

Enhancing Their Likelihood for a Positive Future: Focus Groups Reveal the Voice of Inner-City Youth

Kenneth R. Ginsburg, MD, MEd*; Penny M. Alexander, MSW§; Jean Hunt, RN§; Maisha Sullivan, MSW§; and Avital Cnaan, PhD‡

ABSTRACT. *Objective.* To learn directly from adolescents living in a challenging environment what they believe would most influence their likelihood of achieving a positive future.

Design. A teen-centered methodology used focus groups, nominal group technique sessions, and a survey to allow adolescents to develop, prioritize, and explain their own solutions. AmeriCorps workers guided in-school 8th-, 9th-, and 12th-graders in north Philadelphia through a 4-stage hierarchical process. This article reports the qualitative explanations offered by adolescents in Stage 4 explanatory focus groups. In these 10 groups, 91 youth added meaning and context to the ideas their fellow students generated and prioritized. Transcriptions were reviewed for consistent themes. Direct quotations representative of those themes are offered here.

Results. Students in all grades gave highest priority to solutions that would promote educational or job opportunities. Solutions that would ameliorate disruptive surroundings or reduce risk behaviors were generally rated lower. Focus group participants agreed that education, improved employment opportunities, connection with adults, and meaningful uses of their time were the keys to positive change. They also expressed how a risky environment impacted on their chances for success and offered strategies for reducing their risks. They discussed how positive forces might counter the draw of the streets. Although most adolescents remained optimistic, some viewed problems in their neighborhood as intractable.

Conclusions. An individual's ability to draw from protective resources while avoiding the challenges inherent to a risky environment may determine his/her ability to succeed. Youth have clear ideas about how they can best be supported to succeed. Adults should consider and incorporate their wisdom as they plan strategies to develop productive young adults. *Pediatrics* 2002;109(6). URL: <http://www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/109/6/e95>; adolescent, poverty, education, resiliency, focus groups.

ABBREVIATION. NGT, Nominal Group Technique.

From the *Craig-Dalsimer Division of Adolescent Medicine and ‡Division of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, Department of Pediatrics, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and §Urban Initiative, Mayor's Children and Families Cabinet, City of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Ms Alexander is currently with Habitat for Humanity International in South Africa. Ms Hunt is currently with the William Penn Foundation.

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Reprint requests to (K.R.G.) Craig-Dalsimer Division of Adolescent Medicine, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, 34th St and Civic Center Blvd, Philadelphia, PA 19104. E-mail: ginsburg@email.chop.edu

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There is an increasing interest in looking beyond the reduction of risk behaviors to consider those protective factors that promote the healthier development of youth. Adolescents living in urban areas of concentrated poverty must negotiate many obstacles imposed by an often precarious environment. The likelihood that they will be able to move toward a productive future is affected by their inherent resiliency as well as the supports offered by family, school, and community.¹⁻⁶

The Mayor's Children and Families Cabinet of the City of Philadelphia committed itself to enhance the well-being of north Philadelphia's youth. It preliminarily determined that the best means to support the area's adolescents was to address violence and teen pregnancy directly. An advisory panel suggested that there might be more effective ways to enhance youth well-being. The cabinet charged this research team to uncover what factors youth perceived impeded or promoted their success.

The objective of this study was to learn directly from a cohort of urban youth what factors they believed make the most difference in influencing whether they would have a positive future. A 4-stage, teen-centered methodology was used to assure that the ideas would be developed, generated, prioritized, and explained by the adolescents themselves.^{7,8} The qualitative processes used in the first 2 stages of the study to develop and generate the ideas used to create the Stage 3 survey, as well as survey results, are described in another article.⁹ The goal of this study was to draw directly from the explanations offered in the final stage of the research process to add meaning and context to the adolescents' ideas.

The focus group data offers policy makers, program designers, and youth workers a deeper understanding from which to develop strategies. The adolescents' ideas challenge us to carefully reconsider our preconceived notions of how to best guide those youth living in urban areas of concentrated poverty toward a positive, productive future.

METHODS

Study Population

The study population for the 4-stage study consisted of all 9th- ($n = 2800$) and 12th-grade ($n = 995$) students in 5 high schools and all 8th-grade students ($n = 905$) in 4 middle schools in North Philadelphia in 1997. A total of 91 of these students (41 8th-grade students in 4 groups; 24 9th-graders in 3 groups; and 26 12th-graders in 3 groups) participated in the explanatory Stage 4 focus groups. These focus group participants were 47% male, 73% Af-

rican American, 7% white, 19% Latino, and 2% Asian, and ranged in age from 13 through 21. No socioeconomic data were collected from Stage 4 focus group participants, but all participants attended schools with between 86% to 91% low-income students, as defined by eligibility for free or reduced lunch. A sociodemographic profile of the participating schools is offered in another article.⁹

Study Design

Data collection was divided into 4 stages. The research protocol was approved by the institutional review board of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the Office of Assessment of the Philadelphia School District. Student participation served as assent and passive parental consent was obtained. Table 1 gives a summary of the teen-centered design. A full description of all stages is offered in another article.⁹

In Stage 1, 60 students participated in 8 mixed-grade exploratory focus groups. The adolescents were facilitated to discuss the factors that impact on their ability to succeed and to develop the single Nominal Group Technique (NGT) question capable of generating the universe of ideas that would respond to the study objective. The final question was "What would you like to see happen in your community that would make things better for teenagers and make it more likely that they would have a positive future?"

In Stage 2, 298 other adolescents participated in NGT sessions^{10,11} to generate responses to the study question developed in the exploratory focus groups. After students were shown the question they were told that a community was "the area you live in, and all the people who live there with you." Positive future was defined as a future where "teenagers would grow up feeling respected, feeling good about themselves, and capable of taking care of themselves and their loved ones." Starting in this stage, each grade generated, prioritized, and explained their own ideas in parallel to other grades.

A survey for each grade precisely incorporated the ideas with the highest mean priority scores from the grade's NGT groups. The survey allowed a larger population to respond to a standard set of ideas. The students rated each affirmatively stated item (eg, "The communities would be cleaner") on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "Definitely would make me more likely to have a positive future" to 5 = "Would definitely not make me more likely to have a positive future." The list of all items each grade prioritized, their mean Likert ratings, and rank by the Marginal Homogeneity Test, and subgroup analyses are given in an accompanying article.⁹ Table 2 lists the items included in the ninth-grade survey to serve as a reference here.

The principal randomly selected students from class rosters to participate in the group sessions. All group processes were facilitated with attention to group dynamics, including strategies to encourage participation of all group members, control the biasing effect of dominant members, and limit imposition of facilitator bias. Groups were convened until generated ideas were repetitive. The Stage 1 exploratory focus groups and Stage 2 NGT sessions were facilitated by AmeriCorps workers with 24 hours of training in group facilitation.

In the Stage 4 explanatory focus groups, 91 students added context and meaning to the prioritized items. All groups were facilitated by 1 of the authors (P.M.A.), a female African American social worker. The students were informed that although the sessions would be recorded, no identifying information would

ever be disclosed. To create a safe setting, the group was told never to use names or refer to any specific person's behavior by name or inference.

In each of the explanatory focus groups, a standard introduction was given to explain the process that had led to the generation and prioritization of the ideas the group was being asked to explain. The groups were then shown a preprinted list of items their grade had generated, ordered by their mean Likert scores. The facilitator asked group members to select items they wished to discuss from anywhere on the list. Although the facilitator used a minimum amount of prompting, she consistently reminded the students that each item should be discussed in terms of its ability to "make you more likely to have a positive future." The students chose the topics of greatest interest to them first, and then the facilitator guided them to discuss a variety of items. This limited the duration of discussion on some topics while encouraging others.

Data Analysis

The items generated in the NGT sessions were each assigned a mean priority score, and the items with the highest scores were included in the survey. Statistical analyses of the survey data are offered elsewhere.⁹

Although software programs exist that allow investigators to organize and then grossly quantify qualitative content,¹²⁻¹⁴ we chose not to perform this type of content analysis. First, the strength of qualitative data are in the depth and context it adds, and by definition, it need not be quantified. Second, to assure that all topics were addressed, the facilitator influenced the items selected and the duration of the discussion. Thus, quantifying the data would to some degree reflect facilitator bias. Third, the teen-centered method's qualitative-quantitative approach offers the population a clear opportunity to prioritize ideas, freeing the final qualitative stage to explain and enrich results.

The transcriptions of the recorded focus groups were reviewed for consistent themes. Direct quotations representative of those themes were selected to reflect, as accurately as possible, the words and views of youth. Because open expression was fostered by anonymity, statements cannot be linked to individuals or sociodemographic groups.

RESULTS

Adolescents Respond to the Ordering of Items

Within a few moments of viewing the survey results, students in most of the groups noted that items related to education and jobs were prioritized highly, whereas items related to risk exposure were rated lower. In other groups, the facilitator explicitly asked whether the ordering of items made sense. In all groups, students agreed that the rank order determined by survey respondents was correct. The contrast did not generate a lot of discussion in most groups, but was instead acknowledged briefly as an obvious point. One eighth-grade female summarized, "It's all about a better education, because without an education you can't get a job, so that should be the first thing up there."

TABLE 1. The Teen-Centered Data Collection Method*

Stage	Technique	Objective(s)	n†
1	Open focus groups	a) To explore the issue b) To develop the question for Stage 2	60
2	NGT sessions	a) To generate responses to the question b) To preliminarily prioritize the responses c) To create a survey using the prioritized responses	298
3	Survey	a) To have the population prioritize the responses b) To allow for subgroup analyses	1761
4	Open focus groups	To explain the responses	91

* In stages 2 through 4, students in each grade worked in parallel to generate, prioritize, and explain their own responses.

† A breakdown of participants by grade is offered in another article.⁹

TABLE 2. Summary of Ninth-Grade Suggestions (*n* = 1022)

Item*†	Rank‡
Teens would have better opportunities to get into college.	1
There would be more jobs for teenagers.	2
There would be more job training programs.	3
There would be programs to keep teens from dropping out of school and to help them finish school.	3
Schools would have better books and better computers.	3
There would be more after school activities for teenagers.	4
There would be more police involved in the neighborhoods.	4
There would be more recreation centers for teenagers.	4
Adults and teenagers would work together to be involved in their community.	4
There would be less theft.	4
The communities would be cleaner.	4
They would get rid of abandoned (empty) buildings.	5
There would be less violence and more peace.	5
There would be more minority owned businesses.	5
There would be more religious programs (activities in churches, temples, and mosques) for teenagers.	5
The police would not be racist or corrupt.	5
There would be a stop to black on black crime.	5
The homeless would have housing and they would not live on our streets.	6
The government would <i>not</i> stop welfare.	6
There would be less guns on the street.	6
Drugs would stop coming into the communities.	6
All communities would have town watch patrols.	6
There would be less drug dealers.	7
Graffiti would be cleaned up.	7

* Items are listed precisely as worded on the survey.

† Items are listed in order of their mean rating on the scale 1 = "Definitely would make me more likely to have a positive future to 5 = would *Definitely not* make me . . ."

‡ Rank by Marginal Homogeneity Test.

On the other hand, there were statements in each group that would support the hypothesis that some respondents felt some problems were so intractable that there was no use in stating their elimination was a high priority. When questioned about the importance of eliminating drug dealers on the streets, 2 ninth-grade boys offered this exchange:

"Oh there's too many of them now."

"That's out of whack. I don't think you can stop that. If you take 1 off the street, you get 3 more."

Regarding the elimination of guns, a ninth-grader stated, "It looks good, but you ain't never going to get all the guns out of here." A girl in an eighth-grade discussion on graffiti said, "No matter how many times the graffiti gets cleaned up, it's going to get graffiti on it again."

Education

There seemed to be universal acceptance in the groups that it was only through education that positive opportunities would become available. One eighth-grade male noted, "They're laying off people, right? . . . it's because everybody in the city is dropping out of school. So, we have to have our schools make the learning materials more interesting. . . so everyone can get better degrees so the jobs can stay here."

Many students talked about the importance of attending college, but acknowledged the barriers to reaching that goal. One female senior said, "If you ask some people 'What are you going to do after high school?' they don't even know what's out there.

They don't know that there's money out there for college. We need more counselors in the schools."

Students often referred to overcoming financial limitations when they explained what was needed to help them get into college. One female ninth-grader stated, "Some people who get out of high school want to go to college, but they be like, 'Darn, I can't cause I don't got money for it.' And that's not right, because if they want their hopes and dreams to come true, they should go to college." Some teenagers stated that if their peers knew scholarships were more available they would stay more focused on their studies. In 2 groups, students discussed how financial barriers preventing enrollment can lead to a longstanding loss of motivation. A female senior summarized this phenomenon, "They wait for a year to make money and then plan to go to college. Then sometimes when they wait for a year, they don't feel like going at all. So, they just sit doing nothing."

Many students focused on the importance of at least finishing high school. Two ninth-graders held the following exchange describing strong messages from home about staying in school.

Male: "I didn't want to be like my parents, they dropped out. If I graduate, I'll be the first one."

Female: "My mom dropped out in tenth grade and she's always telling me 'Oh go to school, that's the best thing you can do. Don't be like me.'"

The adolescents talked about the barriers to staying in school, including their perception that they were not safe in school. An eighth-grader commented, "Sometimes people don't come to school because they feel as though they're not safe. If you

have those kind of checks (weapon and drug checks) they'll feel as though 'Okay, I can go to school. I don't have to worry about getting hurt.'" Students in other groups discussed the limitations of those infrequent checks, stating that long lines at the entrances alerted anyone with contraband to discard it before being checked. Several students suggested that metal detectors and surveillance cameras should be standard in schools.

When 8th- and 12th-graders discussed the item "Schools would be fixed up," they raised the issues of schools being poorly supplied and falling into disrepair. They stated that the disrepair affected student morale and the school's reputation in the community. "You'll be hearing little conversations around your community and people ask you what school you go to and people like, 'Oh you go to that old, dirty school,' and then you don't want to go to that school no more." Others spoke specifically of damaged books or of filthy bathrooms. An exchange among freshmen follows:

Male 1: "Get better books in here, man."

Male 2: "Most of these books ain't got the glossary in them."

Female: "And they don't have no back on them. They got electric tape holding the book together."

Male 1: "And we just now getting books that we can take home."

In 2 groups, the importance of air conditioning was raised, "cause in the summertime it be hot and you cannot concentrate on your work."

The students also discussed their perception that classroom conditions were not conducive to an adequate learning environment. One senior vented his frustration, "Some of the teachers don't care at all. The kids do whatever they want. It's at the point now that . . . teachers can't even control the kids." An eighth-grader thought that classroom size was a major problem: "An average class has 33 students in it. It should be no more than 25 students . . . It's overcrowded, the teacher can't get to you and tell you what you're doing if you don't understand. When it's so many, by the time she gets to you the period is over." Generally, when complaints about classroom conditions were aired, other participants stated that students were primarily responsible for deteriorating conditions. A female responded to the previous statement about overcrowding: "No, the whole class got to listen. They don't listen, then you don't get it. Half the students don't come. If students want to learn, they will learn regardless of what. It's not all the teacher's fault. If the kids just shut up, they'll understand better."

The adolescents explained that the challenge of preventing dropout was in making the draw of education greater than the draw of the streets. They spoke of a need for a more interesting curriculum and safer schools. The draw of the streets was described by a ninth-grade male: "Some of these high school students drop out 'cause they think they can get more money and stuff, because they be like if I work, I ain't going to have that much money like I get here on the corner. They get blind by a dollar

sign." A senior described the draw of the streets as "fast cars, fast money, fast this, and fast that."

Job Training and Job Opportunities

Adolescents in the focus groups agreed that job training and job opportunities were critical to assuring success for community adolescents. Seniors, in particular, acknowledged that the college route was not the only way to achieve success. A female senior stated, "Some people might decide that college isn't for them. We need somewhere they can go where they can speak to a person that places them in training." A male senior in another group concurred, ". . . because a lot of people have different types of gifts . . . they look for something that would train them in the gift that they had." In several of the groups, the participants made a point that jobs gave young people the work experience that would increase their employability: "there should be more jobs opening up for younger people . . . so when they get older, they have more experience."

The link between education, employment, and social problems was made repeatedly in the groups. A brief exchange between eighth-grade males exemplifies their awareness of the connection.

"If we had more jobs it would stop violence because people go out and rob people because they don't have a job. They don't have the money, so they go out and get the money."

"If they had more jobs, they won't be selling drugs, 'cause they could get a job."

Productive Use of Time and Meaningful Connections With Adults

The adolescents raised several ideas related to productive use of their free time and meaningful interactions with adults as means to guide them toward a productive future. Youth spoke of how after school activities gave them a safe place to go, offered them an opportunity to interact with adults, and held the potential to benefit their school performance. One ninth-grade boy stated, "We should have after school stuff, where we could talk to each other and talk to people about how we feel or whatever." An exchange among eighth-graders follows:

Male: "Cause if you have more homework activities after school, that will help you in class . . . then you'll get a good grade on your report card like A's and B's."

Female: "It will keep you off the street."

Male: You might have an opportunity to do something that you want to get into. Like if you do computers, you could learn more about the Internet."

Some students explicitly stated that staying off the streets averted trouble. An eighth-grader stated, "if they have a recreation center that will keep their minds off of thinking of doing drugs or selling drugs . . . they could be playing basketball." Many teenagers felt that programs should organize teenagers to serve the community. Usually, they spoke about cleaning up graffiti, or the schools. One eighth-grade male suggested recreation centers are not optimizing their impact: "Recreation centers think they are just a good place for kids to come and play. They need to help them get more involved, like activities to help other people, like homeless people."

Youth in several groups talked about how playgrounds should be safe places for children and adults to congregate and lamented the state of their community playgrounds. A young man commented:

"When I was growing up, I had playgrounds to go to. They were all clean. But how am I going to get my kids to a playground today? I'd have to go at 2 in the afternoon when the cops are on patrol. I can't take them at 8 at night when it's nice and cool outside. No way."

When groups discussed the item "adults and teenagers would work together to be involved in their community," the responses were always about caring, responsible adults. The following exchange between ninth-graders reveals their recognition that adult wisdom could make a difference in young people's lives.

Male: "Adults and teens should always be together because parents and their teenagers should always confront each other with problems. Some people don't do that at all."

Female: "I think they should stick together, 'cause adults, they used to be teenagers and they should know how it is, how it is now. So, they should understand our problems, 'cause they was young and go back in the day, too. They have been through so much."

One ninth-grade female related a story about the difference that an effective block captain can make.

"... We used to have a together block captain. She was an African American lady. This lady—oh my God, God bless her! She used to do everything that's possible for us. We used to have barbecues; we used to have hot dogs for the kids, soda, candy. We used to have games. We used to have everything for these kids, but she moved out of our block and now we get this [name] and he don't do nothing. He's corny. He just closes the block to clean it up, and then opens it back up."

When youth spoke about role models, they made the point that the best role models were local. One eighth-grade boy stated, "I know a construction worker, and he took me on his job and he taught me how to do some of the construction work. If we had more people that would show children how to do things, different things, it would probably help us." In 1 group, youth spoke about how teenagers needed to be role models for younger children, "... like 13- or 14-year-olds working with 6- and 7-year-olds."

Youth in several groups spoke of how role models could serve as a counterweight to the draw of the street. A group of seniors describes the phenomenon, at first taking the point of view of a young boy on the street.

Male: "You see that kid hustling on the corner. He's making money. For real."

Female: "I want to be like him . . . I want to make a lot of money. I want to wear nice shoes, you know."

Male: "But I think if you have a really positive role model, it really helps you, because I want to be like someone who really has an impact on people . . . it just makes your life a lot better if you have someone positive to look up to."

Because the study question was "What would you like to see happen in your community that would make things better for teenagers and make it more likely that they would have a positive future?", the teens did not generate solutions in the personal or family realms. However, in the focus groups when students talked about role models or adults, parents

were often discussed. When 1 senior was talking about his definition of a role model he stated, "I'm not talking about (a well-known sports figure). You know how some kids role model is like (him) or somebody else? Their mom and dad should be there. There shouldn't be no other person being their role model, unless they don't live with their mom or dad." A discussion among seniors expresses their view that quality parenting is the real answer:

Male 1: "Children's attitudes are formed by the time they're 6 years old."

Male 2: "By their parents."

Male 1: "Yeah, by their environment and parents."

Male 3: "By their parents more than anything."

Male 1: "The only way we can make things better is we have parents teach our kids."

In many groups, however, there was a strong acknowledgment that many parents had troubles of their own and were not able to act as effective role models. An eighth-grade boy described how he thought young people needed to plead with their parents to stop using drugs.

"These parents . . . should talk to their kids and sit down and talk to them about how they (the children) feel about what they (the parents) doing and maybe the parents will stop. Because some parents smoke and they be like, 'I love you.' They can't say that they love their kids if they don't love their self, because if they loved their self, they wouldn't be doing that."

Cultural Awareness

The seniors highly prioritized "There would be more cultural, ethnic, and racial awareness in schools and communities." They explained that being aware of one's own cultural strengths makes one stronger and that people are more respectful of others when they know more about them. A student who had moved from a suburban community with few people from his ethnic background stated that he felt more confident in his current school where programs taught the history of his group: "You're more aware of where you came from, where you been." Many students explained that racial prejudices between groups impeded everyone's success. An exchange among seniors follows:

Female: "Because of a certain (stereo) type, they think that person is a certain way. Maybe by having these cultural awareness programs, we can get to know each other better and we can get to know different cultures."

Female 2: "Yeah, that keeps you from saying racial slurs or being prejudiced. . ."

Male: "You understand that person more. You're going to have more respect for them . . . you have an understanding more than, okay, that person is there and he's a different color than you."

Male 2: "And together as a group and as a nation we're going to rise together."

Safety

Many of the items generated in this process related to safety, including items dealing with police, town-watch, theft, guns, punishment, even rape. Furthermore, when youth discussed many other items, including drugs and drug dealing, deteriorating communities, abandoned buildings, and graffiti, they talked about how they changed their perception

of safety. Debate was generated on many of these topics as youth varied on their proposed solutions.

The greatest debate in the groups was over whether police were part of the solution or part of the problem. This dichotomy is apparent on the surveys, where the seniors rated the need for stronger punishment very highly, yet rated decreasing police corruption higher than they rated their desired presence.⁹ Youth who supported increased police presence made their points succinctly, as did an eighth-grade girl: "If you got a lot of police around, ain't nowhere for them to hang out and buy stuff from, you got police checking out every corner around your environment and you won't have nobody selling drugs." On the other hand, youth who wished to register complaints did so at length. An exchange among seniors exemplifies these discussions.

Male 1: "They be disrespecting us."

Male 2: "... they let it go to their head."

Male 3: "They try to enforce the law while they breaking the law."

Female: "That's where the thieves get guns from. Cops sell them to them."

Male 1: "They bust the big dealers and sell it to the small dealers."

Youth complained specifically about their sense that police stereotyped them: "They expect, 'cause the way you look, you doing something." In 3 groups, individuals stated they believed that white people get better police protection. No one in the groups refuted this view. An eighth-grade boy exemplified this perspective: "if you call the police, they usually don't be on time. I think if you was a white person, they'll be there, but as blacks, they'll take their time 'cause . . . they don't care enough, I guess."

Contrasting opinions also existed over the effectiveness of punishment. In several groups, youth expressed frustration at the lax penalties for breaking the law.

"Two, three days and then they be back out doing the same thing. The older ones get the younger ones thinking that the younger ones are going to get away with it. Ah, they only going to go to Juvie. They only going to get probation."

On the other hand, youth in every group that discussed punishment pointed out that jail did not produce productive people and that rehabilitation should be considered.

Ninth-grade female: "Then we putting them in jail and they not doing nothing with their life. They just locked up behind bars and most of the time when people locked up behind bars for a certain amount of time, when they get out of jail, they don't know what to do 'cause they been sitting in jail."

All groups agreed on the benefit of townwatch groups, but students in several groups discussed their perception that most people were too frightened to participate.

The Effect of a Risky, Unstable Environment

Students were very clear that aspects of their environment were very challenging and substantially affected their well-being. Students expressed how the pervasive drug culture interfered with their lives

on many levels. One discussion among ninth-graders follows:

Male: "If there weren't drugs, there wouldn't be so many gang fights . . ."

Male: "Kids would be in school rather than on the corners high."

Male: "I'm scared to walk outside my door because I might get shot."

Female: "Or, walk out at night."

An eighth-grade boy described how drug dealers affected his sense of safety and freedom: "When they are on the corners they think they own the streets. If you pass by in a car they always think you going to buy something and they always coming up to everybody's car, don't let nobody pass by." An eighth-grade female proposed, "a small way that you can get drug dealers off the corner is if a grownup had kids playing rope or put up a basketball court, cause drug dealers don't like a lot of people around to see what they are doing."

The presence of guns in the community was discussed in most groups. One ninth-grade male offered his perspective:

"Stop making all those powerful weapons, cause you know mostly drug dealers buy them. Police can't carry them powerful weapons and the only people that's going to buy them are drug dealers and people from the street . . ."

One of the more striking results of this process was that adolescent pregnancy was not viewed as a major impediment to success by many of the adolescent respondents. Teenagers in several groups expressed the view that early pregnancy was an impediment to a positive future. One eighth-grade male made a connection between pregnancy and school attrition: "often teenagers drop out of school because of pregnancies, then the males drop out because they feel as though 'now I have to get a job so I can take care of my child.'" The opposing viewpoint is illustrated in the following exchange among seniors:

Male 1: "Prevent teen pregnancy? I don't see nothing wrong with that."

Male 2: "Take care of it."

Female: "That's responsibility."

Male 3: "We need more black kids. There's a lot of black people dying."

Perhaps the most disturbing challenge uncovered by this research process is the eighth-grade item "There would be less rape and streets would be safer for girls." When the middle school students addressed this item, their familiarity suggested that they did not consider rape a rare event and that they had a clear sense of the pervasive impact rape has on a victim's life. A male stated, "When somebody gets raped . . . it destroys their life cause they don't know how to live, cause you've been raped, and it's not like you got beat up or nothing." A female stated, "I think less rapes can better your education because you wouldn't be thinking about if you knew someone that got raped. You probably have some negative thoughts toward the person who raped you and you'd probably go out and do something stupid yourself. And I think having less rapes could positively help us by keeping those bad thoughts out of children's minds."

Teenagers in this study were clearly aware of those more subtle environmental issues that either lead to or reflect community breakdown, such as homelessness, graffiti, and community cleanliness. Teenagers in the groups expressed a sense of empathy for homeless individuals, recognized their challenges, and offered solutions.

Ninth-grade female: "Because there is some homeless people that are very intelligent. They don't go out because, like, you go for a job, they got to have something to wear, but they can't because they're homeless . . . and then you go to the job . . . and they go 'oh, I don't want to hire you.'"

Ninth-grade male: "They need a good place to live . . . I mean start them off on the right track, they get some money, some nice clothes . . . then they can go for job interviews, get jobs and then pay all that back."

One eighth-grade girl made the subject more personal: "We need more homes for children that live in the shelter that go to school and have to worry about being teased because they live in a shelter. If the community pitches in and helps build their houses, something better, then they can have a home to live in just like their classmates."

In discussions about graffiti, teenagers acknowledged that graffiti adds to the sense of insecurity in a community, especially if it is gang related. One eighth-grade female proposed a solution: "I think that we should help the kids doing the graffiti, cause they not just bad kids. They have a talent. Get some kind of art center to help them express their talent in a better way instead of destroying the place."

Participants commented that community filth and disrepair affected their perception of safety and ability to play freely. Two eighth-grade girls summarized:

"If your way is clean, then you ain't got to worry about a drug dealer on the corner or something."

"Yeah, 'cause they don't want to be in a clean place . . . the little kids cannot go outside, 'cause there's little needles and glass out there. They can get cut up, but if the neighborhood is clean, there's no needles out there for the kids to get stabbed by . . . so they can go outside and play instead of being stuck in the house all day."

One ninth-grade male described how it might influence an outsider's perception of people in the community: "If you trying to get into a college, and then your recruiter comes to your neighborhood and see all this stuff, he's going to be like, 'Oh, you a pig', and stuff."

A senior understood that property values were affected by how well a neighborhood is maintained. "A cleaner community makes your area more valuable. Say you own a house and it's all dirty and messed up, abandoned houses and stuff like that and you want to rent it or sell it, it ain't really gonna be valuable."

The continual exposure to a challenging environment takes its toll on some of the youths' beliefs that they can control the course of their lives. This was clear when some students made the point that the environmental challenges (eg, drugs and violence) were not likely to be affected as easily as the school environment or job opportunities. One exchange among ninth-graders exemplifies the lack of personal

control some youth perceive they have over their environment:

Male 1: "I'm just living here. I don't make up no rules or nothing."

Male 2: "No, my rules is just worry about myself."

Female: "And try and survive."

DISCUSSION

Adolescents in this teen-centered process generated and prioritized ideas they believed would make a difference in their likelihood to reach a positive future. The explanatory focus groups allowed youth an opportunity to assure that the ideas their peers generated would be understood by adults. Their explanations added depth and context to the ideas—and illustrated that the problems and solutions are much more complex than the list of ideas was able to reveal.

Adolescents living in urban areas of concentrated poverty must overcome many challenges inherent to living in an environment that is often dangerous. Research has tried to elucidate risk factors and determine how demographic variables predict a person's likelihood of being affected by a challenging environment. Intervention efforts have focused on the amelioration of environmental risk factors. However, there is an increasing understanding that outcomes may be most affected by an individual's ability to negotiate his/her environment by drawing from protective resources while avoiding the challenges imposed by a risky environment.

In responding to the NGT question "What would you like to see happen in your community that would make things better for teenagers and make it more likely that they would have a positive future," youth in this study called for added protective factors as well as the reduction of risk factors. However, when given the opportunity to rank the items they seem to tell us "if you want us to be successful, give us the opportunities that come with a good education, good jobs, and meaningful connection with adults. We can handle the rest." Their suggestions are consistent with research that has examined critical protective factors in the lives of teenagers.¹⁵⁻²⁰

Protective strategies are explored in the resiliency and youth development literatures. The resiliency literature notes that some youth succumb to challenges while others overcome adversity. It finds that a young person is more resilient when consistent protective forces are found within the individual, the family, the school and the community.^{1-6,15-24} Some adherents of the youth development paradigm believe that focusing on risk factors may harm youth because it implies that we expect young people to engage in risk. Instead, it stresses that we must hold youth to the high expectations that are communicated when we authentically prepare them to be competent, contributing adults.²⁵⁻²⁸ Although these models stress the importance of protective forces, they do not ignore the importance of reducing environmental risk factors. Resilience is by no means equated with invulnerability.¹

Although youth that engaged in this study call for protective forces in their lives, they also lament the

challenges they face. They actually spent most of their time discussing the difficulties they face living in a community with a high prevalence of drugs and violence and few economic resources. The fact that the time spent talking about negative environmental forces was longer than discussion of positive forces should not lead to the conclusion that they would prioritize reduction of negative forces over implementation of positive strategies. In focus groups, people talk about what they find most interesting, not necessarily most important.¹⁴ Participants often use the group setting as an opportunity to vent. In the case of this process, participants clearly but succinctly stated that education mattered most to them. It was a point they considered obvious and not worthy of much discussion. They used the occasion of having adults listen to them to vent their discontent and brainstorm solutions to other problems. The advantage of exploring this question using the teen-centered method is that youth had already assigned priority ranks to each item, freeing the final stage reported here to explore ideas in depth.

Although some adolescents expressed a belief that the most challenging issues were intractable, most offered optimistic, even idealistic, solutions on a range of issues from homelessness to rehabilitation. Many recognized that although their community lacked economic or structural resources, they were rich in cultural resources and potential role models. They clearly saw themselves as having a role in community improvement, and wished to be guided by adults in how to make meaningful contributions.

The adolescents noted that the draw of the streets was enticing to some youth. They spoke of the quick money and fast life offered on the streets. They suggested that there was a dynamic between prosocial opportunities and the benefits of engaging in street life, as discussed in existing literature.²⁹ Although they believed strongly in the power of education and jobs, they pointed out that current efforts were not adequately tipping the balance toward positive opportunities. Contrary to the notion that adolescents want to exist independently of adult influence, they called for active involvement from adults that would give them meaningful things to do with their spare time and offer them prosocial role models.

The results of this process must be understood in the context of this study's limitations. First, when considering the protective forces the adolescents discuss, it is important to remember the precise wording of the study question. It limited the ability of the respondents to generate the breadth of items the resiliency model considers protective factors. The question focused on "community" and therefore did not generate individual- or family-based solutions. Second, the data reported in this manuscript are qualitative. Although efforts were taken to limit investigator bias, the potential for imposed bias must be acknowledged. Third, as in all qualitative research, the findings cannot be generalized beyond the "expert" participants who describe the circumstances of their lives. Next, in schools with such high absentee and dropout rates, the participating students have demonstrated by their attendance that

they believe school is important. Most importantly, this study reveals adolescent perceptions; it is not an outcome study measuring the impact of an intervention.

CONCLUSION

Youth in this northeastern urban area of concentrated poverty believe that despite the challenges they confront—guns, violence, the drug culture, even rape—protective forces can help them overcome the odds. Next steps must include rigorously evaluated initiatives that explore whether protective actions will produce more positive outcomes than strategies that primarily target risk. As we develop these initiatives, we should continue to listen to the wisdom of youth, as it can offer wonderful insight into the interplay of forces that affect adolescents' lives.

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