self-Defense program may be an effective way to address concerns about personal safety and community wellbeing. Participants demonstrated increased knowledge, improved reflexes, better coordination, increased confidence, and a heightened ability to make decisions under pressure leading to reduced anxiety, helplessness, and fear.

The substantial gains in recognizing threats and applying self-defense techniques highlight the program’s success in teaching both prevention and response strategies, empowering individuals to protect themselves more effectively. Many expressed intentions to incorporate proactive safety behaviors into their daily routines and consistently practice the techniques learned. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with numerous participants advocating for extended or more frequent training sessions, underscoring the program’s impact and the demand for continued self-defense education.

By equipping individuals with practical self-defense skills, the program directly addresses concerns about personal safety and community well-being. Expanding this

program has the potential to contribute to a safer society by fostering awareness, prevention strategies, and proactive safety behaviors, which may reduce violent crime especially rape and sexual assault.

Future Directions

The program's success underscores its public value, as participants leave with a heightened sense of security and the ability to take control of their personal safety. Given the strong demand from individuals of a wide range of age and abilities, modifying and expanding the program could enhance its accessibility and impact. Future efforts could incorporate additional training on situational awareness, de-escalation tactics, and non-physical self-defense strategies to provide more comprehensive prevention tools. Incorporating alternative self-defense techniques that do not rely on physical strength would further ensure accessibility for individuals with physical limitations.

While most participants expressed confidence in applying the skills learned, many expressed a desire for additional skill development. Expanding training opportunities, such as multi-session workshops and specialized courses on weapon defense, ground defense, or workplace safety, could meet diverse learning needs. Additionally, long-term impact assessments would help evaluate skill retention and real-world application, ensuring that self-defense techniques remain effective over time. By continuously evolving and adapting, the program can further strengthen its role in promoting safety and empowerment within communities.

Implications for Extension

University Extension programs provide research-based education to the public, serving individuals of all ages, races, and genders. Committed to accessibility and inclusivity, these programs offer an excellent environment for learning basic self-defense skills. With a broad reach across both rural and urban areas, they ensure a structured, credible, and accessible setting where self-defense training can be taught effectively and safely.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that the Empower Yourself Through Self-Defense

program is an effective tool for enhancing individuals' knowledge and skills to protect themselves, address personal safety concerns, and build confidence. For more information about how to access the free Empower Yourself Through Self-Defense curriculum or how to become a trained instructor please contact Stephanie Carlson at stephanie.carlson@usu.edu.

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Tables

Table 1.
Evaluation Questions Pre-Post Survey Results

| Survey Question | |
|-----------------|--|
| Q1 | I know how to recognize dangerous situations |
| Q2 | I know actions I can take in the event of a confrontation |
| Q3 | I know ways to avoid becoming a victim |
| Q4 | I know targets on the body to hurt or disable an attacker |
| Q5 | I know parts of my body I can use as a weapon to defend myself |
| Q6 | I know how to prevent injury by blocks or avoiding blows |
| Q7 | I know how to use punches and kicks to hurt/disable an attacker |
| Q8 | I know ways to free myself from a hold |
| Q9 | I know how to protect myself if attacked |
| Q10 | I feel confident I can protect myself |
| Q11 | I will use this information to protect myself and others |
| Q12 | What motivated you to attend class |
| Q13 | List one or two things that you learned or found interesting from this activity |
| Q14 | What changes do you plan to make as a result of the information you have learned |
| Q15 | What other self-defense topics/skills would you like to learn |
| Q16 | Comments |

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Table 2.

Pre- and Post-Workshop Self-Defense Knowledge and Confidence Scores with Paired t-Test Results.

| Question | Pre-Event Mean | Post-Event Mean | Change | p-value | n | t-statistic |
|----------|----------------|-----------------|--------|-----------|-----|-------------|
| Q1 | 3.71 | 4.56 | 0.84 | p < 0.001 | 233 | -13.63 |
| Q2 | 3.09 | 4.46 | 1.37 | p < 0.001 | 228 | -21.7 |
| Q3 | 3.46 | 4.55 | 1.09 | p < 0.001 | 227 | -15.69 |
| Q4 | 3.41 | 4.66 | 1.25 | p < 0.001 | 226 | -18.13 |
| Q5 | 3.43 | 4.66 | 1.23 | p < 0.001 | 228 | -17.34 |
| Q6 | 2.88 | 4.46 | 1.58 | p < 0.001 | 226 | -21.25 |
| Q7 | 3.07 | 4.5 | 1.43 | p < 0.001 | 224 | -19.05 |
| Q8 | 2.87 | 4.44 | 1.57 | p < 0.001 | 224 | -20.06 |
| Q9 | 3.07 | 4.42 | 1.36 | p < 0.001 | 224 | -19.59 |
| Q10 | 3.03 | 4.28 | 1.25 | p < 0.001 | 210 | -16.85 |