

Sparking Solutions: Issue Profile on Youth Safety

By Kate McGovern

1

In our second issue-profile to prepare readers for the Delaware Valley Grantmakers Sparking Solutions Conference, we provide an overview of youth safety in the greater Philadelphia region.

Introduction

Recent reports on the safety of Philadelphia's youth paint a grave and incomplete picture. In several neighborhoods, violence is considered by some as an appropriate and even expected way to solve a conflict, according to the city Youth Violence Prevention Collaborative.

The reasons for youth violence are varied: poverty, homelessness, joblessness, poor educational opportunities, a lack of supervision, mental health issues, barriers to re-entry after incarceration and a cycle of trauma, among other things. The causes are tightly intertwined and focusing on them individually has proven ineffective, according to a recent report from the Collaborative.

Philadelphia has the worst poverty rate of the ten largest U.S. cities. Forty percent of its children live in poverty, according to the city. And research shows that high-poverty neighborhoods often have high rates of mental health issues and unemployment, which are risk factors for crime and violence.

Poverty also contributes to homelessness — another risk factor for becoming a victim or a perpetrator of a violent crime. One out of every 21 Philadelphia high school students has been homeless at some point. Youth experiencing homelessness are more likely than their peers to carry weapons and engage in illegal activities, according to the People's Emergency Center. Compared to housed youth, unaccompanied Philadelphia youth are 11 times more likely to carry a gun and seven times more likely to be injured in a fight at school.

We also know that violence begets violence. More than 5,000 city residents under age 24 have been shot since 2007. And 44 percent of victims who survive are victimized again within five years. Children exposed to violence, as victims or witnesses, are at a higher risk of eventually engaging in criminal behavior, the city's report says. Exposure to violence can cause poor performance in school; traumatized youth may carry weapons to deal with feelings of vulnerability or use illicit drugs to treat their distressing symptoms.

"When a child is repeatedly crossing yellow tape or walking around blood-stained streets or not safe in their home, all kinds of things happen to them," said Cathy Weiss, executive director of the Stoneleigh Foundation. Kids who are the victim of violence often become perpetrators and kids who witness violence shut down and live in fear, she says. This often causes them to drop out of school.

The decision to drop out of school, carry weapons, use drugs or perpetrate violence often earns youths a criminal record. Because a criminal record is a barrier to employment, education, benefits and housing, it is a risk factor for poverty, which completes the cycle, the city explains.

Despite these numbers, some data suggest that youth violence is declining. In a 2011 interview with the Daily News, Dr. Lawrence Steinberg from Temple University reported that youth violence seems to have peaked in the mid-1990s. In 2009, there were 50 percent fewer juvenile arrests for violent crime as there were a decade earlier, he said.

But the data is incomplete because there are gaps in reporting and sharing. The Philadelphia Inquirer's 2011 "Assault on Learning" series revealed that the city's school district often fails to report crime. And even when data is available, concerns about violating federal privacy laws often lead schools to keep it to themselves. Moreover, that data only addresses incidents involving the school. Weiss says this is the biggest hurdle to youth safety.

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2

Opportunities & Innovation

What's working? Here we take a look at the broad overview of the strategies, collaborations and innovations being used throughout the greater Philadelphia region.

The City of Philadelphia

The city has various supports aimed at reducing the risk factors for violence but they have been operating independently, and sometimes inefficiently and redundantly.

Last year, the U.S. Department of Justice added Philadelphia to its National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention. The designation has brought funding, but it also required the city to create and implement a plan to reduce youth violence by 25 percent in five years.

So the city formed the Philadelphia Youth Violence Prevention Collaborative, made up of the city's police department, health and human services department, its family court and other experts. Last month, the collaborative released Philadelphia's Strategic Plan to Prevent Youth Violence, which calls for a long-term cultural shift away from violence.

The plan aims to prevent youth violence by addressing the underlying causes. It focuses on the 22nd police district in north Philadelphia, which has the highest incidence of shooting victims between the ages of 14 and 24 in the city. The plan has tangible goals: removing illegal guns from the streets, lowering truancy rates and providing after school activities. It also lists more abstract goals such as reducing the number of youth exposed to trauma and ensuring youth feel safe in their homes, on the street and in school.

The plan also acknowledges and addresses the city's redundancy and data problems. It calls for city agencies to align their work with that of other community-based service providers and the private sector. "This will require concerted attention to collecting, analyzing and using data to 1) devise effective and sustainable strategies that address community need and 2) inform how the city directs its resources of time, talent and investments," it says.

Weiss, a member of the collaborative, says the group has already had some successes. "People are already making some connections that weren't made before. I can't say we prevented 10 kids from being in harm's way but the awareness and the connections are beginning to be built." For more information on the collaborate and its early successes see *Sparking Solutions: Q&A With Cathy Weiss, Executive Director at Stoneleigh Foundation*.

Annie E. Casey Foundation

A recent report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which is headquartered in Baltimore but has locations through the country's northeast, calls for a focus on children's earliest relationships and experiences. "Early intervention can prevent, or at least reduce, some of the negative effects associated with living in poverty," it says.

High-quality early childhood programs can reduce the effects of poverty and improve children's outcomes. "According to Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman, early childhood interventions are some of the best investments we can make as a nation, with a return on investment at 7 to 10 percent annually by reducing crime, improving academic achievement and building a skilled workforce," the report says.

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Additionally, the foundation says it wants to focus on two-generation strategies. Often, low-income parents struggle to gain and retain employment; experience violence and trauma; battle substance abuse; and have physical and mental health problems. The Foundation believes that this is cause for providing more support to the parents of young children

And simply adding more dollars to existing strategies is neither wise nor feasible, it notes. “We should focus our resources on strategies with evidence of high returns in child well-being and healthy development.”

Stoneleigh Foundation

The Stoneleigh Foundation, a local organization, is major presence in anti-violence initiatives throughout the city. In addition to Weiss and others serving on the collaborative, one of the organization’s fellows serves as the assistant to the mayor for youth violence prevention. Another works with the city’s School Reform Council. And a third is leading a program in local hospitals to provide services to youth with intentional assault wounds in an effort to reduce re-injury and retaliation. “[T]hrough our fellows we can help prevent the long-term, negative outcomes of exposure to violence and protect the basic civil right of safety for all of our children,” Stoneleigh says.

And like the Annie E. Casey Foundation, it focuses on understanding and addressing the intergenerational cycle of violence in Philadelphia. But equally as great “is the need to identify and treat those youth exposed to violence so that the systems designed to serve them don’t unintentionally deny any child the opportunity to become successful students, productive workers, and responsible family members, parents, and citizens,” the foundation says.

Other Innovators

Spark Philadelphia is part of a national nonprofit focused on mentoring middle school students and guiding them toward a career. Spark partners with schools and businesses to pair low-income 7th and 8th graders with mentors working in career fields aligned with their interests.

Youth Build Philly focuses on education. It is a one-year program provides high school dropouts with a chance to earn their diploma. While enrolled in the program, youths also learn job skills and provide community services: students are considered part-time AmeriCorps members while enrolled.

Mural Arts, a partnership between the city and a nonprofit, attempts to reduce violence through its Restorative Justice program. The program promotes a concept of justice that involves the victim, the offender and the community in the healing process, according to the organization. It then incorporates this practice into art instruction, mural making and community service work. Inmates and individuals on probation and parole are given the opportunity to learn new skills and make a positive contribution to their communities. The program emphasizes re-entry to the community after incarcerations and uses art to “give voice to people who have consistently felt disconnected from society.” More than 300 inmates and 200 juveniles are involved with the program every year.

Regionally, the Coatesville Youth Initiative organizes a monthly meeting for nonprofits and community groups helping youth to “share information, explore the community’s assets, programs and existing services, and to set priorities for the future,” according to its website. Since it began, more than 40 organizations and 80 individuals have met on a monthly basis.

For a deeper look at this issue, attend the breakout session Defending our Children: Connecting the dots between youth safety and future successes at the Delaware Valley Grantmakers Sparking Solutions Conference.

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Helping to ignite that conversation will be Weiss, along with:

- Paul DiLorenzo, Casey Family Programs
- Rainie Williams, author of the 10th Code Street Ideologies
- Richard Greenwald, Stoneleigh Fellow for City of Philadelphia Youth Violence Prevention Strategy
- Annette John-Hall, Mighty Writers

Further Reading

Want to dig deeper? Check out these useful resources and reports for understanding youth violence in the state and city.

2013 Data Book: State Trends in Well-being

This report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation provides state-wide data on childrens' overall well-being with a focus on four subgroups: economic well-being; education; health; and family and community.

The report reveals that while improvements have been made in childrens' health and education, their economic statuses and family and community factors have not done as well. In fact, troubling trends emerge from recent data, the report concludes. The recession has resulted in continued unemployment and disparities among children by income and family structure are growing.

The report ranks Pennsylvania 17th in the country for its childrens' overall well-being. It ranks 17th in economic well-being, 8th in education, 22nd health and 25th in family and community — the subgroup that included the effects of poverty on youth safety.

Shared Prosperity Philadelphia: Our Plan to Fight Poverty

This report, published by the city, provides data on poverty in Philadelphia. Like the city's strategic plan, it calls for a "collective impact" philosophy that establishes a common agenda, a shared measurement system and continuous communication among city agencies and stakeholders.

The report outlines how the city's plan for addressing youth violence dovetails with other services the city provides for children and adults facing poverty, including access to housing, benefits, education and employment.

Homeless Youth in Philadelphia: An Innovative Method for Identifying Youth Experiencing Homelessness

This report from the People's Emergency Center explains how one group went about collecting data on the city's homeless population, in an effort to determine what supports they need. "Policy makers and providers ignore some of the leading causes of adult/family homelessness — including past youth homelessness and the lack of a high school degree or GED," according to the report. "This is done, in part, because policy makers and providers lack local data on homeless teens."

The organization conducted survey in 2009 and 2011 of public high school students in Philadelphia. It found that one in 21 have identified as homeless at some point, putting them at an increased risk of perpetrating or being the victim of violence. Homelessness also puts youths at a higher risk of joblessness, dropping out of school, mental health problems, substance abuse and risky sexual behaviors – all of which, in turn, place them at a higher risk for violence.

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