2021 Assessment

WORCESTER YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION INTIATIVE:

THE COMMUNITY IS THE TABLE

CYCJ

Contents

The Community is the Table

The Community is the Table. This simple tagline represents a not so simple shift that needs to occur to see reductions in racial inequity in youth violence in Worcester.

There is a great deal of lived wisdom and empirical research about the causes of youth violence.

The Community is the Table came out of discussions we had in 2021 about the "causes of the causes." In other words, what are the reasons that the well-known causes of youth violence persist—despite all that is known about them—and that result in Black and Latinx youth experiencing a disproportionate burden of harm and other inequitable outcomes?

The <u>Community</u> is the Table connotes that the <u>right voices</u> need to be at the <u>right tables</u> 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 Community is the Table represents a new form of governance. It does not mean elected and appointed leaders step aside and community leaders take over. **Rather, it is a true partnership between formal and community leadership; where each uses their power, knowledge, connections, and skills to affect real change.**

It is a governance structure that takes a believing stance when community members share their experiences and acts accordingly and with urgency. It is where formal leadership accepts responsibility for past harms and supports the healing needed to eliminate inequity in outcomes for our city's young people and families.

Introduction

Homicide is the third leading cause of death among youth ages 10-24 years old in the United States; it is the leading cause of death for Black youth and the second leading cause of death for Latinx youth. Violence is a major cause of nonfatal injuries among young people. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that youth homicides and assault-related injuries result in over $21 billion annually in medical and work loss costs for the country. The current White House has acknowledged gun violence as a public health crisis that disproportionately affects communities of color (White House Briefing, 4/7/21).

The extent of the problem, the complexity of its causes, and racialized dynamics surrounding its impacts make youth violence a "wicked problem" (Rittel & Webber 1973; Woo, 2019). Despite its complexity, research on youth violence intervention has tended to concentrate on individual level risk factors. Even youth violence models that acknowledge organizational and systemic factors mainly produce research that informs individual and family-level interventions. While these interventions may produce aggregate reductions in youth violence and associated behaviors, focusing intervention on individual level or even family level risk factors is insufficient to

> **Interventions that situate both the solution and problem of youth violence on individuals, their families and communities, overlook organizational and systemic factors, and the potential for more impactful public policy solutions.**

reduce inequitable youth outcomes. Interventions that situate both the solution and problem of youth violence on the individuals, their families and communities, perpetuate harms produced by organizations and systems, and overlook the potential for more impactful public policy solutions.

The **Worcester Youth Violence Prevention Initiative (WYVPI)** is the City of Worcester's response to youth violence. The WYVPI was formed following a gang and youth violence assessment and citywide strategic planning process that engaged youth, adult residents, and other stakeholders from fall 2013 through spring 2015. This timeframe also corresponded with a spike in youth violence, including shooting incidents leading to serious injury and homicide, creating a sense of urgency among city leadership to identify solutions to youth violence.

The 2015 assessment identified the following as significant drivers of youth violence in Worcester: family stress; unemployment; early childhood trauma; generational cycles of gang involvement; limited neighborhood recreation opportunities; and punitive school discipline. In

2018, the WYVPI released a second assessment informed by a structural violence framework, that identified relevant risks and protections within five domains or systems: community, family, school, peer-group, and individual; and outlined how these domains are shaped by larger societal forces of racism, implicit bias, toxic stress, income inequality, poverty, gender norms, and other intersectional dynamics—leaving low-income Latinx and African American youth most vulnerable. The model aimed to show that ignoring societal and community dynamics and addressing only the behaviors of proven risk or high-risk youth and families was an insufficient and unjust response to youth and gang violence.

When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world.
JOHN MUIR
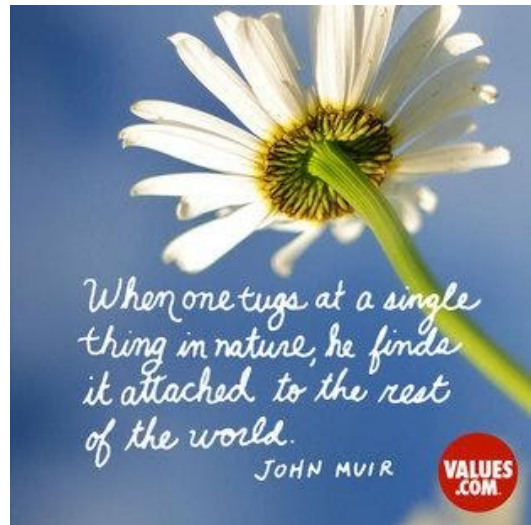
The 2015 and 2018 assessments recognized the structural causes of violence. These assessments informed the creation of strategies (See Figure One) that have contributed to a 43% reduction in gun and knife incidents involving young people under 25 years of age. Yet, upon reflection, we acknowledge that many of these were operationalized largely as youth risk factors operating within a deficit model, limiting the resulting interventions' ability to address persistent racial inequity in youth outcomes.

While not ignoring the complex realities of young people in Worcester, the 2021 assessment shifts the analysis away from the harms that young people inflict on each other in acts of violence. Drawing on the lived experience of interview respondents, this assessment instead examines organizational and system practices that create and exacerbate conditions that produce interpersonal violence. We found that these organizationally produced harms have generated community distrust of formal institutions as well as rifts within the community that interrupt collaboration and resource sharing. These factors contribute to persistent racial inequities in youth outcomes and require aligned, community-engaged intervention.

Figure One: A Sample of Worcester Youth Violence Prevention Initiative Strategies

Early Childhood Trauma Intervention

- Highlighted strategy: Worcester ACTs

Outreach and Engagement

- Highlighted strategies: Recreation Worcester, Youth Crisis Response Team, Youth Resources Network, HUB implementation

Diversion

- Highlighted strategies: District Attorney's Family Chaos Diversion Program

Trauma Informed School Climate

- Highlighted strategies: Handle with Care

Employment

- Highlighted strategies:Summer and Year Round Youth Works; employment support for SSYI and Shannon

Suppression

- Highlighted strategies: Cross-Sector Information Sharing

Coordination of Efforts

- Highlighted strategies: Health and Human Services Division created a full time position to coordinate community efforts; evolution of Worcester Youth Violence Prevention Initiative into the Governance Council for Children , Youth, and Families.

Problem Statement

There's a lot of guns out there, and kids are using them, and we can't deny that. But we also know that punishment, in and of itself, is actually not going to reduce recidivism or make anyone more safe. We've really got to figure out a different way.—Assessment Interview

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The 2021 assessment aims to provide 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, a relative rate index analysis revealed that in 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).

We focus on gun and knife incidents because of the significant harm and trauma they impose on the victims, witnesses, perpetrators, and communities. When young people are involved in gun or knife violence, it represents failures of multiple, upstream systems such as schools, child welfare, public works, public health, public safety, and juvenile justice that should be resourcing, protecting and/or diverting young people away from harm. If we see reductions in gun and knife victimization and perpetration, it signifies improvements across multiple systems that will also then contribute to reductions in inequity in other areas (i.e. education, youth development, housing, employment, etc.).

Table One: Gun and Knife Data[1]	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
# of gun and knife incidents involving youth and young adults (under 25 years old)	290	294	235	228	176	164
gun	*127*	*126*		*96*	*75*	*87*
knife	*163*	*168*		*132*	*101*	*77*
# of youth involved in gun or knife incident	602	631	541	503	332	388
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	

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[1] Source: Data from WPD Crime Analyst; RRI analysis performed by Laurie Ross

Methods Overview

The quantitative portion of the assessment represents a review of existing secondary data, including Census, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, etc. It also contains analysis of data provided by the Worcester Police Department and Worcester Public Schools.

The qualitative portion of the assessment was conducted in two graduate level courses in 2021, in partnership with nine community collaborators—all men of color with lived and professional experience of youth violence in Worcester. Action! by Design facilitated a series of Design Workshops to orient the assessment around critical questions and to guide the assessment toward the identification of authentic, impactful, and community-centered solutions. Results from the Action! by Design-facilitated process are incorporated into this report.

We sought to answer the question about why racial inequity persists in violence, even as overall rates have declined in the city. Recognizing the intersectionality of the causes and impacts of violence, we also examined how gender and gang involvement affect youth violence in the city, although these analyses are not featured prominently in this report. We approached this question through over 25 key informant interviews (KIs), four focus groups with adult stakeholders, and three focus groups with young adults. We wanted to bring traditionally unheard voices to the assessment and so the community collaborators assisted with recruitment of key informants who were closest to young people affected by violence. Most interviewees and focus group participants were people of color who grew up in Worcester and/or had lived experience of community violence.

Preliminary analysis of the data was conducted by the practicum students in collaboration with community collaborators in June 2021 and continued into the fall 2021 course. Findings were refined through a community dialogue with people who participated in the assessment as a collaborator, key informant, or focus group participant in November 2021 (roughly 15 people). A larger community meeting (attended by roughly 60 people) was held on December 15th 2021 to do a final review of findings and to develop a set of recommendations aimed to address the 'causes of the causes.' This report centers around the raw qualitative data so that the reader can understand how we developed our analysis and can add their own analysis to this work.

Findings Overview: The Causes of the Causes

The 2021 Assessment forced us to reframe our thinking about violence. Rather than focus on violence as something youth do to each other, the voices of those most impacted emphasized that a cause of violence is when organizations are under-resourced, understaffed, or staffed with people who lack deep understanding of young people's situations and experiences.

This 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.

As we engaged in discussions about definitions and causes of violence, it became clear that much of what we experience in Worcester is well known. It has been described and analyzed in the literature and has been raised by community members for decades. Over the past six years, the WYVPI has worked intentionally to address much of what has been and continues to be identified about youth violence.

While there may have not been surprises about what we learned about the definitions and causes of youth violence, our focus on the persistence of racial inequity in youth outcomes raised interesting issues that require ongoing deliberation and action. We realized that what we were hearing about were really the "Causes of the Causes" of persistent racial inequity in youth violence. Table Two presents a brief summary of our findings, including community definitions of violence, the causes of violence, and the 'causes of the causes'.

Table Two: Summary of Findings		
Definitions of Violence	• **Violence as a physical act** • **Violence as the lack of safety**	• **Violence as not being understood or supported** • **Racism and other systems of oppression as violence**
Causes of Violence	• **Inaccessible and missing resources and supports** • **Lack of safe spaces**	• **Under-resourced community supports (e.g. youth workers)** • **Social determinants of health (e.g. quality employment, education, affordable housing**
Causes of the Causes	• **Punitive policies and practices instead of problem-solving** • **Lack of transparency & accountability in city decision-making**	• **Funding that maintains the status quo** • **Lack of representation and lived experience among those who are in positions of power over youth**

The Community is the Table: Recommendations Overview

The WYVPI has invested resources and instituted many effective practices over the past several years in response to youth violence. The 2021 assessment supports the continuation of many of these practices. Yet, our focus on persistent racial inequity in youth outcomes revealed a strong need to acknowledge and repair past harms in order to foster trust and healing in the community. Accordingly, as we envision the next steps, we can be guided by the following questions:

- How might we align WYVPI stakeholders to address youth violence in ways that center the voices of those most impacted; acknowledge the harm caused by past decisions, structural racism and systems of oppression; and create an accountability mechanism that diminishes or eliminates power imbalances when decisions are being made?
- How does a community build trust?
- What might cause people who are not close to or have personal experiences with violence to care more deeply and with compassion about the issue?

There is emerging consensus that the following three action steps will begin to answer these questions and will support Worcester's movement toward greater equity.

1. **Develop authentic mechanisms for youth and community decision-making in the WYVPI.**
   *The primary outcome of this work would be the creation of a **Community Advisory Board** to set priorities for Worcester's youth violence funding, including Shannon, SSYI, and other federal, state, and private funding.*

2. **Align the Worcester Youth Violence Prevention Initiative with the 'Community is the Table' vision.**
   *The primary outcome of this work will be the creation of **Community Agreements** that help to shift formal leadership's perspectives and behaviors to align with the community's understanding of the 'causes of the causes' of violence. This will increase the likelihood that the work of WYVPI will have an equitable and positive impact on youth and families.*

3. **Elevate the WYVPI's Youth Resource Network (YRN) as the center of community dialogue and information sharing regarding youth violence.**
   The primary outcome of this work is to dismantle the current barriers and gatekeeping as it relates to information sharing and collaboration among community-based organizations. The YRN will be a trusted space to share and distribute information and resources that support the city's most under-resourced youth and families.

2021 Assessment Findings

The findings from the assessment are organized into four sections; the first two provide quantitative data and the second two provide qualitative data. The first section of quantitative data provides an overview of the youth and young adult population in Worcester. The second section of quantitative data provides an overview of gun and knife incidents through police and school data. The quantitative population and weapon data contextualize and make visible the interconnections between violence, trauma, adverse childhood experiences, and structural and systemic factors. The patterns in the quantitative data are given depth and nuance by the qualitative findings. Accordingly, the third section shows how the community defines violence and its causes. **The qualitative data in the fourth section helps to explain the persistence in inequity—or what we are calling the 'causes of the causes' of youth violence.**

Youth and Young Adult Population in Worcester

There are roughly 65,000 young people under the age of 25 in Worcester; 0-24 year olds make up 35% of Worcester's population. Roughly 49% of children under 18 live in married-couple, family households; 42% live in female-headed households with no spouse present; and 9% live in male headed households with no spouse present. Young people under 18 are the age group most likely to live in poverty in Worcester, at 27% (ACS, 2019 5-Year Estimates).

Age and Race Breakdown

Chart One shows the age and race breakdown of the child, youth, and young adult population.

Chart One: Age and Race Breakdown in Worcester, 2019
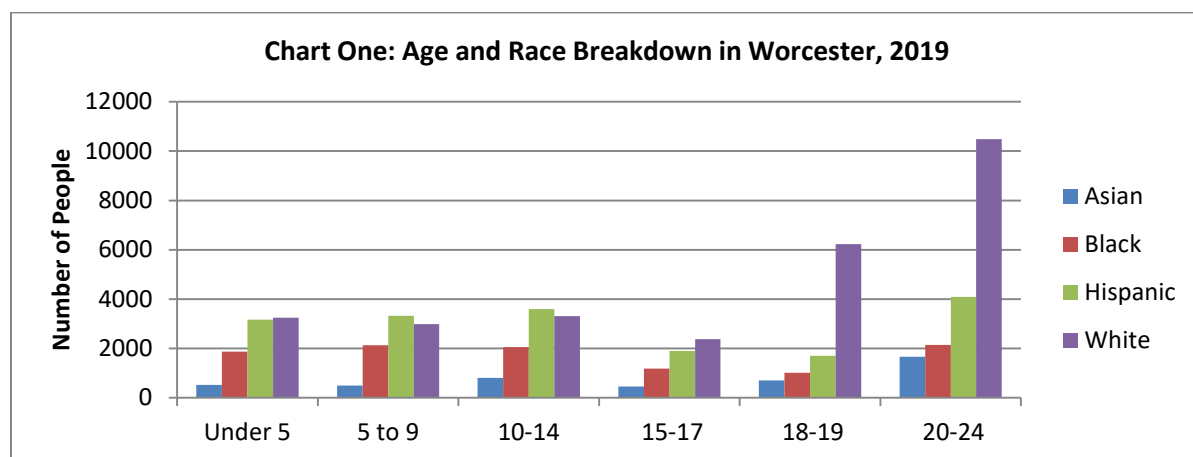
These data provide a clear picture of the ways Worcester's demographics are changing, with a movement toward greater parity among racial/ethnic groups in terms of numerical representation, particularly between the White and Latinx populations.

Charts Two compares the race breakdown of the 0-24 population with that of Worcester and MA.

Chart Two: Comparison of Worcester and MA by Age and Race, 2019
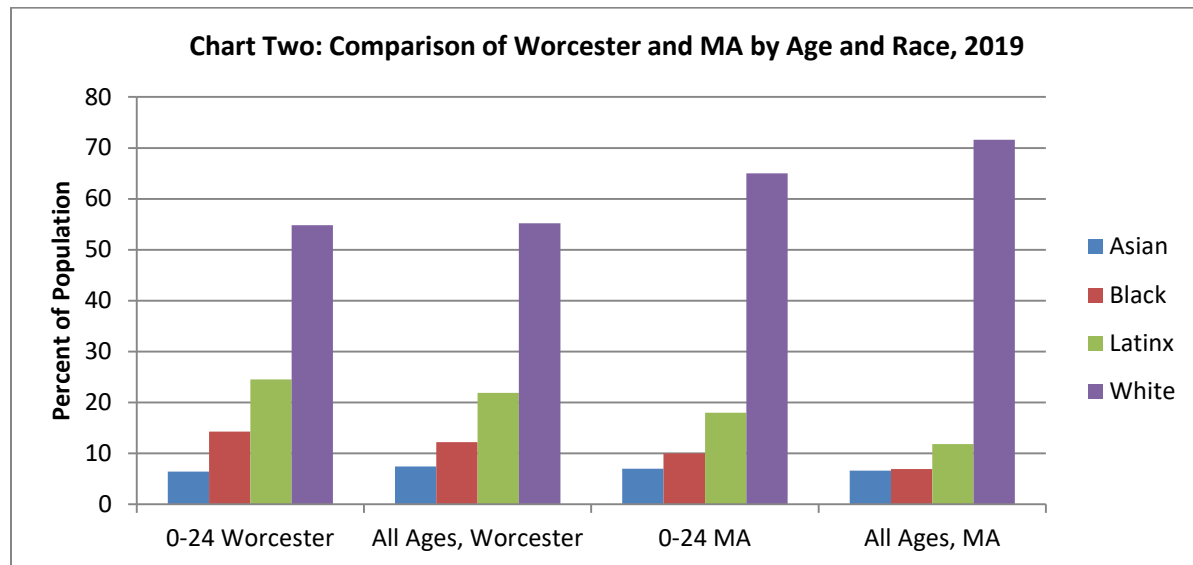
For both Worcester and Massachusetts, the youth and young adult population is more compositionally diverse; with Worcester's youth population having higher rates of Latinx and Black populations than the city and the state.

Languages Spoken by Worcester Residents 5 Years and Older

Roughly one-third of Worcester's population speaks a language other than English at home. Worcester residents are more likely to speak only Spanish or Asian/Pacific Islander languages than Massachusetts residents (Chart Three). Of those who speak a language other than English in their homes, roughly 42% speak English "less than very well," (ACS, 2019 5-year estimates).

Chart Three: Comparison of Worcester and MA Languages Spoken at Home, Population 5 Years and Older, ACS 5-year estimate
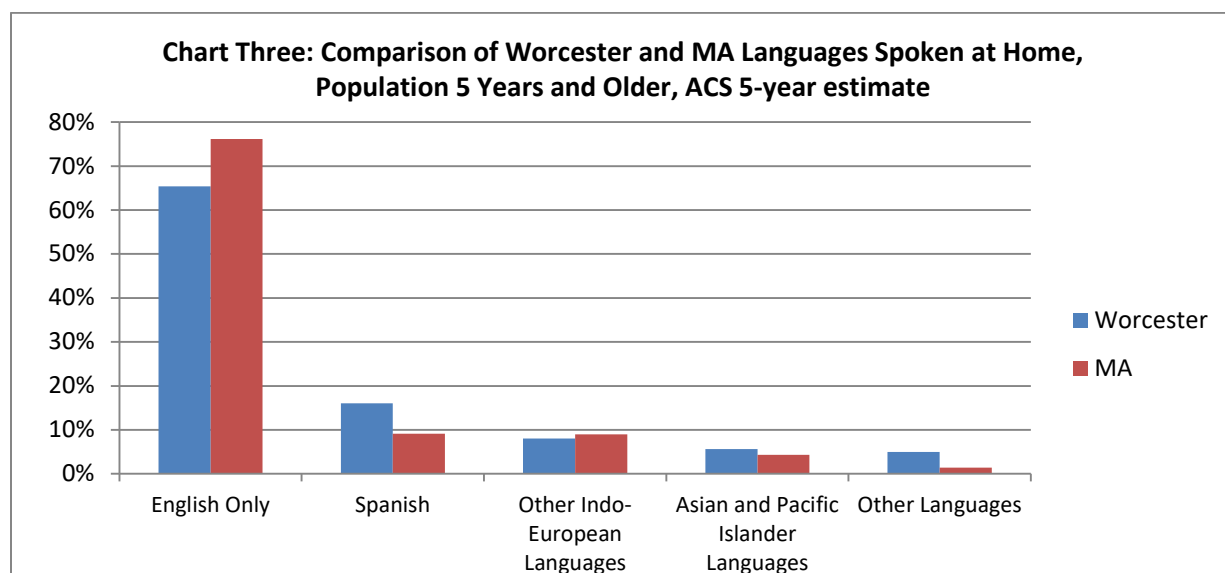
Educational Attainment

Worcester residents between the ages of 18-24 are more likely than residents in Massachusetts to have a high school diploma or higher (92% for Worcester versus 90% for MA). Worcester residents who are 25 years old or older are less likely than residents in Massachusetts to have a high school diploma, at roughly 85% versus 90.8% for Massachusetts.

Chart Four shows how educational attainment varies by race and ethnicity. Thirty percent of Worcester residents hold a Bachelor's degree or higher. This rate is exceeded by Asian residents at close to 45%. Black residents are slightly less likely than Worcester residents as a whole to have a Bachelor's degree or higher at roughly 28%. White residents are similar to the figure for Worcester. Latinx residents are less likely to have a Bachelor's degree at 11%. At 33%, Latinx residents are also less likely to have completed high school than other racial/ethnic groups.

Chart Four: Educational Attachment by Race, ACS 5-year estimates
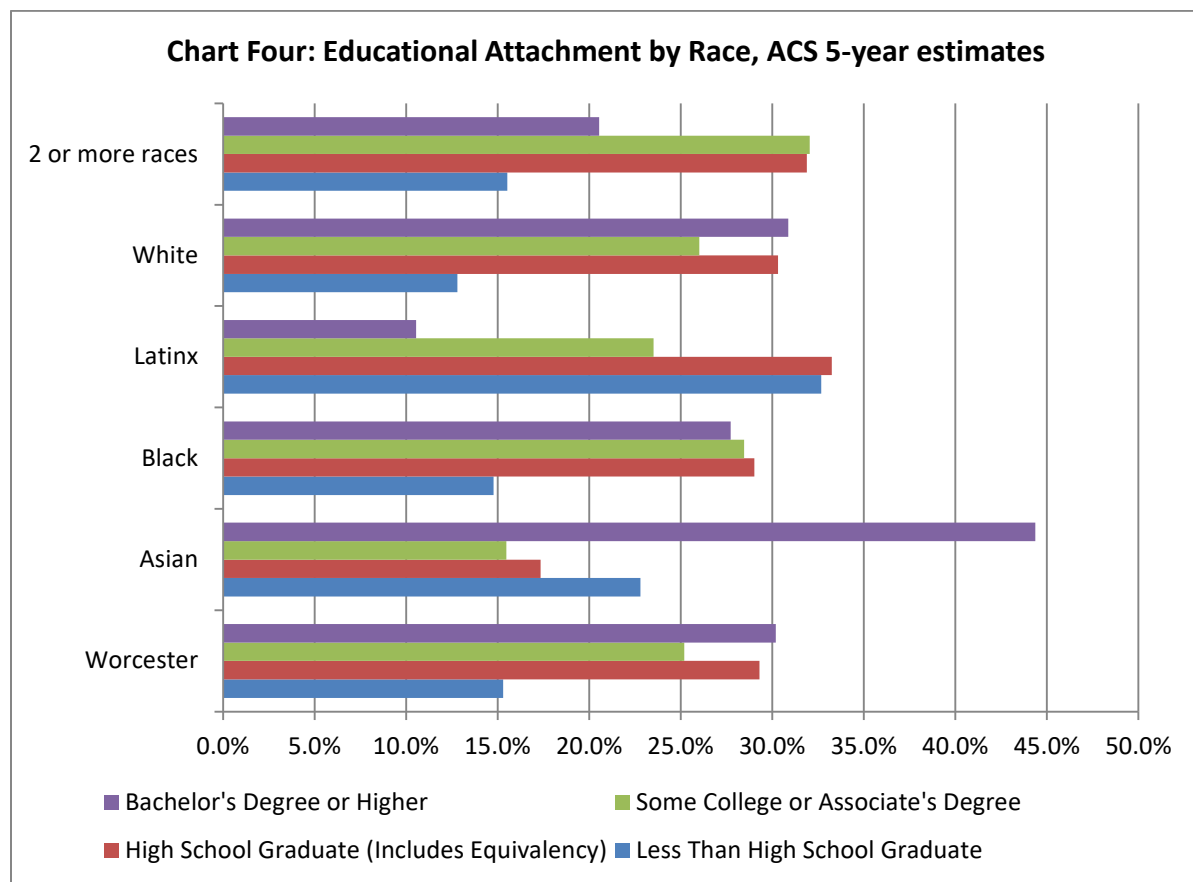
When looking at the Worcester Profile from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), the four-year graduation rate is 87.3%. For Latinx youth, it is 84.7%; for children in foster care it is 67.4%, and for children with disabilities it is 69.1%.

Income and Poverty Status

The median household income in Worcester is $48,139, which is significantly less than the state's median income of $81,215. At 20.9%, Worcester residents are almost two times more likely to live in poverty than Massachusetts residents as a whole (11.6%). Roughly 30% of Latinx residents in Worcester live in poverty. Overall, 15.2% of families with children under 18 live below the poverty threshold.

Chart Five shows the percent of families living in poverty by household structure and race.

Chart Five: Percent of Families Living in Poverty by Household Structure and Race, 2019
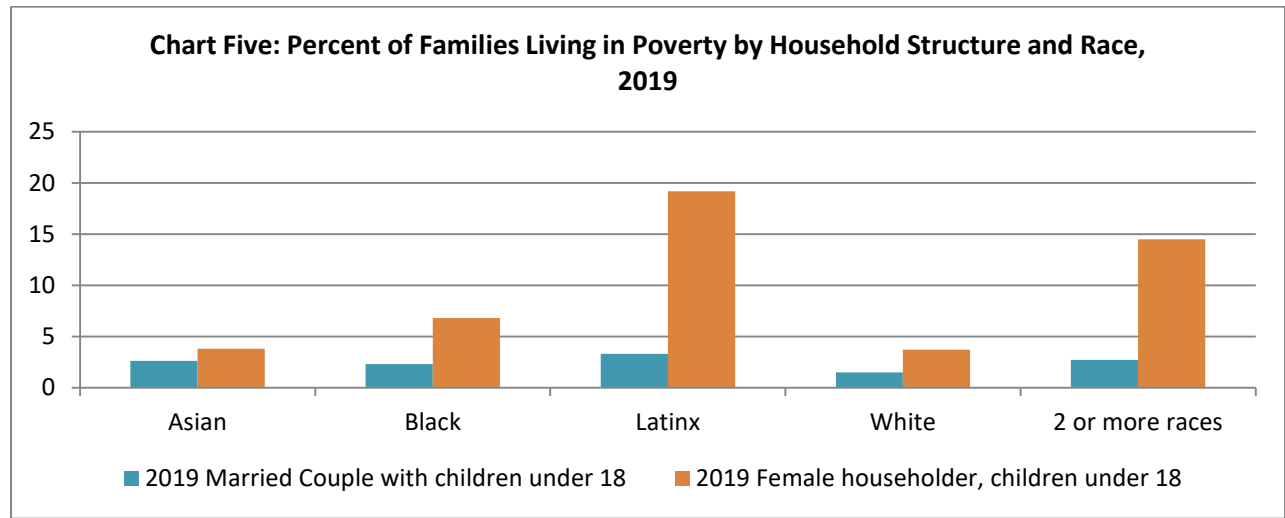
Latinx householders with children under 18 are more likely to live in poverty than other groups. Close to 20% of Latinx female-only households with children under 18 live in poverty.

Involvement with the Department of Children and Families (DCF)

There are two broad categories for children and family involvement with the Department of Children and Families. Children can be in placement, meaning that the state determined that it is the child's best interest to not be with their birth family. Alternatively, children can be involved with DCF, but not in placement, meaning that the state determined that it is in the best interest of the child to remain with their family while receiving services.

In 2020, there were 819 children in placement and 2,947 children not in placement. Of the children in placement, 37.4% are Latinx, which is slightly higher than their percent of the youth population. Of children not in placement, 40.5% are Latinx, which also is higher than their percent of the youth population.

Summary

Structural vulnerabilities facing Latinx youth emerge from this quantitative analysis in terms of income, education level, family structure, and child maltreatment.

Gun and Knife Incidents, Violence, and Gang Participation Involving Young People under the age of 25: What do we know?

In the Introduction, we stated that we were shifting the analysis away from what young people do to each other in acts of violence toward organizational and system practices that inflict harm on young people. However, we felt it was important to share data on gun and knife incidents and violent crime in order to be able to support data-informed, collective action.

Worcester crime statistics collected by MA Executive Office of Public Safety and Security indicate that young people in the 18 to 24 age range were arrested for weapons law violations in 2020 over twice as frequently as any other age group.[2] If we add in young people under 18, 58% of all weapons law offenders are committed by young people under 24 years old. Young people 10-24 make up roughly 26% of the city's population, and therefore are disproportionately involved in weapons law violations given their percent of the population.

These data need to be put into the context of the size of the youth population in Worcester. Roughly 60 young people were arrested for weapons law violations in 2020, out of 50,474 young people in this age range. At less than 1% of all youth 10-24, we are talking about a very small percent of the youth population. Additionally, only seven weapon law violations involved a young person using a weapon; most violations were for possessing, concealing, or transporting a weapon. While we do not condone youth possessing weapons, through focus groups with young men, we did learn that there are young people in the city who lack a sense of safety and feel the need to have a weapon to be safe.

We also looked at Aggravated Assaults[3] committed with a firearm or dangerous weapon. In 2020, 237 aggravated assault crimes with firearm or dangerous weapon were committed by young people under 25. There were 218 victims under 25 years old; 65% of the victims did not report an injury associated with the crime.

WPD Police Incident Data

Table Three presents gun and knife police incident data from 2015 through 2020. Since initiating the WYVPI, Worcester has experienced an overall decline of 43.4% in gun and knife incidents involving youth and young adults, with a roughly 36% decline in the number of youth

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[2] The violation of laws or ordinances prohibiting the manufacture, sale, purchase, transportation, possession, concealment, or use of firearms, cutting instruments, explosives, incendiary devices, or other deadly weapons.

[3] An unlawful attack by one person upon another wherein the offender uses a weapon or displays it in a threatening manner, or the victim suffers obvious severe or aggravated bodily injury involving apparent broken bones, loss of teeth, possible internal injury, severe laceration, or loss of consciousness. This also includes assault with disease (as in cases when the offender is aware that he/she is infected with a deadly disease and deliberately attempts to inflict the disease by biting, spitting, etc.).

involved in these incidents. The decline was 50% for Black youth, 43% for Latinx youth, and 64% for White youth.

Table Three: Gun and Knife Incidents	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	% change since 2015
# of gun and knife incidents involving youth and young adults	290	294	235	228	176	164	-43.4
# of youth involved in gun/knife incident	602	631	541	503	332	388	-35.5
Under 11	42	28		33	25	34	-19.0
Under 18	198	162	170	118	88	105	-47.0
18-25	404	469	371	385	244	283	-30.0
Male	419	405	333	277	198	235	-43.9
Female	178	215	164	175	107	131	-26.4
Asian/PI	8	3	4	0	4	0	-100.0
Black	113	101	94	78	40	56	-50.4
Hispanic	163	172	125	127	81	93	-42.9
White	111	108	64	57	41	40	-64.0
Race Unknown	204	244	217	238	164	197	-3.4
Arrested	98	115	75	71	42	53	-45.9
Charged	12	11	9	7	6	3	-75.0
Suspect	33	41	39	32	14	16	-51.5
Victim	247	251	179	173	138	110	-55.5
Witness	100	91	82	82	50	54	-46.0

Table Three shows that males are more likely than females to be involved in gun and knife incidents. Young people involved in gun and knife incidents tend to be between the ages of 18-25. Each year, there have been between 25 and 42 children ages 10 and younger documented in a gun or knife police incident report. We assume that these children are recorded as victims, witnesses, or other; however we do not receive data disaggregated in this way. Black and Latinx youth are more likely to be involved in gun or knife incidents than White or Asian youth.

Figure Two shows that a small number of the young people involved in gun or knife incidents are suspects, charged or arrested, as shown in the bottom three blocks of each column in dark blue, red, and green. The vast majority, roughly 80% in 2020 were victims, witnesses, or coded as other in the police data, as shown in the top three blocks of each column, in purple, light blue, and orange.

Figure Two: Youth Role in Incident

Legend: ■ Arrested ■ Charged ■ Suspect ■ Other ■ Victim ■ Witness

Role	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Witness	100	91	82	82	50	54
Victim	247	251	179	173	138	110
Other	90	103	135	125	74	137
Suspect	33	41	39	32	14	16
Charged	12	11	9	7	6	3
Arrested	98	115	75	71	42	53
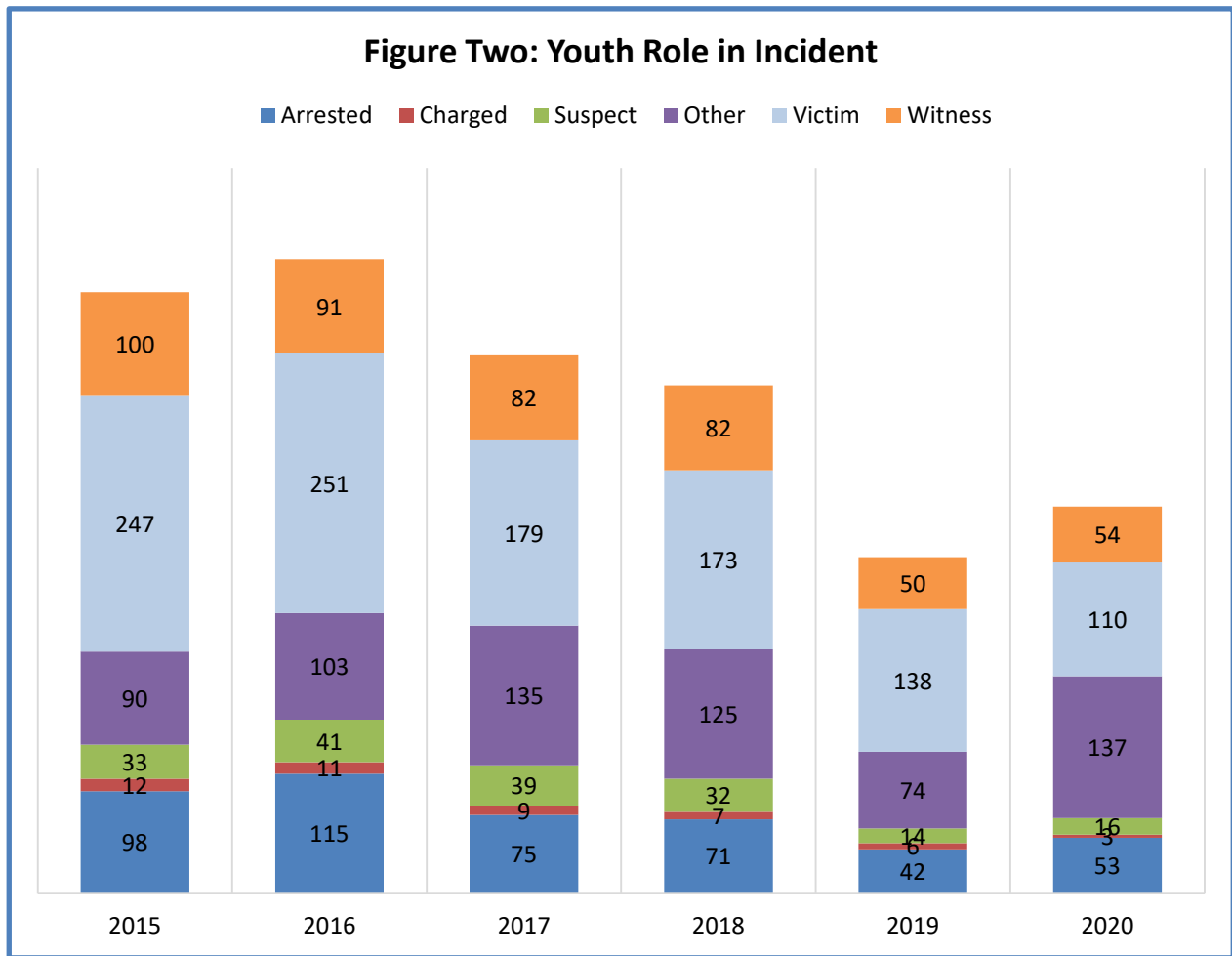
Exposure to gun and knife incidents is traumatic and is a risk factor for subsequent involvement in violence. Interventions such as Worcester ACTs and the Youth Crisis Response Team were developed to support victims, witnesses, and perpetrators of gun and knife violence, yet these interventions have been underutilized to date.

School Incident Data

In this section, we look at school discipline data for weapons on school premises as well as relevant results from high school data from 2013 and 2019 from the Worcester Youth Health Survey. Table Four shows that there has been a 71% decline in the number of students disciplined for bringing weapons to schools since 2016-2017.

Table Four: School Discipline Data for Weapons on School Premises	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	% Change
All Students	58	64	27	17	**-71%**
English Learner	22	31	7	7	**-68%**
Economically disadvantaged	46	54	21	16	**-67%**
Students w/disabilities	25	26	13	6	**-76%**
High needs	52	59	24	17	**-67%**
Female	12	11	3	6	**-50%**
Male	46	53	24	11	**-76%**
Asian	1	1	1	0	**-100%**
Afr. Amer./Black	6	8	4	1	**-83%**
Hispanic/Latino	33	40	15	14	**-58%**
Multi-race, Non-Hisp./Lat.	5	2	3	0	**-100%**
White	13	13	4	2	**-85%**

Table Five indicates that youth reported an increase in not attending school due to safety concerns and an increase in being threatened or injured with a weapon in the past 12 months. There were reported decreases in being in a fight and being bullied in school.

Table Five: Results from the 2013 and 2019 Worcester Youth Health Survey	2013	2019
Carried a weapon to protect self during past 30 days	12%	12.9%
Did not attend school because felt unsafe in school or on way to or from school during the past 30 days	3.3%	5.7%
Been threatened or injured with a weapon during past 12 months	5.2%	6.6%
Been in a physical fight at least one time in past 12 months	24.6%	19.3%
Been bullied on school property over the past 12 months	13.1%	11.8%
Been e-bullied	10.3%	10.1%
Felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that stopped doing some usual activities during past 12 months	24.8%	32.4%
Attempted suicide	7.1%	8.3%

Of significant concern is the increase in young people expressing depression symptoms. There was an increase from 1 in 4 to 1 in 3 students reporting depression symptoms from 2013 to 2019—and this was before the pandemic! There was a one percentage point increase in the number of students who said they attempted suicide. There is also evidence that Latinx youth are the least likely to have an adult, including a parent or a teacher, that they could talk to about important things in their lives.

The 2019 survey contained several relevant questions that were not on the 2013 survey:

- 4.2% reported having felt pressure to join a gang in the past 12 months
- 19.8% reported that there was a firearm in their home; 15.3% said they were unsure.

- 4.5% said they were physically hurt by someone in their family; 5.7% said they witnessed violence in their family;
- 2.2% said they were hurt physically by someone they were dating; 3.1% said someone they were dating forced them to do sexual things they did not want to do

Youth Gang Involvement

According to the Shannon Community Safety Initiative, as of 2020, there were 326 young people under the age of 25 that were considered to be gang members in Worcester (Shannon Brief, 2020). That number decreased 23% since 2017, when there were 400 young people under the age of 25 identified as a gang member (Shannon Brief, 2017). Violent crime trends among young people in Worcester have decreased during the same time period (Shannon Brief, 2020).

According to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, there are four main categories of risk factors that make youth more likely to experience gang involvement and violence: individual, family, peer & social, and community. Within the categories are characteristics such as exposure to trauma, family instability, social isolation, poor academic performance and economic exclusion, all of which are more frequently present among marginalized communities (Roberts, et al., 2011; Shambaugh, et al., 2019). The city of Worcester contains a population whose background and identities make them more likely to experience the kinds of marginalization outlined, as compared to the national average. Such identities and correlative risk factors are especially prevalent in the Main South and Vernon Hill/Grafton Hill neighborhoods of Worcester. It is no surprise then that residents in these neighborhoods are also more likely to experience gang and youth violence compared to the rest of the city (WYVPI, 2018).

Based on a resource assessment, we found nearly 250 programs that focus on prevention, intervention or suppression of youth violence in Worcester, including at least 17 specifically focused on addressing gang involvement. Among them, most are located in the downtown area or Main South (WYVPI, 2018). Theoretically, there are more than a sufficient number of programs to serve gang-involved youth; in fact, given the number of resources and gang-involved youth, each program would be able to serve fewer than twenty young gang members, and the city would still be able to claim it has reached every gang member under 25.

The quantitative data presented in this section demonstrates that a very small number of young people in the city use weapons, engage in violence against other people, or are involved in gangs. The data demonstrate a higher level of victimization, witnessing, and trauma and lower levels of support for marginalized youth, families, and neighborhoods. The data suggest increasing levels of mental health distress as evidenced by increased rates of depression symptoms and suicide attempts.
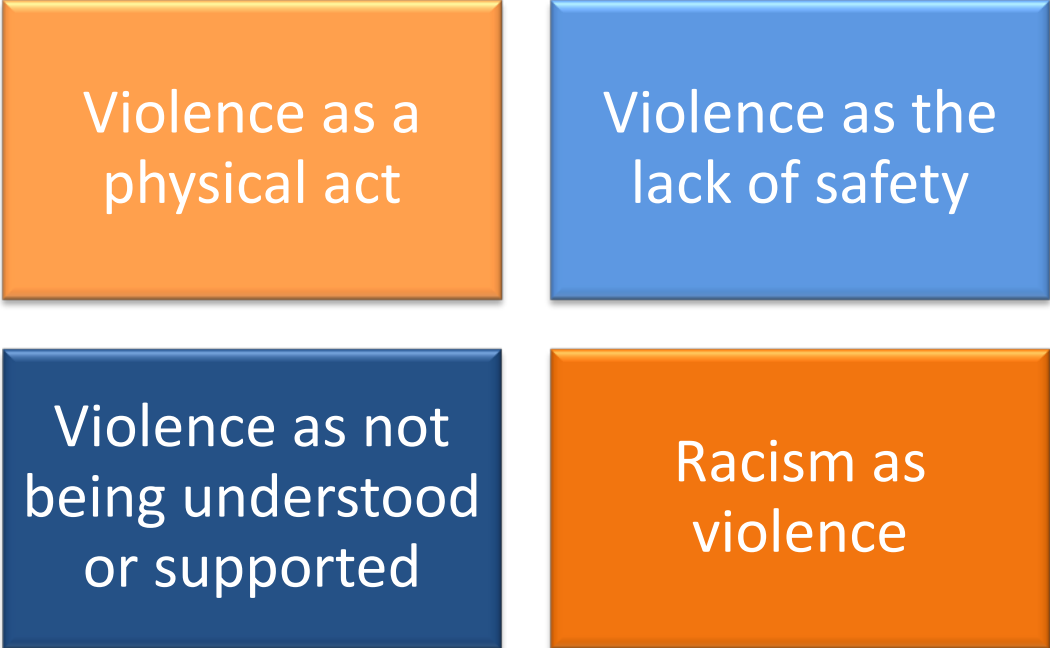
Persistent Inequities in Youth Outcomes: Qualitative Explanations

From our inquiry to understand the persistence of racial inequity in youth violence, we heard a great deal about community harm and the need for healing. We learned about harms that exist between the stakeholder groups involved in the WYVPI; tensions based on who has been involved in this effort and what voices have been left out; and the unevenness of trust in relationships among those who are and those who should be involved in the WYVPI. We organize the qualitative findings into two primary sections. The first section explores the multiple ways the community defines and understands youth violence and its causes. The second section delves into what we call the 'causes of the causes' of youth violence.

Definitions and Causes of Violence

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) defines youth violence as: "the intentional use of physical force or power to threaten or harm others by young people ages 10-24. Youth violence can include fighting, bullying, threats with weapons, and gang-related violence. A young person can be involved with youth violence as a victim, offender, or witness."

Respondents from diverse backgrounds and perspectives expressed multiple definitions of violence that fell under the following four categories.

Violence as a physical act	Violence as the lack of safety
Violence as not being understood or supported	Racism as violence

Violence as a Physical Act

- Some respondents defined violence in the physical sense, similar to the CDC's definition. Violence could be a group or solo act and include victims, perpetrators, and witnesses.

- Respondents defined violence as:
  - *"some injury to another"*
  - *"the use of weapons to perpetuate or threaten injury"*
  - *"when there is a clear victim and perpetrator of physical harm involving young people under the age of 25"*

- Youth defined violence most literally in the physical sense. In a focus group of young men, they defined violence as:
  - *"punching, shooting, stabbing, and drugs"*
  - *"something that happens when you want to get revenge or get back at someone"*
  - *"it's random, it's being at the wrong place at the wrong time"*

Violence as the Lack of Safety

- Other respondents defined violence as a lack of safety. One said it was, "not feeling safe in your own community." Another mentioned that "fear makes them [youth] hold a weapon." This suggests that youth may enact violence out of a need to protect themselves when they feel unsafe. Our respondents shared:

- *"I also think that those sorts of relationships and gangs or cliques or however you want to define them also grow out of a place where people are looking for safety. Like I don't think people join gangs to hurt people specifically. I think they join gangs to have a place where they belong and a group of people that will have their back in a world where they might feel that no one else does."*

- *"I was talking to a kid a couple of weeks ago. I was like, 'yo, how did you get involved?' He said, that he came from Lowell and started hanging around guys in Plumley becasue he met them at school. All of a sudden, the guys from the south associated him with being in that crew. Everytime they'd ask him, he would say no, I'm not east side. But it all changed when he was walking home and a group of guys jumped him. He was like, 'yo, if they're already associating me with these guys then I might as well get down and have some protection and go to war with them.' So that's something you hear. It's not a choice, they're forced into it...they run to the streets for protection."*

Violence as not being understood or supported

- Other respondents suggested that violence is "not all about guns and shootings, there is more to youth violence than that." Respondents discussed how violence is about not being heard, understood, or supported. As the following quotations from interviews convey, we heard that violence is the lack of mental health support, lack of authentic mentorship, and the lack of someone to listen to you:

- *"It's all ongoing. It's just a matter of limited resources for all of the staff. There is a limited amount of resources for cultural awareness or better understanding of mental health. Sometimes trainings are just trainings. Huge lack of resources for that and youth can quickly identify when their teachers don't understand where they are coming from and what they're feeling."*

- *"The best way to prevent youth violence and any kind of violence, is to eliminate the existing needs that aren't being filled. Violence doesn't just come from nowhere. A lot of times it comes from a place of desperation and specifically financial desperation. If we could address that I think, [it] would actually be the most effective thing that we can do."*

- *"I come from a place where like, if you're not in the gang, you're an enemy of the gang. So you have to figure it out who you're going to be. You're going to be in, you're going to be out? And I think that the kids find families within those gangs. We see gangs, and we automatically think the worst, right? Violence, that hurt and people that taking from people, and they're selling drugs, they're buying drugs, that's what we think of a gang, but if you talk to these kids, above all of that, they see somebody who cares if I'm eating, somebody who cares if I have clothes on my back. I might have to sell drugs for him. But guess what, he's buying my wardrobe. I might have to go and beat somebody up for them. But guess what? They made sure I ate last night. You know what I mean? So - we don't understand, we don't understand the structure of a family because we come from a place where the family is the least important part of the structure. And it's sad, but it's the truth."*

Racism as Violence

- Racism was expressed as violence against people of color. Black community members discussed needing to protect each other due to the systemic racism that they face. Other stakeholders discussed how youth of color are more likely to be labeled as problematic or punished differently than White youth. As expressed by our respondents:

- *"So what ends up happening is that even though the diverse population has been increasing, and even though there are very important enclaves that are very positive from the many different wonderful groups that live in the city, the sense of non-belonging and oppression that continues to be perpetuated by the influential groups is so high, that that families and people and youth still feel that they don't belong. And I think that when you have dynamics like that, people really have a very hard time finding purpose in life. They begin to look at other influences to give them a sense of purpose. And once that happens, then there are breakdowns, you know, internally in people, in the way that they are relating to others and the environment... that have nothing to do with developing community. There are groups that are very effective at developing community, but they are under-resourced, and they're doing an incredible job. But the resources are not enough to spread that wonderful work to influence more youth. So whenever youth have no access to that, or families have no access to that, then that group of youth and those families are at the mercy of more oppressive dynamics, you know, that basically reinforce that there is no purpose, that there is just no purpose on so many things."*

- *"Overall, we live in a racist, sexist, patriarchal, misogynistic society, capitalist society. And that you see that punishment meted out and that power taking over. So you know, in the hierarchy of who perpetrates violence--white, cis-gender white males, right? And the ways we do it, whether that's in a physical way, whether it's in a systemic way, in terms of how we socialize and who we consider neutral, that's important. You know, even as we talk about people of color, which is fine. I always say we can't in a racist society, which is why I don't like the term but it's politically expedient sometimes, but I don't like the term because it makes white seem neutral, like white isn't a color in a racist society."*

Causes of Violence

- Rather than understand violence as something individual youth do to each other, we started to see violence as the impact on youth when organizations are under-resourced, understaffed, or staffed with people who lack deep understanding of young people's situations and experiences.

Inaccessible and missing resources & support	*"Youth hold a lot of anger. If they don't have anyone there for them, they hold it inside, which leads to suicide and mental health issues. Kids go through a lot of stress in life and don't have no one to talk to or anyone to be there for them." --Assessment interview* *Violence is not having access to resources. Violence for for us is about not having infrastructure, childcare, etc.--Assessment interview*
Lack of safe spaces	*One of the things is just not having enough safe places. A safe space is where they can be, check in, and be heard. I feel like they are not available, especially for gang involved youth. I feel like they deal with violence with more violence. It's just how they react and respond to it most of the time. Or like internalizing it, right, and then they go to drugs, alcohol to escape that feeling they are having. It goes back to not having those safe spaces to process what really happened. Process trauma, which is the violence, and, unpack what's really going on, in their minds and in their bodies. So, it's just kind of left there, instead of being able to get a release and understanding.--Assessment Interview*
Under-resourced community supports (e.g. youth workers)	"Pockets" of people in Worcester dedicate their time to working with youth. These youth workers frequently have experienced the same challenges that youth are currently experiencing, therefore they are particularly suited to assist their development. However, these youth workers often lack resources or may compete for the same resources, and are unable to work on a united front.
Social determinants of health	Many respondents mentioned poverty, lack of social safety nets, lack of quality childcare, and lack of affordable housing, as causes of violence. Relatedly, other respondents mentioned that a lack of meaningful employment opportunities for youth causes violence.

In our work to understand how people define violence and its causes, we heard about a series of 'lacks' that are experienced by youth and families. Specifically, we heard about a lack of…

- Safe spaces
- Support
- Things to do
- Social safety net
- Access to mental health resources
- Mentorship
- Someone to listen to them
- A stable home
- Employment
- Education
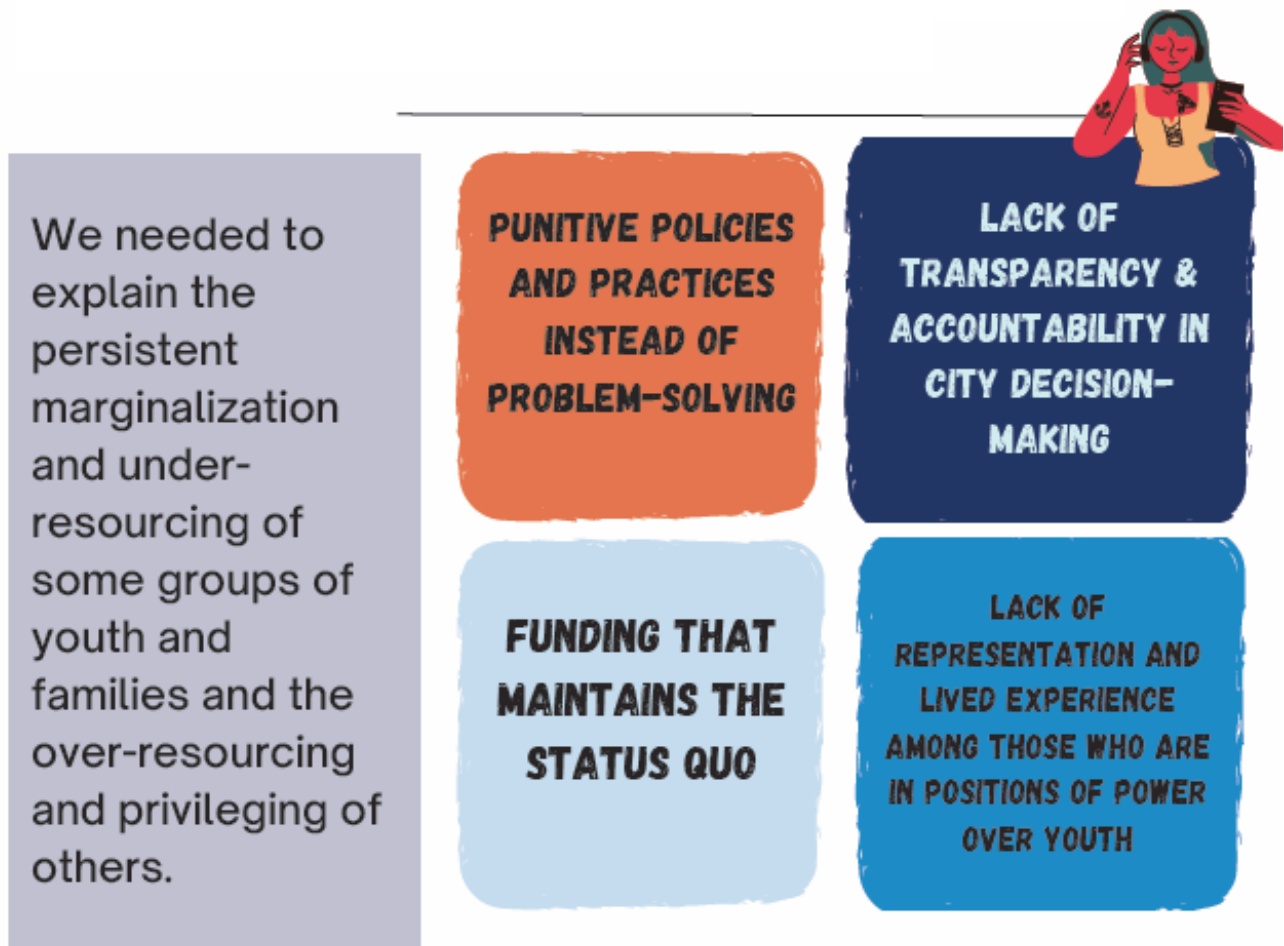- Tools on how to avoid violence and break generational cycles of violence

Interventions that propose to reduce youth violence must address these community-level 'lacks' and focus on why the needs of young people who are at higher risk for engaging in violence are not being met.

While some interviewees mentioned "social disorder" and "gangs" as drivers of violence, these can be encapsulated by the needs of youth, like the need to be protected and safe, not being met.

The picture that emerges is the persistent marginalization and under-resourcing of youth and families as a primary cause of violence.

The Causes of the Causes

As we engaged in discussions about definitions and causes of violence, it became clear that much of what we experience in Worcester has been described and analyzed in the literature on youth violence. Over the past six years, the WYVPI has worked intentionally to address much of what has been and continues to be identified about youth violence. While there may not have been surprises about what we learned about the causes of youth violence, we felt our focus on racial inequity in youth outcomes was leading us into important territory. We realized that what we were hearing about were really the "Causes of the Causes" of persistent racial inequity in youth violence.

We needed to explain the persistent marginalization and under-resourcing of some groups of youth and families and the over-resourcing and privileging of others.

PUNITIVE POLICIES AND PRACTICES INSTEAD OF PROBLEM-SOLVING

LACK OF TRANSPARENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY IN CITY DECISION-MAKING

FUNDING THAT MAINTAINS THE STATUS QUO

LACK OF REPRESENTATION AND LIVED EXPERIENCE AMONG THOSE WHO ARE IN POSITIONS OF POWER OVER YOUTH

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.

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?**

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.

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.

"That position of school resource officer. What is that? That's a presence in a uniform standing in front of me, there's nothing else past that. They need to remove that position. And they need to put these kids in places where there's somebody that they can go to and say, I want to tell you my truth without you running with it. Without you using it against me without you pitying me. That's the youth mentality now - I will never show you my weakness, because you're going to turn it around and use it against me."

"Alternative schools. I truly do love them. I love the effort that they try, the logic behind it is meant to be helpful. Do I think it ultimately helps? No, because these kids are graduating not knowing how to read and write. They don't know how to spell. They can't even read a chapter book. And you're expecting them to go into the world and get a job and know, understand, and read the documents that they have in front of them? I think the alternative schools has a good framework. I understand the intention, but…"

"As a community we are failing them and setting them up to fail. Then when they grow up and go out into the community, we are dissatisfied with who they become."

"We have a gang database that you can wind up in by being a gang member, knowing the gang member in your family or your friends, or just living in a neighborhood where there's more than a certain percentage of identified gang members. You can be gang-identified in Worcester and therefore in the entire state gang database, just by where you live. And that changes your life. You will be contacted aggressively by the police, a lot, if you are in that database."[4]

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[4] There is a community perception that a gang database exists. The WPD state that a gang database does not exist.

"I thought we didn't do 'Stop and Frisk,' we say we don't do 'Stop and Frisk,' and yet here we are both together, watching 15 kids posted up on a wall, a block south from Clark in front of whatever it is now, what used to be Uncle Sam's Pizza. And she was like "oh, well, they're gang involved."

"The public schools, they are there five days a week, from 7am to 3pm. That's the majority of their day our youth are in school - in a safe space with mature adults to guide them. And when you're not speaking to them in a positive way, and you're continuing to put them down? What would be the expectation? There, the youth are doing exactly what I expect them to do when people talk to them the way they do. You know? If there was more positive language and more of focusing on the good things they do instead of the bad thing. So of course, you're gonna address the bad things, but you don't have to make it a point. Don't say, 'Oh, nice of you to show up today'. No, be happy they came to school today. Instead say, 'Hey, good morning. Oh, I'm so glad you're here today. We're gonna have a great day!'"

LACK OF TRANSPARENCY & 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.

"Don't be worried about 'Well these are all the good things we've done.' If you're going to listen you have to listen. Don't go into that meeting saying 'We've done this, we've done this, we've done this.' It sounds defensive, and who cares? It's not enough. So please listen to people. That's where it starts. You may not be able to do everything, you may not even agree, but let's engage in some real earnest conversation and dialogue."

"I think one of the main things is we have to allow our youth to be a part of the conversation, be a part of building whatever communities we're trying to build for them, whatever programs are trying to create for them. They have to be the leaders in all of that, so there's no way it's gonna work with - with us, as the adults just kind of saying, dictating, saying, oh, we know what's best for you."

"It's the fact that people don't address their own biases. From what the news have shown there has been plenty of white perpetrators of violence that were given a cup of water when they're arrested, drove through the McDonald's drive thru to get food and yet, there are Black men who get knees to their neck and die when somebody is saying I can't breathe. So, I wish there was one answer that kind of summed it all up. But I think it just goes back to the fact that people do not address their own biases. It has to do a lot of self-reflection and self-checking in order for you to go out and think clearly."

"And there's no transparency. That's not part of the process. So, like with ShotSpotter, when that happened, people mobilized around that issue that had already been decided. They were just deciding how MUCH they were going to spend on it. So people are protesting things that have already been decided and they didn't know about it. Even the funding for the police budget to increase last year, folks were just up in arms and folks were calling in for 2-3 hours of public testimony. But they [police] were going to get it. Protests and rallies and those things should be held prior to decisions already being made, but you don't know when those decisions are being made. So we get exhausted."

"How can we change policies of youth in Worcester without representation?"

"I think this city is built on a lot of the same people who been in this position for way too long, in that if you had new, young - even if they're white, I'm fine with that. I just think there needs to be a change of hierarchy in the city. And not just like a city manager or something, but like, over - like, Worcester public schools, city managers, politics, all of it. When do people retire? A new group of people, minority groups are in the city now. You have to change with the time, you cannot try to enforce what was old today and hope that it works because this is a new set of youth. There's sex trafficking, kids being kidnapped, there's all types of horrible things happening because of social media, and you still want prehistoric policies and procedures to work today?"

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.

"I would really love if agencies would collaborate more than fight each other. I understand everybody having their own mission, and their vision, and agenda and that's needed to make the world go round. But if there are so many agencies that have similar programs - and I was like 'can you imagine if we all just put our brains together' but then everybody is like 'who's going to get credit for it? Whose name comes first? If politics wasn't so involved in it and we were just doing the work to do the work, the city would have some really awesome programming, but money talks and people's pride gets in the way and it's unfortunate but… each agency had to reinvent the wheel instead of us just like adding a tire, let's add a tire, add a tire - and then we have a whole car. I think there is so much more competition than there is collaboration."

"The amount of resources that it takes to really do this stuff well is expensive. I don't think it's rocket science. But like resources are really necessary. And like real resources, like I mean, the amount of money it takes."

"The other thing is, I just, I just think it just comes from like, being able to see the strength within people, right. I don't think we need more agencies. They are sort of like being redundant with providing more resources. There's a whole lot of resources that just aren't - they're just not making the mark, and that they're not successful. So, if we can sort of like reel them in and say, hey, maybe try it from this angle. And, again, empower them. And, you know, allow the families and the youth to just speak, and be heard, and take a minute to process what's being said."

"For the young men I work with, there's work that needs to be done in order to build that level of responsibility, way of thinking… when it comes to like, just to show up for programming. … Like real talk, the young people that we're working with, historically…[are] not good for your summer youth work model. They [funders] need certain results to say, x percent entered, x percent came out and they ended up going on to this. And so if [they are] continuing to see that that's not happening, [they aren't] going to take a risk. They're going to take their risk with someone who's more likely to complete than not. And the young people that we're working with? They are less likely to complete."

"Prevention and intervention are always underutilized and underfunded, but if you truly want to see the numbers go down in the jail, which will take a while, and if you truly want to see kids getting through the process and having the best chance in life, you've got to do more in these programs."

"So not just throw money at something, but really, like, invest in the longevity of programming and things like that, which is I know, it's kind of like a pipe dream. But yeah, that's, I think those are the necessary steps, you know, those are the things we need. And it just boils down to how much you know how much we care as a community as a system. And as adults that are trying to support these kids, how much do we really want to invest our time and energy?"

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. We selected these quotations to demonstrate the depth of knowledge of community members and their immersion in these issues. 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.

"You see how the kids act out when they get angry? I was one of those kids. I was one of those kids. I didn't give anyone an opportunity to sit down and talk to me. I wanted to hurt everybody and anybody who I felt like they were close to me, and that's why I know what these kids are doing. I can see it, you know what I'm saying? You know, it's really about how much effort we put into sitting down with the kids."

"I've recognized in my own career and the experience that I had, that letting kids see that somebody who looks like them, who sounds like them, who might live next door to them, definitely sets them up to feel like, if she could, I can."

"You teach your job, when you go home, it's easier to do that and ignore anything else that's coming out with being a teacher, or working out of school, or working in a boys club or working in a community of kids. It's easier to turn that button off and go home and ignore anything else that could happen. It is easier.

And in a lot of cases that's the road to take, especially if you're trying to lay low. But I'm seeing it through a different lens that most of the educators, most of them administrators in the city haven't. They haven't lived off of Pleasant Street. I don't think I've met one person that's lived in this neighborhood that I've worked with. One of my students lives right here behind my mom's house, and it blew his mind to see me sitting out here with the kids! You don't see people come around here in positions like that."

"It can't just be one person trying to move forward, you can't just have one person running a cleanup. You can't just have one person doing free haircuts for these kids. It has to be a community effort. When I say community, I don't mean the mayor. They have to keep their hands out of it, because it comes down to politics with them. The people in the city that complain about this violence. Look at Bike Life. Right? They wanted to provide them with a space to get them off the damn streets. Yes. What happened to that? It's a great idea. In theory, yeah, let's give these kids a place because I'm sick of beeping at them when I'm driving. Now it's personally affecting you. Not because hey, this kid built that bike from scratch. I want to see what he can do with something else. Not because hey, I see this kid all over the city, but I've never seen him with an adult. I see these kids riding through traffic, but I've never - I've never seen one of them when they get hit by a car. Have they been seen? No, we don't see past that - we saw the theories look good. And it sounded good for the image, right? Yeah, we're gonna give these kids a place to go. We're gonna have a place for them to go and ride their bikes and nobody's gonna bother them. We might even put some ramps in there – in theory it sounds good. But that's as far as it went, in theory, right?"

The Community is the Table: Recommendations for Next Steps

The WYVPI has invested resources and instituted many effective practices over the past several years in response to youth violence. The 2021 assessment supports the continuation of many of these practices. Yet, our focus on persistent racial inequity in youth outcomes revealed a strong need to acknowledge and repair past harms in order to foster trust and healing in the community. Accordingly, as we envision the next steps, we considered the following questions:

- How might we align WYVPI stakeholders to address youth violence in ways that center the voices of those most impacted; acknowledge the harm caused by past decisions, structural racism and systems of oppression; and create an accountability mechanism that diminishes or eliminates power imbalances when decisions are being made?
- How does a community build trust?
- What might cause people who are not close to or have personal experiences with violence to care more deeply and with compassion about the issue?

We recognize that to move to answers to the above questions, we must engage in a process that…:

- Challenges assumptions about youth.
- Safeguards against perpetuating harm against those with lived experience of violence.
- Centers anti-racist, reflexive, and trauma-informed practices.
- Holds systems and structures of power more accountable as a community.
- Fosters unity among community-based organizations.
- Addresses community needs and requests with depth and authenticity.

There is emerging consensus that the following action steps will begin to answer these questions and will support Worcester's movement toward greater equity.

1. **Develop authentic mechanisms for youth and community decision-making in the WYVPI.** To address some of the problems we heard in the assessment, we recommend the creation of a structure for community members to set priorities for youth violence funding, specifically a **Community Advisory Board (CAB)** consisting of young people and community members affected by violence. The process to create the CAB would involve two steps.

   a. Hold a youth-only version of the Community is the Table meeting that was held on December 15th to initiate a youth-adult partnership in this work. There is a strong consensus that young men and women should be invited into all discussions concerning their well-being. They should contribute to problem formulation and solution development. They are not simply victims and perpetrators; they can also be change agents and partners.

   b. Engage in mapping current efforts and strategies. This mapping would include an analysis of power and explore who benefits and who is harmed by the policies and problems affecting youth and community members.

The CAB would be based on youth and community-defined visions for what it would mean to reduce youth violence in Worcester. It would fully consider a full range of strategies, and ensure youth and gang violence prevention and intervention were as well funded as suppression efforts. The CAB would work with local funders on developing more grounded and realistic performance expectations. The CAB would ensure stakeholder accountability to youth and community priorities. It would also advocate at the state level for needed changes in funding guidelines.

The primary outcome of this work would be the creation of a Community Advisory Board to set priorities for Worcester's youth violence funding, including Shannon, SSYI, and other federal, state, and private funding. This CAB would seek ways to repair divisions created by the current funding practices and foster community unity and consensus on Worcester's approach to youth violence reduction, including a strong focus on meeting the basic material needs of youth and families. Ensuring that young people have food, water, shelter, materials for school, and adult support is the starting point to increasing safety and decreasing violence.

2. **Align the Worcester Youth Violence Prevention Initiative with the 'Community is the Table' vision.** Acknowledging the critical importance of building solutions alongside members of the community and centering the voices of those who have experienced the most harm due to systems of youth violence in Worcester, the WYVPI has identified a need to better align understanding about violence between formal leadership and community members.

This area of action involves the development of shared language, definitions, and principles. This work would lead to the creation of a set of **Community Agreements** that would guide decision-making about policies, practices, and funding. Imagined as an inclusive process, the development of Community Agreements would facilitate community awareness of and involvement in WYVPI efforts. This process would also signal that those in positions of leadership and power have done their own work on understanding structural racism and have acknowledged their institution's role in contributing to past harms and have a willingness to take an active role in community healing and repair.

The primary outcome of this work will be a shift in formal leadership's perspectives and behaviors in ways that align with community's understanding of the 'causes of the causes' of violence. Building trust takes time. It takes listening skills, humility, reflection, self-awareness, and consistency. This work will increase the likelihood that the efforts of WYVPI will have an equitable and positive impact on youth and families.

3. *Elevate the WYVPI's Youth Resource Network (YRN) as the center of community dialogue and information sharing regarding youth violence.* The YRN was established by SSYI and Shannon street outreach workers and case managers in 2016 out of their need to gain access to resources for youth facing highest levels of marginalization in the city. They meet monthly with other youth service providers and sectors impacting youth and families. The YRN's goal is to offer information and face-to-face contacts to enable a smooth referral process and relationship building opportunities to enhance the capacity and effectiveness of case managers and outreach workers. The YRN includes an email distribution list for service providers to ensure that all youth related information, programs, events and job opportunities are distributed community-wide. The Youth Resource Network also serves as a space for community discussions related to youth violence prevention and intervention in the City of Worcester.

The primary outcome of this work is to dismantle the current barriers and gatekeeping as it relates to information sharing and collaboration among community-based organizations. The YRN will be a trusted space to share and distribute information and resources that support the city's most under-resourced youth and families.

Concluding Thoughts

At the December 15th community meeting, some participants left inspired to take action. Others expressed that they have been part of similar conversations for years and have yet to see any real change. When reflecting on the theme of punishment instead of problem solving, some participants expressed that the system is in fact doing exactly what it is supposed to do; real change would require making those who hold power and resources uncomfortable. It would require that community organizations put their differences aside and collaborate on the solutions. Participants recognized the need for more dialogue and strategic planning, AND the need to stop talking and take immediate action.

- Immediate action includes community members creating space for their healing.
- Immediate action includes continuing to build relationships with young people to help make their lives better.
- Immediate action includes addressing root cause issues such as structural racism and the woeful lack of mental health and trauma-informed support for young people and youth workers. This support was seen as potential alternatives to the current focus on punishment.

Ultimately, it was recognized the young people must lead this effort and so another immediate action is the creation of mentoring communities surrounding young people.

To conclude, we want to acknowledge that the Community is the Table vision requires building trust across multiple stakeholder groups. While we won't be able to move faster than the speed of trust, there needs to be a commitment to take steps toward a true partnership between formal and community leadership so that all can use their power, knowledge, connections, and skills to affect transformative change **with** young people and families in Worcester.