



## BOSTON HIGH-RISK YOUTH NETWORK

# NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF HIGH-RISK YOUTH IN BOSTON

SEPTEMBER 2005

**A Report To**  
**THE BOSTON CAPACITY TANK**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**The Boston High-Risk Youth Network** - The Network was created by a partnership consisting of the Black Ministerial Alliance, United Way of Massachusetts Bay, Emmanuel Gospel Center, and Boston Ten Point Coalition (hereinafter referred to as the Partners). With a three year federal Compassion Capital Fund (CCF) grant, the Partners convened over 130 people and involved them in a year-long planning process to better meet the needs of high-risk youth, ages 12-21.

This diverse group, representing both private and public agencies, service providers, funders, and policy makers, faith-based and secular programs, and grass-roots and business groups, met monthly throughout 2005. Two priority groups, created from the larger group, were responsible for conceiving this report and designing the research, for hiring Navin Associates to conduct the research and write the report, and for guiding the research and approving this report.

The Network defines youth at high risk as youth who are: aged 12-21; court-involved; truant or out of school; gang-involved; a chronic substance abuser; homeless; or pregnant and/or a parent. The definition is intended to help providers and policymakers design and target services to address factors that put youth at high risk.

### **Facts and Figures about Risks for Boston's Youth**

- The number of Boston youth, aged 10-19, grew 12% to 76,184 between 1990 and 2000.
- 40% of Boston's children live with one parent.
- Males lag females in nearly all education-related indicators.
- The Boston Public Schools report an annual dropout number of 1,350-1,600. Official dropout rates do not account for dropouts from middle school which have been rising rapidly in number since 1995.
- Over 700 seniors in 2003 and 600 in 2004 left school without passing the MCAS.
- In Boston, 7,827 youth were neither in school or work in 2000, including those with and those without diplomas. This represents 7.5% of Boston's total 16-24 year old population.
- Only 30% of Boston's dropouts in the 16-19 age group was employed in 2000, giving Boston a rank of 44<sup>th</sup> among the nation's largest 50 cities.
- Twenty-three percent of all children in Boston, almost 25,000, live in intense poverty.
- Suffolk County Juvenile Courts handle 2,275 cases of youth under 18 annually.
- Over 5,300 children under 18 are under DSS supervision in the Boston Region.
- Boston's annual homeless census in 2002 counted 1,367 homeless children and youth, part of a rising, multi-year trend.
- AIDS is a leading cause of death among people age 25-44; it is highly likely that many people in that age group are being infected as teens.

## **Key Findings from Primary Research**

### Characteristics of Youth at High Risk in this Report

Seven key informant interviews and six focus groups were used to gather the primary data upon which most of the findings in this report are based. For the purposes of this report, “youth at high risk” refers to the youth that are being served by the people who participated in the interviews and focus groups. The organizations involved included city and county government departments, community-based organizations, and faith-based organizations. The general characteristics of these youth at high risk are as follows.

- Most are teenagers in their middle to late teens.
- Most are male with the exception of girls with CHINS cases.
- Most are African-American or Latino.
- Most are truant, at risk of failing in school, or dropped out.
- Many are from single parent homes.
- Many are using alcohol and/or drugs, mostly marijuana, with some group-specific harder drugs of choice (i.e., Asians and ecstasy, whites and oxycontin and heroin).
- Concern about being a victim of violence is a pervasive fear of youth at high risk, creating many obstacles to where they can go and what they can do.
- Pregnancy and parenting is an on-going if decreasing issue, although it may be on the rise for certain populations, e.g., Vietnamese youth.
- Homelessness is not an issue for most youth, but it is a key concern for many youth who are released from DYS without a viable option for shelter.

### Concept and Definition of High Risk Youth

There was widespread agreement with the Network's concept and definition of “high risk youth”: court-involved; drop out, truant, or failing in school; gang-involved; a chronic substance abuser; homeless; pregnant and/or a parent.

### Effective Strategies for Working with High Risk Youth

Based upon the opinions of the participants in interviews and focus groups, what works with youths at high risk is to:

- 1) establish a trusting relationship with the individual youth;
- 2) listen carefully to learn what help s/he wants; and
- 3) connect him/her to services that will provide that help.

The best way to accomplish this is to have very good staff, preferably staff that have been well trained and have a personal history of overcoming challenges similar to those the youth faces.

Some of the best methods to use in this work are:

- outreach;
- helping kids develop skills and responsibility by giving them small tasks/responsibilities and letting them fail and then try again;
- mentoring;
- working with the parents or people who are important to the youth; and

- using partnerships and collaboration to obtain services and avoid duplication.
- offering programming that is flexible enough to introduce innovative or fresh elements that are age-appropriate to the population;
- utilizing homevisits;
- knowing not only the right organization to call, but also the person within that organization who will go the extra mile; utilizing interagency cooperation and coordination; and
- appealing to the faith-based beliefs of some youth and parents.

#### Priority Needs and Gaps in Services

The responses of participants in interviews and focus groups were tallied to arrive at the following prioritized list of needs of youth at high risk and gaps in services.

##### *Prevention Services*

- Interesting and fun age-appropriate activities
- Mental health services, presented in a non-stigmatizing manner
- Services to deal with truancy

##### *Employment and Employability Training*

- Jobs for youth over 15
- Year-round jobs
- Training in how to apply for a job, keep a job, and manage money

##### *Boston Public Schools*

- Inappropriate placement of and inadequate services for learning disabled
- Lack of accountability for educational outcomes
- Lack of consistent truancy prevention policies and practices
- Ineffective methods of involving parents and interested professionals

##### *Parent Involvement*

- Failure of many parents to provide sufficient structure and support
- Unwillingness of some parents to support and advocate for their children in school or in court
- Inability of some parents to support and advocate for their children in school or in court, especially parents who are illiterate or not proficient in English
- Inadequate resources to teach parents how to advocate for their children

##### *Safety-related Resources*

- High risk youth experience violence to be a pervasive and immediate threat.
- High risk youths' planning for the future occurs in a context of violence, racism, and negative outcomes that tend to undermine their confidence in their ability to succeed.
- High risk youth tend to avoid normal social situations such as parties, pools, and roller-skating rinks, in order to avoid violent death or injury
- High risk youth tend to avoid certain "turf", in order to avoid violent death or injury
- Parents of high risk youth constantly fear for the safety of their children

- Some high risk youth are victims of and/or witnesses to violence in their homes

*Structural Issues*

- There are not enough experienced, high-quality youth workers and streetworkers, due to:
  - Funding cutbacks, such as the elimination of most of the Boston Housing Authority's 30+ youth workers
  - Very low pay
  - Limited training and
  - Limited burnout prevention policies and procedures
- There are few, if any, structures in place to facilitate coordination and sharing between and among both criminal justice personnel and youth services providers
- There are insufficient interpreters and translators in the courts, schools and other institutions

*Material Needs*

- Youth programs are confronted with youth at high risk who are hungry and ill-clothed because of their families' deep poverty or neglect.
- Some funders of programs for youth at high risk are reluctant to provide funds for youth's basic needs.
- There are few resources for a youth without a place to sleep; many stay in friends houses with or without the parents' knowledge
- Programs for homeless youth have space limitations, entrance requirements and procedures that prevent many youth from accessing the services, particularly youth who are leaving a DYS residential facility
- Some youth choose to return to DSS, DYS or House of Correction custody because they have nowhere to stay

## **Recommendations**

These recommendations are based primarily on the findings and, to a lesser extent, on the input of participants in the Partners 9/22/05 conference "Networking High-Risk Youth Services".

*Prevention/Social-Emotional Resources*

- ⇒ Make individual, family and group counseling more available and accessible to youth at high risk and their families.
- ⇒ Make prevention programs that include a) implicit and explicit messages regarding unhealthy or risky behaviors and b) alternative activities more available to youth at high risk.
- ⇒ The Boston Public Schools, in collaboration with community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, parents and other stakeholders, should develop and

implement strategies to prevent chronic truancy in elementary, middle and high schools, and to prevent chronic truants from dropping out.

*Employment and Training*

- ⇒ More public and private funding of jobs programs is needed, and more attention should be paid to developing year-round, part-time and summer job opportunities by government, foundations and CBOs.
- ⇒ More programs should offer occupational skills training in a youth-oriented model, and should include pre-employment training, a wage or stipend, and post-placement support.

*Parent Involvement and Advocacy*

(These recommendations include input from participants in the Partners 9/22/05 conference “Networking High-Risk Youth Services”.)

- ⇒ Parents should be persistent in trying to obtain needed resources for their children.
- ⇒ Organizations that serve youth should make information about services readily available and accessible to parents, including those with low English proficiency or low literacy.
- ⇒ Organizations that serve youth (e.g., BPS, DYS) should provide and publicize formalized structures to engage parents.
- ⇒ Organizations that serve parents and their families should be organized to be user-friendly, e.g., easy to find what is needed.
- ⇒ Organizations that serve parents and their families should train their staffs to utilize a strengths-based approach in which they partner with parents who are trying to help their children, rather than blaming parents for perceived past or present parenting practices.
- ⇒ Short and long term parent support groups should be made available to parents of high risk youth who are confronting similar issues.
- ⇒ Parents of high risk youth need to be able to access a range of services that enable them to address their own issues including depression. A Survival Guide for Parents would be helpful.
- ⇒ Public and private sector service providers should collaborate to reduce service fragmentation, which is a barrier to effective services, and increase service coordination.
- ⇒ Community-based and faith-based organizations, with their more flexible and responsive structures, should provide support and leadership in helping parents implement these recommendations.
- ⇒ Funders should require parent advisory boards to be built into most youth programs they fund.

*Safety*

- ⇒ Maximize opportunities for police officers and youth at high risk to get to know each other on sight.
- ⇒ Increase dramatically the number of streetworkers who work with high risk youth.
- ⇒ Raise the salary and the amount of training of streetworkers to levels closer to that of police and probation officers with whom they work closely.
- ⇒ Ensure that politics and bureaucratization do not compromise the essential nature of the Streetworker Program.
- ⇒ Increase the number of center-based programs for youth at high risk, particularly in hotspot areas.
- ⇒ Provide more resources to pregnant and parenting youth at high risk, and to their children, in order to prevent their children from becoming youth at high risk.
- ⇒ Ensure that youth released from DYS residential programs have an appropriate place to stay and are connected to necessary support services.

*School-Related Services*

- ⇒ Lessons learned from BPS' initiatives with small schools and small learning communities should be applied system-wide.
- ⇒ The BPS should develop mechanisms to communicate with afterschool programs and counseling and case management programs in the community about individual students' needs and services.
- ⇒ The BPS should collaborate with parents, and organizations that represent them, to develop and publicize formalized structures, which will engage parents and provide them with resources to support their children's' education, including training in educational advocacy.
- ⇒ The BPS should collaborate with parents of special needs children and organizations that represent them to ensure that students with special needs receive appropriate services.
- ⇒ The number of community-based and faith-based alternative education programs for youth should be expanded and supported. The BPS should routinely communicate with, and provide support for, these programs as long as they are contributing to the education of Boston's youth.
- ⇒ Community-based and faith-based organizations should collaborate with the BPS to provide more outreach, stronger relationships, and academic and support services, in order to engage more youth in MCAS tutoring and remediation programs for struggling students and for those who have already left school.

- ⇒ The BPS, in collaboration with parents, experts in the field, and community-based and faith-based organizations, should develop a comprehensive dropout prevention policy in which all teachers and administrators are trained, with the objectives of preventing truancy, increasing grade promotion rates, and offering students the help they need to succeed educationally with students of their own age.
- ⇒ The BPS should provide annual reports to parents and the community on each school's attendance, dropout, grade retention, exclusion, and test data, in order to increase the system's accountability to parents and the larger community.

### *Infrastructure*

- ⇒ Funders, organizations that employ those who provide direct services to youth at high risk, and direct service workers should undertake a serious and sustained campaign to increase the compensation of streetworkers and youth workers to levels that can support a family.
- ⇒ CORI restrictions, which prevents the hiring of candidates with a personal history that includes overcoming challenges similar to those faced by youth at high risk, should be examined closely and, within prudent limits, reformed in order to take advantage of the experience of ex-offenders who are otherwise qualified to work with youth at high risk.
- ⇒ Funders, organizations that employ those who provide direct services to youth at high risk, direct service workers, and local colleges should create a collaborative, interdisciplinary mechanism to explore the feasibility of a citywide training program for working with youth at high risk.
- ⇒ Funders, organizations that employ those who provide direct services to youth at high risk, direct service workers, and local colleges should undertake a collaborative examination of the Child Development Associate National Credentialing Program and the Family Development Training and Credentialing Program. These are possible models for a youth development training and credentialing program that would enhance the quality of youth work by defining, evaluating and recognizing the competence of those direct service staff who work with youth.
- ⇒ Organizations that employ those who provide direct services to youth at high risk, with the support of funders, should provide frequent in-service opportunities for training, networking/team-building and stress reduction, including low/no cost perquisites such as opportunities for direct care workers to take their families to a ballgame or harbor cruise.
- ⇒ Organizations that provide direct services to youth at high risk should, with the support of funders, utilize formalized structures to communicate with each other in structured, systematic ways in order to:
  - Help their staffs know both what resources are available and the relevant eligibility requirements;
  - Foster personal contacts across agencies;

- Help their staffs coordinate their efforts regarding individual youth and more broadly;
  - Develop collaborative initiatives and networks that can achieve efficiencies, maximize impact and attract funds;
  - Develop unified messages to their funding sources on areas of consensus; and
  - Facilitate capacity-building of individual organizations serving youth at high risk.
- ⇒ Funders and organizations that provide direct services to youth at high risk should support efforts to build organizational capacity at a system-wide level.
- ⇒ Funders and organizations that provide direct services to youth at high risk should develop ways to assist organizations, who are *not* focused on youth at high risk but whose staffs naturally come into contact with them, by assisting them to better understand and interact with youth at high risk.
- ⇒ Funders and organizations that provide direct services to youth at high risk should assemble and effectively present data regarding unserved youth and regarding services provided, numbers served, and outcomes.

*Material Needs*

- ⇒ Programs that serve youth at high risk, funders and policymakers should consider ways to provide needed food and clothing to youth who are unable to obtain them otherwise.
- ⇒ Programs that serve youth at high risk should use food as a means to attract and nurture youth.
- ⇒ Funders, policymakers, housing providers, providers of services to youth at high risk and other community leaders should collaborate to develop transitional and supported housing for youth with nowhere to stay.

*Other Areas*

- ⇒ Funders and organizations that provide direct services to youth at high risk should develop or ally with existing provider/consumer coalitions to plan and advocate for additional resources and/or policy changes in the following areas:
- Flexible innovative programming
  - Services for older teens
  - Translators / Interpreters for parents at school and court
  - Training in appropriate use of CORI
  - Evening activities
  - Streetworker resources
  - Substance abuse treatment beds
  - Foster homes

## **INTRODUCTION**

**The Boston High-Risk Youth Network** - The Network was created by a partnership consisting of the Black Ministerial Alliance, United Way of Massachusetts Bay, Emmanuel Gospel Center, and Boston Ten Point Coalition (hereinafter referred to as the Partners). With a three year federal Compassion Capital Fund (CCF) grant, the Partners convened over 130 people and involved them in a year-long planning process to better meet the needs of high-risk youth, ages 12-21.

This diverse group, representing both private and public agencies, service providers, funders, and policy makers, faith-based and secular programs, and grass-roots and business groups, met monthly throughout 2005. It formed three Priority Groups: one focused on identifying gaps in youth services; one charged with setting common, measurable goals for youth services; and one focused on expanding employment and job services for youth. The first two priority groups were responsible for conceiving this report and designing the research, for hiring Navin Associates to conduct the research and write the report, and for guiding the research and approving this report.

Each priority group identified goals and activities to strengthen the system of services, in two phases. Phase 1, funded by the CCF grant, culminated in September 2005 with the Networking High Risk Youth Services Conference, the launch of both a website for youth service practitioners and the Boston Youth Survival Guide, and two reports – this one and *Promising Practices in Preparing, Hiring and Sustaining High Risk Youth in Employment*. Phase 2 activities are projected to start in October 2005.

**What Is a Youth at High Risk?** - The Network defines youth at high risk as youth, aged 12-21, court-involved, truant or out of school, gang-involved, a chronic substance abuser, homeless, pregnant and/or a parent. The definition is intended to help providers and policy makers design and target services that address risk factors that can keep youth from growing up healthy. There is a broad sense that a significant group of youth are at the brink of very troubling life outcomes, that this group is seriously underserved, and that changes in services, programs, partnerships, and targeting could have a major positive effect.

Some people (including some of our key informants and focus group participants) view *all* youth who grow up in neighborhoods with high incidence of poverty and violence (or, perhaps, more geographically limited ‘hot spots’) as being at high risk. Others are concerned with the consequences of labeling youth with the negative language of “high risk.” Still others see the need to describe clearly the unique challenges and assets of the sub-set of youth defined by the Network as youth at high risk, so that appropriate supports may be offered.

This debate is complicated by the struggle for scarcer and scarcer funds, which pushes nearly all youth programs to declare their population as high-risk. One can hardly blame them, especially since virtually all youth have unmet needs, even if some youth have more critical needs. Moreover, many funders prefer to see the maximum number of youth served per dollar invested, with programs for youth at highest risk almost always suffering by comparison. The Network may be able to work with funders to create standards for describing services and populations, increasing understanding of the need and cost-

effectiveness of targeting some services for youth truly at high risk.

Researchers in substance abuse have defined three categories of youth and sets of appropriate services for each; the theory is equally applicable to violence, delinquency, dropout, etc.

- *Primary prevention* is for all youth in a community or school and usually consists of positive development opportunities plus education on the dangers of and ways to avoid risky behavior.
- *Secondary prevention* targets youth who have already engaged in risky behavior, but not at the most serious or prolonged levels (e.g. first-time offenders or moderately truant students).
- *Tertiary prevention* is for youth in serious and/or chronic trouble. These youth are typically removed from the mainstream, by incarceration, out-of-family placement, separate education programs, etc.

Youth at high risk are in the secondary or tertiary category. It is the secondary category where attention and new thinking are perhaps most needed, since these youth are often left in the home and community without the services they need to avoid an increasing spiral of risky behavior. Secondary prevention may be the most cost-effective focus for expanded services, yet it is very often overlooked, because the numbers of youth are lower and their problems more challenging than primary prevention youth, yet they do not (yet) command the attention of tertiary youth.

The definition of youth at high risk and related questions could be debated endlessly. Are these the right criteria or should others (e.g. victims, perpetrators, or witnesses of family or street violence; academic failures) be used instead? Should we require youth to meet *two* or more of these criteria before we count them as high-risk (despite the fact that studies show that youth who meet any of the criteria are likely to meet others)? What about youth behind closed doors who are quietly wasting away without creating an acute burden on society? Whatever the definition, the key features of youth at high risk are that they are in trouble now, and they need specialized resources to change possible negative life outcomes.

**The Needs of All Youth/The Needs of Youth at High Risk** - There has been much research and writing about developmental needs of adolescents. Before discussing the particular, distinct needs of youth at high risk, the following summarizes some of these well-documented developmental needs:

1. Basic material needs – Adequate food, clothing and shelter are the building blocks of all healthy human development.
2. Safety - All youth need to feel safe and protected at home, at school, in the workplace, and in the community. Most youth take these things for granted, but those who cannot usually do not simply ‘get used to it.’ Instead, they sacrifice opportunity (e.g. losing jobs or becoming truant) and also suffer damaging psychological consequences.

3. Consistent behavioral consequences - Children and youth need to be rewarded for pro-social behavior, and not rewarded for anti-social behavior, with some consistency over time and in all arenas of their lives: home, school, work, and community. Lacking this, they will acquire negative and destructive habits, have difficulty forming positive individual and group relationships, and suffer low self-esteem. As identified by Glasser (1965), schools and youth programs can establish consistent environments with opportunities for youth to learn the consequences of their behavior.
4. Nurturing adult and community relationships - Youth need positive relationships with strong adults serving as nurturers, mentors, and role models. This not only teaches ways to meet life's challenges, but also gives them a positive bond with or stake in society. As they move from early to late adolescence, parents tend to decrease in importance and adults in other arenas become more critical.
5. Skill-building activities - Youth need *lots* of opportunities to explore and develop skills related to career and education as well as those that are purely avocational or fun. This includes an array of activities such as athletics, arts, academics, trades, hobbies, and social, environmental, and cultural experiences. This prepares the youth for future challenges and also builds self-esteem.

These needs all apply to youth at high risk as well as all other youth. Yet most of the interviews, focus groups, and research we drew from recognized a need for something more. Youth at high risk generally cannot avail themselves of opportunities, relationships, or therapeutic milieus unless someone goes the 'extra mile' to make these resources accessible and usable by youth who may be lacking in educational, vocational, and social skills, disengaged and hard-to-reach, and habituated and prepared for failure. Extensive outreach, intensive adult relationships, structured milieus, and incremental, individualized activities may all be needed to achieve success.

## **SNAPSHOT: A PROFILE OF BOSTON'S YOUTH AT HIGH RISK**

This Snapshot uses secondary data to profile Boston youth at high risk, including quantification of the risk factors and obstacles that hinder their progress. This Snapshot is based primarily on reports, studies, and other data gathered and reviewed, that are specific to Boston youth and measure various indicators.

**Reading the Data** - This Snapshot contain many statistics, even though we have tried to present only data that may help service providers and policy makers determine what should be done. It is easy to jump to the wrong conclusions from a mass of data.

Too often, data specific to youth at high risk are not available and many statistics about the overall youth population do not tell us anything about youth at high risk. For example, data show rising rates of college and post-secondary training enrollment among Boston Public Schools graduates, but this good news may have no meaning for youth at high risk, if all the change is occurring among populations that are not at high risk. Similarly, falling rates of teen pregnancy could mask a lack of change (or perhaps even increases) among youth at high risk.

### **General Demographic Background**

Boston's population of 589,141 in 2000 was up 2.6% from 1990. The number of pre-teens and teens, ages 10-19, grew 12% in that decade, to 76,184. The stress that this level of growth can place on schools and other services, especially in an age when funding is flat or shrinking, can result in major increases in the numbers and problems of troubled youth.

By 2010, Boston's child and youth population will decrease, except for the 15-19 year old cohort.

Most Boston residents are now persons of color. The 2000 census found that 37% of children and youth were black, 25% white, 24% Hispanic, and 7% Asian-Pacific Islander. During the 1990s, a 40% increase in Hispanic children and 22% increase in Asian children offset a 26% decrease in white children, while the city's percentage of black children remained constant at 37% (BCYF, 2003). The Boston Public Schools have even higher percentages of students of color than the city at large: 47% black, 30% Hispanic, 14% white, and 9% Asian (BYC, 2004).

Forty-six percent (46%) of Boston's children live with both parents and 40% live with one parent. The remaining 14% live with grandparents (a growing category), other relatives or non-relatives, or in group settings (BCYF, 2003).

Forty-eight percent (48%) of Boston children and youth live in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan, exceeding these neighborhoods' proportion of the total population (BCYF, 2003). A disproportionate number of youth in these neighborhoods have been identified as delinquent and dropped out of school, exceeding their higher-than-average share of the city's youth population. (See Discussion at the end of this Snapshot.)

Yet the fastest growing neighborhoods in the 1990s in terms of increases in youth were East Boston (36%), Hyde Park (22%), West Roxbury (20%), Charlestown (18%), and Roslindale (13%). Mattapan and Dorchester each grew by a healthy 11%. (BCYF, 2003)

Males lag females in nearly all education-related indicators (attendance, graduation, and college enrollment). For youth of color, those gaps widened in the 1990s. Large gaps between males and females of color also persisted around violence, arrests, injuries, and other problems -- this is despite increasing involvement of females in these problems.

## **Education**

Much evidence indicates that school is a key factor in the lives of young people---even for those who avoid it---and that the school experience will bear heavily on later outcomes. The structure and curricula of that experience thus matter a great deal, but are beyond the scope of this needs assessment.

**Dropout** - High school graduation is a major determinant of later career, economic, and social outcomes, so dropout is a key issue for youth at high risk. Dropouts earn far less money in the short and long term and are far more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system. An estimated 6,846, or 10%, of Boston's 20-24 year olds in 2000 were dropouts. Another 2,598 additional dropouts were 16-19 (BYC, 2004). The Boston Public Schools report an annual dropout number of 1,350-1,600 (CLMS, 2003).

The four-year Boston Public Schools dropout rate (a standard measure that counts the percentage of entering ninth graders who will not complete school or move to another area) is 32%. This is 2.5 times the statewide rate (BYC, 2004). Official dropout rates do not account for dropouts from middle school. Youth of color are disproportionately represented among dropouts (BYC, 2004). In 2000, Hispanics accounted for 45% of Boston's dropouts ages 16-24, even though only 15% of this age group is Hispanic (YTP, 2005a). (See Discussion at the end of this section.)

Clearly, youth who have left school without a diploma are at high risk, yet so are nearly 10% of graduates who remain unengaged in college, training, or employment. (CLMS, 2003)

Over 700 seniors in 2003 and 600 in 2004 left school without passing the MCAS. (Starting in 2003, no one can graduate without passing.) In effect, these youth finished school, but were 'made' into dropouts. More dropped out earlier when they concluded that they would never pass. Hispanic and African-American youth are over-represented among youth who fail the MCAS. Several researchers and educators suggest that the MCAS has raised the dropout rate; more recent dropout figures are needed to investigate this further (YTP, 2005a).

**Middle School Dropout** - Data are limited, yet middle school students also drop out, including 152 in 2000-01, concentrated in just four schools. That number is triple what it was just four years before. Since youth under 16 cannot officially leave school, these dropouts are all 16 and older and their overage status is surely a major factor in their decision to leave. As at the high school level, this primarily affects youth of color; 87% of these dropouts are African-American or Hispanic (Wheelock, 2001; FairTest).

Truancy is closely tied to dropout. In 1996-97, 23% of all Boston Public Schools high school students (4,058 students) missed over 27 days of school (a student missing more than 27 days cannot pass). Thirteen percent (13%) of middle school students (1,312 students) fell in the same category (BPS, 1997). Once a youth is out of school, several factors make further trouble probable: he or she is marked as a failure, discards pro-social values and aspirations, has lots of idle time, and spends that idle time with similar youth and adults.

## **Employment**

**Unemployment** - Sharp increases in youth unemployment, in Boston and across the US, are probably due to both cyclical and structural factors. Cyclical factors include a weak economy in the early 2000s and a growing youth and young adult population, which have combined to squeeze the youth job market. These factors should eventually reverse, easing the pressure. Yet structural factors, such as the continued disappearance of manufacturing and low-skill jobs, may make it difficult for young people without a strong education and/or with other risk factors to gain a foothold in any decent career-track employment (CLMS, 2003).

**'Idle' Youth** – In Boston, 7,827 youth were neither in school or work in 2000, including those with and those without diplomas. This represents 7.5% of Boston's total age 16-24 population (YTP, 2005a). Nationally, teen employment has dropped dramatically since 2000, from 45.2% (of the total workforce) to 36.8%---the lowest ever---so the number and proportions of these 'idle' youth in Boston are likely to be even higher today (BYC, 2004).

Of these idle youth, 45% are dropouts. Conversely, only 30% of Boston's dropouts in the 16-19 age group were employed in 2000, giving Boston a rank of 44<sup>th</sup> among the nation's largest 50 cities (YTP, 2005b). This contrasts sharply with Boston's relatively high rates of graduation and college enrollment, yet both extremes exist, side by side.

Seventy-two percent (72%) of this group of idle youth in 2000 were African-American and Hispanic, again far out of proportion to these groups' representation in the total youth population (see Discussion at the end of this Snapshot). Nationally, the proportion of all African-American youth ages 16-19 who were employed during the year fell to 19.9% in 2003. That was the third consecutive year of decline (from 28.9% in 2000) and the lowest rate in over 50 years (CLMS, 2004).

**Student Employment** - Ample data on teen employment show that it correlates strongly with reduced teen pregnancy, increased graduation rates, and successful employment at least into the early twenties. These correlations are even stronger for youth of color and for non-college bound youth, a population that is more likely to include youth at high risk (PIC, 2004). The importance on teen employment was cited in the primary research as well, though increasing teen employment is a difficult goal at a time when it is at record low rates nationally and locally.

## **Poverty**

In 2003, nearly twenty percent of the overall Boston population lived in households with

incomes below the federal poverty line. Roughly twenty-three percent of all children in Boston, almost 25,000, live in intense poverty. (BPHC, 2005) These children and many with slightly more resources may have neither sufficient food to avoid hunger nor adequate clothes for the weather or to avoid ridicule. The 2005 federal poverty level for a family of four is \$19,350.00. By contrast, the Massachusetts Self-Sufficiency Standard for a family of four is \$54,612.00.

### **Delinquency and Gangs**

**Arrests** - Arrests of Boston youth, ages 14-19, dropped 22% (5,438 to 4,265) from 1997 to 2001 (BCYF, 2003) and another 11% (to 3,814) through 2004 (BPD, 2004). Although arrest data sometimes reflect policing policies and other factors rather than actual crime, other data appear to confirm that youth crime has been declining significantly for several years. For example, from 1993 to 2001, emergency room treatment of gun and knife injuries to 10-19 year olds declined from 208 to 97.

These declines have been broad in terms of neighborhood and type of crime, through arrests for drugs and for aggravated assault have only declined slightly and arrests for vandalism and for disorderly conduct have risen, each by nearly 50%. Most encouraging, arrests for all Part I crimes (including violent crime, larceny, burglary, and vehicle theft), except aggravated assault, have declined, though by not quite as much as for other age groups (BPD, 2004). Although the arrest data reviewed indicate a decline in arrests of young women, there is evidence of a surge of violence perpetrated by a tough group of chronic female perpetrators (Smalley, 2005).

**Court Involvement** - Suffolk County juvenile courts (covering Boston, as well as Chelsea, Winthrop, and Revere) handle 2,275 cases of youth under 18 annually. Aside from the few additional youth tried as adults, the most serious and/or repeat juvenile offenders are committed to the supervision of the Mass. Department of Youth Services. At any time, about 700 juveniles in Boston are committed to DYS; the majority remains at home and a portion are placed in secure or non-secure institutions, group homes, or foster care. Roughly 600-800 additional youth are detained by DYS before trial. A few of these will eventually be committed to DYS; the majority will be placed on court probation and sent home (BYC, 2004).

Incarcerated youth and other serious juvenile offenders are at very high risk. Half to three-fourths of incarcerated youth are estimated to have a mental health disorder and more than half have substance abuse problems warranting treatment. An estimated 50-75% of incarcerated youth will be re-arrested (AECF, 2005a).

**Gangs** - Data on gangs are not readily available, but the consensus is that gangs have declined in size and significance since their peak in the early 1990s. Researchers at that time found that violent youth crime was concentrated among a small number of serially-offending, gang-involved youth. Approximately 1,300 youth, ages 14-24 and belonging to 61 gangs, were well-known to community members, youth workers, and the police. They represented 1% of the city's youth population and 3% of the youth population in the neighborhoods where they were based. Gangs were small, poorly organized, and

neighborhood-based, tied to turfs that collectively totaled 1.7 square miles, or 3.6% of the city's area. Yet they accounted for about 60% of all homicides and similarly high proportions of other violent crimes (Braga, 2002).

## **Child Welfare and Foster Care**

**Youth in Out-of-Home Placement** - Child abuse and neglect investigations by the Mass. Department of Social Services (DSS) Boston Region (including Boston, Brookline, Chelsea, Winthrop, and Revere) rose from 2,210 to 2,674 in 1998-2001. Only a fraction of investigations result in removal of a child or youth from the home, yet funding more than need for out-of-home placement determines the actual number of placements. For the three-year period of rising reports of abuse, foster care placements fell from 1,151 to 912 (DSS, 2005).

Recent data show 5,354 children under 18 under DSS supervision in the Boston Region. Twenty-two percent (22%), or 1,155, were in out-of-home placement, including 1,074 in foster care. For youth alone, 723 were in placement, including 359 in foster care, 278 in group residences, and 86 in other placements. Because youth are more challenging than children, a much smaller proportion of youth are placed in foster care (DSS, 2005).

Nationally, 40% of children in foster care are black, far exceeding the proportion of blacks in the overall population. Black children are more often placed in institutions than other ethnic groups. Placements last longer on average and children are less likely to be reunified with birth families (AECF, 2005a). Of DSS-supervised children in its Boston Region, 47% were Black, 24% were white, and 35% were Hispanic, overlapping the racial groups (DSS, 2005).

**Youth Aging Out** - A critical systemic problem for youth in placement is that most of them 'age out' at 18, ending their placement and other support from DSS. Since few of them return to their birth parent(s), they are left to fend for themselves at an age that few would consider to be 'adult.'

As with incarcerated youth, youth in placement are at very high risk. As many as 55% drop out of high school, 25% are homeless at some time, and almost 50% are arrested as juveniles. More than 50% of young women who have been in foster care have children early (AECF, 2005a).

## **Homelessness**

It is even harder to obtain data for homeless children and youth than for homeless adults, yet Boston's annual homeless census in 2002 counted 1,367 homeless children and youth, part of a rising, multi-year trend (ESC, 2004). Domestic violence and substance abuse are major contributors to homelessness and homeless youth are at high risk for many problems, including involvement in prostitution.

## **Pregnant and Parenting Teens**

The number of teen mothers has steadily declined in Boston, from a high of 55 births per 1,000 teen women to 35 in 2000 (BCYF, 2003). Yet at the same time, the proportion of

mothers, ages 16-24, who are single, has steadily risen over several years. In 2000, 78.7% of mothers, 16-24, were single, with a total of 3,167 single mothers in that age group. (BYC, 2004)

Young single mothers are much less likely to complete high school or college and less likely to work than others in their age group, both in the short and long term (AECF, 2005). In Massachusetts, 58% of young single mothers under 25 live in poverty; the poverty rate for single mothers 25 and over is 25%. The challenges of young single mothers are especially significant, since they affect outcomes for both mothers and their children.

## **Substance Abuse**

Teen smoking in Boston has declined since the early 1990s, while marijuana and alcohol use have risen. In the 2001 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 42% of high school students reported using alcohol in the past 30 days and 22% reported using marijuana. Fifteen percent reported using tobacco, down from 21% in 1993. Forty-two percent (42%) of high school students had used marijuana at least once in their lives, compared to 37% in 1998 and 31% in 1996. Alcohol use has not changed from previous surveys and matches national norms (YRBS, 2001). Male and female students were equally likely to use most drugs. Lifetime use figures for other illegal drugs are 3% for heroin, 9% for ecstasy, 8% for cocaine, 6% for methamphetamines, 5% for non-prescribed steroids, and 13% for other drugs such as inhalants, LSD, PCP, mushrooms, Ketamine, Rohypnol, or GHB (EOPS, 2004).

From 1992 to 2003, the number of youth admissions to DPH-funded substance abuse treatment programs increased 72% but is down 25% since the high of 4,057 in 1998. The decline is due to a reduction in program capacity rather than a decrease in need (EOPS, 2004).

Beyond trends in the prevalence of substance use among the overall youth population, there are few data on the subpopulation of youth at high risk.

## **HIV and Other Sexually Transmitted Diseases**

In 2001, Boston had the 11th largest concentration of AIDS cases in the US. As with most large cities, Boston's share of AIDS cases is far out of proportion to its total share of state population.

Data from the past decade shows that the HIV epidemic has shifted to a younger, more female, and more minority population. Because of low testing rates and the lapse of time between infection and diagnosis, it is hard to quantify youth incidence of HIV/AIDS, yet AIDS is a leading cause of death among people age 25-44 and it is highly likely that many people in that age group are being infected as teens.

In Boston, youth knowledge and reported use of preventive practices has increased (YRBS, 2001). In 2001, 73% of sexually active teens reported using a condom at the time of their last intercourse. White teens had the lowest rate of condom usage, with only 55% of sexually active teens reporting use of this protection. African-American teens had the highest rate, with 80% reporting condom use (BCYF, 2003).

There are not specific data about how this trend affects youth at high risk, who are likely to be at higher risk to begin with and more resistant to prevention education.

## **Discussion of Snapshot Issues**

1. **Ethnic Disparities in Risk Status** - Despite favorable data in such categories as condom use and use of hard drugs, a major issue emerging from the data is the disproportionate representation of black and Hispanic youth in nearly all categories of risk, e.g., dropout, unemployment, arrest, incarceration, poor MCAS performance, and out-of-home placement,. What is the cause of this disparity?

Some, but by no means all of the disparity is related to poverty. We do not have a clear answer to what is clearly a long-term, complex, multi-layered problem, but a long trail of research data gives us considerable perspective. Clearly, this is not just a Boston problem, but a national problem

To ascribe the problem to personal failings of youth of color or their families would be 'blaming the victim' and would ignore data showing that most youth of color graduate high school and succeed by many other measures. Rather, the evidence points to two interrelated factors:

- a. Some educators, employers, medical and other professionals, and even youth and families (as cited later in this report) hold low expectations for and negative images of youth of color. (HGSE) These expectations and images are fed by pervasive, long-term media and cultural images of youth of color, and have very negative consequences for the youth, their families and communities, and our nation.
  - b. Institutionalized discriminatory practices continue to exist in many sectors of this society including criminal justice and education. "Discrimination ... may be deliberate, reflecting invidious bias. Or it may flow from ostensibly neutral decisions that nonetheless produce an unjustified racially disparate impact. Both types of racial discrimination contradict the principles of justice and equal protection of the laws". (HRW) Racial discriminatory practices can result in differences in how and when youth are arrested and convicted, or in how schools handle the educational needs and behaviors of students (as cited by several people later in this report).
2. **Overlapping Risk Factors** - Throughout our review of data, there is ample evidence that risk factors are very highly correlated, e.g. the high proportion of incarcerated youth who have substance abuse problems (AECF, 2005a), high rates of teen pregnancy, arrest, homelessness, and dropout among youth placed outside the home (AECF, 2005a), and high rates of unemployment and underemployment among dropouts (BYC, 2004).
  3. **Small, Concentrated Numbers of Youth at High Risk** - For some of the most serious risk factors detailed in this Snapshot, the actual number of youth affected is relatively small in terms of absolute numbers and percentages of Boston's total youth population. This is partly due to the overlap cited above. Institutions and support agencies find that the same youth are repeatedly truant, repeatedly arrested, repeatedly placed outside the home, etc. The Boston Police and partners have had some success reducing crime by

carefully tracking and marshalling both enforcement and support resources on a relatively small number of gang-involved youth who are on several institutions' 'radar.' Such an approach may be applicable for other relatively concentrated groups of youth who at high risk of the most serious problems.

## **FINDINGS**

### **PRIMARY SOURCE DATA: FOCUS GROUPS AND KEY INFORMANTS**

#### **Introduction**

This section includes: the questions that were put to key informants and focus groups (respondents); key informants reactions to the Network's definition of youth at high risk; a description of the youth served by respondents; strategies that respondents found effective in working with youth at high risk; resources that respondents found to be useful for youth at high risk; priority needs of youth at high risk and gaps in services; and a summary of key findings.

#### **Key Informants**

##### **Participants**

Key informant interviews were conducted with seven people. These seven were selected from a much longer list of names that was compiled from suggestions made in the initial focus group of high risk youth service providers, suggestions by the Partners' staff and consultants, and suggestions by High Risk Youth Network Priority Group I. The same set of questions was used for each interview; they are presented below and contained in the Appendices. The presentation of findings is generally organized according to these questions.

The persons selected as key informants were intended to represent a cross-section of the types of personnel who are involved with services to high risk youth, directly or indirectly. They included two directors of youth programs (one in which participation is voluntary, and one in which participation is mandated by the court), a Boston Police Department (BPD) official, a legal advocate for youth, a representative of a local foundation, and an official of Boston Centers for Youth and Families (BCYF) with knowledge of BCYF's Streetworker Program. Navin Associates conducted the key informant interviews.

##### **Questions**

The following questions were used for all key informant interviews. (See Appendices for full protocol.)

1. Please tell me about the nature of your (organization's) involvement with high risk youth.
2. I've told you this project's definition of high risk youth. How does it fit how you think of the kids you deal with? How do you refer to or think about them?
3. Describe and characterize the high-risk youth that your organization serves. (Ages, gender, ethnic group, etc.) What particular challenges do they face? (Court-involvement, school truancy/drop out, gang involvement, substance abuse, homelessness, pregnant/parenting, violence, unemployment)

4. What are the most effective strategies you know about to help high-risk youth? What organizations utilize these strategies effectively in Boston?
5. Who or what are your trusted resources for helping youth who are – Unemployed? Court-involved? Struggling or out of school? Gang involved? Abusing substances? Without a place to stay? Pregnant/parenting? Victim of violence? Violent?
6. What resources or services do you have the most trouble locating for these young people? Why is this the case?
7. If you could change the system to better serve high risk youth, what changes would you make?

Do you have any parting thoughts about serving high risk youth?

## **Focus Groups**

### **Participants**

The High Risk Youth Network Priority Group I: Gaps in Services, in consultation with staff of the Partners and consultants, decided that the focus groups would target the following populations:

- Providers of services to high risk youth
- Personnel in criminal justice system-related organizations
- Parents of high risk youth
- High risk youth who are committed to the Department of Youth Services
- High risk youth who are engaged in non-DYS high risk youth programming

Partners' staff identified and invited the focus group participants. The actual make-up of the first two focus groups included some of both target groups, service providers and criminal justice personnel. Information about the participants is included as part of the record of each focus group that is included in the Appendices. Stipends of \$25.00 were provided for youth and parents. Navin Associates took notes during and tape recorded all focus groups, and facilitated all focus groups except DYS-committed youth, which was facilitated by the Chairperson of Priority Group I.

In addition to the five planned focus groups, Navin Associates attended the August 24, 2005 meeting of the City-Wide Youth & Violence Prevention Task Force at the Ella J. Baker House. Those in attendance responded to the focus group questions for personnel in criminal justice system organizations. Those attending included representatives of the Department of Youth Services, Boston Police Department District B-3, Mass. Housing Finance Agency security service, and the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office.

### **Questions**

The focus group protocols for the service providers and criminal justice personnel both asked each individual to introduce him/herself, his/her job and organization, and included a version of the following questions.

- What are the most effective strategies you have used or witnessed to help high-risk youth?
- What is the greatest challenge to serving high risk youth?
- What are the hardest services or resources to find for high-risk youth?
- What Boston-area entities and/or individuals do you find most useful in serving high risk youth?

The criminal justice focus group participants also were asked:

- How well do the various aspects of the criminal justice system work with each other regarding high risk youth?

The service providers also were asked:

- Do you involve parents in your work? If so, how?
- Who is the most knowledgeable person about high risk youth that you know?

The purpose of the last question was to identify potential key informants.

The focus group protocols for parents and both groups of youth included questions that were intended to elicit:

- Their first name, neighborhood, and why they were participating.
- What youth programs or services they had experienced and found helpful.
- What youth programs or services they had experienced and found unhelpful.
- Where they can turn for help.

The parents also were asked:

- What do you think your teenager needs, that you would like help with?
- What is the one service your child needed that you just couldn't find?

The youth also were asked:

- What is the most important thing about being a teenager in Boston these days, which most adults don't get? What's the hardest thing?
- What is the best part of being a kid in Boston these days?
- When you think about the future, where do you see yourself in five years?

## **FINDINGS**

### **Definition of HRY**

The informants were presented with a definition of high risk youth as youth with two or more of the following characteristics -- court-involved; drop out, truant, or failing in school; gang-involved; a chronic substance abuser; homeless; pregnant and/or a parent.

All of the informants agreed that any youth with two or more of these characteristics were at high risk of negative life outcomes. Moreover, there was general agreement that a youth living in Boston is "at-risk", especially if s/he is Black, Latino, or Asian.

The informants generally agreed that youth with two or more of the relevant characteristics could be categorized as high risk youth; however, none seemed to find that terminology useful day to day. Rather, their clients were determined by their past or current involvement with a governmental agency (e.g., DSS, DYS, Courts), by the likelihood of their involvement with crime, or by living in a high risk area.

It appears that, when using the term “high risk youth”, the risk may be best thought of as *risk of negative life outcomes* versus the milder *risk of engaging in negative behaviors*. It is also noteworthy that all of the following were considered risk factors for youth by one or more informants:

- residing in Boston;
- residing in a BPD-defined hotspot area;
- being Black, Latino, or Asian; and
- being from a very low-income family.

### **Youth Served by Programs of Key Informants**

There were time and resource constraints that limited the scope of this research. Nevertheless, five of the seven key informants and many, if not most of the focus group participants had citywide or county-wide responsibilities, excluding the youth and parents. Thus, the characteristics of high risk youth as described herein may be assumed to be a generally accurate representation of high risk youth in Boston, although the characteristics of high risk youth in a specific neighborhood may vary in some specifics.

- Most of the clients of the programs are teenagers in their middle to late teens.
- Most are male with the exception of programs designed for girls and kids with CHINS cases.
- Most of the youth are African-American or Latino, but Asian and Caucasian youth are represented as well.
- Most are truant, at risk of failing in school, or dropped out. Much of the blame was put on the schools for failing their students in multiple ways.
- Some are using alcohol and/or drugs, mostly marijuana, with some group-specific harder drug choices (i.e., Asians and ecstasy, Whites and oxycontin and heroin). There was very little mention of crack and none of powder cocaine. Interestingly, very few of the cases handled by the legal advocacy program involved drugs, but the probation office said substance abuse was a major issue.
- Homelessness was described as a problem that was more likely to affect a youth's family than an individual youth. However, youth homelessness does occur, particularly for youth exiting DYS residential facilities. It usually is handled by staying with friends, openly or otherwise, or perhaps choosing commitment to DYS or DSS; programs reported great difficulty in finding beds for youth.
- Pregnancy and parenting was identified by only one program as a major concern, although another program noted that pregnancy among Vietnamese seemed to be rising.
- Preventing or countering the effects of street and home violence is a major concern of these programs.

- Lack of food and lack of adequate clothing were noted as problems for youth by the informant who is personally in the most direct contact with youth on a daily basis.

### **Effective Strategies**

Based upon the opinions of the participants we talked to in interviews and focus groups, what works with youths at high risk is to:

- 1) establish a trusting relationship with the individual youth;
- 2) listen carefully to learn what help s/he wants; and
- 3) connect him/her to services that will provide that help.

The best way to accomplish this is to have very good staff, preferably staff who have been well trained and have a personal history of overcoming challenges similar to those the youth faces.

Some of the best methods to use in this work are:

- outreach;
- helping kids develop skills and responsibility by giving them small tasks/responsibilities and letting them fail and then try again;
- mentoring;
- working with the parents or people who are important to the youth; and
- using partnerships and collaboration to obtain services and avoid duplication.
- offering programming that is flexible enough to introduce innovative or fresh elements that are age-appropriate to the population;
- utilizing homevisits; and
- knowing not only the right organization to call, but also the person within that organization who will go the extra mile.

Being consistent in dealing with the youth, utilizing inter-agency coordination and cooperation, and appealing to the faith-based beliefs of youth or parents also can contribute to success.

*Having a relationship with the youth is the biggest thing so they trust you and having them believe that you believe in them. I have kids that call me that I knew 10 years ago asking questions and getting advice because I had called on them. It's just taking the time to talk to them and making them see that there is other things out there.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

*It's partnership and collaborations. Everybody has a role in this. We can't forget the clergy. We can't forget probation. We can't forget law enforcement because together we can make an impact.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

*-- This program (BUYF) helps us a lot. They make it fun. It's like they know how you are and they know we can get loud. They don't let it get out of hand but it makes you want to come. When I was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I used to come here every day and a lot of times when a whole group of people had got locked up, I'd say to myself, if I hadn't*

*been here, I'd have been there and I would have a least like 4 or 5 things on my record.*

- I think like programs in general that keep kids off the streets.*
- That depends on the program. Some of them make you want to back on the street.*
- They talk to you here.*
- They help*

Program-engaged Youth Focus Group

*A lot of the programming that's around now has been around for a long time and it's not innovative. So, you have to take a look at that and try to come up with a program that is not only age appropriate but also meets their needs.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

*It's consistency. The same person saying the same thing. Everything about you has to be consistent. So that you are the same person they knew 15 years ago. I also think what works is Faith. Of all the statistics, the one that stands out with these kids is the lack of nurturing and hope. No hope for a future or careers and it fuels them and leads to more and more violence. I think that Faith is a definite component that works. I think they have to consider it when they see a kid get shot and why didn't it happen to them. I like to tell them it's because God had a plan for you.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

### **Trusted Resources**

Respondents were asked what programs they trusted or had found helpful. This question was intended primarily to gather information for a directory of those services that welcome and serve high risk youth, based upon the experience of the respondents. The list of over 111 organizations included community-based organizations, governmental organizations, and faith-based organizations. (See Appendix) The following is a list of the organizations that were mentioned in at least three of the thirteen focus groups and interviews. (Several mentions of the same organization in one focus group were counted as one mention.

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Mentions</b>
Youth Opportunity Boston	7
Bridge Over Troubled Water	6
Action for Boston Community Development	4

Boston Centers For Youth and Families	4
Ella J. Baker House	4
Home for Little Wanderers	4
Crittenton Hastings House	3
Long Island Shelter	3
STRIVE	3
Teen Empowerment	3
Ten Point Coalition	3
Youth Advocacy Project	3

**Priority Needs and Gaps in Services**

Key informants were asked “*What services or resources do you have most trouble finding for these young people?*” Focus group participants were asked a variation of this question depending on their circumstances, e.g., program staff, parents, or youth. The following presents a summary of the most frequent responses to this question. (See Appendices for a matrix summarizing all responses.)

***Prevention Services***

- ⇒ Participants in the youth focus groups emphasized the need for interesting and fun age-appropriate activities. Youth saw this primarily as a way to keep kids out of trouble and safe for awhile. Providers tended to see such activities as a way to get youth onto a positive path or to attract youth in order to connect them to needed services.

*Sometimes there ain’t too many opportunities out there for us. They might have a gym or something but then they only let us be there for a certain amount of time and then they kick us out. When they kick us out, we go stand on the block and get in trouble. Sometimes they try to put it like they try to do this and they try to do that, but really there ain’t that much opportunities out there. They think we just want to just stand on the block but it ain’t like that.*  
 DYS-Committed Youth Focus Group

*We’re too old to think like people can still help us out or help us to do things and we’re too young to be called adults. I feel like ages 16 and up to 19 get left out in the cold. They think we’re too old and we don’t have a lot of things to do.*

Program-engaged Youth Focus Group

-- *We need more things to do.*

-- *Skating rink like in the suburbs. Crime rate is lower 'cause they have more to do.*

-- *More free sports leagues and not just in the summer time. Organized sports is fun.*

Program-engaged Youth Focus Group

- ⇒ Parents complained that no counseling was available for their children until the things they were trying to prevent occurred. They also said they were treated like bad parents when they said their children needed help.

*Prevention services for family counseling. Prevention services that got her into group treatment or therapy. Prevention services for her education. All prevention. She was 13 when I tried. I went to the school for help then and there was nothing. I tried to find prevention services and could not find them. Finding affordable prevention services was the hardest thing. They offered me services after she was having trouble.*

Parent Focus Group

- ⇒ Key informants from the BPD, Streetworker Program, Probation, mandated youth program and legal advocacy organization said more mental health services were needed, although the difficulty in overcoming the stigma traditionally associated with mental illness was acknowledged.

*Schools and DYS don't address kids with mental illness. Kids are not being diagnosed and, when they are, are reluctant to accept services due to stigma, especially youth of color. Families need to receive an array of supports, one of which can be mental health.*

Streetworker Program Official

*Anger management counseling groups are a huge need. We use the 10 week program through the Court Clinic for some kids, but anger management is only one of many topics; a lot more resources are needed for this.*

Key Informant

*One thing we've found is that statistics show that 70% of the girls who get their health care needs met do not return to lock up. So, health services are critical.*

Youth Services Providers Focus Group

- ⇒ Youth service providers and criminal justice-related participants saw the need for much more attention by the schools to truancy. Participants saw a clear connection between not attending school regularly, including middle school, and later delinquency.

*Truancy is a big unaddressed issue. For example, a kid who is absent for 21*

*days and there hasn't been a call to the home. Standards vary from school to school and are not enforced consistently.*

Key Informant

### ***Employment and Employability Training***

Although jobs and job readiness programs could justifiably be called a prevention program, they were specifically mentioned so often (five of seven key informants and four of six focus groups) that they warranted a separate category.

Specific considerations included the need for jobs during the school year as opposed to summer jobs, the need for jobs for youth over 15, the need for training in interview skills, work habits, and how to keep a job, and the even greater challenges to employment for court-involved youth.

*-- There's only so many times you can go to Downtown Crossing.*

*-- Yeah.*

*-- We need jobs.*

*-- I want a job during school*

*-- When there's nothing to do, that's when trouble starts.*

Program-engaged Youth Focus Group

*-- Around our neighborhoods, there's no malls or shopping centers. You've got to travel. If you travel all the way from Dorchester to the South Shore Mall in Braintree and you fill out an application and you might not get the job. Everything is hard.*

*-- Not everybody want to dress up in a suit. Just for some interview. Some people might not have the money to get a suit.*

*-- Everything is difficult. You got look for a job and if you get committed as a YO and get an adult charge, even though you got charged as a YO, and they don't want to hire you because you got that adult record.*

*-- Sometimes kids don't want to wait for the summer to get a job. They want a job for the whole year round.*

*-- At 16 you can get a work permit and work year round and get paid year round. After school, keep yourself busy. You can get a job, work part time. That's how a lot of people stay out of trouble.*

DYS-Committed Youth Focus Group

*Kids are dying for jobs but they are not equipped to get and keep them.*

Key Informant

*Jobs for kids over 15.*

Citywide Youth and Justice Task Force Discussion

*Access to employment opportunities especially during school year, in order to provide money and to build skills and experience, especially for kids with CORI issues.*

Key Informant

*Jobs and job training, especially for kids who are court-involved because employers don't want them. Kids need jobs but they need to be trained on how to apply for and hold a job. This is major need.*

Key Informant

*Misuse and lack of understanding how to read a CORI constitute a significant barrier to employment. Employers need to know how to interpret whether items in the person's background relate to the job in question.*

Citywide Youth and Justice Task Force Discussion

### ***Parent-related Issues***

In response to the question of the hardest resources to find for high risk youth, or hardest part of working with high risk youth, many participants addressed the role of parents. Those who work directly with youth were more likely than others to connect the negative traits of high risk youth with those of their parents, particularly with the parents' failure to provide structure for their children. Some members of the criminal justice providers focus group said that there are more resources available now than ever, a somewhat surprising assertion after years of reductions in community-based social services.

*I think there are more services available now than at any given time but there's two things that prevent kids from using them: 1) lack of family support 2) fear of gangs.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

*They've never had a curfew or a structure that young people need. And I'm seeing that although they like to act tough, they want that structure. They are crying out for that structure. But they don't know how to accept it because they don't know how to socialize.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

While most programs stated that involving parents is an essential part of their approach, others noted that some youth do not have a parent who will stand up for them in school or at court, or who are so unhelpful that involving them is not seen in the youth's best interest.

*Some of them have no family support. I've had girls who were in lockup for 8 months without one visit from a family member.*

Youth Provider Focus Group

*I definitely agree with what he's saying about structure. A lot of parents aren't getting involved and you go to talk to the parents about what's going on and they don't want to be bothered.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

*Parent involvement in services for the kid. It's hard to get parents involved in services because the parents point at the kid, when really they are the problem. They provided no structure and now we have to come in and play the heavy and provide the structure they didn't.*

Key Informant

*The missing piece is the number of kids who don't have parents in the community. That's where it falls apart. Is it a foster parent, is the kid homeless, etc. Any effective model brings the parent in early and consistently. It's when the parent has never been there that it gets difficult.*

Youth Services Providers Focus Group

*We don't do a lot of work with parents. The kids don't want it. Doing homevisits often leads to filing 51As, which the kid doesn't want. A lot of the parents are so needy that they can't focus on the needs of their kids.*

Key Informant

Sometimes the parents are doing their best, but both are working so much there is little effective structure.

*Sometimes I've gone into homes and I couldn't believe what I was seeing 'cause the parents actually do care about their child, but they have no idea what their child is doing.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

Parents were the most likely group, but not the only one, to identify their need for help with advocating for their children and themselves, including providing training for them.

*I was a woman in a domestic violence shelter 7 years ago. ... I've come through it but I've learned that you have to be a ball-buster. I'm sorry but you have to be. If they call you and say that they are going to call you back by 2 o'clock and they don't call you, call them back. That's how you have to do it to take care of yourself and your kids. You have to be your own advocate.*

Parent Focus Group

-- *They don't know the circumstances and they assume that the parent is unfit.*

-- *As parents we need someone who will help us to write a letter to make sure that we are heard. If I had to do this myself, I wouldn't have been able to because I was too emotional. So, I called my girl friend and told her that I needed help. There should have been someone in the system to help me.*

Parent Focus Group

-- *I thought a shelter would have more resources and I've found out more from other people than from the staff.*

-- *You have to be your own advocate and be persistent.*

-- *I'm not a persistent person. I'm the one who someone will say that they are going to call them back and I wait for them to call.*

-- *You have to be persistent.*

Parent Focus Group

*-- There are a lot of parents who are illiterate or whose first language is not English who just can't do it. And therefore, they are denied their rights. You need to help the parents and the child together.*

Parent Focus Group

*A lot of the challenges we face focuses around bringing parents back into the loop. Often there is a reversal of roles because due to the child being more fluent in English and better understanding the culture, the parent becomes dependent on the child as a translator. This gives the child power over their parents. The parents become disempowered and detached from the child's daily activities.*

Youth Provider Focus Group

The youth said very little about their parents directly, but spoke at length about the need for positive role models.

*Another thing is that a lot of young people aren't aware of the positive role models in their community. We need to be more aware of the positive role models in our area. ... Say if a kid didn't have a father figure growing up, and that can cause a lot of problems. A lot of youth don't know that there are role models in the community, and that's important so that they can be positively influenced by them.*

Program-engaged Youth Focus Group

*Facilitator: Who in the community has been good to you?*

*-- I got neighbors telling me what to do but they are not as important as my parents and siblings. They are my mental and emotional support. But this one neighbor, he be coming up to me with this folder of applications of jobs that I should fill out.*

*-- Me? Right now, my caseworker. Growing up? Nobody.*

DYS-committed Youth Focus Group

### ***Safety-related Resources***

Participants in five of six focus groups and one key informant spoke about an unsafe environment and identified a need for more resources to help keep youth and their families safe.

The youth were intensely aware of physical danger and the restrictions it places on their lives.

*Girls fight over real stuff but boys they fight over stupid stuff. It's like girls got a problem, they just fight. But with boys it's not no more fighting, they get a weapon. Girls will fight before they go grab a gun, but boys will just leave right away to get the gun. That's why it's so dangerous.*

Program-engaged Youth Focus Group

*-- Young people are afraid of being a statistic. A victim of the street. Killed*

*or locked up or doing time for somebody else. Being institutionalized and letting the streets take your mind.*

*-- Even if you're doing right. We're young. Know what I'm saying. And we like jewelry and things. So if we walking down the street wearing our jewelry and things, but you can be a victim. Somebody can like your chain, so they shoot you cause of that. You can always be a victim. Just scared about being a statistic like he was saying. Wrong place at the wrong time.*

DYS-committed Youth Focus Group

*-- I don't like parties.*

*-- Yeah, parties aren't the place to go nowadays 'cause there's different areas that don't get along and such.*

*-- Parties are like a hearse. Like everybody's just sitting in the hearse until something happens.*

*-- Something gonna happen.*

*-- I don't go to Chez-Vouz or parties. You won't catch me at any of those places.*

*-- Swimming pools are like a party. If you can be touched, you can end up dead. Bullets ain't got no name on them. Death is the only thing that is promised to you. Life ain't even promised to you. Know what I'm saying. I can be coming out of my front door and he could be walking down the street, car come by and shoot at him and hit me.*

DYS-committed Youth Focus Group

*-- Trailblazers – like you can't wear any jersey around that area that has Trailblazers on it or you get shot, the way I heard it. It's a gang thing.*

*-- They're called OP.*

*-- The Blazers jersey he was talking about. That's real life around here. You can't wear that.*

Program-engaged Youth Focus Group

*-- What's the hardest thing about being a young person in Boston? Trying to stay safe.*

*-- Yeah.*

*-- Yeah.*

*-- I think it's worse for boys. I don't know about females*

Program-engaged Youth Focus Group

Parents discussed both their fear of violence and its very real effects.

*-- I live in a hot zone where crime is high.*

*-- Is that like certain streets?*

*-- They have it zoned off where there is a lot of crime, shootings, etc. In my area, shootings are the problem. My children can't walk the streets 'cause their lives are in danger.*

Parent Focus Group

*I'm just trying to keep my son safe. I don't want him on the streets this summer and I don't have a viable summer program, 'cause I know if I can't get my son out of the city of Boston, then I'm not concerned about my son.*

Parent Focus Group

*-- I have a 16-year-old daughter who was assaulted badly when she was 13 and never really recovered.*

*-- My daughter was murdered.*

Parent Focus Group

Providers also recognized the unsafe streets and the effects on youth. Some went on to discuss violence in youths' homes.

*Kids will go 10 miles out of their way just to avoid going on the wrong turf. Some places they just won't go.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

*And it comes back to the home again. Young people aren't taught how to socialize. They don't know how to socialize whatsoever. That's why there can't be a party without something going on.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

*A lot of the good kids were dressing the same as the bad kids and they (BPD District 2) were afraid the good kids were going to get targeted just because of the way they were dressed.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

*I also think we've got to look at domestic violence. I look at the police reports and 52% of the police calls in the housing projects in Grove Hall is connected to domestic violence. We need to find ways to help these women. The young kids see this violence and it gets ingrained in them. We've got to find some kind of intervention or some linkage to help these women get out of this cycle of domestic violence. That's an extraordinary figure, 52%.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

*Sexual abuse is often there and it's the same story over and over again. You have a runaway that gets arrested, placed under DSS or locked up and no one is looking into what is going on at home that caused this child to runaway. The police are not holding the adults accountable. So, the kid runs away, gets place a CHINS and it's just a vicious cycle. There are actually networks of runaway kids who have been through this that are now out there helping new runaways cause no one else will do it. Kids on the street hear of a new runaway and they hook him/her up with a place to sleep, place to get food, etc. They are doing for themselves because adults won't do it. It is dangerous. They are so vulnerable to adults exploiting them and they do. There's really a lack of services for runaways in general.*

Youth Provider Focus Group

***BPS-related Issues***

Two informants and members of three focus groups identified gaps in the performance of the Boston Public Schools that contributed to delinquency: lack of appropriate placement of youth with learning disabilities; lack of a systematic response to truancy; and lack of accountability for educational outcomes.

Occasionally someone would say that the schools don't have needed resources or can't make up for what a student experiences outside of school. More often, both key informants and focus group participants condemned the schools in harsh terms – not only for failing to educate students, but also for failure to pay adequate attention to whether children and youth even attend school.

Do these criticisms unfairly condemn the educational system because of the difficulty in engaging and educating high risk youth? Not according to most of these participants. On the contrary, their opinion was that the school system's failures created high risk youth.

*The failure to address truancy and inappropriate school placements for learning disabled kids are examples of the school system's lack of accountability for kids, which leads to kids with a lack of skills, which leads to delinquency.*

Key Informant

*Schools are failing the kids horribly. What do you do for a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader who can't read? What do you do to prevent a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader who can't read?*

Key Informant

*You have 18 year olds entering the 10<sup>th</sup> grade not able to do the work. ...Schools are dumbing down our kids. Schools have failed.*

Citywide Youth and Justice Task Force Discussion

*There are no advocates for the kids at school. Sometimes they are illegally dismissed without a hearing or without notifying the parents. No one at the school is looking to find out what's going on at home.*

Youth Service Providers Focus Group

*The school issue is real. I wish the school would come to us before they suspend the kid but sometimes they just have no patience.*

Youth Service Providers Focus Group

*We are concerned about the lack of communication between schools and parents but also with the children themselves getting appropriate education, especially those that are behind and need special attention to get caught up. The schools do not have the resources to help these kids and that is a definite gap in service needs.*

Youth Service Providers Focus Group

*I have a dyslexic 16-year-old. One of the things that pisses me off, excuse my language, and I have to pray before I go into the schools, because they will say that my child is a behavior problem, but my child has a learning problem. If you don't address that learning problem, it becomes a behavior problem. And once it becomes a behavior problem, they're ready to address it and call me up to the school. But when he was struggling to do an assignment, they don't call you and tell me about it. Ask me to help with it. But when he acts out, you have to come up to the school. Why didn't you call me before it got to this point?*

Parent Focus Group

*One year at the end of the school year, a teacher hit my son, a child with special needs. I told the school that I do not want that teacher around my child. I sent the child back to school 2 days later after speaking with the principal. Then I went down to DSS and filed a 51A on that teacher cause if he would have come to school and told you that I hit him, you would have filed a 51A on me. Then I pulled him out of school, I wrote letters to everyone stating that they were depriving my son of his education and my lawyer would be contacting you. That's when they started to reconsider the whole thing.*

Parent Focus Group

*-- You have an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) that is a contract and they are supposed to honor that but sometimes you have to go to court to get them to do so.*

*-- No one really helps you.*

*-- My child has an IEP and he was promoted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Maybe if he would have been kept back it would have helped him. I'm not so sure that was right for him. Some times a child falls through the cracks. Not all children get helped.*

Parent Focus Group

### ***Structural Issues***

Three key informants identified systemic deficiencies that included:

- An insufficient number of experienced, high-quality staff, due in part to very low pay and inadequate training and nurturance of staff; and
- Inadequate coordination and sharing among both criminal justice personnel and youth services providers.

The staffing issue resonated throughout the focus groups especially; both the difficulties involved in affording and training good staff, including CORI-related problems in hiring

people with criminal records. Streetworkers and DYS personnel came under particular scrutiny.

*So, we've lost a lot of streetworkers who have had to move on to other jobs to feed their families and what happened is we lost a lot of people who intimately knew the kids and could respond. The kids would literally have their number and call them directly for help. The workers had relationships with the gang members. Or police officers that were working with the kids have been promoted and now the grass roots people doing the work are not there.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

*I think for a while now we've been seeing streetworkers getting hired solely on education. We're seeing streetworkers getting hired based on who they know. It's always a factor. And because of the CORI issue, we have a lot of people who have the skills to be excellent streetworkers who do not become one.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

Centralized staff training in working with high risk youth was suggested, as a means of coping with staff and programs inexperienced with high risk youth.

*I would like to concur with him about how difficult it is to get quality staff that have the tangible skills needed to work with the high risk youth in the community. I think what is needed is a city-funded program that is entirely focused on staff training specifically with dealing with high-risk youth.*

Youth Services Providers Focus Group

*So there needs to be some kind of intermediary program that can walk people through the process of welcoming incorrigible youth into their centers and churches. A lot of times people want to do that but they don't know how and they have certain fears that are unfounded and others are real that need to be worked out. There needs to be place where they can have a conversation around how to work with those kids.*

Youth Services Provider Focus Group

A good staff has to be diverse enough to be able to communicate with and relate to the youth and their parents.

*Each culture has its own needs. I have found it very difficult to find people to work with these kids who can empathize, be sympathetic and really listen to what they have to say. You need people who can understand and accommodate their needs 'cause many of them are lacking so much. So many of us come to them with our perceptions of them without really listening to who they really are.*

Youth Services Provider Focus Group

*When I think of challenges and lack of services, I think of the lack of translation services in the courts. Some times our staff ends up being translators. Often parents are then left out of the loop.*

Youth Services Provider Focus group

*It's important to create capacity but it's also critical to facilitate access and that means translators.*

Youth Services Providers Focus Group

Providers and parents also discussed some consequences of not having good staff.

*That's why a lot of kids don't come. They don't trust the people that are working with them. I found that out when my son was at DYS. I hear a guy talked to my son: "Nigger, you gonna do this or that."*

Parent Focus Group

*And as far as DYS is concerned, we've come across a couple of counselors that have been arrested themselves with guns and dealing drugs. That's a problem 'cause these kids are in there supposed to be getting counseling and I don't understand how these counselors keep their jobs after being arrested over and over again. We had one gentleman who was arrested like 3 times in a 3 month span.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

*This man told me that he was going to come and help me. This man came to my house in the morning and tried to be intimate with me and then he wrote a letter. I could have really exposed DSS right there but I was afraid. They had my kids. I didn't know what to do. When I see that man in court, I just freeze. I wonder how many other people he did that to. That's why a lot of parents don't say anything 'cause they are scared. They had my kids.*

Parent Focus Group

In addition to hiring and retaining good staff, participants in both interviews and focus groups discussed the need for better coordination among provider organizations and for assigning streetworkers according to programmatic rather than political needs.

*There're 22 streetworkers in Boston and they do run back and forth from neighborhood to neighborhood trying to provide services around the city. The key is partnerships and collaboration. One entity cannot do it all. I think the police, probation officers, streetworkers, housing, need to work together to not duplicate services, which I see a lot of in the city of Boston because it is rich in resources. A lot of work that streetworkers do, YSPN workers do. A lot of the work that YSPN workers do, probation officers do. The same with community service officers. When you've got too many people working on the same thing, duplicating services, it becomes a lot harder to advocate for a young person. It happens sometimes that 6 programs are*

*working with the same kid and it can become a manipulation of sorts. If we have better partnerships and collaborations, people can focus on one thing. If the street worker is working on employment let that person do that. If the YSPN worker wants to advocate for this young person in court, so be it. But at the same time, we are all on the same page because when we sit at the table the community service officer can tell us that we're seeing that person on the same corner every day. What's going on? And the probation officer can tell us that he's failed two urine tests, I have a feeling that he's hanging with the wrong crowd. We need to check up on him. The probation officer works primarily 9-5 while the street worker works at night. We should be able to report back and we can develop, as a group, resources to work together for the young person. That way we are not duplicating services and at the same time providing the exact thing that the young person needs.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

*It's not that we have to reinvent the wheel but the time has to be spent in (identifying) who does it, who does it well, and how is it applicable to what we do in the city. Sometimes what agencies get caught up in is that it does not fit my program and will not work for my kids, rather than looking at it holistically, at how we find a model that works and how do we look at the needs of the high risk youth.*

Youth Services Providers Focus Group

*I think streetworkers do a great job but I think they are stretched too thin. Streetworkers are assigned to a geographical area but now they are all over the place. He's assigned to one area that could keep his caseload busy for 16 hours a day, 7 days a week but when a crisis comes up, they move him all over the place.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

*Pulling the streetworkers out because of some crisis just doesn't make any sense at all. Number 1 it is not effective. It takes 6 months to develop a relationship and get to know the services in the area. We know that it is done for political reasons more than anything else. Another thing is how are streetworkers assigned? Do they look at hot spots or is it politics?*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

*Facilitator: Do the various aspects of the criminal justice system work well together?*

*-- It's up to the individual.*

*-- Certain people stand up. I sit on the reentry panel and I get to know some people and share information. I know District 3, the anti-crime people, and we share information. It kind works on an individual way. There's really no set structure.*

*-- Yeah there is no structure. It's an individual thing. Being in the work forces a good worker, makes the person seek out others to work with.*

*-- And that's how you know who is really committed to doing their job. They*

*reach out. Try to form some bonds. It's only to their benefit when I can give a person a cell phone of a streetworker.*

*Facilitator: Streetworker, probation, police, there's no formal thing?*

*-- There are meetings all over the city. Lots of meetings. You have to figure out which ones to go to and what your role is.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

The lack of such an infrastructure that facilitates communication and coordination, plus staff turnover, funding cuts and shifting political priorities, may have created a gap in the ability of Boston's public and private sectors to benefit from the lessons learned in the past about responding to the needs of high risk youth.

*The replacements didn't happen. Replication didn't happen. Expansion didn't happen. Updating didn't happen. Most people that are coming on board now don't have a history to be able to articulate what happened with the Boston Miracle and what's needed to be done to keep the programs going. The programs dissolved because of a lot of things that caused them to be unable to sustain themselves.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

### ***Material Needs***

*Not everybody want to dress up in a suit. Just for some interview. Some people might not have the money to get a suit.*

DYS-committed Youth Focus group

*One of the hardest resources to find for these kids is places to get food and clothes. We always try to have food at the program, and I'll often have a kid sweep the floor or get me a coffee so I can give him a buck to go across the street to get a burger at Mickey D's. But funders aren't big on money for food - "What's the outcome?" - even though these kids are often hungry. Similarly, if a kid is in here busting through his only sneakers, I'll try to hook him up with a resource to get another pair.*

Key Informant

The two key informants, who run youth programs, and participants in both youth focus groups, said that the availability of food and/or clothing was a problem for some high risk youth. Trying to find sufficient funding to make food and clothing available was cited as a problem for the programs.

Food also was mentioned as a reliable way to attract youth to a program, even if not all youth depend on it for sustenance.

Participants in two focus groups and two key informants said that youth who cannot stay at home have few, if any, options. This is a predictable and recurring problem for youth

leaving DYS residential facilities.

*Beds. It's been on-going problem for a while. This happens constantly. A young girl gets out of lockup and the mom doesn't want to take her home because they've been fighting for years. So, we try to put her in foster home, can't find one. She's on the street. So, what ends up happening a lot of the young girls end up doing is spending 3 times more in lockup than they would have because they have no where to go when they get out. They come back to lockup cause they have nowhere to sleep or they break the terms of their probation cause they have no where to sleep.*

Youth Provider Focus Group

Bridge Over Troubled Waters was known to all providers as a longstanding resource for homeless youth, but limited space and an enrollment process that requires three interviews are obstacles.

*Sometimes the agency is so focused on protocol that they don't provide services to those who are most in need. I had a girl that they said needed to go through the interviews but the question is "Where is she going to sleep for the next 3 days?" and she ended up back on the street. And the agencies make us lie. We have to sign a waver and affidavit that the kid has nowhere to go and has been on the street for a certain amount of time.*

Youth Services Providers Focus Group

The youth stated that DYS or jail is sometimes the refuge of last resort.

*-- Some people go to DYS just to have a place to stay.*

*-- Don't you have to do something first?*

*-- You got to be referred or something right? Go through some kind of program.*

*-- Kid that got nowhere to go, they put you in a foster home and the kid don't like it so they run and DYS pick them up. Rather be in DYS. Then when you turn 18 they let you out. Tell you can't stay here no more.*

*Facilitator: Do you actually know anyone that has intentionally gone into DYS?*

*-- Yes.*

*Facilitator: So they committed a crime to get into DYS?*

*-- Yeah.*

*-- I know that it happens a lot.*

*-- It happens and they go to jail. They do pick up something at a store and not pay for it so they can go back in. The chase won't be that strong.*

*(Laughter)*

*-- It's like going back home.*

*Facilitator: Are these kids?*

*-- 18, 19 but he's talking about in their 30s.*

Program-engaged Youth Focus Group

**Other Needs**

The preceding is the prioritized list of categories of service gaps or needs that were mentioned most often. The following is the rest of the items on the list, still prioritized. They are all services that one or more key informants or focus group member(s) had difficulty finding. Undoubtedly, most of the key informants and focus group members would have agreed that they are all scarce resources, had they been asked directly about each item, as opposed to being asked to name the services/resources that were most difficult for them to find. Most had to do with specific services or approaches. The highest score an item could get was thirteen, meaning that it had been mentioned in all seven key informant interviews and all six focus groups. The score of each item is to its right.

Flexible innovative programming	4
Services for older teens	4
Translators / Interpreters	3
Training in appropriate use of CORI	3
Evening activities	3
Streetworker resources	3
Substance abuse treatment beds	3
Attention to marijuana use and dependency	2
Effective services at DYS	2
Experiential learning programs	2
Family service programs	2
Mentors	2
Motivation to better oneself	2
Probation Department resources	2
Re-entry services	2
Resources for self-improvement	2
Attention to positive behavior	1

Case management	1
GED programs for youth	1
Gender-specific programming	1
Mediation between competing groups	1
Sharing among agencies	1
Stable funding sources/priorities	1
Youth workers in BHA developments	1

**Systemic Changes**

The key informant interview allowed time for a question not put to the focus group – *“If you could change the system to better serve high risk youth, what changes would you make?”*

The responses to a large degree reflected the informant’s role in relation to high risk youth. Nevertheless, many of the same themes emerged as have been discussed above:

- ⇒ The need for more prevention services to help youth not become high risk youth;
- ⇒ The need for better services and more accountability from the schools;
- ⇒ Better compensation for direct service youth workers and streetworkers;
- ⇒ Help for parents; and
- ⇒ The need for an infrastructure to support coordination, communication, training, and institutional memory.

*Key Informant A*

- Resolve the structural problems that prevent people from staying in youth work
  - Low salaries
  - No benefits
  - Foundations should endow “chairs” for neighborhoods, as in universities, to enable experienced people with credibility and connections to stay in neighborhoods

*Key Informant B*

- Make the schools accountable for what they do with students, especially regarding truancy and diagnosing and responding appropriately to kids with learning disabilities
- Increase the number of substance abuse treatment beds
- Provide real discharge planning that begins early enough to be effective at the Suffolk County House of Correction
- Bring a family focus to the re-entry work of DYS and Suffolk County House of Correction

*Key Informant C*

- Apply more resources earlier in children’s lives, beginning prenatally. Mom’s academic achievement is the best predictor of her children’s life outcomes.

- Enable families to enrich the lives of their kids
  - Help pregnant women
  - Provide resources for infants
  - Universal daycare and pre-school
- Provide major resources to elementary schools including resources for much more parent involvement (busing militates against parent involvement but neighborhood-based segregated schools is not the answer)
- Make schools centers of the community, very diverse and not segregated

*Key Informant D*

- Need more money for CBOs to serve the kids
- Spend as much or more on prevention and re-entry than on incarceration

*Key Informant E*

- Don't try to impose systemic change from the top down: convene stakeholders and develop consensus
- Examine mega-issues, e.g., how funding is provided, detention policies
- Implement shifts in thinking, e.g., an openness to thinking about what works
- Support mini-networks of people doing good work

*Key Informant G*

- Ideally, a referral for services would lead to immediate services.
- The CHINS law should be changed to make parents more accountable. They petition against their kids, meanwhile they are responsible. There should be a tool short of a 51A that we could use to hold parents more liable, maybe even criminally liable.
- More programs and services for kids, for example, a job training program that has a job at the end.
- More diversionary programs that could be used for a kid who was picked up for the first time. If the kid gets counseling, goes to school, performs community service, participates in organized activities for a period of time, then the charge is taken off his record, so it doesn't hinder him from becoming something later on such as a police officer.

## **Key Findings from Primary Research**

### Priority Needs of Youth at High Risk and Gaps in Services

#### *Prevention Services*

- Interesting and fun age-appropriate activities
- Mental health services, presented in a non-stigmatizing manner
- Services to deal with truancy

#### *Employment and Employability Training*

- Jobs for youth over 15
- Year-round jobs
- Training in how to apply for a job, keep a job, and manage money

#### *Boston Public Schools*

- Inappropriate placement of and inadequate services for learning disabled
- Lack of accountability for educational outcomes
- Lack of consistent truancy prevention policies and practices
- Ineffective methods of involving parents and interested professionals

#### *Parent Involvement*

- Failure of many parents to provide sufficient structure and support
- Unwillingness of some parents to support and advocate for their children in school or in court
- Inability of some parents to support and advocate for their children in school or in court, especially parents who are illiterate or not proficient in English
- Inadequate resources to teach parents how to advocate for their children

#### *Safety-related Resources*

- High risk youth experience violence to be a pervasive and immediate threat.
- High risk youths' planning for the future occurs in a context of violence, racism, and negative outcomes that tends to undermine their confidence in their ability to succeed
- High risk youth tend to avoid normal social situations such as parties, pools, and roller-skating rinks, in order to avoid becoming a statistic of violent death or injury

- High risk youth tend to avoid certain “turf”, in order to avoid becoming a statistic of violent death or injury
- Parents of high risk youth constantly fear for the safety of their children
- Some high risk youth are victims of and/or witnesses to violence in their homes

*Structural Issues*

- There are not enough experienced, high-quality youth workers and streetworkers, due to:
  - Funding cutbacks, such as the elimination of the Boston Housing Authority's 30+ youth workers
  - Very low pay
  - Limited training and
  - Limited burnout prevention policies and procedures
- There are few, if any, structures in place to facilitate coordination and sharing between and among both criminal justice personnel and youth services providers
- There are insufficient interpreters and translators in the courts, schools and other institutions

*Material Needs*

- Youth programs are confronted with youth at high risk who are hungry and ill-clothed because of their families' deep poverty or neglect.
- Some funders of programs for youth at high risk are reluctant to provide funds for youth's basic needs.
- There are few resources for a youth without a place to sleep; many stay in friends houses with or without the parents' knowledge
- Programs for homeless youth have space limitations, entrance requirements and procedures that prevent many youth from accessing the services, particularly youth who are leaving a DYS residential facility
- Some youth choose to return to DSS, DYS or House of Correction custody because they have nowhere to stay

## **DISCUSSION**

The organization of this section follows the key findings from the primary data. It utilizes: the data gathered from focus groups and key informant interviews; data gathered by others investigating services for Boston youth at high risk; additional information and perspectives from people in related fields; and feedback from participants in the conference “Networking High-Risk Youth Services” sponsored by the Boston Capacity Tank.

The contents of this section, as well as the entire report, are not offered as an exhaustive and comprehensive examination of the issues, but as a contribution to a better understanding of high risk youth in Boston. Limitations of this report are more fully discussed in the Methodology section.

### **Demographics**

The term “youth at high risk” may include youth who have already engaged in risky behavior but not at the most serious or prolonged levels (e.g. first-time offenders or moderately truant students), and it certainly includes youth in serious and/or chronic trouble, who are often removed from the mainstream for periods of time by incarceration, out-of-family placement, separate education programs, etc.

For the purposes of this discussion and report, “youth at high risk” refers to the youth that are being served by the organizations that provided information for this report through focus groups and interviews. The organizations included city and county government departments, community-based organizations, and faith-based organizations. The general characteristics of these youth are as follows.

- Most are teenagers in their middle to late teens.
- Most are male with the exception of girls with CHINS cases.
- Most are African-American or Latino.
- Most are truant, at risk of failing in school, or dropped out.
- Many are from single parent homes.
- Many are using alcohol and/or drugs, mostly marijuana, with some group-specific harder drugs of choice (i.e., Asians and ecstasy, Whites and oxycontin and heroin).
- Concern about being a victim of violence is a pervasive fear of youth at high risk, creating many obstacles to where they can go and what they can do.
- Pregnancy and parenting is an on-going if decreasing issue, although it may be on the rise for certain populations, e.g., Vietnamese youth.
- Homelessness is not an issue for most youth, but it is a key concern for many youth who are released from DYS without a viable option for shelter.

### **Priority Needs**

These needs have been prioritized based upon the number of focus groups or interviews in which they were mentioned by participants. They are presented in ranked order; the first category (prevention/social-emotional resources) was mentioned eleven of thirteen possible times (each interview or group equals one time) and the last (material needs) was mentioned four times. Although this type of frequency analysis can be helpful in analyzing data,

caution should be used in interpreting the results for several reasons. First, most of the people participating in the interviews and focus groups (hereinafter the respondents) probably would agree that all of the identified needs are real needs of youth at high risk, even though they might not have thought to mention them. Second, interviews and focus groups are appropriate tools of qualitative research, not quantitative, so the material gleaned from them does not easily lend itself to being counted. Third, creating the following categories of need that group together varied needs is a subjective process and the results may not seem justified to the reader. The matrix used to develop the prioritized list and categories can be found in the appendices.

### **Prevention/Social-Emotional Resources<sup>1</sup>**

This category of needs includes Counseling, Prevention Programs, and Truancy Services. Because the number of times each was mentioned were combined, this was the most mentioned category of needed services. Although it may appear to be cobbled together from three somewhat disparate components, the key informants and focus group participants spoke explicitly about all three components as prevention services that are needed to keep bad things from happening to youth.

The parents focus group and five of seven key informants spoke about the need for short and long term counseling/mental health services including, but not limited to, family counseling, group counseling and anger management. Although some respondents said existing services were underutilized because of a stigma associated with mental health services, systems mentioned (i.e., BPS, court clinics, DYS) were not seen as offering adequate resources for this need.

*Finding appropriate counseling for my son was the hardest thing to find. One that would understand my son's learning style, one that would understand the frustration that he was going through and what his family needs are. He was struggling and hurting and I didn't know how to help him. I called so many places and heard "I'm sorry but we don't have a counselor available for your son". And then, trying to find a minority male counselor that will understand my son, forget about it!*

Parent Focus Group

Prevention programs typically involve a) implicit and explicit messages regarding risky behaviors such as substance abuse, unprotected sex, and smoking, and b) alternative activities. Youth, parents, and direct service youth workers were the most frequent advocates for such programs, primarily because they provided youth with something positive and safe to do.

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<sup>1</sup> Public health theory gives us three categories of prevention that are helpful. *Primary prevention* is for all youth in a community or school and usually consists of positive development opportunities plus education on the dangers of and ways to avoid risky behavior. *Secondary prevention* targets youth who have already engaged in risky behavior, but not at the most serious or prolonged levels (e.g. first-time offenders or moderately truant students). *Tertiary prevention* is for youth in serious and/or chronic trouble.

*I think the hardest thing is to find something to do, because there really is nothing to do. Kids are mischievous, not all of them, but they need to have something to do. You just can't leave kids alone after school with nothing to do, because there's gonna be violence.*

Program-engaged Youth Focus Group

Truancy prevention strategies include both internal BPS responses and those of external community-based and faith-based organizations such as Boston Urban Youth Foundation. Respondents involved with the criminal justice system and youth service providers said that much more attention should be given to youth with unexcused absences, in order to prevent chronic truancy that leads to dropout and delinquency. This is a problem that begins in elementary or middle school, according to some respondents. Current data were not available for this report, but the number of BPS middle school dropouts increased from 37 in 95/96 to 152 in 00/01 (Wheelock, 2001).

*-- Goals are different now. You asking us about 5 years from now. Right now a good goal for a black male living in Roxbury – graduate. It don't happen. A lot of my friends, school is over for them. My little brother, 10<sup>th</sup> grade, school's over for him.*

*-- Kids drop out of middle school.*

*-- Don't you have to go to school till you're 16?*

*-- Kids just stop going.*

Program-engaged Youth Focus Group

## **Employment**

*-- We need more jobs that kids can benefit from. Kind of like the youth programs are doing so that they can build upon it.*

*-- Like City Year. They give you \$5000 towards college plus the money you get working there. Something like that where there's incentives and benefits. Yeah, that would be good if we could get something with benefits. That'd be terrific. Some dental. A lot of guys need braces and stuff.*

*-- A job that you can build upon, skills that you can utilize when you become an adult. More internships.*

Program-engaged Youth Focus Group

There are approximately 8,000 16-24 year olds in Boston without jobs and not in school; roughly half do not have a high school diploma. (BYC, 2005) Just three in 10 Boston dropouts between 16 and 19 years of age are employed. That figure ranks Boston forty-fourth of the fifty largest U.S. cities. (BYC, 2004) Loss of much of Boston's manufacturing base, an increase in the educational credentials and level of skills required for many new jobs, racial and cultural discrimination, and competing for jobs with adults who have work histories are some of the challenges facing dropouts looking for work.

The youth at high risk who were contacted for this report all were working or wanted to work in order to make money. They also were interested in paid job training, paid

internships, year-round jobs for older teens, jobs with benefits including medical and dental coverage, jobs that provided useful skills, and training in money management. The youth expressed no interest in volunteer work or unpaid internships because they did not produce needed income. Those in school insisted that they could work more than half-time during the school year and still get their homework done. In the key informant interviews and focus groups, Youth Opportunity (YO) Boston, STRIVE, and YouthBuild Boston were frequently mentioned as trusted resources for youth employment.

Youth who were in DYS custody were concerned about their ability to find work because of their records. Criminal justice system personnel and other youth program staff confirmed that employers' use and misuse (through ignorance) of Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) "constitute a significant barrier to employment for youth at high risk."

Those who help youth at high risk find employment said that another barrier to youth employment was that many youth did not know how to go about getting or keeping a job. Consequently, pre-employment training (sometimes called employability, job readiness, or career awareness training) is a critical element in many youth employment programs, as is alternative education for those without a diploma or GED.

Several employment-related needs were cited frequently in both the primary and secondary research, including school-year jobs for in-school youth at high risk; employability and skills training (especially for struggling students and dropouts); and jobs for idle youth (both graduates and dropouts who are neither working nor in education) (BYC, 2005). Several aspects of this issue and related recommendations include the following.

1. Jobs for In-School Youth - School-year and summer jobs are a priority, both to keep youth at high risk in school and out of trouble and to help them identify and develop career interests, skills, and goals. The Mayors Office of Jobs and Community Services (JCS), the Private Industry Council (PIC) and Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD) put many youth to work each the summer. But many others are unable to find summer jobs and, given the depressed state of the 16-24 year old labor market year-round jobs are even harder to find, particularly for youth at high risk (BYC, 2004). The Massachusetts Attorney General's Office was also mentioned as a source of funding for jobs for high risk youth that is utilized by youth workers and streetworkers.

More public and private funding of jobs programs is needed, and more attention should be paid to developing year-round, part-time *and* summer job opportunities by government, foundations and CBOs. A paycheck is a very powerful incentive for youth to stay engaged.

2. Job Training - Job Corps, YearUp, YouthBuild Boston, Bridge Over Troubled Water, and JFY Networks train about 540 Boston youth per year, and Morgan Memorial/Goodwill Industries provides transitional employment with some training for about 350 youth annually. However, there are many more youth who are unskilled and/or idle (i.e. not working and not in school or training), who need and want training.

Few youth use adult programs. An adult setting without accommodations for youth at high risk is unlikely to work very well; JCS and the PIC have funded short-term pilot

programs to develop best practices for training youth at high risk. Access to Individual Training Account (ITA) vouchers to pay for training also may be a problem for youth. A recent JCS analysis found that only 14% of 320 ITAs were granted to 18-25 year olds, even though one need only be 18 to be eligible. (BYC, 2005)

Two critical elements to successful employment for most youth at high risk are pre-employment training and post-placement support. Occupational skills training provided in a youth-oriented model has been successful in programs such as the Hull Lifesaving Museum's Maritime Apprentice Program. High risk youth in focus groups said that job training programs that do not include any stipend or wage during the training period are impractical.

3. School-To-Career and Internships - Besides skills training, several programs for struggling students, alternative school students, and out-of-school youth expose them to career options and world of work requirements, and give them practice experience in the workplace. These programs typically include career awareness, internships, job shadowing, work-based learning, and career-related mentoring. They often provide students with a stipend, typically based on both attendance and demonstration of appropriate work behaviors. This area is an especially high priority for youth at high risk.

4. Relationships and Outreach - Underutilization of several job training programs indicates the importance of supportive relationships and outreach, especially for out-of-school youth, who disappear from most providers' 'radar screens.'

For an in-depth discussion of employment-related issues for youth at high risk, see the companion to this report entitled *Promising Practices in Preparing, Hiring and Sustaining High-Risk Youth in Employment* by Claudia Green.

### **Parent Involvement and Advocacy**

*It all starts at the home. I've been in homes where the parents are smoking marijuana and getting high, alcohol is all around. Every one ... has the same story. None of them have fathers and they are repeating the same cycles. They all have kids and none are providing support.*

Criminal Justice Personnel Focus Group

A number of respondents in this report who were professionals, especially in law enforcement, tended to blame the bad behaviors of youth on their parents for letting their children grow up without sufficient structure (structure the professionals were now called on to provide), or even for neglecting or abusing them. On the other hand, a streetworker noted that he sometimes gets calls from parents looking for their kids; they try hard to be good parents, but work so many hours that their children lack sufficient structure and supervision. With respect to involving parental figures in their work with the youth, most felt it was important to do so, but some felt that it was not central to their work or necessary in order to be effective.

*The ringing thing in my ear was “We’re not there yet” or “We could only help her if this happens or that happens” and it took my daughter getting raped for them to help her, a week later after I’m screaming to them what could happen. I said to the judge, “Now what do you want to do, you want her dead? You wouldn’t listen to me before and two days later we’re back before you and she’s been raped.”*

Parent Focus Group

Parents in turn did not hesitate to blame professionals, especially those at the Boston Public Schools (BPS), the Department of Social Services (DSS), and those involved in the CHINS process. Despite overwhelmingly negative feelings about them, parents did acknowledge that sometimes it is possible to find a good staff person who will listen and work with you, instead of ignoring or blaming you. Some parents also acknowledged deficiencies in their parenting, particularly when they were younger, for example, by paying too much attention to themselves and too little to their children.

The following are more specific issues relating to parents of youth at high risk.

1. Advocacy – Participants in the parent focus group were in agreement that it was absolutely necessary to be your own advocate. They were unwilling to discuss specific services or programs that they had found helpful, until they made clear that the more critical factor is a parent’s willingness and ability to be a persistent advocate for her child and herself. From gathering information and advice from other parents, to asking questions of their children’s teachers, to finding someone to help write a letter of complaint or appeal, to becoming familiar with statutes and regulations, to finding a lawyer to help advocate, to starting an organization for parents, they told stories about taking responsibility for obtaining the services their children needed.

However, they also said they could not do it all on their own. The parents were clear about their need for both training that would help them become better advocates, and for support from advocates who knew the pertinent laws and regulations better than they did. The EdLaw Project and Youth Advocacy Project were strongly recommended by the parents who had used their services.

*As parents we need someone who will help us to write a letter to make sure that we are heard. If I had to do this myself, I wouldn’t have been able to because I was too emotional. So, I called my girl friend and told her that I needed help. There should have been someone in the system to help me.*

Parent Focus Group

2. Resources – After agreeing that the most important resource was self-reliance, they also were unanimous that finding help depends a lot on the individual person you encounter rather than the program itself. A person might meet a good worker who helps them a lot and someone else might go to the same program and find a person who is not helpful at all. Some of the agencies mentioned in a positive light were:

Family Ties, EdLaw Project, Youth Advocacy Project, South End Health Center, Dimock Health Center, Boston Medical Center Learning Disabilities Unit, Home for Little Wanderers, the Federation of Children with Special Needs, Landmark in Beverly, some local church pastors and a state senator's office.

A key resource for parents of youth at high risk is other parents. They can provide understanding, support, and specific information about organizations and individuals that parents without that experience find helpful. Such was the case in the parent focus group, which ultimately looked a lot like a parent support group because of the mutual validation, counsel, encouragement, and information that was exchanged. The members articulated what had become obvious, that is, they have needs that must be met as well, in order for them to care for their families, and parent support groups are a way that can happen.

3. Needs – The predominant need articulated was for prevention services. Participants strongly argued that they wanted help before their children were having serious problems but could not find any. The kind of help they wanted included tutoring, additional support for children with special needs, community help within the schools, counseling and therapy, mentors, affordable afterschool and summer programs, assistance with the court system, assistance with sexual abuse issues, continued support for victims of domestic violence, information about parents rights and general information about the school system, the criminal justice system and DSS. It was also agreed that while some workers were good, DSS, BPS, and DYS were basically untrustworthy, not helpful and to be feared. Participants felt a responsibility to work to make all three of these organizations more accountable for their policies and actions.

## **Safety**

Youth at high risk in Boston are intensely concerned for their physical safety as are their parents. They should be.

*Somebody can like your chain, so they shoot you 'cause of that. You can always be a victim. Just scared about being a statistic like he was saying, wrong place at the wrong time.*

DYS-committed Youth Focus Group

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), homicide is the leading cause of death for Black males between 15 and 24 years of age, and second leading cause for Latino males. Sixteen percent of Boston's high school students reported carrying a gun, knife or club during the previous month and 10% reported that they had missed school in the previous month because they feared for their physical safety, according to the CDC. Outside of school, turf issues are a major concern that impact how and where youth can travel. Private parties, as well as public playgrounds and swimming pools, were described as high risk areas.

*Parties are like a hearse. Like everybody's just sitting in the hearse until something happens.*

DYS-committed Youth Focus Group

There is no silver bullet available to prevent a pervasive sense of being unsafe or to eliminate the violence that underlies it. There are, however, several contributing factors that should be addressed.

1. Police-Community Programs - The Boston Police Department (BPD) has identified 'hot spots' around the city (mainly in Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury) where the most crime occurs and has targeted both enforcement and youth support resources on these areas. In these areas and elsewhere, it is often difficult for police and other adults to distinguish youth at high risk from other youth, because of styles of clothes that are common to both, and because "good kids" and kids who are "in the mix" may hang out together on the same corner of basketball court.

BPD programs that help police and youth get to know each other as individuals might help police better target the minority of criminal youth and better protect the majority of youth, who are more likely to be victimized than any other citizen of Boston. These programs include BPD initiatives such as DARE, tutoring, and sports leagues, and Operation Homefront, a BPD-clergy collaboration that conducts home visits to truant and delinquent youth. It is ironic that the same youths, who are so fearful of being a victim of violence, seldom see police as a resource. This may be due, in part, to their experiences of being stopped and hassled by police or picked up for a crime they did not commit.

2. Streetworkers - The Streetworkers Program in Boston Centers for Youth and Families deploys 22 streetworkers throughout the city. Other than the BPD and BPS, these probably are the City employees most likely to encounter youth at high risk. Because of their outreach method, street savvy and valuable contacts, they have special access to and credibility with youth. They also generally are well respected by law enforcement and clergy with whom they collaborate, and the many programs to whom they refer youth. One of the ways they prevent violence is by mediating between conflicting groups of youth.

The focus groups with criminal justice-related personnel, including current and former streetworkers, also provided some critiques of the program, however. These included: hiring people without relevant life experience because they have a degree and/or political connections; not hiring people with relevant life experience and a criminal record; an increasing tendency to be facilities-based instead of on the street which may be connected to the change to a case management approach; high turnover due to very low pay, burnout, and less sense of mission among some newer streetworkers; and pulling streetworkers out of their assigned geographic areas to respond to a crisis in, or political pressure on behalf of, another area. Nevertheless, there was general agreement that the streetworkers are an extremely valuable resource that is stretched too thin.

3. Youth programs – While law enforcement personnel tended to view favorably the availability of resources such as youth programs, most other respondents described serious cutbacks to program funding and losses of valuable services over the past several

years, the most recent example being Youth Opportunity Boston. Good youth programs provide safe havens while the youth are there, in addition to connecting youth to needed services. It would be interesting to see how many of the BPD-defined "hotspot areas" contained a youth program in which local youth might find respite from the stress of living with the fear of violent crime.

4. Prevention programs – Some of the most surprising responses heard while conducting the focus groups and interviews were about prevention. Parent focus group participants stated emphatically that resources for prevention were the one thing they had the hardest time finding for their children. One key informant, when asked what he would do to change the youth services system, said:

*Apply more resources earlier in children's lives, beginning prenatally. Mom's academic achievement is the best predictor of her children's life outcomes. Enable families to enrich the lives of their kids. Help pregnant women more. Provide resources for infants. Provide universal daycare and pre-school. Provide major resources to elementary schools including resources for much more parent involvement.*

Legal Advocate for Youth

Perhaps this should not have been surprising, because of the literature about the correlates to delinquency, among other things. Children who are abused and neglected have lower grades, more suspensions, more disciplinary referrals, and more grade repetitions than normally treated children, independent of the effects of poverty. A 1997 study found that youth who experienced maltreatment during childhood were significantly more likely to display a variety of problem behaviors during adolescence including serious and violent delinquency. In fact, over half of youth committed to DYS come from families with confirmed reports of maltreatment, according to the Massachusetts Children's Trust Fund.

5. Services to DYS-Committed Youth – There is a multi-year initiative underway at DYS regarding in-house education re-entry into education. A key need is for basic support and resources to youth (male, as well as the growing female population) released from DYS facilities or residential programs (BYC, 2005). Some need housing, since returning to their families is not feasible. Others need major support, currently only available to a few, to connect to appropriate education and job opportunities. YO is a successful model for this type of service.

## **Education**

As noted earlier, most youth at high risk are truant, at risk of failing in school, or have dropped out, according to the respondents in this report. Approximately 1,200-1,600 officially drop out of Boston Public Schools (BPS) high schools every year. The number of students excluded from school for disciplinary reasons reached its highest point in a decade during the '02/'03 school year when 221 students were removed from school for ten or more consecutive days. (MDOE 2004) Boston's number of middle school dropouts increased every year from '95/'96 to '99/'00, the last year for which data were available for this

report. In 1995/1996, Boston's middle school dropouts were 20.2% of the state total; by 1999/2000 they were 58.2%. A 2001 review of Massachusetts Department of Education data found the following in regard to the dropout rate in Boston's middle grades of 6, 7, and 8:

- The number of students dropping out of Boston middle grades has been on a steady upswing for the past five years.
- The majority of middle grades dropouts, all of whom must be 16 to leave school, are leaving with less than a seventh grade education.
- Because these students are not included in dropout rates, official statistics are underreporting the increase in the district's dropouts. (Wheelock, 2001)

BPS staff, who were not among the respondents in this report, might point out that schools cannot make up for some students' overwhelmingly negative environmental circumstances, nor do BPS budget cuts make the jobs of teachers and administrators any easier. However, many of the respondents contributing to this report were adamant, and at times passionate, in the opinion that the BPS exacerbates students' problems by:

- not providing appropriate services for children and youth with learning disabilities;
- defining learning problems as behavior problems;
- not involving parents/caregivers and helping professionals early enough; and
- responding too little and too late to truancy.

Many believed that, in these ways, the BPS creates youth at high risk.

*The failure to address truancy, and inappropriate school placements for learning disabled kids, are examples of the school system's lack of accountability for kids, which leads to kids with a lack of skills, which leads to delinquency.*

Boston Police Department Official

New and/or expanded prevention strategies involving the schools and key stakeholders are needed for youth at high risk, not only to help the students who are already in trouble, but also to correct systemic problems that may put students at high risk of negative academic and life outcomes.

Not all attention should go to "fixing" the schools, to the exclusion of further study of and support for Boston's alternative education system for youth, which received several endorsements in focus groups and interviews.

Specific considerations include the following.

1. School Reform - The current high school focus on small schools and small learning communities (SLCs) holds special promise for youth at high risk, both because they offer more experiential learning and greater career focus, and because their longer and stronger teacher-student relationships may have greater impact on youth at high risk (BYC, 2005).
2. Collaboration - There is a lack of communication regarding specific youth with after-school programs and counseling and case management programs that are potential resources to schools, according to focus group participants. Similarly, parents complained

that their children's schools did not involve them unless and until their children became "behavior problems".

3. Alternative Education Programs for Youth - Community-based alternative programs serve 750 youth (60% are dropouts; the rest are 'struggling' students). Most maintain waiting lists. This is in addition to 1,000 struggling students in BPS in-house alternative programs, a major increase from past years (BYC, 2005). Given the demand, the system could expand, especially in seats for dropouts, and be strengthened through additional resources for case management, behavioral management, basic literacy, and learning disabilities services that many dropouts need.

4. MCAS - Given the high number of students who leave school without passing the MCAS (and thus, since 2003, without obtaining a diploma), tutoring and remediation to both struggling students and to those who have already left school is necessary. Yet current programs for both populations are underutilized, so the challenge is to provide more outreach, stronger relationships, or fuller academic and support services in order to engage more youth (BYC, 2005).

5. Truancy and Dropout Prevention – BPS "has no coherent overall policy to prevent an increase in the number of dropouts and no policy or services tailored to the growing problem in the middle grades." (Wheelock, 2001) A comprehensive approach to prevent truancy and dropout should be developed by the BPS in collaboration with parents, experts in the field, and community-based and faith-based organizations. External programs such as Boston Urban Youth Foundation's School Success program should be examined and, if successful, replicated.

## **Infrastructure**

### *Staffing*

*It's awful that the quality of service depends on the individual you get.*

Parent Focus Group

Both parents and professionals declared that the key to getting the resources they seek for a high risk youth depends more on knowing the right person to go to within an organization, than on knowing the right organization. The right person is someone who cares and is willing to go the extra mile, someone who not only will help you access the resources s/he controls, but also will help you understand where else to go and whom to talk to.

Providers talked about the difficulty of finding good staff, streetworkers talked about the loss of experienced staff, and both parents and staff said that the quality of services received at any organization depended on the quality of the staff person encountered. A brief consideration of some of the issues mentioned by respondents follows.

1. Compensation – Youth workers and streetworkers typically do not receive salaries and benefits sufficient to support a family, as evidenced by the report that virtually all

Boston streetworkers must hold second jobs to make ends meet. Two consequences of this are a) loss of current staff to higher paying occupations, and b) inability to recruit new staff with prohibitive financial obligations including college loans.

2. Qualifications – Demonstrated ability to establish rapport with youth at high risk, familiarity with youth service resources, familiarity with Boston and its neighborhoods, and a conceptual understanding of adolescent development, among other qualifications, all are desirable for someone who works directly with youth at high risk in Boston. In addition, a personal history that includes overcoming challenges similar to those faced by youth at high risk, as well as personal qualities like consistency, reliability, and dedication, increase the likelihood of success in working with youth at high risk. On the other hand, political influence in hiring, overemphasis on education, inattention to linguistic and cultural diversity, the Boston residency requirement, and disqualification due to CORI-related restrictions were cited as factors that can compromise the quality of an organization's staff.
3. Staff Development and Nurturance (Stress-Reduction) – Although these can be discussed separately, responses to both can be overlapping and mutually reinforcing.

- Pre-service Training – The idea that generated the most energy in the service providers focus group arose organically from the group –

*“A city-funded program that is entirely focused on staff training specifically with dealing with high-risk youth. The reason I say it should be citywide is because it would be opened up for all agencies in the city. If you look at the issues that are emerging throughout the city, it would be worthwhile to have consistency so that people are working collaboratively with same kind of formal training. They thus have common ground to work from.”*

Respondents in this and the Criminal Justice Personnel focus group spoke about the lack of consistency and quality in pre-service and in-service training for direct service staff. A formalized pre-service training program not only would establish “a common ground to work from” but also would build the networks of personal contacts across organizations. Both of these could improve the quality of services to high risk youth and their families.

- In-service Training – This would serve both of the quality improvement functions discussed under pre-service training, and provide opportunities for reducing the stress and burnout experienced by those who work with youth at high risk. Streetworkers in the Criminal Justice Personnel focus group spoke about the need to talk with other streetworkers who understand the stresses on them and their families, for example, long and erratic hours or building a relationship with a youth who is subsequently murdered. Practitioners in every human service field are able to gain psychic energy and useful information through discussion with their peers.

*Collaboration and Coordination*

*“There's lots of meetings but no structure to facilitate dialogue and relationship-building.”*

Criminal Justice-related Personnel Focus Group

There are many levels at which it makes sense for organizations serving high risk youth to communicate with each other in structured, systematic ways.

- Workers can learn and stay current on not only what resources are available, but also the eligibility requirements that determine who can and cannot access which resources.
- Workers can “build the rolodex” of personal contacts to whom they can refer, a key component of providing good service.
- Workers in varied systems, e.g., streetworkers, police, probation officers, clergy can support and complement each other's efforts on behalf of individual youth, families, streets, and neighborhoods, such that the effects of their coordinated efforts is greater than the sum of the individual parts. The inclusion of civic and citizen watch groups can increase the positive effects significantly.
- Coordinated efforts also can prevent duplication of services and identify youth or families who try to inappropriately “work the system”.
- Collaborative initiatives and networks allow agencies to share information, resources and planning efforts, which can achieve efficiencies, maximize impact and often attract more funds than an individual organization's initiative.
- Collaboration among youth serving organizations might enable them to speak to their funding sources in an organized way about the practical effects of: uncoordinated and shifting funding priorities and categorical versus holistic approaches to funding.

*There is no infrastructure of youth serving agencies in Boston, such as intermediaries, technical assistance, financing, political connections.*

Local Foundation Official

Collaboration can facilitate capacity-building efforts that can help youth service organizations build organizational capacity, such as planning new or enhanced services, addressing operational standards and issues, evaluation, fiscal management, and fund raising. Collaboration also is essential to addressing these same capacity-building issues at a system-wide level. The recent work of the Boston Capacity Tank, and the network of alternative education providers that target youth, now known as the Youth Service Providers Network, may provide valuable lessons in system-wide capacity building.

In addition to collaboration among organizations that target youth at high risk, some respondents discussed the need to collaborate with agencies who are *not* focused on youth at high risk, but whose staffs naturally come into contact with them. Assisting them to better understand youth at high risk and handle these interactions more comfortably and effectively could benefit both the staff and the youth. Assistance could include training and technical

assistance to organizations, resource-sharing, and peer-to-peer support.

### *Information*

In order to plan, prioritize, and improve programs, the community of providers, funders, and policymakers needs to know the extent to which services are addressing the needs of particular populations and particular neighborhoods. One necessary step toward getting needed services for youth at high risk is to assemble and effectively present data that shows how and where these youth are underserved. Several policy reports and studies of various types of service note that the lack of clear information on services and utilization rates frustrates intelligent planning (YTP, 2005b). The problem may be more acute for youth services than for other fields, because the areas of service vary greatly and are difficult to standardize categories.

### **Material Needs**

Although the provision of food has been accepted as a way to nurture families in highly regarded programs such as Head Start and The Nurturing Program, youth program directors find it difficult to convince some funders to provide funding for food. The high risk to which some youth are exposed is related directly to their being members of families in deep poverty. It is not unusual for such a youth to resort to illegitimate methods to obtain money for the necessities for himself and/or his family. Youth programs that cannot address a youth's hunger, or his/her embarrassment over shabby clothes, will have little credibility or even opportunity to address other issues.

*Resources for homeless kids is a huge gap, very little available. There's the shelters if the youth is old enough, but I don't like to send even a 21 year old to a shelter with the vets and ex-cons, 'cause he don't know enough, he can't handle it.*

Key Informant

Bridge Over Troubled Water and the Huntington St. YMCA were mentioned as housing resources for youth at high risk, but only if the youth fit certain criteria and could handle the admissions process. Youth leaving DYS residential programs cannot qualify legitimately for Bridge because one criterion is that the youth has been living on the street. These caveats, in addition to space constraints, mean that it is extremely difficult to find shelter for a youth with nowhere to stay. Staying with friends or relatives is common. Participants in the youth focus group talked matter-of-factly about youth using foster care or DYS as sources of shelter when desperate.

### **Other Areas**

It is important to remember the following about the prioritized list above: a) it is based primarily on the primary research conducted for this report (see Methodology for additional discussion of limitations); b) some responses that might appear disparate were grouped into

categories because of fundamental connections in the ways they were discussed, particularly the Prevention/Social-Emotional category; and c) there are many other unmet needs of youth at high risk and the programs that serve them including, but not limited to:

- Flexible innovative programming
- Services for older teens
- Translators / Interpreters
- Training in appropriate use of CORI
- Evening activities
- Streetworker resources
- Substance abuse treatment beds

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Prevention/Social-Emotional Resources**

- ⇒ Make individual, family and group counseling more available and accessible to youth at high risk and their families.
- ⇒ Make prevention programs that include a) implicit and explicit messages regarding unhealthy or risky behaviors and b) alternative activities more available to youth at high risk.
- ⇒ The Boston Public Schools, in collaboration with community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, parents and other stakeholders, should develop and implement strategies to prevent chronic truancy in elementary, middle and high schools, and to prevent chronic truants from dropping out.

### **Employment and Training**

- ⇒ More public and private funding of jobs programs is needed, and more attention should be paid to developing year-round, part-time and summer job opportunities by government, foundations and CBOs.
- ⇒ Provide more programs that offer occupational skills training in a youth-oriented model, and that include pre-employment training, a wage or stipend, post-placement support, and other features that have been demonstrated to be effective.

### **Parent Involvement and Advocacy**

(These recommendations include input from participants in the 9/22/05 conference “Networking High-Risk Youth Services”.)

- ⇒ Parents should be persistent in trying to obtain needed resources for their children.
- ⇒ Organizations that serve youth should make information about services readily available and accessible to parents, including those with low English proficiency or low literacy.
- ⇒ Organizations that serve youth should provide and publicize formalized structures to engage parents.
- ⇒ Organizations that serve parents and their families should be organized to be user-friendly, e.g., easy to find what is needed.
- ⇒ Organizations that serve parents and their families should train their staffs to utilize a strengths-based approach in which they partner with parents, who are trying to help their children, rather than blaming parents for perceived past or present parenting practices.
- ⇒ Short and long term parent support groups should be made available to parents of high risk youth who are confronting similar issues.
- ⇒ Parents of high risk youth need to be able to access a range of services that enable them to address their own issues including depression. A Survival Guide for Parents would be helpful.
- ⇒ Public and private sector service providers should reduce service fragmentation, which is a barrier to effective services, and increase service coordination.

- ⇒ Community-based and faith-based organizations, with their more flexible and responsive structures, should provide support and leadership in helping parents implement these recommendations.
- ⇒ Funders should require parent advisory boards to be built into most programs they fund.

### **Safety**

- ⇒ Maximize opportunities for police officers and youth at high risk to get to know each other on sight.
- ⇒ Increase dramatically the number of streetworkers who work with high risk youth.
- ⇒ Raise the salary and level of training of streetworkers to levels closer to that of police and probation officers with whom they work closely.
- ⇒ Ensure that politics and bureaucratization do not compromise the essential nature of the Streetworker Program.
- ⇒ Increase the number of center-based programs for youth at high risk, particularly in hotspot areas.
- ⇒ Provide more resources to pregnant and parenting youth at high risk, and to their children, in order to prevent their children from becoming youth at high risk.
- ⇒ Ensure that youth released from DYS residential programs have an appropriate place to stay and are connected to necessary support services.

### **School-Related Services**

- ⇒ Lessons learned from BPS' initiatives with small schools and small learning communities should be applied system-wide.
- ⇒ The BPS, afterschool programs in the community, and counseling and case management programs should develop mechanisms to communicate about individual students; needs and services.
- ⇒ The BPS should collaborate with parents and organizations that represent them to develop and publicize formalized structures that will engage parents and provide them with the resources needed to support their children's' education, including training in educational advocacy.
- ⇒ The BPS should collaborate with parents of special needs children and organizations that represent them to ensure that students with special needs receive appropriate services.
- ⇒ The number of community-based and faith-based alternative education programs for youth should be expanded and supported. The BPS should routinely communicate with, and provide support for, these programs insofar as they are contributing to the education of Boston's youth.
- ⇒ Community-based and faith-based organizations should collaborate with the BPS to provide more outreach, stronger relationships, and academic and support services, in

order to engage more youth in MCAS tutoring and remediation programs for struggling students and those who have already left school.

- ⇒ The BPS, in collaboration with parents, experts in the field, and community-based and faith-based organizations, should develop a comprehensive dropout prevention policy in which all teachers and administrators are trained, with the objectives of preventing truancy, increasing grade promotion rates, and offering students needed help to succeed educationally with students of their own age.
- ⇒ The BPS should provide annual reports to parents and the community on each school's attendance, dropout, grade retention, exclusion, and test data, in order to increase the system's accountability to parents and the larger community.

### **Infrastructure**

- ⇒ Funders, organizations that employ those who provide direct services to youth at high risk, and direct service workers should undertake a serious and sustained campaign to increase their compensation to a level that can support a family.
- ⇒ CORI restrictions, which prevents the hiring of candidates with a personal history that includes overcoming challenges similar to those faced by youth at high risk, should be examined closely and, within prudent limits, reformed in order to take advantage of the experience of ex-offenders who are otherwise qualified to work with youth at high risk.
- ⇒ Funders, organizations that employ those who provide direct services to youth at high risk, direct service workers, and local colleges should create a collaborative, interdisciplinary mechanism to explore the feasibility of a citywide training program for working with youth at high risk.
- ⇒ Funders, organizations that employ those who provide direct services to youth at high risk, direct service workers, and local colleges should undertake a collaborative examination of the Child Development Associate National Credentialing Program and the Family Development Credentialing Program as possible models for a youth development credentialing program that would enhance the quality of youth work by defining, evaluating and recognizing the competence of those direct service staff who work with youth.
- ⇒ Funders, organizations that employ those who provide direct services to youth at high risk should provide frequent in-service opportunities for training, networking/team-building and stress reduction, including low/no cost perquisites such as opportunities for direct care workers to take their families to a ballgame or harbor cruise.
- ⇒ Funders, organizations that employ those who provide direct services to youth at high risk should
- ⇒ Organizations that provide direct services to youth at high risk should, with the support of funders, utilize formalized structures to communicate with each other in structured, systematic ways in order to:
  - Help their staffs know what resources are available and relevant eligibility

- requirements;
  - Foster personal contacts across agencies;
  - Help their staffs coordinate their efforts;
  - Develop collaborative initiatives and networks that can achieve efficiencies, maximize impact and attract funds;
  - Develop unified messages to their funding sources (on areas of consensus) and
  - Facilitate capacity-building of organizations serving youth at high risk.
- ⇒ Funders and organizations that provide direct services to youth at high risk should support efforts to build organizational capacity at a system-wide level.
- ⇒ Funders and organizations that provide direct services to youth at high risk should develop ways to assist organizations, who are *not* focused on youth at high risk but whose staffs naturally come into contact with them, by assisting them to better understand and interact with youth at high risk.
- ⇒ Funders and organizations that provide direct services to youth at high risk should assemble and effectively present data regarding unserved youth and on services, numbers served, and outcomes.

### **Material Needs**

- ⇒ Funders and programs that serve youth at high risk should consider ways to provide needed food and clothing to youth who are unable to obtain them otherwise.
- ⇒ Funders and programs that serve youth at high risk should use food as a means to attract and nurture youth.
- ⇒ Funders, policymakers, housing providers, providers of services to youth at high risk and other community leaders should collaborate to develop transitional and supported housing for youth with nowhere to stay.

### **Other Areas**

- ⇒ Funders and organizations that provide direct services to youth at high risk should develop or ally with existing provider/consumer coalitions to plan and advocate for additional resources and/or policy changes in the following areas:
- Flexible innovative programming
  - Services for older teens
  - Translators / Interpreters
  - Training in appropriate use of CORI
  - Evening activities
  - Streetworker resources
  - Substance abuse treatment beds

## **PROVIDING SERVICES TO YOUTH AT HIGH RISK**

The following discussion is based on the findings from primary research for this report (focus groups and key informant interviews) and review of other research and analysis. For issues on which there is no clear consensus, we have tried to present various sides of the debate.

**Categories of Service for Youth at High Risk** - Most programs for youth at high risk belong in one of four categories, with many, of course, including elements of two or more categories, adapted to meet the needs of a particular population. This is not a definitive description of each area, nor a set of evaluated Best Practices, since each of these areas embrace many practice models, some of which have proven results and many of which do not. No endorsement of the examples should be inferred, since they were not evaluated for this report; rather, they are presented to illustrate the possibilities of each area.

1. Outreach/Streetwork - More than the other three, this category is designed specifically for youth at high risk. Its particular strength is that it does not rely on the youth's decision to use facilities or programs. The outreach worker spends most of his or her time on the streets, visiting homes, or elsewhere in the community where youth at high risk are likely to be found. Once the worker finds and establishes contact with target youth, he or she has two aims:

- To build and maintain relationships that can be leveraged to help the youth avoid negative behavior and set and pursue positive goals.
- To 'broker' relationships between the youth and helping institutions, e.g., youth programs, schools, jobs, support service programs. This often means helping the youth to fit the institution and the institution to fit the youth, for accommodating behavior is often needed on both sides.

Sometimes an outreach program is just that, relying on partner programs and services to meet youth needs once the worker has formed a solid relationship. In other cases, outreach is a component of a specific program and is aimed mainly or even solely at drawing youth into that program. Perhaps the leading citywide example of the first, broader model is the City of Boston's Streetworker Program. The second model is employed by several health centers and other health-related organizations. Operation Homefront, the police-clergy outreach program for truant youth, is an example of broad outreach to a very specific population.

Given the widespread, persistent, and damaging disaffection of youth at high risk from school, jobs, and helping resources, there seems to be a great need for more outreach. Of course, some programs, such as ones serving DYS-committed youth, may not require outreach.

2. Relationship/Case Management - A relationship model depends on a strong, trusting relationship between an adult youth worker and a young person. Through that relationship, the youth receives guidance, brief counseling, crisis intervention, role modeling, and brokering of services. The counseling often uses a reality therapy

approach (Glasser, 1965), with the adult serving as a guide and a sounding board for the challenges that the youth faces day-to-day. 'Relationships with youth' and 'connecting kids to services' were the two effective practices most cited by primary research participants.

Strong, deep adult relationships are useful for many youth, especially as they separate from their families. But for youth at high risk, these relationships are particularly critical. Youth at high risk may have more difficulty forming bonds with adults such as teachers or clergy -- experience has taught them to keep a distance -- so they deeply need such a relationship, not least because they may not be engaged in any service or program. Yet it can take great skill and effort for the youth worker to make it happen. The disadvantages to this model are that it depends on skilled, charismatic staff and that it can be very intense.

Many programs for youth at high risk in other categories include a relationship/case management component, while many other programs focus just on this one critical component. A few programs use volunteer adult mentors, yet relying on volunteers is a challenge to most programs. Examples of programs with a relationship approach at the core include Youth Opportunities and the Boston Urban Youth Foundation truancy prevention program.

3. Drop-in - The drop-in model provides a safe place for youth to go after school or evenings, attractive activities, and strong, positive relationships with peers and adults. It is especially appropriate for youth at high risk because they can control how fast and to what extent they want to engage with the program and its staff; for youth with a pattern of distancing and disengagement, this is vital.

Although some drop-in programs offer unique, innovative activities, for most of them, the activity is less critical than the safe haven and social milieu aspects of the model, so activities may shift with the interests of participants. This flexibility, along with the safe haven and relationship aspects of the model were cited as effective practices frequently in the primary research for this report.

The model is easier and less expensive to establish than a facility-based youth center; it can usually be established in a storefront. It can also be quickly established in a neighborhood designated as a 'hotspot' for youth crime and other problems. Its drawback is that it will not necessarily attract all youth at high risk and it may attract many youth who are not at high risk. Similar to a youth center, program staff must be able to ensure that program space is considered "neutral turf". The Dorchester Youth Collaborative has run drop-in programs in Fields Corner for many years.

4. Activities and Skill-Building - This is the broadest category, including educational, vocational, personal development, spiritual, recreational, avocational, and just plain fun activities. Most after-school programs fall into this category. Some programs are designed to provide vocational, academic, work habits, and social skills essential to educational or career success. Others are more avocational, including sports and various hobby interests. Some programs resemble the drop-in model in being flexible in their activities and/or focusing as much on relationships as on activities.

Activity and skills programs are offered to a range of youth, but programs that most effectively target youth at high risk often include a strong relationship/case management component and may also include outreach. The activities themselves may also differ from programs for youth who are not at risk in catering to skill limitations or needs for a more 'sheltered' social environment.

Like their peers or even more so, youth at high risk need opportunities to develop essential skills, to explore their interests and talents, and to build a sense of self-efficacy and competence. The most frequent drawback to programs in this category are that they may lose or fail to attract youth at high risk if they are not catered specifically to their needs (see #1 in the subsection below); the experience of dropout, expulsion, or failure may reinforce the youth's low self-esteem and disengagement.

**Other Issues in Developing Services** - The following are four program issues around which there are varying viewpoints among researchers and practitioners:

1. Opportunities vs. Support - As noted above, there is an array of activity and skill-building programs in Boston, from the educational and vocational to the avocational and cultural. There is currently a strong movement toward a 'youth development' (also called an assets-based) approach with the goal of positive development of youth through acquisition of skills and competencies. Proponents advocate expanding the opportunities available to all youth and minimizing approaches that design programs around a youth's problems instead of his/her potential.

The counter view supports many principles of youth development, but finds that the special needs of youth at high risk must be met through key program elements. Activity and skill-building programs usually need to build in extra support from a close adult relationship (see #2 in previous subsection) and perhaps significant outreach as well. They also could require tailoring an activity to the particular skill and social interaction limitations of the youth.

Youth at high risk shun many activities that could benefit them (BYC, 2005); many see the lack of support elements as the major reason why. Participants in our focus groups and interviews cited the need for such support elements repeatedly, though they were not asked explicitly whether a youth development approach could succeed without them.

2. Empowerment - There are at least two distinct youth empowerment approaches. One enables youth to plan or have input into the programs that serve them. The other trains youth in leadership skills and enables them to mobilize their peers around community or societal issues they deem important. Teen Empowerment is an example of this latter approach.

Several primary research participants cited this as an effective model for working with youth at high risk. Proponents stress the particular value of granting power to youth who have had so little power throughout their lives. Yet some in the field feel that these programs can be counter-productive for youth at high risk. These opponents state that youth at high risk need structured programs that enable them to develop skills within a well-defined program environment. They argue that encouraging leadership skills in

youth who lack self-discipline and often are on the fringes of gang-related or illegal activities can foster destructive and self-defeating attitudes and behaviors.

3. Maintaining Program Focus on Youth at High Risk - A major hazard of targeting programs to youth at high risk is the tendency to shift toward a lower-risk population, called 'creaming.' There are many reasons for this. It is easier to find, engage, and serve youth at lower risk. For a streetworker, it is easier to stay in a warm, safe facility than to go out on the streets seeking hard-to-reach youth. Youth, who actively seek services and cooperate, are easier to serve and often show better progress. Serving youth at high risk requires special program elements, raising the cost per participant, even while funders push programs to serve the greatest number for the least cost.

Creaming occurs subtly and unintentionally, so avoiding it takes effort. Funders need to understand just who their funding is targeting and how to keep programs accountable for this targeting. Program evaluation should gather and present clear, accurate data on the population served. Youth workers and managers need to be on top of who they are supposed to serve, who they actually serve, and what steps they can take to maintain the population focus. In addition, managers should be trained in methods to hold youth workers accountable around the target population and in methods to support workers in their difficult work with hard-to-reach youth.

4. Using Faith-Based Resources - Starting with the work of the Ten Point Coalition in the early and mid 1990s, Boston has been recognized as the nation's leader in involving faith-based institutions in meeting the needs of youth at high risk (PPV, 2000). Over the past decade, the breadth and depth of work has grown, as has the willingness of funders, government agencies, and secular non-profits to work with faith-based resources. At least three Boston-based 'para-church' organizations (BMA, Ten Point Coalition, and Emmanuel Gospel Center) are engaged in encouraging and supporting faith-based involvement in youth work; all three, along with the United Way of Massachusetts Bay are co-sponsors of the Network.

This brings several strengths to the work with youth at high risk:

- Faith-based institutions have a moral authority and longstanding ways of comforting the afflicted that many disaffected youth respect.
- They also often have strong grass-roots networks, especially in the African-American community. For most youth at high risk, it is likely that a parent or other close relative belongs to a church or mosque, giving the institution a direct connection to the youth that often proves to be very valuable.
- Faith-based institutions have a pool of stable, committed adults in the community from which they can draw volunteers to fill numerous roles.
- They have used a broad range of approaches, including some truly innovative forms of outreach and activities, such as Operation Homefront, that go beyond traditional social service programs.

On the other hand, the faith-based movement must confront key challenges to its success

(PPV, 2000):

- Some faith-based institutions do not wish to provide services beyond their own congregation.
  - Many are uncomfortable focusing on youth at high risk rather than a broader, less high-risk population. As the PPV study put it, “when it comes to working with high-risk youth, [community ministries] often fall short of the mark precisely because of the strategy of addressing a...broad, territorially-based constituency.”
  - Some larger urban congregations have increasingly become dominated by commuters who come in from the suburbs and do not have the same stake in the neighborhood.
  - Many institutions have infrastructures that hinder their capacity to create and sustain quality programming, including dealing with issues such as strategic planning, fundraising, financial accountability, collaboration, and evaluation.
5. Key Ingredients: Outreach and Relationship-Building - Two services respond to needs of youth at high risk that are distinct from the needs of youth overall: (a) Conducting extensive outreach to find and engage youth. (b) Building and maintaining strong, trusting relationships between staff (or, in some cases, volunteers) and youth. It is vital for programs almost across the board that these two elements be provided either separately or integrated with other services. Without them, the best designed education, vocational, recreational, cultural, and other opportunities may not succeed.

To improve understanding and proper use of these two services, the following are suggested:

- Widespread training of youth workers in these areas through concise and easily delivered courses.
- Expectation by funders and other leaders that all programs and partnership that target youth at high risk have plans for outreach and relationship-building.
- Channels to provide peer support and mentoring among youth workers focusing on these areas.
- An interactive website for youth workers through which they can share and learn successful strategies and case studies of successful outreach and relationship-building.

## **METHODOLOGY AND**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

**Methodology** - This needs assessment is based on the following data sources:

- A consultant team work with the input and oversight of the Network Priority Group on Gaps in Services throughout the assessment process.
- The team gathered and reviewed an array of data on the status and needs of Boston youth and, particularly, on Boston youth at high risk. Information was sought from members of the Gaps Priority Group and a wide array of others identified to be expert on Boston youth at high risk in general and in specific risk factors and outcomes. The research literature itself identified other sources of data. The team also conducted various Internet searches and reviewed data at various local and national websites. In a few cases where published materials were lacking, the team interviewed researchers or practitioners in the relevant fields.
- The team similarly gathered and reviewed data on available services and gaps in service for youth at high risk in Boston, using all of the methods of identifying data employed for the previous item.
- The team interviewed seven people identified as key informants: two directors of youth programs (a secular one and a faith-based one, one with voluntary participation and one with court-mandated participation); a Boston Police Department official; a legal advocate for youth; a local foundation representative; an official of the city-run Boston Centers for Youth and Families (which runs the Boston Streetworker Program, among others); and a Suffolk County probation official.

The Gaps Priority Group had input into the selection of these seven people from a much larger set of names and positions assembled through broad networking and suggestions from the Service Providers focus group. The final set of informants was selected by the Chairperson of the Gaps Priority Group, in consultation with PARTNERS staff to represent a broad, albeit small cross-section of services to youth at high risk in Boston. The benefit of this cross-sectional approach was that it resulted in a variety of perspectives; the weakness was that it resulted in few areas of consensus, but those that emerged may be more robust than a consensus among people with a single type of involvement with youth.

The number of interviews was limited by the time and resources available. The final selection of key informants was limited by the availability of potential informants during the end of the summer of 2005, when the interviews were conducted.

- The team conducted five focus groups: providers of services to youth at high risk, criminal justice system-related personnel, parents of youth at high risk, DYS-committed youth, and other youth at high risk engaged in voluntary programs. As with the key informants, the Gaps Priority Group had input into determining the set of groups and the

specific composition of each group. They similarly had input into the sets of questions (distinct for each group) that guided the group discussion. Partners' staff recruited the focus group participants and coordinated all groups. Participants in the parent and youth focus groups received stipends in return for their participation.

- The team also conducted a focus group during a meeting of the City-Wide Youth & Violence Prevention Task Force, consisting of additional criminal justice system representatives.
- The information from each of these sources was assembled, analyzed and interpreted by the consulting team, first for each source by itself and then in conjunction with the information from the other sources. The Discussion and Recommendations obviously involves interpretation and the team obtained input from the Gaps Priority Group and other Network members.

**Recommendations for Further Research** - The Network established an ambitious scope and this needs assessment was simply not able to cover all aspects of that scope, due to limits of time, resources, and available data. The following are the key areas for which the data we obtained were insufficient:

- Primary and secondary data around the needs of *immigrant youth at high risk*
- Primary and secondary data around the different needs of and services for youth at high risk in various *neighborhoods of Boston*, especially some with major youth problems that are not, however, quite as critically affected as Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury.
- For some risk factors and populations -- notably *substance abuse, mental health needs, teen pregnancy and parenting, homelessness and youth in foster care and public housing* - data were not as readily available and the time and resources were not available to interview experts and to obtain and review data in these areas.

It is recommended that the Network or another group conduct further needs assessment to fill in these gaps. We also urge it to work further in the following areas; some of these are already part of the plans of the Network and its Priority Groups:

1. **Ethnic Disparities** - Further analysis is needed around the causes and solutions for the disproportionate involvement of African-American and Hispanic youth in various risk factors, as discussed at the end of the Snapshot section. This would especially focus on the schools, but also on other public institutions, and should involve those organizations in developing solutions.
2. **Best Practices** - There is a wealth of research on best practices of service and programming for youth at high risk in various areas, but it has never been analyzed and compiled for application within a locality such as Boston. This work could be extremely valuable, especially if done with the input not just of researchers, but of the institutions and community service providers that would actually adopt these best practices.
3. **Program Standards** - Program standards are important ways for providers and funders

to plan, improve, and evaluate services. Further research could assist in identifying standards for particular service models (e.g. counseling, preventive education, skills training, mentoring) that providers could efficiently adapt to their specific programs and resources. Research could also identify training and support needs around program evaluation for both providers and funders.

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