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Worcester Youth Violence Prevention & Reduction Strategic Plan: Needs and Resources Analysis

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Contents

THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS REPORT
This report opens with a Call to Action and a discussion of general conditions in Worcester, leading into a statement of the youth and gang violence problem in the city. Following the methodology, we discuss toxic stress and resiliency as concepts that help to explain why conditions in Worcester give rise to youth and gang violence. These two concepts shape how we looked at a series of factors that seem to be driving youth violence. We organize the factors based on 'distance' from the young person in that we start with the Built Environment, and move to Employment, School, Family, and the Individual. We then discuss proven-risk young men—the individuals in the community most likely to be perpetrators or victims of gun or knife violence. Examining the characteristics of these men provides a lens to understand where systems have failed to prevent youth violence. Finally, we offer conclusions and recommendations for next steps.

Executive Summary

Most young people in Worcester are healthy, productive, and contribute to their community. They are on a path toward a secure and successful adulthood. However, there is a subset of young people—disproportionately Black and Latino males living in the city's most distressed neighborhoods—who enter a cycle of violence at an extremely early age. Our aim with this report is to provide Worcester residents and decision-makers with data and frameworks that will help the community prioritize areas for action and identify solutions to reduce youth and gang violence.   We acknowledge the excellent prevention work happening in the city and with this report we hope to shed light on the needs of the relatively small percentage of young people who are falling through the cracks of the prevention sector.   Key findings of this report include:

1. Community, school, family, and individual risk factors known to contribute to youth violence and gang involvement are quite prevalent in Worcester:
    - Family residential instability and economic stress
    - Youth and adult unemployment
    - Early childhood trauma
    - Generational cycles of gang and criminal involvement
    - Distressed built environment coupled with limited neighborhood recreational activities
    - School climate and punitive discipline policies
    - Youth mental health, substance abuse, and exposure to violence

2. Worcester has a strong prevention sector and emerging programs for proven-risk young men. However, the location and types of community resources and the location of violent crime hotspots have been persistent over time. Business as usual is insufficient to address gang and youth violence. Worcester needs a strategic, coordinated plan to addressing youth and gang violence because currently we have siloes instead of systems. We also need to build trust and respect between families and providers to counter families' isolation and disconnection from resources.

3. Given these findings, Worcester needs to prioritize the following possible directions for action:
    - A concerted focus on early childhood health, education, and overall wellbeing
    - Restorative Justice approaches in schools and the community that can divert young people from entering the juvenile justice system
    - Significant street outreach presence to interrupt violence and connect young people to resources
    - Effective community-based sanctions for those awaiting trial or on probation in the community
    - Effective reentry programs that support young men coming back into the community and reduce the likelihood of recidivism
    - Trauma-sensitive services and environments

There is potential for early identification and diversion at various stages of a young person's life.   Not taking action has costs not only for the victims and perpetrators of violence, but for our community as a whole. We look forward to the community conversations that will take place in response to this report. We hope to incorporate the lived experiences of residents to complement this analysis and help us move towards action. We are convinced that through dialogue and concerted collaborative work, we can transform these community conditions for the betterment of everyone who lives and works in Worcester.

Introduction

Call to Action

In Worcester serious youth violence occurs among a relatively small group of young men. Today's victim is tomorrow's perpetrator. This cycle of retaliatory violence raises very challenging questions. Why do some young people resort to violence? How do we stop this cycle?

While serious violence is concentrated among a small group, many of our youth face substantial risk factors for engaging in or falling victim to violence. Poverty, high youth unemployment, and neighborhood distress, as well as punitive school discipline policies, family stress, and early or ongoing exposure to traumatic events leaves many of our young people vulnerable.

- 1/3 of Worcester's youth live in poverty.

- There are over 700 people in the Worcester Police Department Gang Member data base.

- In a sample of 105 'Proven Risk' young men in Worcester—31% had contact with the police as a **victim** before the age of 13. Reasons for this contact include abuse, neglect, ambulance calls, and 'domestics'.

The city of Worcester has incredible capacity, both in its youth and the adults who dedicate their lives to working with and for them. Most of our young people are healthy and successful. Our city's excellent programs, services and supports have produced positive outcomes for many individuals, families, and neighborhoods. Yet the problem of youth violence in Worcester persists. Our current strategies are insufficient in the face of pronounced structural inequalities and multi-faceted vulnerabilities that leave some youth with few chances to succeed.

The time has come to address youth violence in Worcester comprehensively as a community. We have the opportunity to reframe and revisit the issue with a new sense of purpose, and a collective commitment to youth in Worcester. When young men and women in Worcester fall victim to violence, we fail as a community.

Manny's Story (Manny's story is a compilation created from the profiles of several proven risk men)

Manny started skipping school at age 13. He joined a gang at age 15. He caught his first gun charge at the age of 16. He went to jail at age 17 for attempted murder. But this set of life events must be understood in the context of another set of life events that occurred in his early childhood and home life.

When Manny was six, he wondered why he had to talk to his father on a phone if he was sitting right there on the other side of a piece of glass. When he was nine, he was scared when he saw his father hit his mother. When he was ten he was confused when he found his older brother smoking weed in the laundry room. When he was eleven he started acting out in school, hoping his mother would show him some attention. The attention he got was being hit and punished. It wasn't what he was looking for, but he kept acting up hoping his mother's response would be different the next time. Manny started and quit soccer, basketball, baseball, boxing, and school. No one ever encouraged him to stick with anything. When he was 15 he told his father he joined a gang—expecting he would be angry. On the contrary, he congratulated Manny for continuing the family legacy. And so the gang was the thing Manny 'stuck' with—until he went to jail, and realized that he had lost three years of his life in jail and most of his childhood to gangbanging.

There should have been moments when someone could have changed Manny's life course—but no one did. How can we prevent more young men like Manny from losing so much?

Worcester Context

Worcester is the second largest city in New England with 181,045 residents. It is the most racially and ethnically diverse community in the region: over 20% of its residents were born outside of the United States and over 30% speak a language other than English at home. Worcester is also a relatively young city, with 37% of residents under the age of 24. Similar to the state, Worcester has a gender breakdown of 51% female. The average family size is 3.14 people.

Table 1: Worcester Population Compared to the State of Massachusetts		
	Worcester	Massachusetts
Total Population	181,045	6,547,629
% Increase from 2000	4.6%	3.0%
Race		
White	59.6%	76.1%
Hispanic	20.9%	9.6%
African-American	10.2%	6.0%
Asian	6.0%	5.3%
Age		
19 years and younger	26.9%	24.8%
20-24 years old	10.5%	7.3%
25-44 years old	27.7%	26.5%
45-64 years old	23.2%	27.8%
65 years old and over	11.6%	13.7%
Gender	51% Female	51% Female
Foreign-born	20.6%	14.6%
Language other than English	33.6%	21.4%
Source: 2010 US Census Bureau; Greater Worcester 2012 Community Health Assessment		

Economic Conditions

Worcester's per capita income and median household income are both lower than Massachusetts'. Almost 20% of the population lives below the poverty level and the unemployment rate fluctuates between 8 and 12%. Currently, 31.5% of children and youth under the age of 18 live at or below the federal poverty level. The rate of youth living in poverty is on the rise; in 2005, 26.8% of children and youth lived in poverty.

Table 2: Worcester Economic Conditions Compared to the State of Massachusetts		
	Worcester	Massachusetts
Per capita income	$24,544	$35,051
Median household income	$45,846	$65,981
Under poverty level	19%	10.7%
Unemployment rate	10.3%	9.3%
Source: 2010 US Census Bureau; Greater Worcester 2012 Community Health Assessment		

Education

While the city is well known for its colleges and universities, Worcester has a slightly lower educational attainment than the rest of the state. Students in Worcester are more likely to speak English as a second language, be identified as high needs, and be disciplined with an out of school suspension than their peers in the Commonwealth. Dropout rates are double that of the state, while graduation rates are roughly 11.5% points lower.
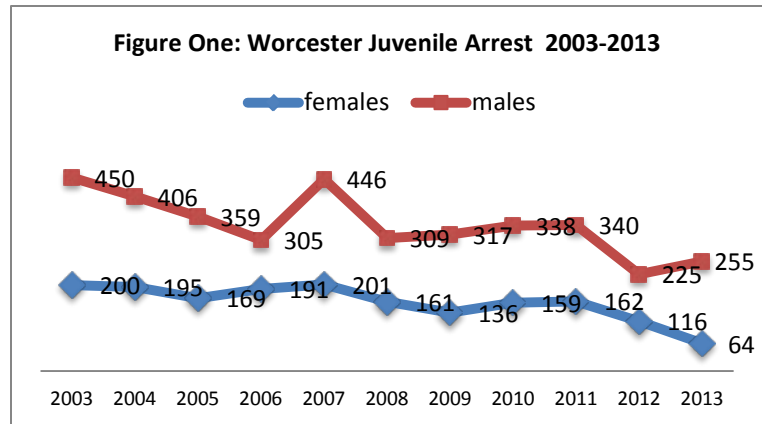
Table 3: Worcester Education Compared to the State of Massachusetts		
	Worcester	Massachusetts
Educational Attainment of Worcester residents		
High School Degree	83.9%	88.9%
Bachelor's Degree or higher	30.1%	38.7%
Select Characteristics of Worcester Public Schools		
Students enrolled	24,740	-
Hispanic enrollment	38.1%	16.4%
African-American enrollment	14.2%	8.6%
English as a Second Language	44.0%	17.3%
High needs	81.7%	47.9%
Out of School Suspension Rate	12.1%	5.4%
Dropout Rate	4.1%	2.5%
Graduation rate	72%	83.4%
Source: 2010 US Census Bureau; Greater Worcester 2012 Community Health Assessment; Massachusetts Department of Education; Latino Education Institute at Worcester State University		

Crime and Violence

The number of shooting deaths in Worcester has stayed relatively stable since 2002 and the homicide rate is low when compared to other cities of Worcester's population size. However, the violent crime rate in Worcester is more than double the rate across the state of Massachusetts. In 2011, the violent crime rate was 988 per 100,000, compared to the state's 428. Violent crime includes murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault (Worcester Community Health Assessment, 2012). There were 3336 property crimes per 100,000 for Worcester, compared to 2259 for the state. Property crime includes burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson (Worcester Community Health Assessment, 2012).

The Problem: Youth and Gang Violence in Worcester

Worcester has many resources and assets that serve as protective factors against youth violence and

gang involvement. The homicide rate is low, gang turf makes up only 2% of the city geographically, and the pool of gang victims and offenders is relatively small. Worcester's juvenile arrest rate has declined over the past five years (see Figure One). These impressive outcomes can in part be attributed to the many collaborative efforts taking place in the city to support youth development, including YouthConnect and the Youth
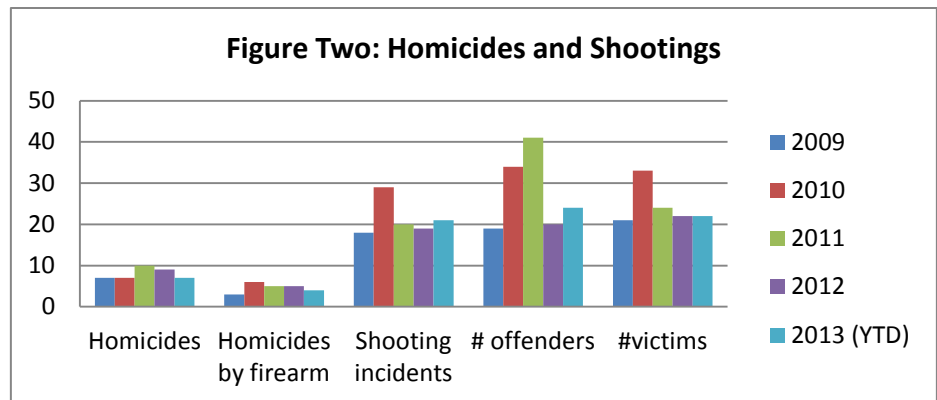
Figure One: Worcester Juvenile Arrest 2003-2013

females   males

Year	females	males
2003	200	450
2004	195	406
2005	169	359
2006	191	305
2007	201	446
2008	161	309
2009	136	317
2010	159	338
2011	162	340
2012	116	225
2013	64	255

Violence Prevention Coalition[1]. The Charles E. Shannon Initiative, and more recently the Safe and Successful Youth Initiative (SSYI), have introduced a collaborative approach to preventing, intervening in, and suppressing youth and young adult violence in Worcester. Community-based agencies, the schools, and the Worcester Police Department are sharing information and working together to good effect.

Worcester, however, has many proven risk factors for youth and gang violence. Nearly one-third of all youth in Worcester live in poverty; the percentage jumps to 44% for Hispanic youth. One-third of Worcester households are headed by a female, and the four-year graduation rate is lower than that of the state of Massachusetts. Roughly 27% of Worcester's students have limited English proficiency. Young people ages 16 to 24 account for 39% of the city's unemployed, despite comprising only 16% of the total population.   The Worcester Police Department estimates that there are currently 16 gangs in Worcester, with approximately 700 total members (Lopez, 2013). National research suggests that 94% of gang members join before the age of 15 and that 73% join voluntarily[2].

Homicides in Worcester consistently have been in the single digits over the past five years (see Figure

Two). The victims of shootings and homicides; however, have been disproportionately Black and Latino men between the ages of 17 and 27. Hundreds of young men between the ages of 12 and 24 have been arrested for robberies, aggravated assaults, and drug/narcotics

Figure Two: Homicides and Shootings

2009
2010
2011
2012
2013 (YTD)

violations (See Figure Three). In 2013, Latino males accounted for 55% of all juvenile male arrests and Latino females accounted for roughly 50% of all juvenile female arrests. Arrest rates for these groups continue to rise, as juvenile arrests for other demographic groups fall.

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Figure Three: Arrest Totals by Age in Three Crime Types in Worcester, MA, 2009-2012

Figure Three: Graph of the number of arrests, by age of arrestee, of males aged 12-24 in robberies, aggravated assaults, and drug/narcotics violations. Data pertains to Worcester, MA from 2009 to 2012.
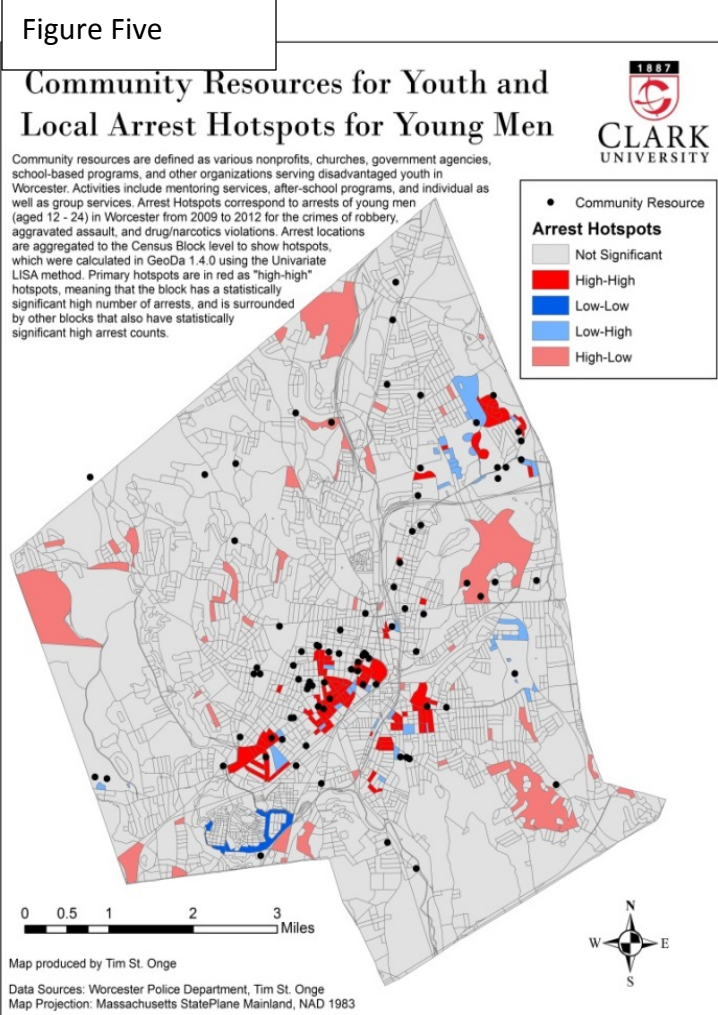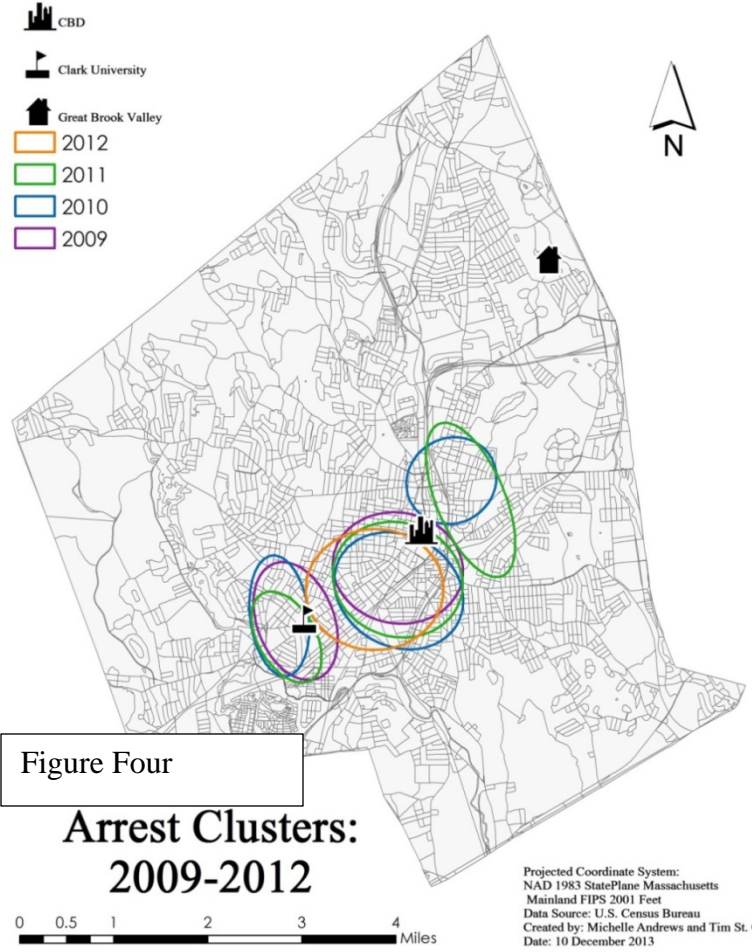
The Worcester Police Department's Crime Analysis Unit provides intelligence about locations and times of day of violent and gang-related crime. Certain parts of the city are more affected by youth crime and gang violence. Figure Four shows arrest clusters for 12-24 year olds in the city. The arrest types include robberies, aggravated assaults, and drug/narcotics violations from 2009-2012. The Central Business District and neighborhoods directly around it have been most affected by youth and young adult violent and drug-related crime for at least the past five years. Figure Five is a mapping of community resources for youth. What is interesting is that the resources are located in high need areas and likely explain why overall juvenile arrest rates are declining and the overall low number of homicides and shooting incidents. However, these maps also indicate new efforts will be needed if we want to be successful in reducing youth and gang violence in Worcester.

Figure Four

Arrest Clusters: 2009-2012

Figure Five

Community Resources for Youth and Local Arrest Hotspots for Young Men

Community resources are defined as various nonprofits, churches, government agencies, school-based programs, and other organizations serving disadvantaged youth in Worcester. Activities include mentoring services, after-school programs, and individual as well as group services. Arrest Hotspots correspond to arrests of young men (aged 12 - 24) in Worcester from 2009 to 2012 for the crimes of robbery, aggravated assault, and drug/narcotics violations. Arrest locations are aggregated to the Census Block level to show hotspots, which were calculated in GeoDa 1.4.0 using the Univariate LISA method. Primary hotspots are in red as "high-high" hotspots, meaning that the block has a statistically significant high number of arrests, and is surrounded by other blocks that also have statistically significant high arrest counts.

Map produced by Tim St. Onge

Data Sources: Worcester Police Department, Tim St. Onge
Map Projection: Massachusetts StatePlane Mainland, NAD 1983

Methodology

Using procedures recommended by the Office of Juvenile Delinquency Prevention (2009) to analyze the factors that drive youth violence in the city[1], we took the following steps to create this report:

1. We convened a leadership group of key decision-makers including individuals from the schools, the city, business, and current Shannon Advisory Committee and SSYI partners.

2. We used Howell's (2012)[3] framework to identify Worcester-specific youth violence risk factors across age and ecological domains, including individual, family, school, peer group, and neighborhood/community. We also segmented the youth population according to the following framework in order to focus our work:
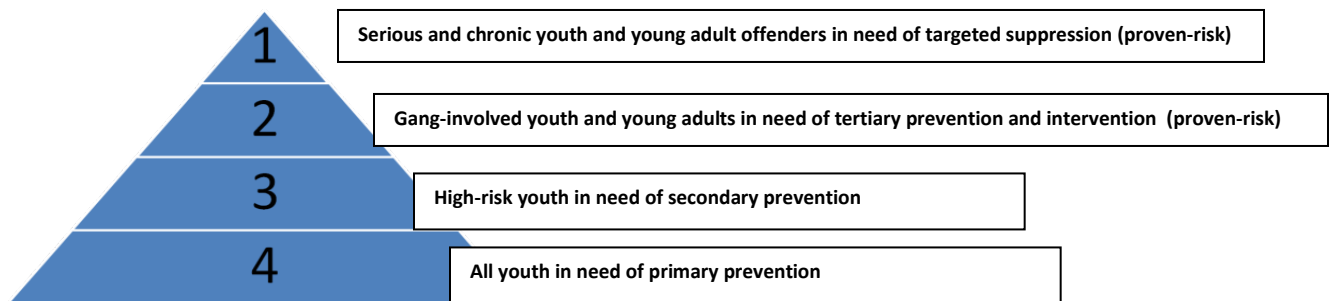
1	Serious and chronic youth and young adult offenders in need of targeted suppression (proven-risk)
2	Gang-involved youth and young adults in need of tertiary prevention and intervention (proven-risk)
3	High-risk youth in need of secondary prevention
4	All youth in need of primary prevention

Figure Six: Gang Prevention and Intervention Strategies based on Wyrick, 2006 cited in Howell 2010

3. We drew on available secondary data including the 2010 Census, the Worcester Community Health Assessment, etc. in order to determine areas that could potentially be driving violence in Worcester. We also inventoried potential protective factors relative to youth violence.

4. We piloted a Built Environment Inventory and Property Audit in a multi-block area in Main South to understand associations between the built environment, perceptions of safety, and actual violent crime. We used GIS to display these associations.

5. Based on secondary data and spatial analysis we identified factors that help to explain youth violence in Worcester.   We then conducted a literature review on how these factors contribute to violence and to learn about evidence-based or promising practices to address them. We conducted a limited number of key informant interviews to gain a local, qualitative understanding of these factors.

6. We analyzed the data to identify gaps in populations being served, gaps in protective factors relative to risk factors, and gaps between local practice and what the literature recommends.

7. We have identified additional data needs (including community perceptions and youth experiences; school climate and disciplinary procedures; and an assessment of adequacy of existing services).

8. We have formulated recommendations for convening community conversations to start strategic decision-making—including goal setting, strategy identification and prioritization, partnership development, establishment of measurable objectives, benchmarks, and timelines, and identification of funding opportunities.

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[1] This report was created through the efforts of two classes at Clark University under the guidance of Professors Laurie Ross and Ellen Foley. Ross and Foley are the Local Action Research Partner (LARP) for Worcester's Shannon and SSYI initiatives. The two classes involved were Ross's Community Needs and Resources Analysis seminar, and Foley's Senior Capstone seminar.

Toxic Stress and Resiliency: Two Concepts to Help Frame Youth Violence

Our review of the literature and Worcester's risk factors for youth and gang violence led us to conclude that early and ongoing exposure to toxic stress is a key component of youth vulnerability and involvement in violence. A toxic stress response arises due to the presence of strong, frequent, and prolonged stressors, such as early exposure to violence, experiencing abuse or neglect, living in poverty, having family members involved in criminal activity, and experiencing the effects of racism. Compounding these stressors is the lack of positive buffers in the form of supportive adult relationships.[4]

Some types of stress can have a positive outcome. Youth development is facilitated by exposure to relatively mild and controlled stressors or even more serious events such as the loss of a parent or a natural disaster, when an adult can help children learn from the experience.   Yet, when a young person has had to endure serious stressors over an extended period without much adult support, a toxic stress response can develop.   This kind of response can lead to permanent changes in the brain structure and functioning of the youth. The youth who remain in this kind of toxic stress cycle fail in the important process of, "…developing the capacity to make healthy adaptations to future adversity"[5]. And when adults in this "high-risk" group become parents,(as at least one-quarter of the proven risk men involved in SSYI are) they are also less likely to be able to provide the kind of stable and supportive relationships that their own children need in order to develop positive stress responses. This perpetuates a cycle of early childhood exposure to toxic stress that literally changes the physiological development of a young person.

While the long-term outcome seems bleak for youth who have developed a toxic stress response, there is hope. The toxic stress response can be tempered by trauma-sensitive and resiliency-promoting settings[6]. Resilience is understood to be a "a dynamic developmental process of positive adaptation that occurs in the context of risk(s)"[7]. Instead of working solely to eradicate structural sources of risk, such as poverty and racism, Jain and Cohen (2013) argue for the development of assets and protective factors to help youth navigate and grow from the serious, persistent stressors in their environments. A primary protective factor is the presence of a supportive caring adult.

Young people who develop a toxic stress response due to the early traumas in their lives are at high risk to use violence as a coping strategy. A resiliency framework suggests that positive outcomes are possible even in the context of serious adversity when adequate protective factors are present. In this study of youth and gang violence in Worcester we attempt to view risk and protective factors from both toxic stress and resiliency perspectives. More specifically, our analysis of Worcester's Built Environment; Employment Sector; School Climate; Family Structure and Violence History; Individual Youth Risk factors; and Proven Risk Population connects toxic stress and resilience to youth violence. Each section of this report provides an overview from the literature, a statistical review of the situation in Worcester, a summary of assets and protective factors in each domain, and a brief discussion of what more needs to be done. We present the problem of youth and gang violence in this way so that we can **prevent** youth from developing a toxic stress response through the **intentional strengthening of protective factors** and **transforming the structures that are driving violence** in the city.

Structural Violence

- Income inequality and poverty
- Racism
- Educational attainment
- Unemployment (youth and adult)
- Gender norms

Figure Seven: Conceptual Map of Youth and Gang Violence in Worcester

This figure demonstrates the embedded nature of the contexts that give rise to youth and gang violence in Worcester. We aim to show that addressing only the behaviors of proven risk or high risk youth is an insufficient response to youth and gang violence.

Geography of Youth and Gang Violence

- Drug availability/use
- Gun availability
- Availability and accessibility of community programs
- Built environment
- Housing quality, availability, policies
- Policing and court practices
- Job availability

Family

- Family structure
- Experience and exposure to violence
- Police/Criminal justice system involvement
- Drug use/exposure
- Education level
- Employment status
- Gender norms
- Income level
- Housing

School

- Resources/Programs
- Performance level
- Disciplinary policies/out of school suspensions
- Attendance rate
- High % ELL, SPED, Free/Reduced lunch
- School culture/environment
- Drug use and availability
- Presence of weapons

Individual

- Age
- Intelligence
- Gender
- Race/ethnicity
- Mental health/trauma history
- Attitudes toward violence
- Risk behaviors
- Peer group
- Employment/ Employability
- Resilience
- Motivation
- Engagement in out- of-school activities
- Police history

Youth and Gang Violence
- Gang involved
- Proven risk

Issues and Resources

Built Environment

Why look at the Built Environment?
Youth and gang violence has a spatial dimension. Violent acts are more likely to take place in certain locations and not others. This approach to understanding crime, which is often called "situational crime prevention," emphasizes that criminal activities are linked to specific characteristics of a place, including the extent to which an area is monitored by its residents and the presence of other forms of social disorder such as drugs, prostitution, etc[8].

The built environment influences the community's perception of a place. How a community member perceives a location ultimately affects the activity that happens there, including youth and gang violence. Specifically, physical disorder sends a message of weak social control and encourages social disorder and crime. Physical features of the built environment such as high-rise buildings, vacant buildings and lots, poorly lit public spaces reduce residents' and visitors' social control over the community[9]. Youth gangs are more likely to congregate in areas with low social control. The built environment not only influences individuals' decisions to offend via their perception of the likelihood of being caught, but it also affects perceptions of safety and crime for community members. If community members perceive an area to be unsafe, they are less likely to use or monitor that space, perpetuating the low utilization and social control of public spaces.

Public space and the built environment of a community should be intentionally designed to facilitate positive social behavior, encourage human interaction, and discourage youth and gang violence. The following factors were identified in the literature as high priorities in this regard: property condition, public infrastructure such as lighting and sidewalks, and overall neighborhood maintenance and aesthetics. The condition of properties is one of the most obvious elements of the built environment that affects the perception of a community. A poorly maintained property decreases the perception of guardianship and increases the perception that crime is tolerated. For example, abandoned buildings in economically distressed neighborhoods have been found to encourage crime[10]. Tita et al have found that high vacancy rates and signs of abandonment, such as boarded up windows, signal both physical and social abandonment of an area. These become spaces where gang members hang out. In addition, outdoor lighting has been shown to reduce levels of perceived risk and increase the perception of safety, as well as discourages illicit or illegal activity due to high visibility. Furthermore, a highly walkable community encourages people to use public space and improves the perception of community use and ownership. The compilation of this research indicates that the built environment has an effect on the presence/ absence of youth and gang violence and supports a need to include strategic built environment improvements as a part of a larger, comprehensive plan.

What do we know?
- Figure Four on page 8 showed that the Main South area of Worcester has persistently been a site for high numbers of youth and young adult arrests for aggravated assaults, robberies, and drug violations.

- A sample study focusing on the built environment in a small area in Main South was analyzed using property and street inventory tools.
- Spatial analysis was used to determine if there are correlations between property and neighborhood conditions and crime. The preliminary results suggest that areas with properties rated "excellent" or "good" have a smaller concentration of crime whereas areas with properties rated "poor" or "fair" have a higher concentration of crime (see Figure Eight).
- Preliminary results of this small pilot suggest there is a correlation between the built environment and crime and it would be important to analyze the built environment at identified hot spots for youth and gang violence in the city.

What is being done?

Worcester has been very successful at revitalizing blocks and neighborhoods through targeted investments and built environment improvements. Studies have shown that in areas where there has been comprehensive built environment improvement efforts, such as the Kilby-Gardner-Hammond Project, there have been reductions in crime. The city has five non-profit community-based development agencies and a large pool of private developers that have the capacity and experience to facilitate this type of work.

What else is needed?

To date, the built environment improvements in the city are not designed or implemented with thought to youth and gang violence. An important next step would entail mapping the hot spot locations of youth and gang violence and analyzing the built environment in those areas using the tools developed for the Main South pilot. Community-based agencies, developers, and youth in those areas should be engaged in the creation of a built-environment improvement strategy. A key element of such a strategy would have to guard against simply displacing problems to another neighborhood.

Property Condition and Crime Locations In Worcester Main South

Employment

Why look at employment?

Financial insecurity can be a source of toxic stress for young people and families, particularly out of school youth and young parents. A positive first job experience can lead to the development of key skills and is crucial in leveraging future employment, often leading to higher lifetime earnings. There is a correlation between youth employment and adult employment; the more a teen works, the more likely s/he is to work as an adult. There is also a correlation between youth and adult wages. Teens who work are more likely to receive higher wages over their lifetime than teens who do not work.[11] In a national longitudinal study, it was found that on average, youth who had worked 20 hours per week during their senior year of high school had 22% higher earnings than their peers who did not have jobs.[12] Harrington and Snyder also draw connections between employment and broader benefits, saying "In short, exposure to work at a young age is thought to contribute to the focus and direction young people need to make decisions about their future life pathways."

Unemployment for adults is a contributing factor to poverty, a larger force behind gang violence. Adult unemployment translates to a more severe lack of jobs for young people, as adults are taking jobs that once were typically youth jobs. Many of our young people lack the connections and skills to obtain and keep a first job, putting them perpetually behind their peers and creating a stressful environment for both parents and children. This highlights the importance for young people to receive training and education on professional behavior and job skills in order to make them competitive in today's economy. For youth who are struggling with other issues such as transportation, housing, or childcare, this need is even greater.

What do we know?
- Worcester's unemployment rate fluctuates between 8 – 12%.
- In the Main South neighborhood of Worcester, the site of many violence and crime hotspots, 56% of the residents between the ages of 18 and 24 are classified as unemployed or outside of the labor force.[13] Similar trends are found in other gang and youth violence hot spot neighborhoods in the city, such as Union Hill.[14]
- In 2012, only 27% of working-age teens in Massachusetts were employed.[15]
  - White, non-Hispanic youth are more likely to work than others; in 2010 in Massachusetts, 23-25% of black, Asian, and Hispanic teens worked versus 36% of white, non-Hispanic youth.
  - In 2010 only 6 to 7% of low-income black and Hispanic youth worked in Massachusetts.
  - Northeastern University professor Andrew Sum (2008) reported that "Job losses for teens the past eight years have been significant, but they have been especially severe for a few groups. Low income Black and Hispanic teens face the equivalent of a Great Depression" (p. 2).
- Fewer than 30% of Massachusetts high school students have participated in structured career development opportunities.[16]

What are we doing?
- Local youth employment opportunities can be broadly divided into two major categories: private sector job opportunities available to teens and subsidized employment or employment programs targeted towards at-risk youth.
- Existing summer subsidized employment opportunities are mainly coordinated by Worcester Community Action Council on behalf of the Central MA Workforce Investment Board, which oversees the state YouthWorks program locally. In order to access this funding, the city must

leverage a local cash match which is done through private sector partners including UMass Memorial Healthcare Building Brighter Futures with Youth Program, Worcester Housing Authority, the Boys and Girls Club, YouthNet, and the Regional Environmental Council.[17] Worcester consistently exceeds minimum state requirements for utilizing the funds primarily for youth wages with an average of 80% of all funds going directly to youth.

- State funding enabled 262 youth age 14-21 to be employed at a variety of sites in Worcester, Webster, and Southbridge in 2012. In addition to meeting income eligibility requirements in the form of free or reduced lunch, priority is given to youth who demonstrate at least one of three other risk factors: court involved, DYS or foster care, or homeless. This year a focus was placed on STEM career placements and a goal of 25% of youth being new to the program.[18]
- While the sites vary widely in number of youth, type of job, and size of host organization, there is an overarching support structure which requires all youth to participate in ten hours of pre-employment training, utilize a work-based learning plan with the support of adult supervisors, provides for weekly site visits to ensure youth are being supervised adequately, and payroll services through the WCAC.
- In addition to YouthWorks, the city has also leveraged funds through MassPort to offer employment through the Parks Steward program.
- Adult staff support for youth career counseling services is offered through state funding from the School to Career budget line item.
- Connecting Activities programming focuses on career readiness with trainings for educators on incorporating job readiness into their curricula.
- Private sector partnerships to place at-risk youth are leveraged through individual career services centers, like the Job and Education Center, and more broadly through the Job1 Coalition, organized by the WIB in order to attract more private sector businesses to hire youth.

What else is needed?
- We need to inventory local private sector job opportunities. This is challenging, however, because roughly 80% of Worcester's private employment opportunities are in the city's many small businesses.
- Challenges and barriers discussed in key informant interviews included:
    - **A lack of opportunities to train youth in the specialized skills** needed in the sectors which are experiencing the most growth.
    - **A lack of access to reliable transportation for the jobs which are available**.
    - **The WIB is not able to solicit funds as a city-staffed agency**, making it difficult for them to leverage the resources to increase local opportunities, particularly for private sector jobs.
    - There is a **tension between the desire to cultivate private sector partnerships for the purpose of providing long term employment for youth versus the enhancing the capacity of community organizations to provide the case management and transitional support needed for the most vulnerable youth populations**. Limited funding often means choosing between these two types of opportunities.

School Climate

Why look at schools?

Schools are one of the most influential contexts for young people. They have a tremendous capacity to support youth's development of resiliency through the provision of protective factors. Support for academic success, helpful peer groups, caring relationships with trusting adults, and direct connections to mental health services are just a few of the potential protective factors that can be present in our schools. Unfortunately, schools can also trigger a toxic stress response in young people. Features of the school environment can be challenging for some young people and punitive disciplinary policies can exacerbate youth stress and lead them unnecessarily into the juvenile justice system.

Punitive disciplinary actions and zero-tolerance policies have been linked to increased likelihood of dropping out of school and engaging in criminal behavior—also known as the 'school to prison pipeline'.[19] Suspensions have been found to be an indicator of whether a child will drop out of school and even if they will be incarcerated.[20] Nationwide, school systems continue to uphold zero-tolerance discipline policies because they want to ensure the safety of students, teachers, and staff; however the negative impacts of these policies must be considered. [21] In August 2012, the Massachusetts Legislature passed Chapter 222 of the Acts of 2012 *An Act relative to student access to educational services and exclusion from school*. This new law aims to curb school exclusions as a primary disciplinary tool.

Students of color are at a much higher risk to be the subjects of these zero-tolerance disciplinary actions, perhaps making them more likely to engage in delinquent behavior later in life. Scholars agree there is an evident "racial discipline gap," first noted in the 1970's and widening since that time. There has been a substantial increase in the use of suspension for students of all races in recent decades; however, these rates have at least doubled for all non-whites."[22] African American students have been targeted for disciplinary action in the greatest number and with greater severity than their peers.[23]

Out-of-school suspensions (OSS) can be an effective disciplinary practice under certain circumstances. However, it must be acknowledged that out of school suspensions are also linked with higher risk for grade retention, dropping out, and involvement with the juvenile justice system, even when controlling for race, poverty, and school characteristics.[24] This supports the argument that frequent suspension is a major risk factor for youth involvement in gangs and violence.

What do we know?

- The Worcester student population is predominantly Latino, with 38.4% Latino students, 34.6% white, 13.6% African American, 8.1% Asian 3.3 multi-race (non-white)[25]
- Worcester students struggle to a greater extent than other students across the Commonwealth on all student indicators:[26]

Indicator	Worcester	Massachusetts
Drop-Out Rate	4.1%	2.5%
Attendance Rate	94.4%	94.9%
Average Days Absent	9.4	8.7
In-School Suspensions	6.8%	3.4%
Retention Rate	3.3%	1.9%

Worcester school students have greater social and economic needs than students in the rest of the state, and are more likely to be labeled high needs and have disabilities[27]:

Factor	Worcester	Massachusetts
First Language Not English	44%	17.3%
English Language Learners	34.3%	7.7%
Low-Income	73.1%	37%
Receive Free Lunch	68.8%	32.1%
Receive Reduced Lunch	6.3%	4.9%
Disabilities	20.7%	17%

- Over 700 out-of-school suspensions were issued to students in preschool through 3rd grade in 2011-2012. The most common reasons for suspensions in early grades include: physical assault on a student, disruption of school, physical assault on an employee, and repeated school violations.
- There appears to be a correlation between the socio-demographics of a school and its use of OSS (see Figure Nine).
- Elementary schools with high out-of-school suspension rates are also located in neighborhoods with very high numbers of arrests of males 11-24 for crimes such as robberies, aggravated assaults, drugs, and property crimes (see Figure Ten). Many young people in our city are living in toxic stress inducing environments, which could help to explain some of the student behaviors that result in suspensions in early grades.

We can see from the Worcester data that students, especially Latino students, are at high risk for suspension. This is further compounded by evidence that many of the students being suspended have disabilities and are low-income. As we have learned, there is compelling evidence throughout the literature that links suspension and other zero-tolerance disciplinary actions with delinquent behavior.
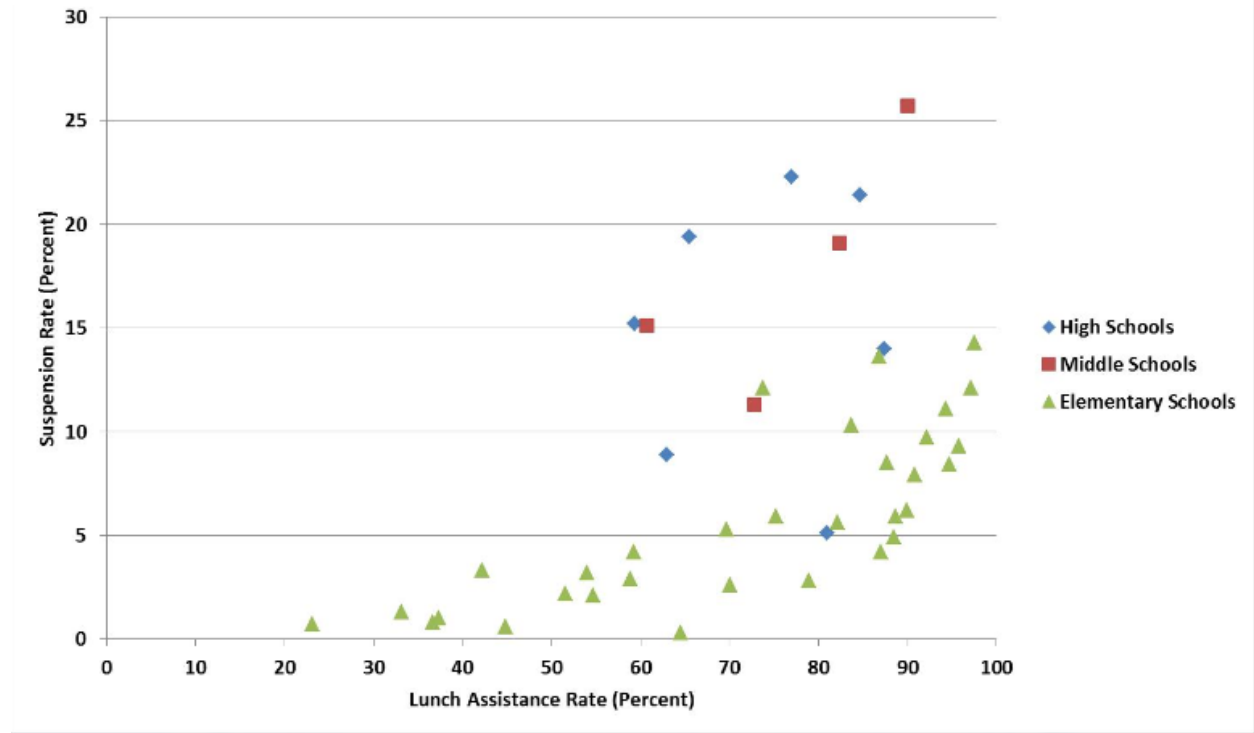
What is being done?
- Worcester school administration is correctly concerned about maintaining a safe environment for students, faculty and staff.
- Many of the schools have adopted positive and supportive disciplinary programs such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). The Worcester Public Schools is actively studying principles of trauma-sensitive schools to understand how this paradigm shift could be implemented.
- The Worcester Education Collaborative with the Latino Education Institute in cooperation with the Worcester Public Schools is studying out of school suspensions and how current disciplinary practices are affecting Worcester's students.

What else is needed?
- WPS may want to look into how a restorative justice model could enhance a sense of community in the schools and reduce negative outcomes of out of school suspensions.
- We need to understand more about the disciplinary practices in schools that have high socio-demographic risk factors and low out of school suspension rates to see how they may be models for the rest of the District.

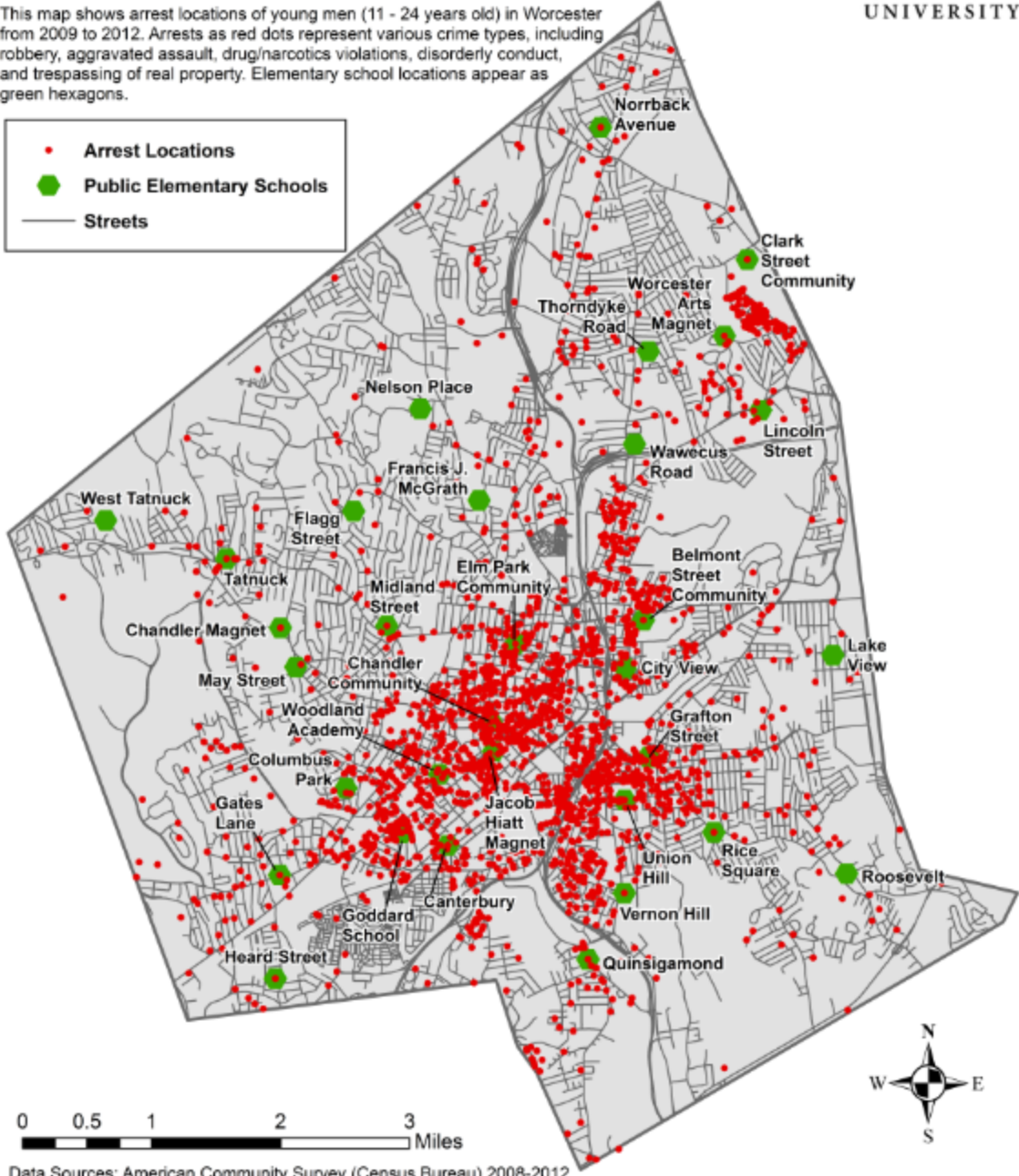Figure Nine: **Suspensions and Lunch Assistance in Worcester Public Schools**

Arrest Locations and Elementary Schools in Worcester, 2009 - 2012

This map shows arrest locations of young men (11 - 24 years old) in Worcester from 2009 to 2012. Arrests as red dots represent various crime types, including robbery, aggravated assault, drug/narcotics violations, disorderly conduct, and trespassing of real property. Elementary school locations appear as green hexagons.

Legend:
- Arrest Locations
- Public Elementary Schools
- Streets

Norrback Avenue
Clark Street Community
Worcester Arts Magnet
Thorndyke Road
Nelson Place
Lincoln Street
Wawecus Road
Francis J. McGrath
West Tatnuck
Flagg Street
Belmont Street Community
Elm Park Community
Tatnuck
Midland Street
Lake View
Chandler Magnet
Chandler Community
City View
May Street
Woodland Academy
Grafton Street
Columbus Park
Gates Lane
Jacob Hiatt Magnet
Union Hill
Rice Square
Roosevelt
Canterbury
Vernon Hill
Goddard School
Heard Street
Quinsigamond

0 0.5 1 2 3 Miles

Data Sources: American Community Survey (Census Bureau) 2008-2012
Map Projection: Massachusetts StatePlane Mainland, NAD 1983

Map produced by Tim St. Onge

Family Factors

Why look at families?

Children are being raised in a variety of family environments in Worcester, including one parent families, two parent families, with grandparents or other family members, by young parents, and non-familial guardians. No family type is immune from contributing to a toxic stress response. Likewise, all family types have the potential to act as a nurturing force working to help youth cope with stressors and develop resiliency.

Family instability can have negative effects on children and can lead to a child's inability to form healthy and lasting connections[28]. Early exposure to violence, family incarceration, and negative attitudes toward law enforcement contribute to a higher probability of children becoming involved with criminal activity. The effect of early exposure to violence has lifelong effects – social, psychological, tolerance for violent relationships, low self-esteem, depression, emotional instability that can lead to high-risk behavior[29]. Identified in the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, more than half of youth with reports of maltreatment are at risk of grade repetition, substance abuse, delinquency, truancy, or pregnancy[30].

In addition to family structure and life experiences, family economic factors such as education, income, and housing stability can largely shape a youth's likelihood of engaging in violent and gang activities. One major risk factor is a lack of economic opportunity, which is in part determined by a person's level of educational attainment. Lower levels of educational attainment lead to limited job opportunities. Prolonged stress, periods of unemployment, and poverty can jeopardize a parent's ability to provide positive, consistent guidance to children. "When you have a single-parent household and the mother has to work two and three jobs to provide for those children, it almost eliminates any parental supervision at all" [31].

The presence of role models has significant impact on youth development and engagement with violent crime. Youth whose only role models are engaged in criminal activities are more prone to engage in such activity themselves. Mike Earielo, an original member of Worcester's Kilby Street Gang, reported "my father was a drug addict, always in jail. When I was growing up, my role models were the drug dealers and the pimps and the hustlers out on the street" (Bird Jr. 2013). Families can play a role in the generational perpetuation of a toxic stress response.

What do we know?

Family Structure (Data from 2010 Census)

- One third of households in Worcester have children under the age of 18.
- In Worcester, 2.5% of households are headed by men with no female partner present and with children under 18 years of age.
- Nearly eleven percent (10.9) of households are headed by women, with no male partner present, and have children under 18 years of age.
- The 2010 Census estimates that close to 1000 grandparents are solely responsible for raising their grandchildren.

Family Economic Risk Factors (Data from 2010 Census unless otherwise indicated)

- 16% of families live below the poverty line in Worcester
    - 26% of families with children below the age of 18 live in poverty
    - 29% of families with children under 5 live in poverty
    - 5% of married couple families live in poverty
    - 36% of families with a female householder (no husband present) live in poverty
    - **62% of female householder families with children under 5 live in poverty**
- Worcester's educational attainment is lower than the state across the board: bachelor's degree or higher: 30.1% (8.6% less than MA). (City-data Worcester, MA).
- 44.5% of housing units in Worcester are owner-occupied. In Main South, one of the youth and gang violence hot spots, the owner occupancy rate is as low as 16% (Census 2010). In Union Hill, another violence hot spot, the owner occupancy rate is 30.6% (Union Hill Health Impact Study).
- The majority of the population in Worcester rents their housing.
    - Roughly 42% of renters pay more than 35% of their income on rent. This is an indicator of economic distress.

Families, Violence, and Abuse
- According to Department of Children & Families in the Worcester East & West Area offices in 2012:
    - Of the close to 5,000 51A reports filed in the Worcester East and West area offices, roughly 47% were screened in for investigation and roughly 18% were screened in for an initial assessment[32].
        - Between the two Worcester area offices, 38% to 51% of the time there was concern found from the initial assessment
        - Statewide, concern is found in 45% of the cases, putting Worcester in the mid to higher range for substantiated abuse and neglect cases.
    - There are currently 3,056 open cases concerning children under the age of 18 (East: 1579; West: 1477). These account for roughly 22% of the cases in the whole Western DCF region (spans from Central MA to the western most part of the state).[33]
    - In 2012, there were 614 children under the age of 18 in a foster home (East: 318; West: 296)
- In 2011, there was a total of 3,041 domestic violence calls received. Of those calls, 968 ended in an arrest. In 2011, Worcester confirmed a total of 3 domestic homicides[34].

Domestic Activity	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Calls for Service	2820	3635	4075	3321	3041
Arrests	723	891	994	867	968
Protection/ex parte/temporary restraining orders issued	1134	1196	1319	1375	1228
Confirmed Domestic Homicides	2	1	2	0	3
TOTAL	4679	5723	6390	5563	5240

What is being done?

Risk Factor	Resources
Family Structure/change in caretaker	• Coordinated Family and Community Engagement Programs (CFCE) • Parent / Professional Advocacy League (PAL) • Parents Apart – The Divorce Center • Family Services
Child Abuse	• Child & Family Services • Department of Children & Families (DCF) • Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (MSPCC)
Education	• Adult Basic Education/ESOL • Literacy Volunteers of Greater Worcester
Income	• Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) • Worcester Community Action Council IDA Program
Housing	• Section 8 program • Homeowner's HOPE of the Homeownership Preservation Foundation

WHAT ELSE IS NEEDED?

- We need to determine the number of child witnesses involved in domestic violence incidences, and develop more effective responses to support child witnesses, including protocols to communicate information with schools while respecting confidentiality.
- Determine if there are a significant number of children placed in foster care that later became involved in gangs.
- Overall, this data indicates many families are in extreme distress. More is needed to support young families, especially those headed by a single parent.
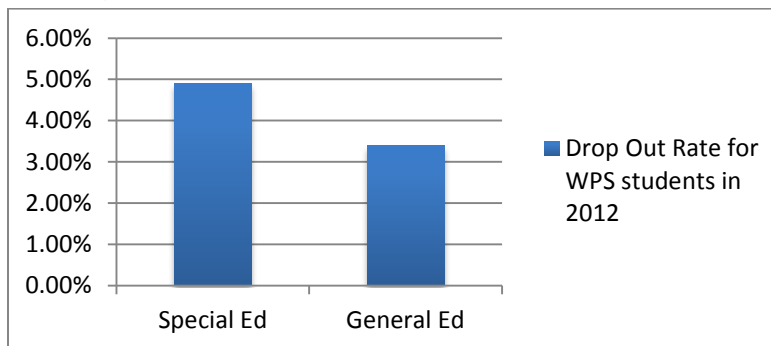
Individual Risk Factors

In this section, we explore three individual level risk factors—mental health, substance abuse, and exposure to violence in the school or community—that are associated with a greater likelihood of a young person engaging in youth or gang violence.

Mental Health

Seventy percent of Massachusetts children who need mental health services do not receive them[35]. Homeless youth, GLBTQ youth, youth in foster care and the juvenile justice system, youth of color and low-income youth are least likely to get mental health care (Access to Mental Health Care, 2013). Nearly 50% of students with a mental health disorder drop out of school, the highest dropout rate of any disability group[36]. Research shows that there is a link between traumatic events and mental health issues, specifically depression, anxiety and behavioral symptoms. Mental and behavioral health challenges, in particular ADHD, are related to increased violent activity and even gang involvement in adolescence[37]. Youth exhibiting conduct disorders, operational defiant disorders, and behavioral problems in childhood have a significantly higher risk for youth violence and youth gang involvement[38].

What do we know about youth mental health in Worcester?

- The dropout rate for "special education" students (including those with diagnosed ADHD and conduct disorders) is 4.9%-- higher than the 3.4% dropout rate for general education students (DESE 2013).

- The 2011 Worcester Youth Point in Time Survey found that 30% of youth respondents reported that youth need better access to mental health resources and drug and alcohol counseling in Worcester.
- Approximately 2.6% of youth in Worcester regional schools attempted suicide and were treated by a doctor or nurse. This is a greater percent than the national rate of 1.9% (Worcester Youth Health Survey, 2011).
- Only 19.2% of residents in the greater Worcester community who were surveyed were very satisfied with the availability of counseling and mental health services for youth. Conversely, 39% were not at all satisfied with the availability of youth mental health and counseling service (Community Health Assessment, 2012).

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse in a young person's life is a result of various risk factors and is simultaneously a risk factor itself for future harmful decisions. Substance abuse has a community-wide effect that is concentrated in particular regions along socio-demographic lines. The risk of violence in late

adolescence increases when individuals take part in drug dealing and gang membership in late childhood[39].

What do we know about youth substance abuse in Worcester?

- In 2011, 18.8% of Worcester area high school students reported to binge-drinking in the past 30 days; 23.4% reported having smoked marijuana. Both of these rates of substance use are lower than the state of Massachusetts as a whole (24.5% and 27.1% respectively) (Worcester Youth Health Survey, 2011).
- In 2011 the percent of Worcester high school students reporting to have used non-prescribed prescription drugs increased with age from 10.5% of 9th graders to 18.6% of 12th graders (Community Health Assessment 2012).
- Over 7% of high school juniors and seniors students in the Worcester region report using opioids; 4.9% reported having used heroin in their lives. Worcester youth heroin use is more than double that of the state as a whole (Worcester Youth Health Survey, 2011).
- Substance abuse was identified by Worcester residents in the Community Health Assessment as a growing issue and a major concern. Existing services fail to address community needs, most notably among youth, low-income, and refugee and immigrant populations.
- While secondary and tertiary treatment programs focus on substance abuse issues, the demand for treatment exceeds the number of providers.
- Residents articulated the interrelatedness of substance abuse and mental health and the lack of services in the area that realize this and provide services on the entire treatment spectrum.

Exposure to Violence

Research reveals the dramatic negative effects that exposure to violence has on individuals. Exposure to violence is a major risk factor for later delinquency and potential gang involvement. Communities of color and low income communities are more likely to be exposed to violence than other populations. Existing research determines that high levels of exposure to violence drastically increase a youth's risk for having psychological, social, academic, and physical challenges, along with their risk for committing violent acts. It has also been shown that reducing youth exposure to violence, drug use and crime has a positive influence on youth development.[40]

What do we know about exposure to violence in Worcester?

- In Massachusetts, 29% of high school students reported having participated in a fight within the past year, with 3% of those students reporting to have been injured and received medical treatment because of the fight (MA Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2011).
- 11.9% of Worcester area high school students reported that they carried a weapon to school (Worcester Youth Health Survey, 2011).
- Roughly 1 in 5 Worcester area high school students indicated that they have been bullied at school and 17% of Worcester area high school students surveyed were victims of electronic bullying (Worcester Youth Health Survey, 2011).

Proven-Risk Men in Worcester

As part of the Safe and Successful Youth Initiative (SSYI), Worcester identified proven-risk young men (ages 14-24). Proven-risk men are those who are at high risk for becoming perpetrators or victims of gun and gang related violence. The Worcester Police Department created this list from several sources including Juvenile Probation, WPD Gang Member List, Worcester Public Schools School Protocol list, DYS, and the WPD Violent Crime Victim/Suspect list.   Over 200 individuals were identified—the majority of whom were on more than one of these lists. These names were then vetted by community partners and 105 young men were selected to participate in SSYI. This program uses street outreach to connect the young men and their families with a full continuum of services such as trauma-informed case management, employment, education and health care. Examining these young men's history relative to education, employment, crime, and to the extent possible trauma, provides a focused lens to examine the drivers of youth violence in Worcester.

Intakes have been completed with 83 individuals on the list (roughly 78%). 18% of the men are in prison or the Worcester House of Corrections. 40% of them are in the community and are engaging with the SSYI outreach workers and/or case managers. 29% have been intaked, but are not engaged in service. 15% of men on the list are in the community, but outreach workers have not been able to connect with them to complete the intake and start services.

What do we know?
- 95% of the men who have been intaked are Black, Latino, or Multiracial.
- The men on the list have had substantial police contact. The nature of their criminal activity becomes increasingly violent as they get older.
    - These 105 individuals have generated over 1000 total arrests in Worcester
        - Several individuals have had over 20 arrests each
    - After Warrant arrests, the most common reasons for arrest were:
        - Disorderly Conduct
        - Disturbing the Peace
        - Resisting Arrest
        - Trespassing
        - Assault and Battery (with and without weapons)
        - Drug violations
        - Motor vehicle related violations
        - Gun related charges
    - 50 arrests occurred before the participant was 14. The most common reasons participants under 14 were arrested that are unique to this age group include:
        - Malicious Destruction of Property +$250
        - Shoplifting by Asportation
        - Disturbing Public Assembly
    - 168 arrests occurred for 20+ year olds. The most common reasons participants 20 and over were arrested that are unique to this age group include:
        - Firearm/Ammo Without FID Card, Possess
        - Fail to Stop for Police
        - Firearm, Carry Without License Loaded
        - Firearm, Carry Without License
        - Operating after License Susp/Rev
        - Stop for Stop Sign or Flashing Red Light, Fail to
        - Intimidate Witness

- Many of the men on the list have struggled with school due to challenges with learning and/or behavior:
  - 71% of the intaked men need educational support
  - Roughly half of the participants were engaged in some sort of education program at intake. The majority that were in an education program were in an alternative school or DYS facility
  - For those participants not in school, the most common reason for leaving school without a degree is that they got locked up or caught a serious charge
  - A minority of participants had a high school degree or a GED prior to SSYI
- The majority of the men on the list lack a consistent employment record:
  - 85% of intaked participants have no employment history and/or are in need of employment support
  - An internal SSYI assessment determined that 71% of the participants are not even ready to participate in a subsidized employment program, meaning that they require basic life skills, additional education, and intensive case management before they will be successful in a subsidized employment situation
  - The SSYI team anecdotally has reported about a number of young men who have gotten arrested after a subsidized employment program ended
- Many men on the list have family circumstances and housing challenges that make it difficult for them to engage consistently in the program
  - 27% have their own children
  - 20% reported living in a precarious housing situation at intake, such as being doubled-up or couch surfing. As outreach workers and case managers get to know the young men, they learn about far more cases of homelessness or precarious housing situations.
- Many men on the list have mental health issues, substance abuse issues, and trauma histories
  - 33% reported having a substance abuse issue on the intake
  - 25% reported having unmet mental health needs
  - 31% of the participants had early police contact (before the age of 13) as a victim (e.g. domestics, abuse, ambulance calls)

What is currently being done?
- There are currently a collection of efforts working with proven risk men, such as Shannon Initiative, SSYI (Boys & Girls Club, Christian Community Church, Straight Ahead Ministries, Worcester Youth Center), Mosaic, Reentry services out of the Worcester House of Corrections, Probation, Parole, and DYS.
- While there are several efforts, the extent to which these initiatives are coordinated or effective needs to be studied and then improvements made.

What more do we need to know? What more do we need to do?
Young people who engage in serious violence and who join gangs generally have an accumulation of risk factors across multiple developmental domains (e.g. individual, family, peer, school, community), including a high prevalence of trauma[41]. Common risk factors for gang involvement include growing up in low-income neighborhoods, single-headed households, association with gang-involved peers, school failure, and early use of drugs and alcohol[42]. While not all youth exposed to these risk factors join a gang or engage in violent activities, these factors are prevalent in the men on the SSYI list.

SSYI has established a robust foundation for continued intervention with proven risk young men. Once traditional social institutions (e.g. family, school, church, criminal justice system) fail these young men, the primary obstacle to effective outreach and intervention is the re-establishment of trust. Young men must be motivated to make a change in their lives, believe that such change is possible, and trust the adults and institutions that can facilitate these changes with them. The literature on intervening with

gang-involved youth and young adults also suggests that cross-sector community collaboration, organizational development, and interventions based on evidence-based principles are required[43]. At present we face the following challenges to helping young men either overcome or avoid violence and gang involvement:

- Lack of early intervention and diversion from the criminal justice system when young people present with known risk factors. The early school experience and arrest trajectory of SSYI participants reveal patterns that should be cause for alarm and suggest the need for restorative justice models.
- Limited street outreach efforts to disrupt violence, to develop relationships with the men, and reconnect them to community resources, education, and employment. [44]
- Limited concerted effort to offer protection from violence after exiting gangs.
- Proven-risk men tend to resist traditional mental health services; yet we have limited alternative models (note: peace circles and trauma circles are a notable exception).
- Limited options that address the inevitable relapses in the process of leaving the gang life style.
- Geographical limitations of service delivery (due to gang turf issues) (i.e. many services are located in the Main South area and can serve Kilby members well, but young people from East Side gangs do not feel they can access the same services).
- Constructions of masculinity that facilitate violence and perpetuate gang involvement alongside limited support and intervention services for very high risk young women.

We also need to know more about the internal culture and structure of local gangs, including a better understanding of the nature of the relationships between gang members in the same gang and across gangs.[45] We often heard that perceived acts of disrespect—in person and through social media like Facebook—are reported to be the immediate cause of many incidents of gun and gang violence.   Having a deeper understanding of the relationships between members of the same and rivaling gangs could provide new avenues for intervention.   We also learned that many violent incidents start due to misunderstandings and perceived disrespect stemming from complex relationships between gang-involved young men and their female partners. We need to know more about how relationships with girlfriends and mothers of the participants' children contribute to violence and how these relationships contribute to the ongoing cycle of violence.

In short, we need a more in-depth analysis of the specific culture of the youth gangs in Worcester and how these cultures may facilitate or inhibit young men's attempts to leave gang life. We also need to pilot innovative street outreach strategies to locate and establish rapport with proven risk men who have little or no prior relationship with the youth social service agencies in Worcester. With a better understanding of the meaning of gang involvement for young men and their difficulty letting go of the gang, we will have a greater chance of creating environments in which the young men can develop a new sense of self and social position, and a feeling safety and success outside of gang involvement.
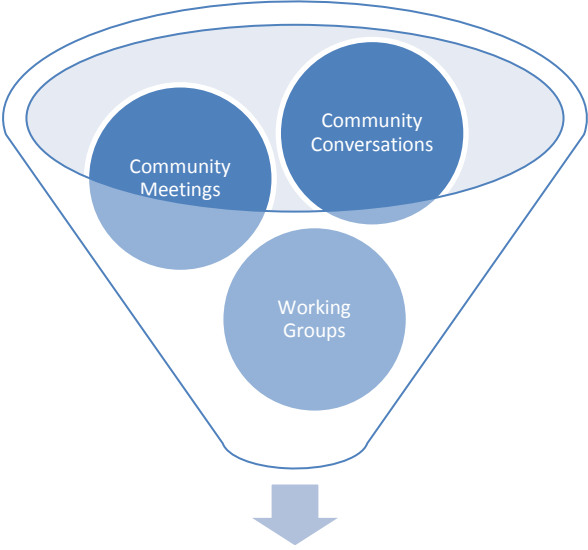
Conclusions

Most young people in Worcester are leading positive lives. They are healthy, productive, and contribute to their community. They are on a path toward a secure and successful adulthood. However, there is a subset of young people—mostly Black and Latino males—facing elevated risk factors to engage in youth and gang violence. Many of these factors reside in the community, in the schools, and in the economy, leaving many individual young people and families with limited ability to control some of the major forces that drive youth and gang violence in Worcester. Collectively, however, we can improve the lives of young people, families, and the wellbeing of Worcester residents.   We can prevent the toxic stress response by building protective factors into the community that will foster youth and family resilience and by working to address persist inequities in our community. To that end, we offer four conclusions:

1. Community, school, family, peer, and individual risk factors that contribute to violence and gang involvement are prevalent in Worcester:
   - Family residential instability and economic stress
   - Youth and adult unemployment
   - Early childhood trauma
   - Generational cycles of gang and criminal involvement
   - Distressed built environment coupled with limited accessible neighborhood-based recreational facilities or activities
   - School climate and punitive discipline policies
   - Youth mental health, substance abuse, and exposure to violence

2. Analysis of community resources reveals that Worcester has a strong prevention sector and emerging programs for proven-risk young men. However, the location and types of community resources and the location of violent crime hotspots have been persistent over time, indicating that business as usual is insufficient to address gang and youth violence. Worcester needs a strategic, coordinated approach to addressing youth and gang violence; currently we have siloes instead of systems making it difficult for youth, families, and advocates to navigate the many pathways within and across sectors and services.

3. In addition to lacking an overarching system, there are programmatic elements that are missing:
   - A concerted focus on early childhood health, education, and overall wellbeing.
   - Restorative Justice approaches in schools and the community that can divert young people from entering the juvenile justice system.
   - Significant street outreach presence to interrupt violence and connect young people to resources.
   - Effective community-based sanctions for those awaiting trial or on probation in the community
   - Effective reentry programs that support young men coming back into the community and reduce the likelihood of recidivism.
   - Trauma-sensitive services and environments

4. A factor that is challenging to acknowledge and perhaps even more challenging to address is the fact that young men of color are disproportionately affected by violence, gang involvement, unemployment, and punitive school discipline policies in Worcester. Many individuals from the communities most directly affected by youth and gang violence have developed a distrust of traditional or mainstream services and institutions.   There are tensions between some youth and the police; between some school teachers/staff and youth; and between some families and service providers. If we want to eliminate youth and gang violence in Worcester, we will have to confront this distrust and the racism and other forces that are driving it. We need to embrace a racially aware analysis and a trauma-sensitive approach to working with youth and families.

Recommended Action Steps

This report assembles data on the needs and resources in Worcester as they relate to youth and gang violence. We need to transform these data into action. We recommend the following steps to this end.

1. **January**: Leadership Team reviews report and finalizes the Community Engagement Plan

2. **February**: Bring the report to the community and convene conversations about the data. The Clark University Research Team, with support from the Shannon Advisory Committee, will attend as many existing community meetings as possible to discuss the findings of this report, to identify additional data needs, and to begin to develop a consensus on several priority areas for action.

Youth Violence Strategic Plan with Clear Goals, Measurable Objectives, Established Timelines, and Assigned Responsibility

3. **April:** Hold a large Community Meeting to agree on a common vision, to prioritize issues, and to divide into 3-5 working groups.

4. **April**: Working groups meet three times each to develop actions plans.

5. **May**: Final Community Meeting where action plans are shared and finalized. Ongoing process for monitoring progress and assessing outcomes is established.

6. **June:** Worcester Youth Violence Prevention Strategic Plan is finalized and action begins!

Endnotes

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