

VOICES FOR COLLECTIVE IMPACT HONORING YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

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PPREPARED BY
Boone County Community
Services Department

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Executive Summary

Overview: The Boone County Children’s Services Board (BCCSB) recently engaged in a research study aimed at gaining understanding from youth about their perceptions of strengths, needs, and violence within the community. The purposes of this study were to inform community action planning efforts identified at the *Voices for Collective Impact: Youth Violence Prevention* conference; to inform a targeted request for proposal following this conference; and to help inform future research studies within Boone County. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this conference was postponed and the targeted request for proposals was not released. While much has changed since January 2020 for youth in Boone County, results from the youth focus groups should still be considered valuable information.

Methodology: The BCCSB held six focus group sessions across Boone County with youth ages 12-18 in January 2020. Participants completed demographic questionnaires and a survey of block/neighborhood conditions following each focus group session. Youth were asked about strengths and weaknesses of the community, what they would like to see done about these concerns, and to prioritize these concerns.

Findings: Youth shared their experiences with educational systems, mental illness, identity-based experiences, community level issues, and their ideas for solutions to some identified problems and concerns within the community. Youth expressed the desire to be heard, valued, and included in decision-making about things which directly affect them.

Implications: This analysis shows the priorities of youth involved in the current research. Community needs assessments should integrate the perspective from youth into future planning efforts. Community stakeholders are encouraged to incorporate findings from this report in applications for funding from the Boone County Children’s Services Fund.

Recommendations: Thematic recommendations are included in each section of the report. Additional community system recommendations are included which focus on policy, programs, and community planning domains in Boone County. These recommendations have been identified from reviewing survey data and themes identified from focus groups.

Programmatic Recommendations

- Expand training for all school personnel on diversity, inclusion, and equity issues
- Expand training for educators regarding mental health
- Expand workforce development programming for youth to participate in trade jobs

Policy Recommendations

- Invest in community-based interventions to interrupt and prevent violence within the community
- Promote equity initiatives which seek to erase disparities among groups within Boone County
- Identify and implement local gun control initiatives within Boone County

- Expand community policing across Boone County to facilitate positive relationships between youth and law enforcement personnel

Community Planning Recommendations

- Prioritize the contributions of youth in community planning processes
- Increase accessibility for youth to engage in planning events

Acknowledgements: This research study would not have been possible without support from collaborating partners and youth. Thank you to Battle High School, COR Columbia¹, Hallsville High School, Oakland Middle School, Lange Middle School, PRISM², and West Middle School for hosting the focus groups. Thank you to Matthew Cooley, Caitlin Cunningham, Scott Daly, Jared Fenstermacher, Dana Harris, Amelia Howser, Nawassa Logan, and Leigh Spence for facilitating and planning focus groups. A special thank you to Ron Rowe of Youth Community Coalition and Rebekah Freese for their part in the focus group planning. Most importantly, thank you to the youth for their vulnerability in sharing their perspectives and lived experiences to help make Boone County a better place.

Background:

The Boone County Children’s Services Board (BCCSB) oversees the disbursement of funds from a quarter-cent sales tax within Boone County, Missouri. Since 2014, the BCCSB has funded programs aimed at prevention and treatment of mental health needs, support for young children and their families, and support for older youth in Boone County. The BCCSB has prioritized supporting teens within the community through the High-Risk Youth Committee (HRYC), which began planning efforts in December 2018. This committee’s goal has been to identify opportunities within Boone County to promote supports for youth with the highest needs. To better understand the needs of youth within the county, the HRYC convened a group of community stakeholders at the Youth Violence Prevention Forum held on Jun 12, 2019. Human service providers, social workers, police officers, government officials, members of the faith community, and educators came together to identify the most critical needs of youth. Forum participants desired an equitable, trauma-informed, and actionable plan with input from youth. Other feedback helped identify how goals for action planning should be centered across four key areas with the following goals:

- Our community feels safe, entities collaborate effectively, and it provides crisis response based on best practices.

¹ COR is an afterschool program offered by Cora Community Outreach. This organization provides support to high school male athletes.

² PRISM is a program for LGBTQ+ teens offered by the Center Project. This grassroots nonprofit organization is Mid-Missouri’s only community center focused on the needs of the LGBTQ+ community.

- Improved access to mental health services and positive, productive activities for youth and families.
- Parents/Guardians develop healthy relationships with youth and provide safe environments.
- Youth achieve their full potential academically, are healthy, and have economic opportunity.

With this feedback, the HRYC set forth a plan for a community conference culminating in community action planning across these four goals. The conference, Voices for Collective Impact: Youth Violence Prevention was scheduled for March 12. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference was postponed.

Motivations for Study: To inform the action planning for the scheduled conference, Boone County Community Services Department (BCCSD) staff began planning for ways to gather information from youth about their perception of community strengths and needs, and their experiences with violence. Through consultation with the HRYC, BCCSD planned a research study with Boone County middle school and high school students. This research serves to inform community action planning, highlight youth voices within the community, and potentially inform funding decisions through targeted Requests for Proposals of the BCCSB.

Research Questions: This study aimed to answer two central questions: 1. What do youth see as major concerns for themselves and their peers within Boone County? and 2. What would Boone County youth like to see within their community? To answer these questions, BCCSD staff utilized focus groups and surveys to gather data.

Methodology:

BCCSD staff conducted six (6) focus groups with sixty-five (65) participants in January 2020. Focus groups were held at schools and nonprofit organization offices. Representatives from each school or nonprofit were trained in the research procedures and guided on ways to facilitate the focus group. Participants in the focus group were required to get parental consent to participate. No names were collected during the focus group or in survey data collected after each session. Each focus group lasted around ninety (90) minutes using a standardized process. Youth were oriented to the focus group, agreed to ground rules, and then began answering the following questions:

- What is going well for youth in Boone County?
- What is not going well for youth in Boone County?
- What is the most important issue facing youth in Boone County?
- What should the community do about these issues?

Each focus group discussed these four questions for around 20 minutes. On average, focus group discussions lasted for one hour and eleven minutes total. Focus group participants were selected by each organization's representative and diversity was sought within each focus group. Facilitators were encouraged to engage youth from diverse backgrounds, including

socio-economic status, involvement in extracurricular activities, and/or race/ethnic backgrounds.

Following the focus group sessions, transcripts were created and utilized with a qualitative analysis software. Codes and themes were identified using an inductive coding process underpinned by grounded theory (Moretti, van Vliet, Bensing, 2011). Initial themes emerged from the research without a prescribed coding process or structure. Codes within each theme were reviewed and placed within the most appropriate theme once all transcripts were coded.

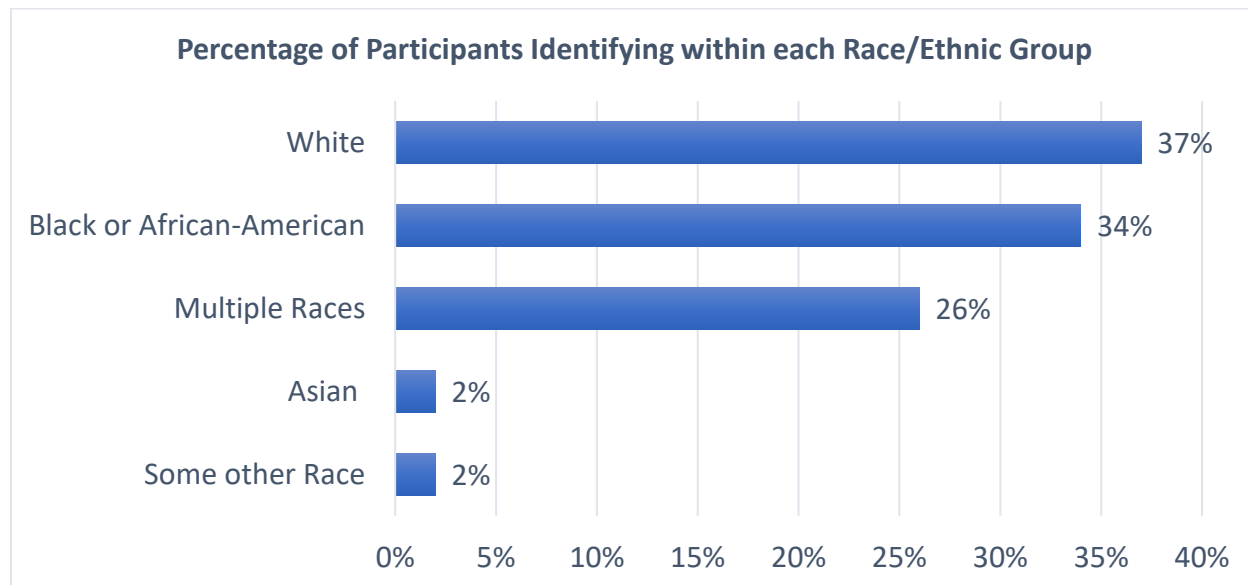
After each session ended, participants were asked to complete questionnaires containing questions about their demographic backgrounds and their perception of neighborhood issues. The Neighborhood/Block Conditions Scales was utilized to assess youth perceptions of neighborhood conditions (Perkins, Florin & Rich, 1990).

Participants:

Focus groups were held at Battle High School, COR Columbia, Hallsville High School, Oakland Middle School, PRISM, and West Middle School with sixty-five (65) participants. Focus group participants completed demographic surveys following each session.

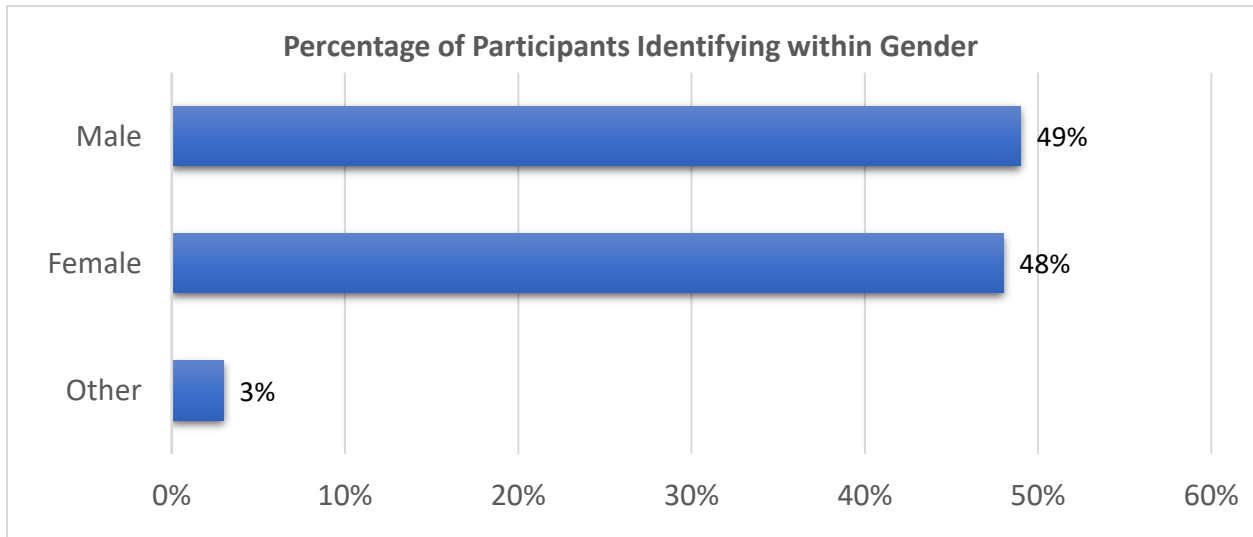
Participant-Identified Race/Ethnicity

There was diverse representation from participants. Of the sixty-five participants providing responses, 37% identified as white; 34% identified as black or African American; 26% identified with multiple races; 2% identified as Asian; and 2% identified as some other race.



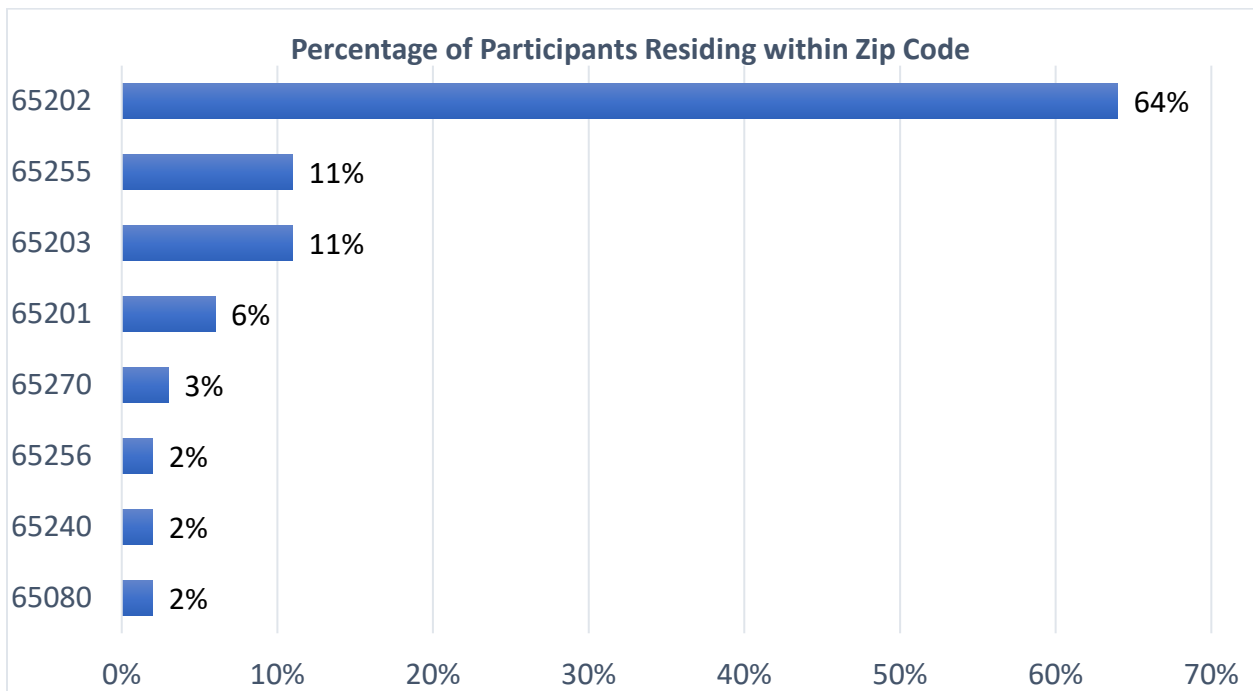
Participant-Identified Gender

Of the sixty-four participants responding to this question, 49% of participants identified as male; 48% identified as female; and 3% identified as 'other.'



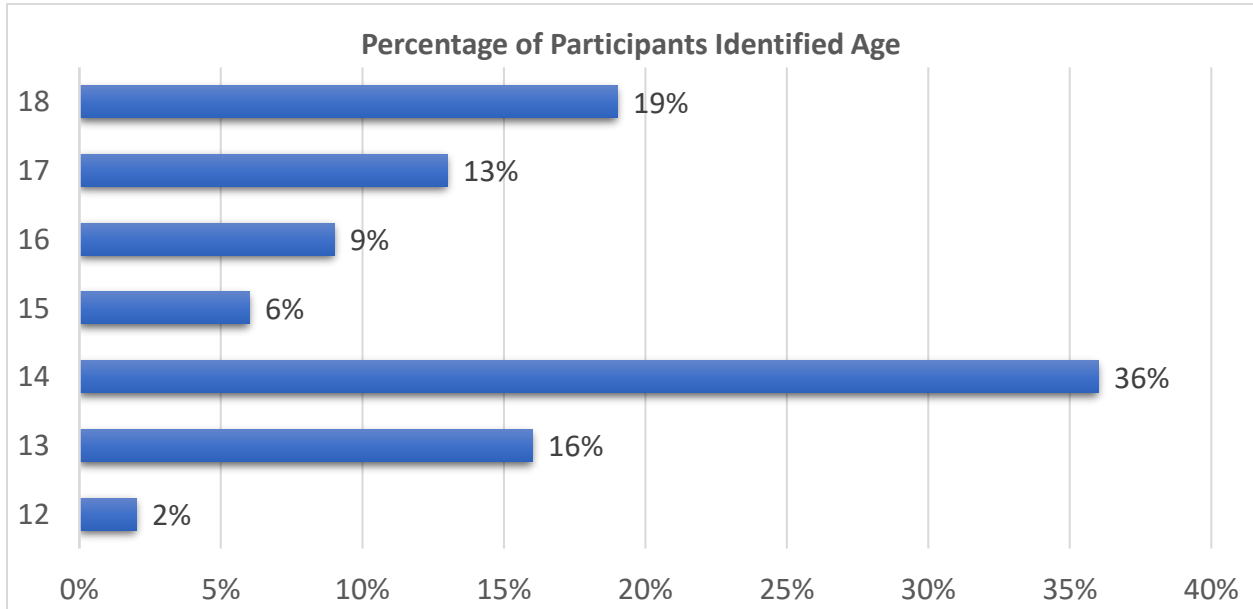
Residence of Participants

Of the 64 respondents to this question, 95% reside within Boone County. Some participants (less than 5%) reside outside of Boone County. These participants attend programming within the county.



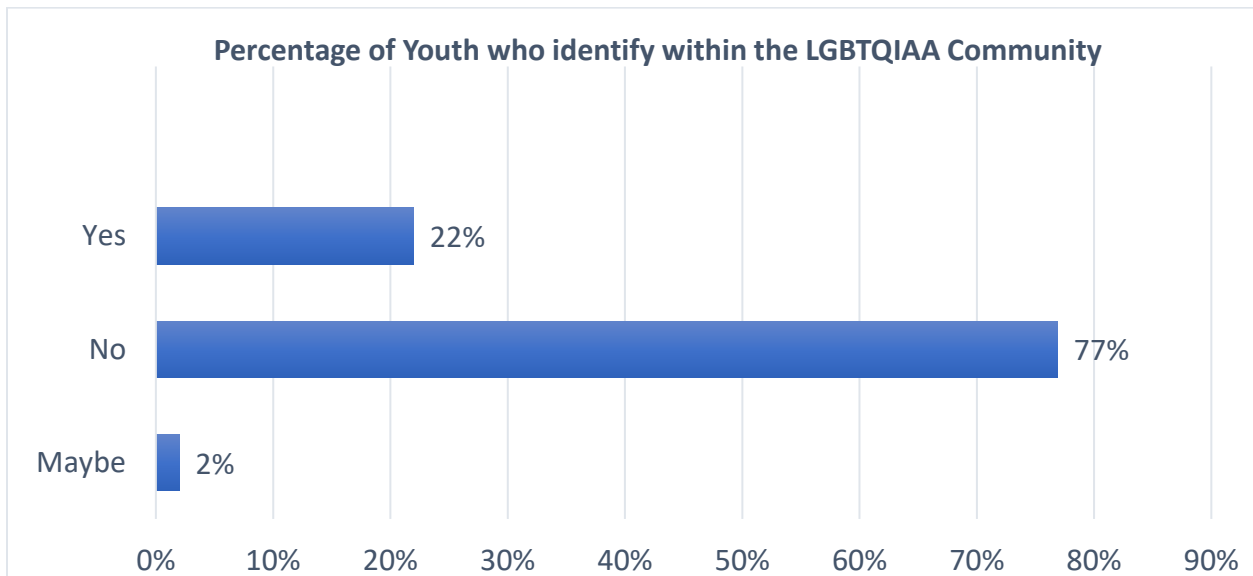
Age of Participants

Of the 64 participants responding, 47% of participants indicated they were 15-18 years old; 54% indicated they were 12-14 years old. The average age of participants was 15 years old.



Membership in the LGBTQIAA Community

Of the 65 participants responding to this question, 22% of individuals identified as being part of the LGBTQIAA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Ally) community; 77% did not identify as LGBTQIAA; and 2% identified as they might be part of this community.

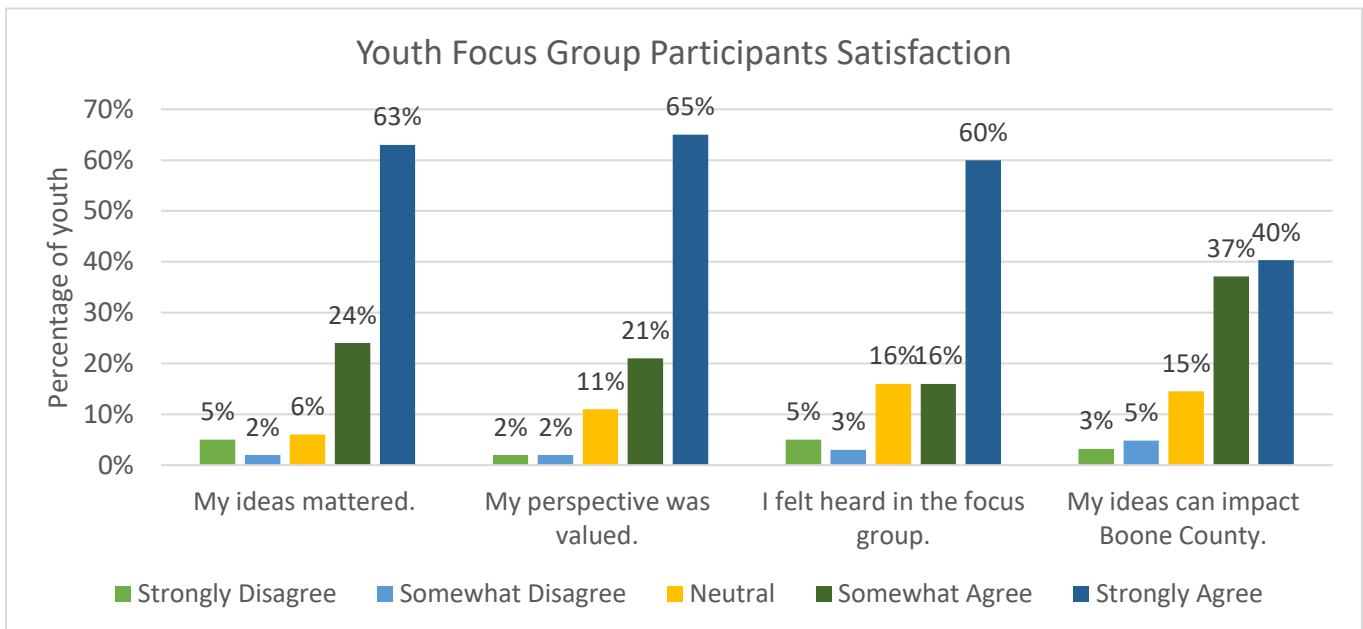


Survey Results

Following the focus group discussion, youth completed a survey which asked questions about their satisfaction with the focus groups, their basic needs, and their perceived neighborhood conditions.

Satisfaction Information

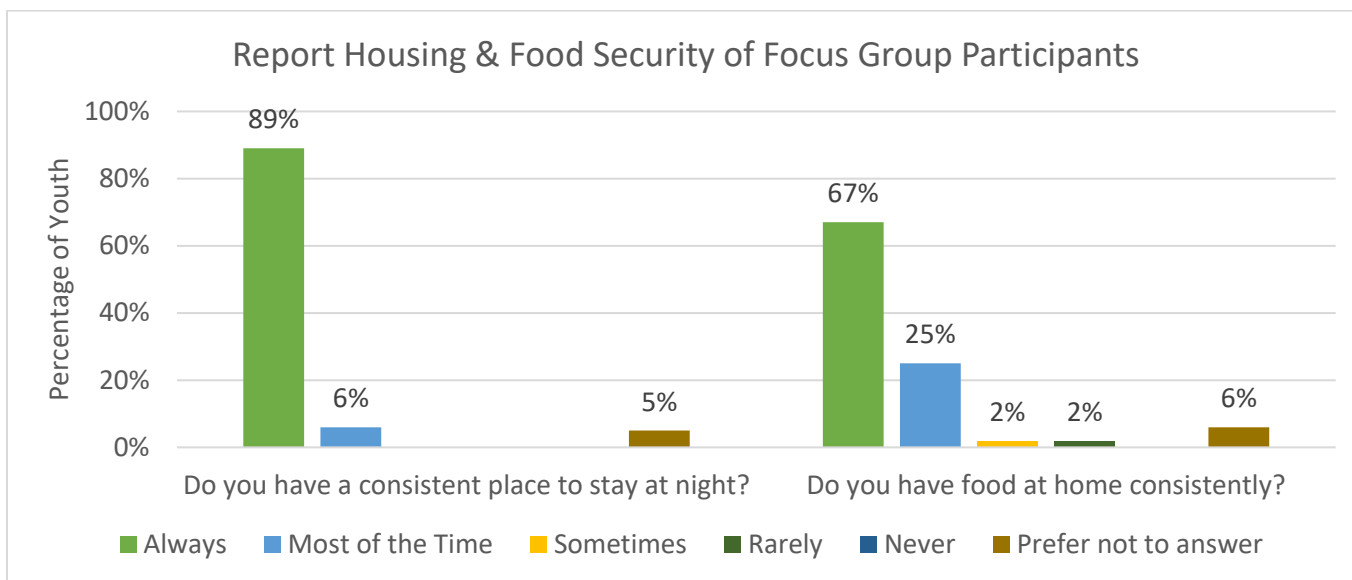
Participants were asked several questions about their experiences within the focus group. Students reported they somewhat or strongly agreed their ideas mattered during the focus group 87% of the time; 13% of participants disagreed or were neutral about their ideas mattering in the focus group. When asked if they felt their perspective mattered during the session, 86% of participants somewhat or strongly agreed; 11% were neutral; only 4% disagreed. Many participants reported feeling heard in the focus groups: 76% somewhat or strongly agreed they felt heard; 16% of participants indicated they were neutral; and 8% somewhat or strongly disagreed and did not feel heard. Participants were asked if they thought their ideas could impact Boone County; 77% somewhat or strongly agreed their ideas could impact the county; 15% were neutral; and only 8% somewhat or strongly disagreed their ideas would impact the county. Overall, youth felt heard, their perspective was valued, and their ideas mattered in the focus group.



Basic Needs

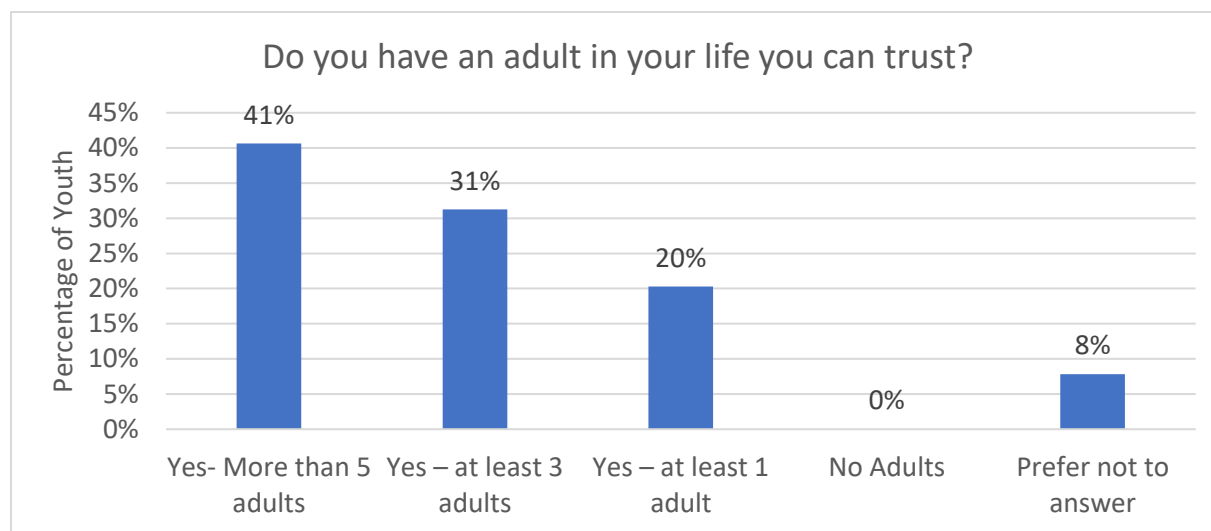
Participants were asked about their food and housing security. When asked about having a consistent place to stay at night, 89% of youth reported they always have a consistent place to stay; 6% of youth indicated they had consistent housing most of the time; 5% of youth preferred not to answer. When youth were asked if they had food at home consistently, 92% of

participants indicated they always or most of the time have food at home; 4% of participants indicated they only had food at home sometimes or rarely; 6% indicated they would prefer not to answer.



Adult Supports

Participants were asked about supportive relationships they had with adults in their lives. Of the 64 respondents, 72% indicated they have at least three adults in their lives they can trust; 20% of respondents indicated they had at least one adult they could trust; and 8% of respondents indicated they preferred not to answer.



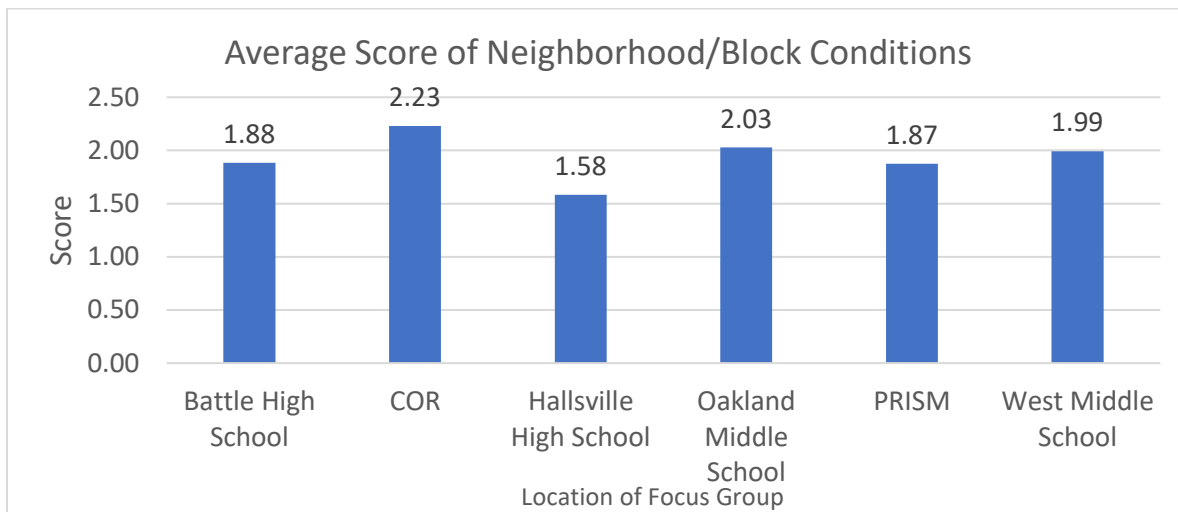
Neighborhood/Block Conditions

The *Neighborhood/Block Conditions* scale measures respondents’ perceptions and beliefs about different neighborhood conditions. Youth within this study completed this measure to inform researchers of community needs within participants’ neighborhoods through rating each item

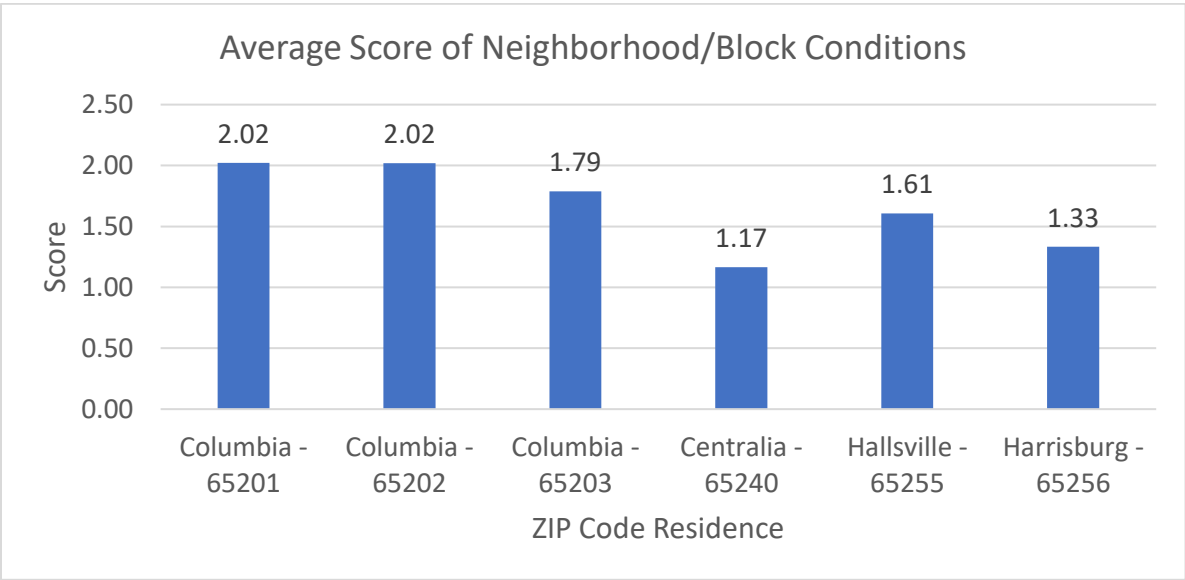
as: a score of one, indicating ‘no problem’; a score of two, indicating ‘a minor problem’; or a score of three, indicating ‘a serious problem.’ Surveys are scored averaging the total score across the number of questions answered. This provides a score between 1-3 with all participant scores from across different neighborhoods in Boone County. Higher scores indicate more perceived neighborhood problems. The following table contains ratings across each item in the questionnaire and their perceived condition in the community. Items were grouped based on which response had the largest percentage of responses.

Not a Problem	A Minor Problem	A Serious Problem
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups of young people hanging around • Organized gangs • Feeling unsafe while out alone on your block during the day • City services, like trash pickup and police response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Property damage • Physical assaults of people on the street • Physical fighting • Feeling unsafe while out alone on your block in evening • Inadequate recreational activities available for young people • Lack of supervised activities for youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drug dealing • Gunshots

Looking at scores across each focus group location, the highest scores are found from respondents involved in COR and at Oakland Middle School. The highest scores across location of the focus group indicates participants believe there to be minor problems across multiple neighborhood conditions.



Based on the ZIP code residency of Boone County participants, participants residing in ZIP codes 65201 and 65202 had the highest scores of problematic neighborhood conditions. Scores across Boone County ZIP codes indicate participants rate their block conditions as ‘a minor problem.’



Results from this survey of neighborhood/block conditions should be utilized in future community planning events to target interventions to community issues identified by youth within this study.

Focus Group Results

From the six focus groups held, there were eleven themes identified. Six themes are included in the major themes and five are considered minor themes based on the percentage of codes within each theme compared to the total amount of themes. Any theme with less than ten percent of the total codes was considered a minor theme.

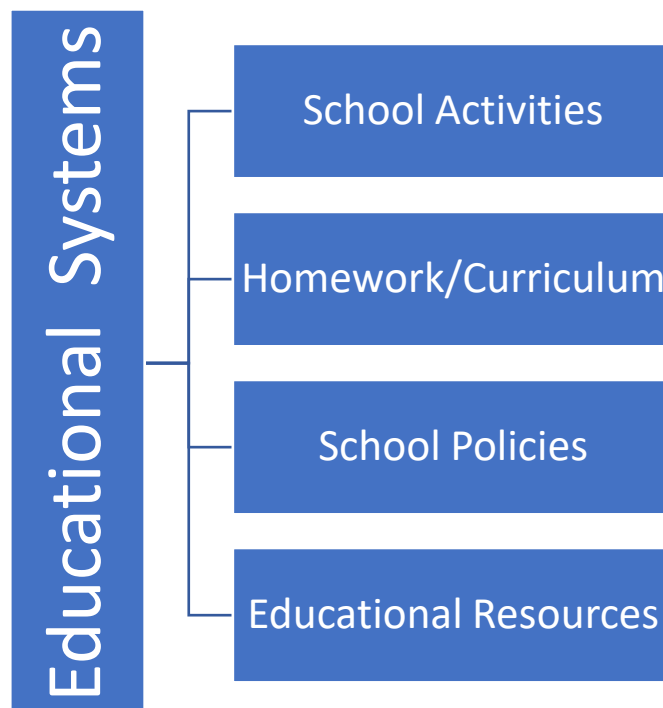
Themes identified are listed below in the table. This report will focus on major themes identified within the analysis, as these had the highest frequency in discussions across all groups. Each major theme includes multiple sub themes. Themes and sub themes are explained below with quotes from participants which illustrate the concept.

Major Themes	Minor Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational System • Mental Health • Violence • Identity-Based Experiences • Community Level Issues • Concrete Solutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home Issues • Social Media • Drug Use • Communication • Miscellaneous/Other

Educational System

Participants want the educational system to better support them in making positive decisions for themselves. They want access to activities, support from teachers, and to learn practical skills for their future.

Within the Educational System theme, there are multiple sub themes. Those listed here contain ten percent or more of the total codes within the educational systems theme. The graphic below provides a visual representation of all the included sub themes within this report.



School Activities: Youth identified school activities, especially sports, as important to helping them make better decisions and stay out of trouble.

"I feel like especially nowadays, the easy road is getting to the streets or do something... you know... you're not supposed to be doing... and sports allow you to become a better person and look forward to being someone in their life."

Homework/Curriculum: Participants desire to have a practical education that can help them in the future; more interactive or creative teaching styles; and a focus on what is happening in the world today.

"They're not teaching us to be people that want to own something one day. Like I want to be, like owning our own company or something, or teachin' us to... work in factories or work at U.P.S. or work somewhere like that's going to continue to be like a 9 to 5 job."

School Policies: Participants discussed school policies they perceive to be impacting their academic performance, policies around paying and keeping qualified teachers, and wanting to feel heard by school administrators.

“We have meetings like this with the principals and stuff sometimes. And people get called in and we talk about how we went to school to change things up. And we’ve brought up like solid points of things that will better our school and it’s never happened.”

Educational Resources: Students want their educators to offer more supports outside of class.

“Sometimes we talk to our teachers about stuff because there’s a lot of goin’ on outside of school...instead of just like in school.”

Educational System Recommendations

Focus group participants shared their experiences with the educational systems within Boone County. From their responses, recommendations have been formulated around these themes.

Increase available positive activities for youth.

Youth described wanting to be involved in activities which have positive influences on their lives. More activities that allow youth to build connections with their peers and gain self-esteem are needed. Increasing access to these kinds of activities will enable more youth to be involved.

Provide opportunities to youth to learn trades (plumbing, construction, electricity, etc.).

Youth emphasized they may not all want to attend college but want practical education that could be used in trades or in operating their own businesses. Investments are needed in creating training pipelines for youth which do not require attendance at a four-year college.

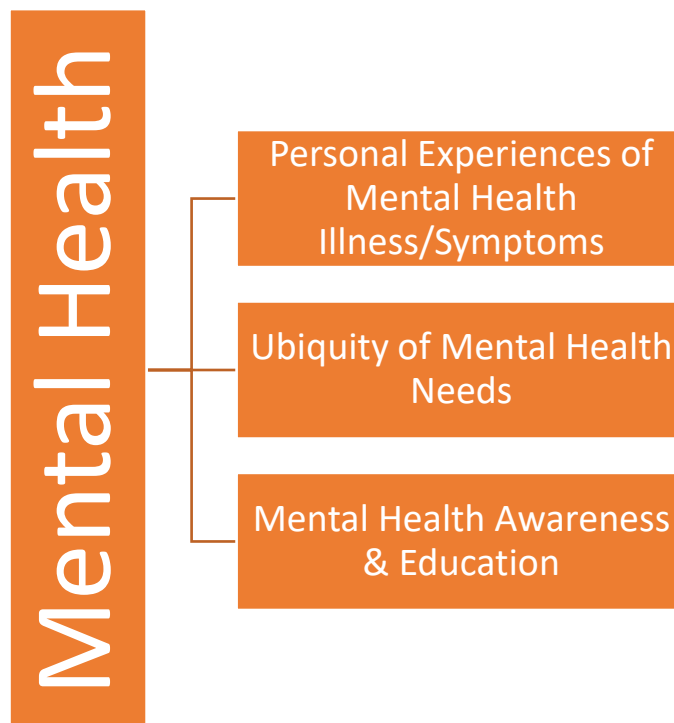
Educators must continue to create meaningful relationships with youth.

Youth expressed a desire to connect with their educators outside of the classroom.

Mental Health

Focus group participants see and experience mental health needs in their lives. They want educators and parents to better understand these symptoms, be comfortable talking about them, and effectively educate students on variability of symptoms.

Within the Mental Health theme, there are multiple sub themes. Those listed here contain thirteen percent or more of the total codes within the mental health theme. The graphic below provides a visual representation of all the included sub themes within this report.



Personal Experiences of Mental Health Illness/Symptoms: Focus group participants discussed their personal experiences of symptoms related to mental health. Suicidal thoughts, depression, and anxiety were frequently mentioned.

“But it's like there's days where you don't know what to do and you don't, you don't know what you feel and you're feeling something that you don't know how to say it in words.”

Ubiquity of Mental Health Needs: Participants reflected about how common mental health needs are to themselves and their peers.

“For me and what I've noticed... Mental health is a big issue because I don't care if you're a part of the [LGBTQ+] community or not. Everyone has seen that. They've gone through a very tough time with depression or anxiety.”

Mental Health Awareness & Education: Youth want educators to share more about the variety of symptoms related to mental health disorders. Participants feel educators should be adept at understanding mental illness and should fight stigma about these issues.

“But we need to stop just trying to be aware and just like talk about it once. We need to actually talk about it. We need to have conversation. It needs to not be just a one-time lesson.”

Mental Health Recommendations

Focus group participants shared their experiences with mental health needs. From their responses, recommendations have been formulated around these themes.

Increase educator comfort and knowledge around mental health topics.

Youth described wanting educators to be more comfortable discussing mental health needs of students. Increasing awareness and youth mental health first aid competency is needed within middle and high schools.

Continue to raise awareness around mental health needs for young people.

Youth discussed wanting more awareness around mental health needs, so more youth feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

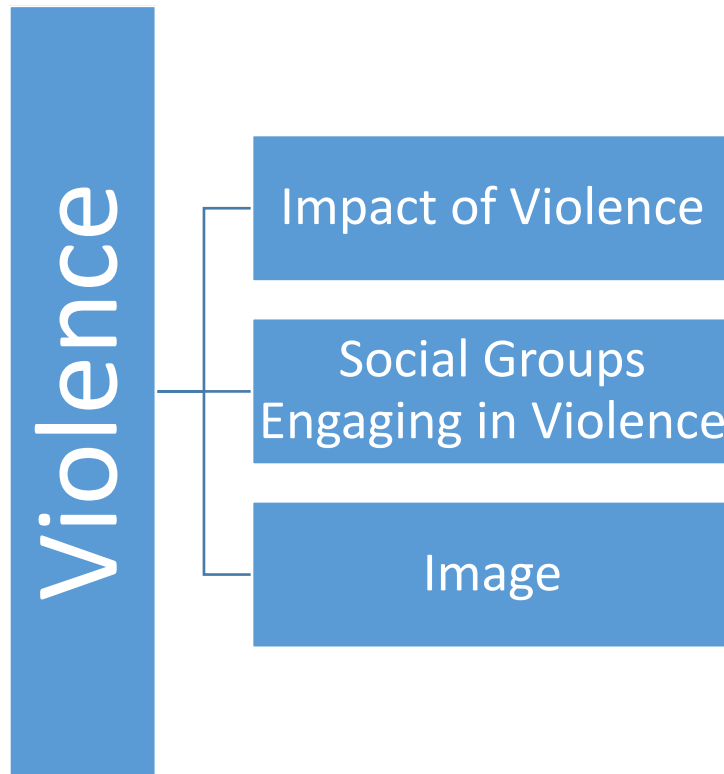
Promote trauma-informed care within Boone County.

Youth shared their personal experiences with mental illness and the importance of understanding how it has impacted their lives. Engaging in trauma-informed care can help empower individuals and families, reduce unintentional harm, and promote safety for those seeking help.

Violence

Participants in the focus group shared the impact of violence on their lives and how they perceive local violence to be tied to neighborhood affiliation within the North and East sides of Columbia. Youth feel the desire of their peers to maintain an image of toughness is a cause of some of the violence within the community.

Within the Violence theme, there are multiple sub themes. Those listed here contain ten percent or more of the total codes within the violence theme. The graphic below provides a visual representation of all the included sub themes within this report.



Impact of Violence: Youth shared the impact violence has had on them throughout their lives. They shared experiences of loss and feeling unsafe in their neighborhoods.

“We all have to worry about whether it's going to be my best friend next that's just caught in the crossfire. Or who's caught or who's shot at in her car and crashes and dies. Like we have to worry about that. But we don't have adults that are talking about it like we have adults that will talk about it with other adults.”

Social Groups Engaging in Violence: Participants perceive the violence to be tied to the North and East sides of Columbia. Participants shared the youth participating in the violence are not a gang, but rather a small group of young people who had once been friends.

“I have cousins that are actually willing to kill each other for to make a statement over which side of town is better... It's kind of like heartbreaking to see that blood is going against each other over territory that they don't own.”

Image: Youth felt their peers might be engaging in violence to bolster their image as someone ‘tough’ or ‘hard.’ Others mentioned many of their peers lack positive role models and instead look to young adults within their lives or on social media.

“Like everyone wants to make a name for themselves in Columbia. And I feel like a lot of the violence comes from [that] and they want to make a name for themselves.”

Violence Recommendations

Focus group participants shared their experiences with violence within Boone County. From their responses, recommendations have been formulated around these themes.

Invest and plan for community-based interventions around youth violence.

Youth shared how violence had impacted them, their families, neighborhoods, and schools. Interventions to de-escalate violence and build community connections are needed to interrupt and prevent violence. Youth identified needs around stopping violence between groups before it escalates.

Offer supports for those directly involved in violence.

Some youth have been directly involved or impacted by violence within the community. Offering crisis supports for individuals immediately following violence and ongoing supportive groups might help families cope with this kind of trauma. Offering support to the immediate and extended families of those harmed by violence can decrease the likelihood of retaliatory acts of violence.

Promote community-based policing.

Youth shared their experiences in interacting with law enforcement. Some youth want to build positive relationships with officers and not be fearful around them. Community-based policing focuses on improving relationships between law enforcement officers and community members by using social services partnerships, techniques aimed at proactive problem-solving, and promotion of organization transformation to better serve local communities (Community Oriented Policing Services, 2014).

Limit access to guns and other weapons.

Youth shared about the ease of gaining access to weapons through social media. Limiting access to weapons, especially guns, can decrease the number of shootings within the community.

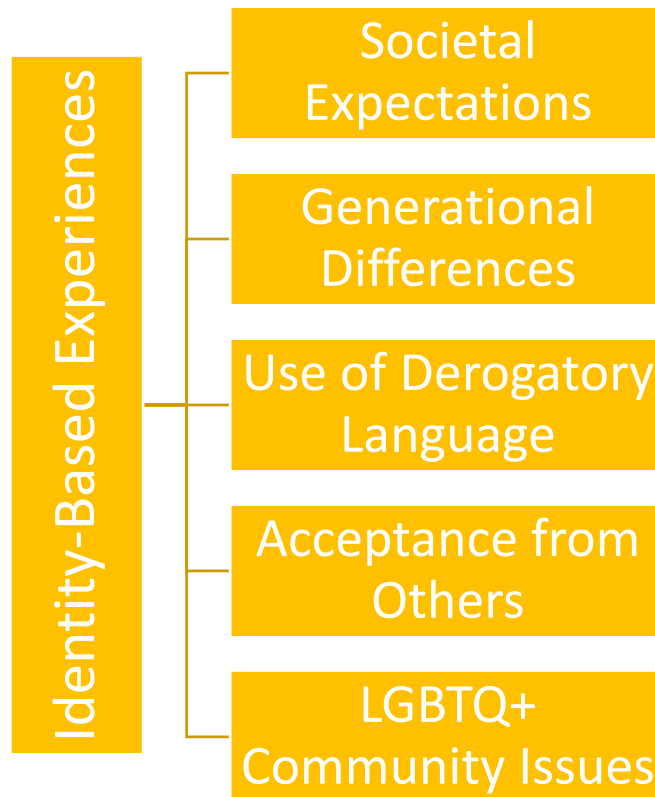
Provide positive activities for youth to make a name for themselves.

Many participants believe individuals engage in violence as a way to improve an individual’s image. Offering positive alternatives for youth to gain self-esteem and a feeling of importance could help decrease the violence within the community.

Identity-Based Experiences

Youth experience unconscious bias and pressure from society to perform based on characteristics tied to their identity. They have experiences with derogatory language, but also see themselves as accepting of their peers.

Within the Identity-Based Experiences theme, there are multiple sub themes. Those listed here contain ten percent or more of the total codes within the Identity-Based Experiences theme. The graphic below provides a visual representation of all the included sub themes within this report.



Societal Expectations: Youth shared how they feel pressured by society to behave in particular ways based on their identity. They expressed this pressure can negatively impact them because they feel they must “prove” themselves to others.

“As a black man, I’m supposed to be something. According to society. As a white woman, you are supposed to be something, according to everybody else. And I think the need...or like I feel like we all feel the need to live up to, be like who we are expected to be. And it kind of takes away from our individual goals, our individual aspirations, because we lose, like, who we really are, trying to fit in to play a part that like we never really wanted to play in the first place.”

Generational Differences: Youth participants reflected on their perceived differences between other adults and themselves. They believe the world is a much different place today than it was when their parents and grandparents were teenagers.

“But I think now, especially since times are changing, like things are way different, than like they were in 1960 when your grandma was alive. And in 1970 when she was watchin' Martin Luther King March. And like it is not the same. You know what I'm saying? There's differences and I think they... I feel like adults try to like make it seem like it's the same. Things aren't that different, but things are so much different. Things are changing so fast and they're not able to keep up. And we have to keep up.”

Use of Derogatory Language: Participants recalled their experiences with slurs and inappropriate language. Many youth described negative experiences with peers and community members.

Acceptance: Youth feel their generation is more accepting than other generations. They believe this allows them to more effectively work together to tackle hard problems.

“Even though we may come from different backgrounds and different cultures, we still come together to help individuals pull themselves up instead of just letting them suffer.”

LGBTQ+ Community Issues: Youth identifying within the LGBTQ+ community discussed their experiences having to validate their own identities. Many youth feel they must legitimize their identities to others, including parents, peers, and other adults in their lives.

“When people in the LGBTQ community speak out about their identities, I hate it when we're told it's just a phase or that like we need to change. Like. No. What really needs to change is that you need to understand that there's so many people who identify as these things and that's not going to change and is going to keep on going. And you might as well just educate yourself and it's trying to stop them for being who they are is not going to happen because who they are is who they are. And that's not going to change.”

Identity-Based Experiences Recommendations

Focus group participants shared their identity-based experiences. From their responses, recommendations have been formulated around these themes.

Promote equity initiatives for youth within the community.

Youth shared how their identities shape the way they experience their community.

Helping youth understand and navigate their identities can help youth feel supported and promote equity for youth.

Increase educator training in diversity, inclusion, and equity topics.

Youth need their educators to understand their lived experiences, especially as those not in privileged groups. Understanding each student's background can help them feel safe and heard in the classroom.

Engage youth in decision-making efforts within the community.

Youth perceive today's world as different than previous generations. They want to be involved in making decisions that affect them today or those which will impact their future. Helping make decision-making processes accessible for youth is critical.

Community Level Issues

Participants discussed resources in the community which have helped them. Other participants discussed the lack of opportunities for employment and resources for themselves and their families.

Within the Community Level Issues theme, there are multiple sub themes. Those listed here contain twenty percent or more of the total codes within the Community Level Issues theme. The graphic below provides a visual representation of all the included sub themes within this report.



Community Resources: Youth discussed some of the resources available in the community and shared their own experiences of positive interactions with service providers.

“And when I was growing up, we did have something like that. We had Granny’s House and Blind Boone Center. And like when you went to Granny’s House, they will feed you. You could talk to them about anything and play all kind of games... So that, like, teaches kids to be kids instead of trying to grow up fast.”

Employment Opportunities: Youth discussed lack of employment opportunities for themselves and their families. They felt there were limited opportunities within the community to find employment.

“I feel like, yeah, we can’t really change, we can’t tell people to change and like do that. I think we just need like an opportunity. Like say someone gets in trouble, and they’re saying they don’t have any job and they can’t make any money. Just givin’ them the chance to get a job.”

Lack of Resources: Youth participants believe there are not many resources for youth within the community including a lack of recreational facilities and few safe spaces for youth.

“Like you go to bigger cities. Like people that travel a lot know that there’s more things to do in other cities. Like stuff that you could just go do instead of going to [the] ARC [Activities & Recreation Center] and going there all the time.”

Community Level Recommendations

Focus group participants shared their experiences with community resources within Boone County. From their responses, recommendations have been formulated around these themes.

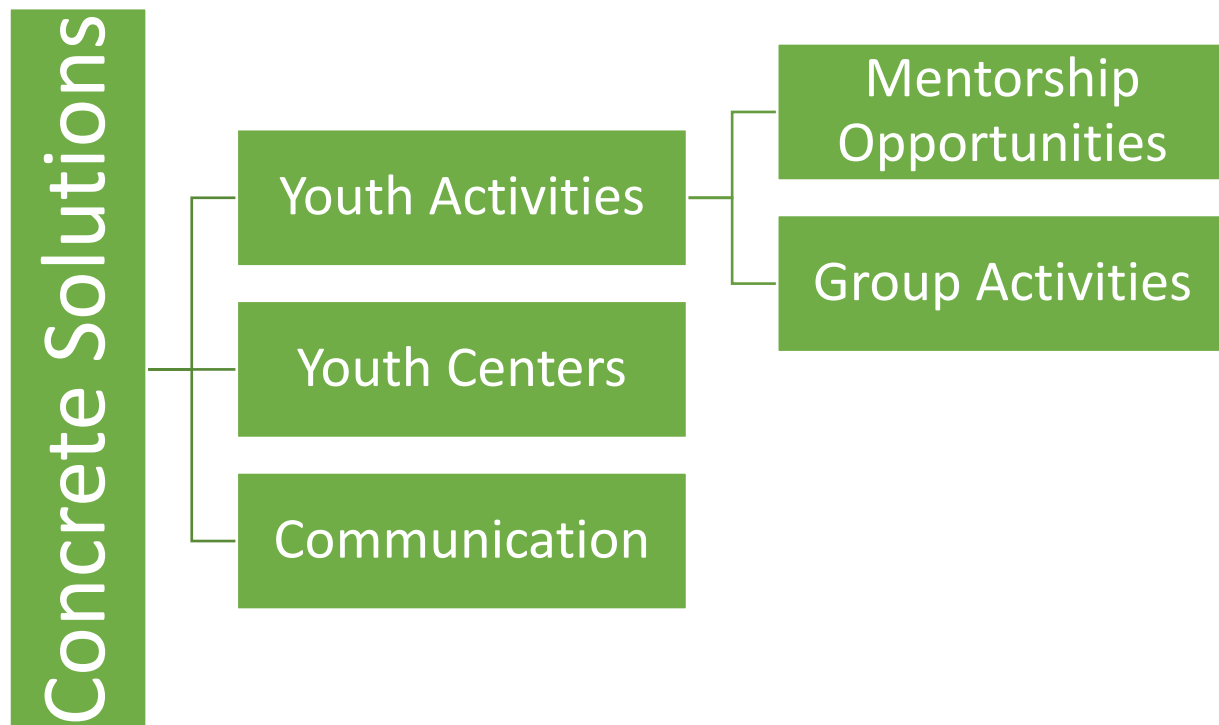
Expand after school programming for older youth.

Youth participants expressed wanting safe spaces within their neighborhoods to go after school. This would allow youth to feel safe and supported by community resources.

Concrete Solutions

Throughout the focus groups, participants shared their ideas and solutions for community issues they identified. They want opportunities to mentor with peers or adults; safe spaces within their neighborhoods to hang out; and communication about decisions made in their schools and communities.

Within the Concrete Solutions theme, there are multiple sub themes. Those listed here contain ten percent or more of the total codes within the Concrete Solutions theme. The graphic below provides a visual representation of all the included sub themes within this report.



Youth Activities: Youth identified the importance of mentorship for themselves and their peers. They expressed wanting support from someone who has similar experiences.

“If there was more, like, people that were able to, like more influential people to look up to. I think that [would] be better for the youth because they have somebody and they can express their feelings to especially if they don't have like a father figure...or [those] that they don't have mothers in our lives to teach them what to do. So I think that... if they had some, like, not even a place, you know, just like someone to talk to that, you know, can be there for you without it being like overwhelming...”

“Yeah, that's a thousand percent like what we need because like you're looking at somebody that's just like you go through the same thing, you're going through it and they can tell you, like, what they do to get through it, like what they do to better themselves, to make them.”

Youth Centers: Youth desire a safe space where they can see their friends and avoid violence within their neighborhood.

"I live on the east side and there's not normally stuff for the kids on the east side to do. I mean, there's the ARC, but that's like far away for them. And then having a safe center for them to go in participating, playing games and stuff because it's cold now, then that's going to play basketball...I feel like there should be a safe center in that area."

Communication: Youth want to be involved in making decisions within their schools and communities. They want more intentional conversations about community violence and mental health.

"But conversations like we're having need to be always happening. With everybody. And like this, having this focus group with select few students that you as adults know that you can trust is good. But everybody needs to be involved in this. Like this is something that everybody in the school needs to be talking about, that all adults, everybody in the community needs to be talking about it because we can't speak for our community. We can speak for us."

"I feel like whenever something traumatic happens and you don't talk about it or don't express it, then you're not really acknowledging that it happened. So basically, adults, adults don't like to talk about stuff because they feel like if they do, then it becomes real. But it is real. And people are actually going through it. And just because you're not, it doesn't mean it's not real."

Concrete Solutions Recommendations

Focus group participants shared their solutions for community issues they identified.

Expand mentorship opportunities for older youth.

Youth want opportunities to engage with adult and relational near-peer mentors. Some participants discussed wanting to be involved as a mentor for elementary age students. Giving youth the opportunity to create positive relationships through mentorship can help prevent community violence.

Create youth centers.

Youth want to have safe spaces to be with their friends, access to programming, and support from positive influences. They desire accessible youth centers within their communities. Youth residing in rural communities frequently discussed needing spaces for older youth to hang out.

Community Systems Recommendations

This analysis shows priorities of youth involved in the current research. Thematic recommendations have been provided for each section of the qualitative analysis in this report based on feedback and discussions within focus groups. The community systems recommendations within this section are a priority to address across systems and have been developed by synthesizing information from the survey data and focus group recommendations at a community level.

Programmatic Recommendations

- Expand training for all school personnel on diversity, inclusion, and equity issues
- Expand training for educators around mental health
- Expand workforce development programming for youth to participate in trade jobs

Policy Recommendations

- Invest in community-based interventions to interrupt and prevent violence within the community
- Promote equity initiatives which seek to erase disparities among groups within Boone County
- Identify and implement local gun control initiatives within Boone County
- Expand community policing across Boone County to facilitate positive relationships between youth and law enforcement personnel

Community Planning Recommendations

- Prioritize the contributions of youth in community planning processes
- Increase accessibility for youth to engage in planning events

Closing

The current report shares perspectives from youth who participated in focus groups aimed at understanding community needs of youth and teens. Boone County Community Services Department staff analyzed qualitative data and survey data to better understand what youth see as priority community needs and how they would like these issues addressed. Community system recommendations identified in this report will require decision-makers and key stakeholders within Boone County to come together to create a youth-informed plan to address these community needs.

The Boone County Children's Services Board will be hosting a conference focused on developing an actionable plan to address violence in Boone County. Following the conference, a targeted request for proposal will be released focused on implementing community goals from the conference.

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