

The Community is the Table: Year One Worcester Youth Violence Prevention Initiative Year One Action Plan 10/18/22

The Community is the Table connotes that the right voices need to be at the right tables to center equity and the thriving of all of our city's young people.

- The **Community** are people connected by common purpose, passion, place or experience; communities are intersectional and diverse, they evolve and change, and are based on the idea that everyone belongs to more than one community.
- The **right voices** are from those individuals with lived experience of violence, who know the neighborhoods, who have deep and ongoing relationships with young people and their families—who they themselves have experienced the “causes of the causes.”
- The **right tables** are the places and times where real decisions are made.

The problem: The 2021 Worcester Youth Violence Assessment provided a community perspective on the persistence of inequity in Latinx and Black youth's witnessing, victimization, and perpetration of gun and knife violence in Worcester. In 2015, there were 290 gun and knife incidents in Worcester that involved 602 young people under the age of 25 as a victim, witness, or perpetrator. By 2020, these numbers dropped to 164 incidents involving 388 young people. **Despite a citywide 35.5% decrease in the number of young people under 25 involved in gun and knife incidents since 2015, by 2019, Black and Latinx youth were almost five times more likely than White youth to be involved in gun and knife incidents** (See Table One). What is more is that only a small number of the young people involved in gun or knife incidents were suspects, charged or arrested. The vast majority, roughly 80% in 2020 were victims or witnesses, revealing an enormous trauma burden on communities of color (See Figure Two).¹

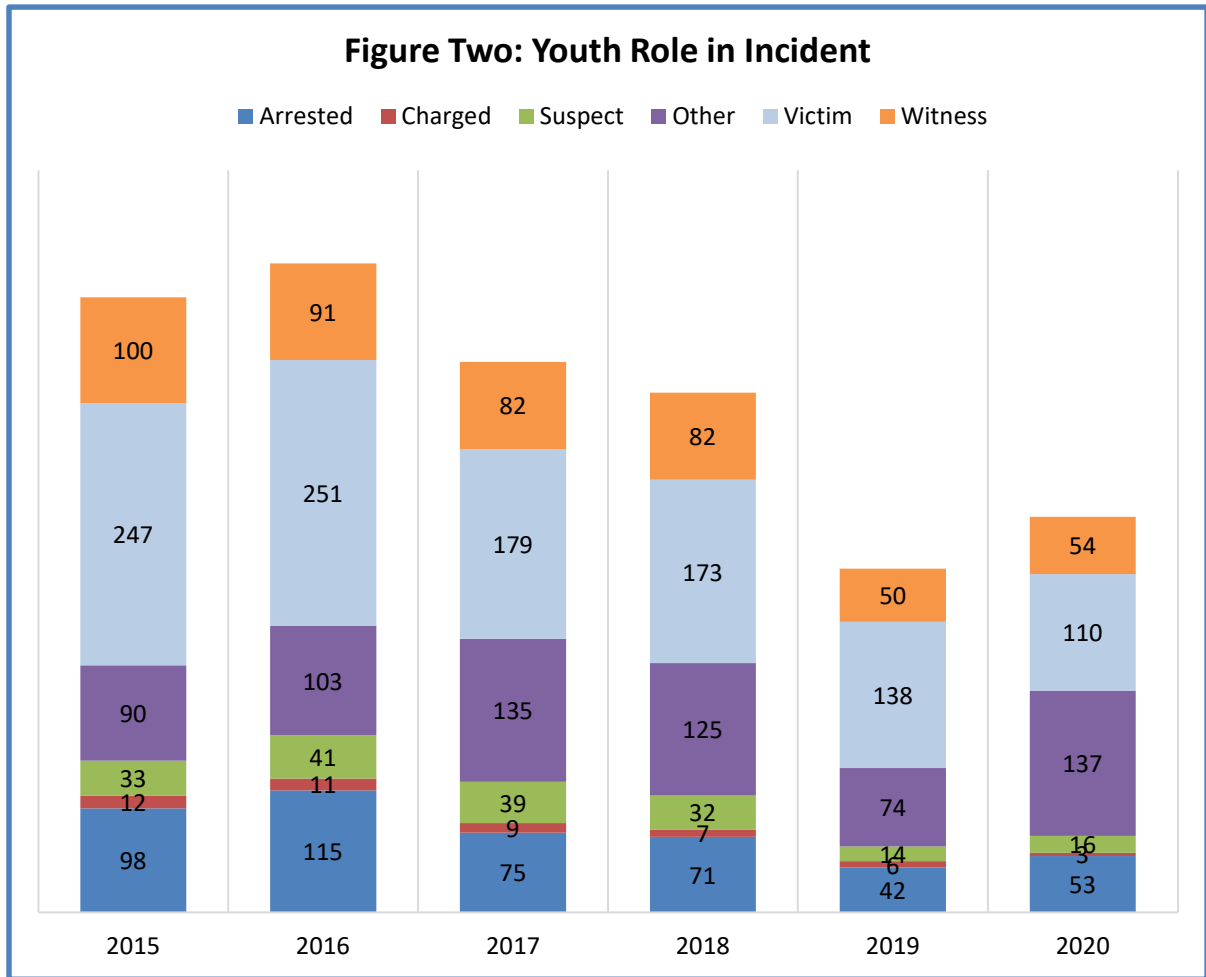
The causes: The 2021 assessment revealed organizational and institutional factors that help to explain the persistence of racial inequity in youth outcomes. An overarching theme across focus groups and interviews was that a major cause of the persistence of racial inequities was the under-resourcing and at times unintentional undermining of authentic support for youth and families at higher risk of experiencing violence. The assessment's focus on the persistence of racial inequity in youth outcomes revealed the “Causes of the Causes” (see Table Two), briefly summarized as:

- **Punitive policies and practices instead of problem-solving:** We heard over and over that many educational and legal policies and practices focus on punishment instead of providing support and solving problems. Respondents expressed that focusing on punishment takes away opportunities to form needed relationships. It was emphasized that punitive practices and policies harm the community and cause youth to feel distrust towards the institutions that are supposed to support their development and growth.

¹ Data goes to 2020 because this was for the 2021 assessment. We have up to date gun and knife data and can provide on request.

- **Lack of transparency and accountability in city decision-making:** Interviewees conveyed that city leadership has made decisions that do not reflect community priorities. We heard that there is absence of transparency and mechanisms for accountability after decisions are made. Respondents said that the problem is made worse because city leadership does not reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the community. This lack of representation, transparency and accountability prevent the development of trusting relationships between city government and the community. Respondents emphasized the importance of authentic dialogue and the need for leaders to acknowledge when they make mistakes and cause harm to the community.
- **Funding that maintains the status quo:** Respondents reported that funding practices create competition and division rather than collaboration, particularly for smaller, grassroots non-profits; and ultimately have negative consequences for youth. Those working in grassroots organizations expressed that funders do not have a deep or nuanced understanding of the challenges on the ground. This is evidenced by expectations for outcomes in too short of a time with too few dollars invested. Competition fostered by current funding practices prevents young people being referred to the programs that would better meet their needs, as organizations expressed that they fear that their funding could be impacted if their numbers go down. It was expressed that funding is inaccessible to people on the ground and seems to reflect a top-down perspective that tells people what they need rather than listens and learns from lived experience.
- **Lack of representation and lived experience among those who are in positions of power over youth:** Interviewees expressed a great deal of frustration with the ways things currently operate. They acknowledged that most people in government and the schools have good intentions and that they care about the wellbeing of young people. Yet, many of these individuals also have the choice about when to step away from focusing on young people. When reflecting on interviews conducted with individuals who have lived experience of violence and who also hold an asset orientation towards youth, families, and their neighborhoods, we realized that many of these individuals do not or cannot separate themselves from this work. Their identities are inextricably linked to those of the young people, affording them a unique vantage point but also putting them at high risk of burnout. The depth of their expertise makes it clear that their knowledge needs to play a respected and prominent role in decision-making about youth violence.

Table One: Gun and Knife Data ²	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022 (YTD)
# of gun and knife incidents involving youth and young adults (under 25 years old)	290	294	235	228	176	164	176	92
<i>gun</i>	127	126		96	75	87		
<i>knife</i>	163	168		132	101	77		
# of youth involved in gun or knife incident	602	631	541	503	332	388	365	232
RRI Latinx youth as compared to White youth (10-24 year olds)	3.1				4.5			
RRI Black youth as compared to White youth (10-24 year olds)	4.2				4.8			



² Source: Data from WPD Crime Analyst; RRI analysis performed by Laurie Ross


Table Two: Summary of Findings		
Definitions of Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violence as a physical act • Violence as the lack of safety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violence as not being understood or supported • Racism and other systems of oppression as violence
Causes of Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inaccessible and missing resources and supports • Lack of safe spaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under-resourced community supports (e.g. youth workers) • Social determinants of health (e.g. quality employment, education, affordable housing)
Causes of the Causes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Punitive policies and practices instead of problem-solving • Lack of transparency & accountability in city decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding that maintains the status quo • Lack of representation and lived experience among those who are in positions of power over youth

“ORDER of Councilor Thu Nguyen – Request City Manager work with the Commissioner of Health and Human Services and representatives working on youth violence prevention to co-create a report of a one (1) year, five (5) year and ten (10) year plan that addresses causes, as well as causes of causes, of youth violence. Said report should include information as to how much affordable housing is needed, how funds can be reallocated to break the status quo, what safe spaces should look like in the city and what roles each part of the city’s government should take in changing the status quo around youth violence in the city. – Item #27b CC Order adopted”

When we shared these ‘causes of the causes’ in a community dialogue with individuals working on youth violence, they were not surprised. They had these concerns too and had been expressing them for years.

And so this assessment asks funders, elected and appointed officials, and directors of large non-profits to **take a believing stance about these findings, reflect on how the findings relate to one’s own position and work, and understand them as the community-identified ‘causes of the causes’** that need to be addressed if we are going to see not just aggregate reductions in violence, but also movement toward equity.

If the community can move toward alignment about the causes of the causes, then Worcester can become city where equity and justice characterize young people’s experiences and outcomes.



These questions can help guide reflection as one reads direct quotations from our interviews that led us to identify these four ‘causes of the causes’:

- How can we acknowledge that we work in institutions that some people do not trust?
- How do we position the community as the primary group that holds organizations, systems, and decision-makers accountable?
- How can we move to a shared understanding about the role structural racism plays in the disconnects between leadership and community?
- How might we acknowledge the power that WYVPI and its partners hold? How can we use this power to centralize information about the WYVPI so members of the community can easily access and understand the mission and focus of this effort and be involved in decision-making about how resources are used?

DRAFT WYVPI One-Year Plan

Year One Work Plan (July 2022-June 2023)		
Goal	Year One Strategy	Benchmark
<p>Align the Worcester Youth Violence Prevention Initiative with the 'Community is the Table' vision.</p> <p>Year One outcome:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation of community agreements in partnership with the CAB and YRN 	<p>Leadership dialogues to be ready to create shared language, definitions, and community agreements in collaboration with CAB and YRN</p>	<p>Governance readiness to engage in process to create Community agreements</p>
	<p>Develop authentic mechanisms for youth and community decision-making in the WYVPI (e.g. Community Advisory Board-CAB).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Action: Funding (\$58,000) received from the United Way of Central MA to stipend youth and young adult community members with lived experience to form a CAB that will allocate funding to grassroots efforts to address youth violence. Racial equity tools will be used to recruit members of the CAB. 	<p>CAB established and is operational</p>
	<p>Governance Council adoption of racial equity tools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Action: Governance Council received an initial training on racial equity tools on September 27th, 2022 	<p>Racial equity tools adopted for Operations and Governance decision-making</p>
	<p>Map current efforts and strategies based on intervention types and intended populations (see below)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Action: Clark Local Action Research Partner is working with the Division of Youth Opportunities and Worcester Community Connections Coalition on the mapping 	<p>Baseline map created</p>
<p>Elevate the WYVPI's Youth Resource Network (YRN) as the center of community dialogue and information sharing regarding youth violence.</p> <p>Year one outcome:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication feedback loops established between CAB, Governance, and YRN; accountability mechanism established 	<p>Establish biannual convening with CAB, Governance, and the community to map progress, identify emerging needs, and establish new goals.</p>	<p>Calendar established and first meeting held</p> <p>Governance Council listens and takes action</p>
<p>Fill gaps, get stuck strategies moving</p>	<p>Fully implement Handle with Care</p>	<p>Handle with Care fully implemented by January 2023</p>
	<p>Develop housing plan for disconnected youth</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Action: Examination of housing needs for disconnected youth will be a component of Central MA Housing Alliance's Youth Homelessness Demonstration grant 	<p>Identification of housing models and how much affordable housing is needed for</p>

		this population
	Through an interactive process with YRN and CAB, establish a youth-created definition of safety for agencies who work with young people at elevated risk of violence	Agencies receiving SSYI and Shannon funds demonstrate how they operationalize the definition of safety
	<p>Develop resource plan to fill gaps and ensure peak times of day and year and places are covered to prevent and intervene in violence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Action: During 2023, management of Shannon and SSYI grants will shift to the city's Division of Youth Opportunities per the City Manager to ensure holistic response to youth risk factors 	Proactive system of ensuring high need times of year, transitions, and spaces are covered
	<p>Develop a community response protocol for tragedies involving children, youth and families</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Team participates in Trauma and Resilience training to develop shared language, definitions, and concepts for a community response protocol. 	Protocol established

Spectrum of Needs

