

# Youth Voice in Preventing Violence: STRYVE Portland's Street Interview Assessment

A report of the Community Capacitation Center of Multnomah County Health Department, Portland, Oregon



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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **About STRYVE**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), violence is a leading cause of injury, disability, and premature death that impacts young people and people of color at higher rates than others (2012). Violence also increases the risk of other health problems, like depression, substance abuse, and chronic disease (Prevention Institute, 2009). Violence is a pressing public health issue because it affects the places where we work, live, play, and pray, making it harder to attend school, get exercise, and build a healthy life. Yet most violence is preventable, not inevitable. Primary prevention means stopping violence *before* it starts (Prevention Institute, 2009).

Striving to Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere (STRYVE) is a national initiative of the CDC. STRYVE supports local health departments to promote a public health approach to violence prevention. Portland, Oregon, in Multnomah County, is one of four STRYVE demonstration sites across the country. In 2011, the Community Capacitation Center (CCC) at Multnomah County Health Department (MCHD) was awarded a five-year STRYVE grant from the CDC to bring together a coalition of partners from different sectors, including youth and community members affected by violence, to create and implement a comprehensive plan for youth violence prevention in the Portland area.

### **Gathering youth voice: Street interviews**

The Portland STRYVE team identified youth voice as a key resource when designing our assessment of youth violence in Multnomah County. To best understand youth violence from the perspective of young people in our community, we sought to engage youth in appropriate and meaningful ways. We recruited and trained a dozen high school-aged youth from

across Portland to gather data in what the youth termed “street interviews,” short peer-to-peer interviews about young people’s opinions and experiences of violence. STRYVE Portland conducted two rounds of street interviews during spring break and summer of 2012. The interview guide, designed with youth input, included quantitative and qualitative questions asking about types of violence youth see in their communities, places they feel unsafe, causes of violence, and strengths that protect against violence. We also gathered demographic data. While there were some differences between instruments for the spring and summer rounds of data collection, they both yielded similar findings.

### **What we learned: Street interview findings**

- About 7 out of 10 interviewees were between the ages of 14-22.
- The majority of those interviewed named fighting, bullying, gang violence, and shootings as the types of violence they see or experience the most in their communities.
- The majority of interviewees identified drugs and alcohol, gangs, and words (verbal provocations) as things that lead to violence.
- Most of those interviewed named parks as the places where they felt the most unsafe.
- The majority of interviewees named community centers as things that help young people avoid violence.

### **Going deeper: Focus groups**

While the street interview data provided a snapshot of young people’s opinions and experiences, STRYVE staff wanted to understand the findings on a deeper level. We conducted two focus groups with diverse groups of high school-aged youth at two youth-serving organizations. In the focus groups, we presented the major types of violence identified in the

street interviews and focused the conversation on the things that lead to and prevent those types of violence.

Young people identified environment, family, and generational influence as the common factors that give rise to all the major types of violence. According to one participant:

*“Sometimes that’s all they’re surrounded by. They see other people do it. If their parents are doing whatever, the kids may be following after. Or big brothers or sisters. If they see it, they’re gonna do it.”*

Participants named other factors that contribute to these major types of violence, including peer pressure, the desire to prove oneself, the need to gain respect, and the effort to earn status.

Focus group participants also talked about ways to prevent violence on multiple levels: individual, relationship, and community. Participants emphasized the choices one makes, the importance of being a positive influence, and the need to talk openly about violence (telling adults when it happens and speaking out against it) as individual-level solutions. On the relationship-level, youth identified the presence of positive people, specifically mentors, as a major way to prevent violence. According to youth, mentors must have shared life experience with young people, as well as high expectations for them. One young man said of his mentor:

*“He says, ‘come on man, I know you can do it. I know you can be that person.’ He pushes you to do more. Now my grades are better, and I thank him for that.”*

On the community level, participants shared that in addition to community centers (the major asset identified in the street interviews), job opportunities, families, and schools were major assets for preventing violence. However,

participants’ comments suggested that solutions that incorporate community centers, schools, or other youth-serving structures may be more effective if youth are actively engaged in changing norms around violence, rather than just invited in as users of a program or facility.

Focus group findings strongly suggest that solutions need to address all levels – individual, relationship, and community – to be effective. In order for individuals to prevent violence in their own lives, they need to be supported by strategies on the community and relationship levels. For strategies at the community and relationship levels to be successful, individuals need to be engaged.

## Conclusion

Perhaps no issue is as central to the wellbeing and thriving of young people, especially low income youth and youth of color, as violence. It is essential to look to young people as sources of knowledge and creative ideas that can help shape the most effective and sustainable strategies. Portland’s STRYVE Coalition will use this data as it moves forward with the development and implementation of the comprehensive plan for youth violence prevention. The Coalition will continue to engage youth as partners and allies as we implement strategies in the community.

## **INTRODUCTION**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), violence is a leading cause of injury, disability, and premature death that impacts young people and people of color at higher rates than others (2012). Violence also increases the risk of other health problems, like depression, substance abuse, and chronic disease (Prevention Institute, 2009). Violence is a pressing public health issue because it affects the places where we work, live, play, and pray, making it harder to attend school, get exercise, and build a healthy life. Yet most violence is preventable, not inevitable. Primary prevention means stopping violence *before* it starts (Prevention Institute, 2009).

Striving to Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere (STRYVE) is a national initiative of the CDC. STRYVE supports local health departments to promote a public health approach to violence prevention. Portland, Oregon, in Multnomah County, is one of four STRYVE demonstration sites across the country. In 2011, the Community Capacitation Center (CCC) at Multnomah County Health Department (MCHD) was awarded a five-year STRYVE grant from the CDC to bring together a coalition of partners from different sectors, including youth and community members affected by violence, to create and implement a comprehensive plan for youth violence prevention in the Portland area. Though we are funded to focus on a specific area, North and Northeast Portland, we have included in our assessment a focus on East Portland, a largely under-resourced area to which a growing number of low income people and people of color are being displaced as a result of gentrification in North and Northeast Portland.

The mission of the CCC is to support communities to identify and solve their own most pressing health issues, by addressing the social and structural causes of those issues. The prevention of violence disproportionately affecting young

people of color is a key focus of the CCC's work around culturally-specific health promotion to reduce health inequities. The CCC administers STRYVE using the values and methods of popular education, also known as empowerment education, an approach to educating and community organizing that engages those most affected by an issue as agents of change.

The Portland STRYVE team identified youth voice as a key resource when designing our assessment of youth violence in Multnomah County. To best understand youth violence from the perspective of young people in our community, we have sought to engage youth in appropriate and meaningful ways. This report details our efforts to gather youth perspectives on violence in their communities.

## **METHODS**

We recruited and trained a dozen high school-aged youth from across Portland to gather data in what the youth termed "street interviews," short peer-to-peer interviews about young people's opinions and experiences of violence. "Street interviewers" were young men and women from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds and neighborhoods in Portland. These youth went through an application process and were given incentives for their participation.

To prepare for their roles, youth participated in a three-hour orientation. In the orientation, CCC staff used popular education to train youth in applying their own knowledge and experience to the street interviews. Youth were empowered to create their own strategies for conducting street interviews with peers. For example, many youth chose to work in pairs, with one youth acting as interviewer and the other as recorder.

STRYVE Portland conducted two rounds of street interviews during spring break and summer of 2012 in public places where young people are known to gather. The spring

and summer street interview guides, designed with youth input, included quantitative and qualitative questions asking about types of violence youth see in their communities, places they feel unsafe, causes of violence, and strengths that protect against violence. We also gathered demographic data.

### **Spring break street interviews**

Street interviewers conducted 300 street interviews in several locales in North and Northeast Portland, including a high profile public park known for frequent incidents of youth and gang violence, located between a transit center and shopping mall (see Appendix A for map of street interview locations).

The spring street interview guide consisted mainly of open-ended questions to give participants the opportunity to answer freely. Questions from the spring street interview guide included types of violence participants have seen or experienced, location(s) where they feel unsafe, their perception of what causes violence, things that could help a young person avoid violence, and ways to create a positive future for the younger generation. An optional demographic section was included to track the race, gender, and age of each participant. (See Appendix B for spring street interview guide).

Because the majority of questions were open-ended, STRYVE staff coded the data (categorizing responses in a systematic way) and used these categories to quantify the findings in SPSS, a statistical analysis program. While this approach allowed us to capture the young people's actual words, we found great variations in responses among the participants surveyed. Thus, we created an "Other" category to make sure that every response was accounted for (see Findings section). The team used the most prominent categories as response options on the summer street interview guide.

### **Summer break street interviews**

In summer of 2012, STRYVE Portland partnered with the Youth Planners Program at the City Of Portland's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability to collect additional street interview data. Youth planners, youth ages 14 to 21 hired to work alongside planners and sustainability professionals to assist in shaping the city in long-range planning, worked with STRYVE staff to adapt the street interview guide to include questions of interest to the City's program, making the data mutually beneficial. Youth planners worked alongside some of the original street interviewers to conduct 200 street interviews in North, Northeast, East, and Southeast Portland (see Appendix C for summer street interview guide).

### **Analyzing street interviews**

In order to quantify the open-ended survey responses, we coded qualitative survey data by reviewing approximately 50% of survey responses and creating a code sheet that categorized responses. We then assigned each code a number and entered the data into SPSS statistical software.



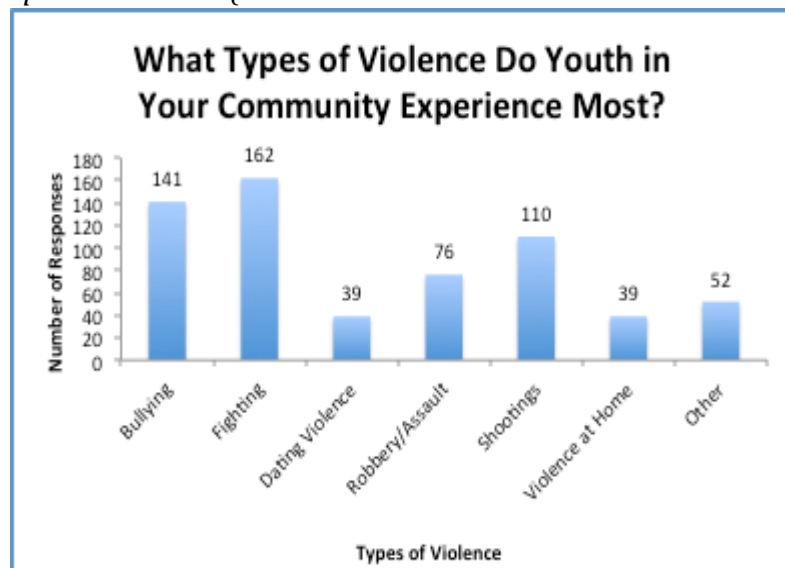


Approximately half of survey respondents answered demographic questions (this section was optional). Of those who responded, about 70% were between 14 and 22 years of age. A majority of participants were female (56%). Thirty eight percent were African American, 20% were White/Caucasian and 16% were Hispanic/Latino/Latina. Nine percent reported being newcomers, or immigrants. Over half reported that they lived in North and Northeast Portland.

## Types of violence

Fighting, bullying, and shootings were the top three types of violence youth reported experiencing most.

*Graph 1: What types of violence do youth in your community experience most? (Since the 295 interviewees who answered this*



*question often picked three or four options, a total of 619 responses are represented in this graph.)*

## Unsafe places

This question yielded a wide range of responses, even though we had mistakenly framed it as a yes/no question. We combined many responses into the categories of Mid County, East Portland, North Portland, Parks and Public Transportation. Aside from those who chose "Other" and "Nowhere," the most common responses to this question were Mid-County and NE Portland. North Portland, including the subcategory St. John's (a North Portland neighborhood), had

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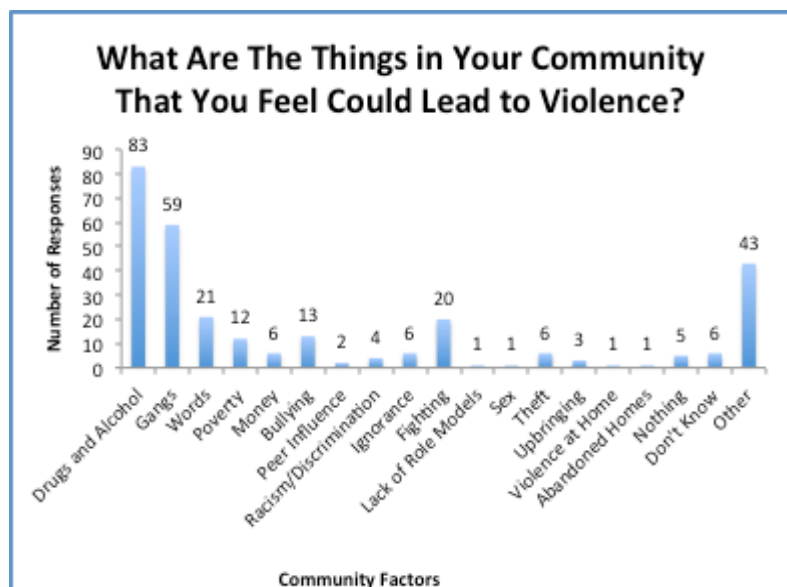


responses.

*Graph 2: Are there locations where you feel unsafe? (Number of responses = 294)*

## Things that lead to violence

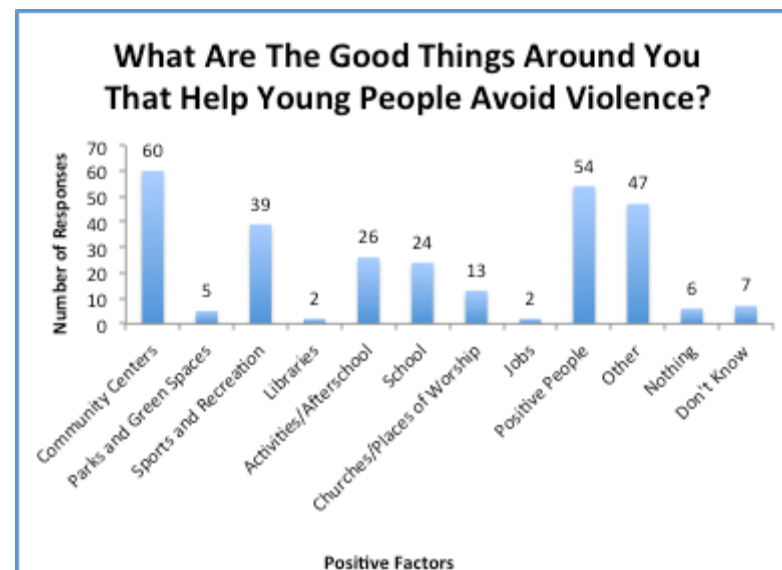
Drugs and alcohol, gangs, and words (or, verbal provocations) were the top three things young people identified as factors that can lead to violence (excluding the “Other” category).



Graph 3: What are the things in your community that you feel could lead to violence? (Number of responses = 294)

## Things that prevent violence

We captured young people’s perceptions of the strengths and assets that help young people avoid violence by asking two questions. The first question was: If you have little brothers or sisters, what can we do to create a future for them without violence? The top two choices were afterschool activities and school/education. The second question was: What are the good things around you (groups, people, places) that help young people avoid violence? Participants named community centers, positive people, and sports and recreation (excluding the “Other” category).



Graph 4: What are the good things in the community that help young people avoid violence? (Number of responses = 285)

## **SUMMER RESULTS**

### **Demographics**

Approximately 75% of survey respondents answered demographic questions (this section was optional). Of those who responded, about 57% were between 14 and 22 years of age. Most participants were female (60%). Thirty six percent were African American, 26% were White/Caucasian, 16% were Hispanic/Latino/Latina, 13 % were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 9% were African. Thirty eight percent reported that they lived in North and Northeast Portland.

### **How youth hear about violence**

The summer street interview guide included an additional question about how youth hear about violence in their community. The majority of responses indicated media as the main source (30%), followed closely by friends (29%), and online (26%). Just 13% of responses pointed to family as the source for how youth hear about violence in their community (2% of responses were in the “Other” category).

### **Types of violence**

In the summer interviews, participants selected fighting, bullying, and gang violence as the top three types of violence youth in the community experience most.



*Graph 5: What types of violence do youth in your community experience the most? (Number of responses = 436)*



## Unsafe places

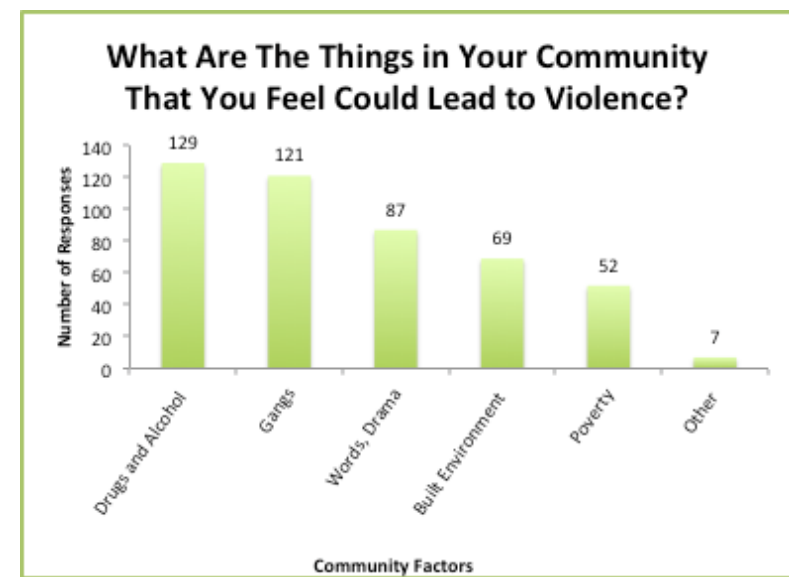
Like the spring street interview guide, the question about unsafe places was open-ended, so we combined some variables to make a more concise list. We created the categories of Mid County, East Portland, North Portland, Parks, and Public Transportation. Under the “Other” category, many respondents did not provide an actual location. In this section, many respondents indicated that they felt unsafe during nighttime or in alleyways.



Graph 6: Are there locations where you feel unsafe? (Number of responses = 164)

## Things that lead to violence

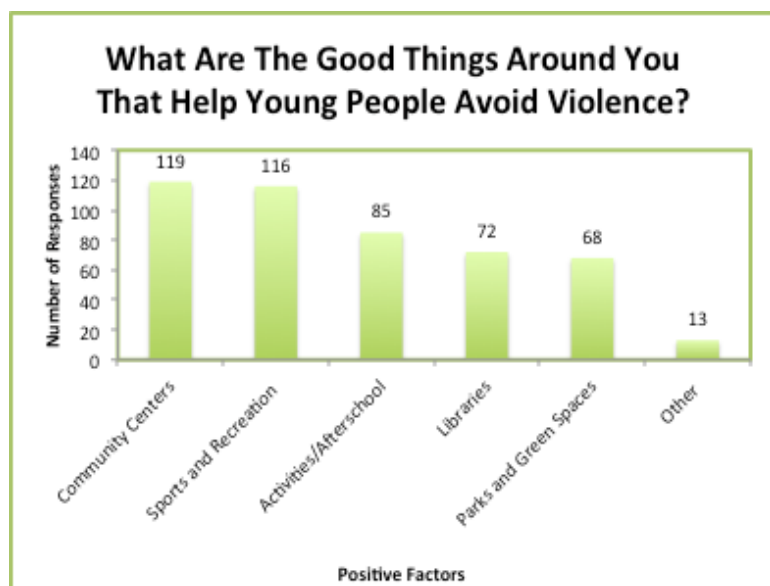
As with the spring street interview findings, drugs and alcohol, gangs, and words emerged as the top three factors young people feel can lead to violence. In the summer street interviews, we included the response options of Lack of Lighting, Lack of Crosswalks, Lack of Transportation, and types of housing. We have combined these into the category of Built Environment (see Graph 7).



Graph 7: What are the things in your community that you feel could lead to violence? (Number of responses = 465)

## Things that prevent violence

For the summer street interviews, we gauged young people's ideas about preventing violence by asking about the good things around them (groups, people, places) that help young people avoid violence. As with the spring findings, the majority of participants identified community centers. Sports and recreation and afterschool activities were the next most popular choices.



Graph 8: What are the good things around you that help young people avoid violence? (Number of responses = 473)

## FOCUS GROUPS

While the street interview data provided a snapshot of young people's opinions and experiences, STRYVE staff wanted to understand the findings on a deeper level. We conducted two focus groups with high school-aged youth at two youth-serving organizations. Participants were between the ages of 14-18 with a total number of 32 participants between the two groups. One group included young men and women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. The other group included young African American men. Both focus groups used interactive and empowering methods to engage participants in thinking critically about the major findings from the street interviews. We analyzed data using Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software.

### Focus group results

In the focus groups, we presented the major types of violence identified in the street interviews (fighting, bullying and gang violence/shootings) and focused the conversation on the things that lead to and prevent those types of violence.

Young people identified environment, family, and generational influence as the common factors that give rise to the major types of violence. According to one participant:

*"Sometimes that's all they're surrounded by. They see other people do it. If their parents are doing whatever, the kids may be following after. Or big brothers or sisters. If they see it, they're gonna do it."*

Participants named other factors that contribute to these major types of violence, including peer pressure, the desire to prove oneself, the need to gain respect, and the effort to earn status. Talking about why young men join gangs, one young woman remarked:

*“The majority is pressure, like they think it’s cute. But at the same time, no one is telling them ‘don’t do that.’ it’s like ‘you ain’t gonna do it,’ [taunting]. They feel like they have to do it to prove their point. Like, ‘I’m not weak, I’m tough.’”*

Focus group participants talked about ways to prevent violence on multiple levels: individual, relationship, and community. Participants emphasized the choices one makes, the importance of being a positive influence, and the need to talk openly about violence (telling adults when it happens and speaking out against it) as individual-level solutions. On the relationship-level, youth identified the presence of positive people, specifically mentors, as a major way to prevent violence. According to youth, mentors must have shared life experience with young people, as well as high expectations for them. One young man said of his mentor:

*“He says, ‘come on man, I know you can do it. I know you can be that person.’ He pushes you to do more. Now my grades are better, and I thank him for that.”*

On the community level, participants shared that in addition to community centers (a primary asset identified in the street interviews), job opportunities, families, and schools were major assets for preventing violence. Participants made insightful comments about the role of community centers in preventing violence. One young man said: *“Just being [at this community center], you can avoid being out in the streets where the violence is happening.”* Another young man shared:

*“[Community centers and sports] don’t prevent violence because if anybody has any sort of conflict, anybody could meet up there and still fight. It doesn’t matter*

*where, it just depends on the person’s mentality, how grown they are in their mind. If your mentality is up there, you’ll just know to walk away.”*

This suggests that solutions that incorporate community centers, schools, or other youth-serving structures may be more effective if youth are actively engaged in changing norms around violence, rather than just invited in as users of a program or facility.

Focus group findings strongly suggest that solutions need to address all levels – individual, relationship, and community – to be effective. In order for individuals to prevent violence in their own lives, they need to be supported by strategies on the community and relationship levels. For strategies at the community and relationship levels to be successful, individuals need to be engaged.

## **CONCLUSION**

Perhaps no issue is as central to the wellbeing and thriving of young people, especially low income youth and youth of color, as violence. It is vital to look to young people as sources of knowledge and creative ideas that can help shape the most effective and sustainable strategies. Portland’s STRYVE Coalition will use this data as it moves forward with the development and implementation of the comprehensive plan for youth violence prevention. The Coalition will continue to engage youth as partners and allies as we implement strategies in the community.

*Thank you to the Youth Planning Program at the City of Portland’s Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, the Youth Violence Prevention Partnership at Multnomah County Health Department, the Multnomah Youth Commission, to the focus group participants, and of course, to all of the STRYVE street interviewers!*

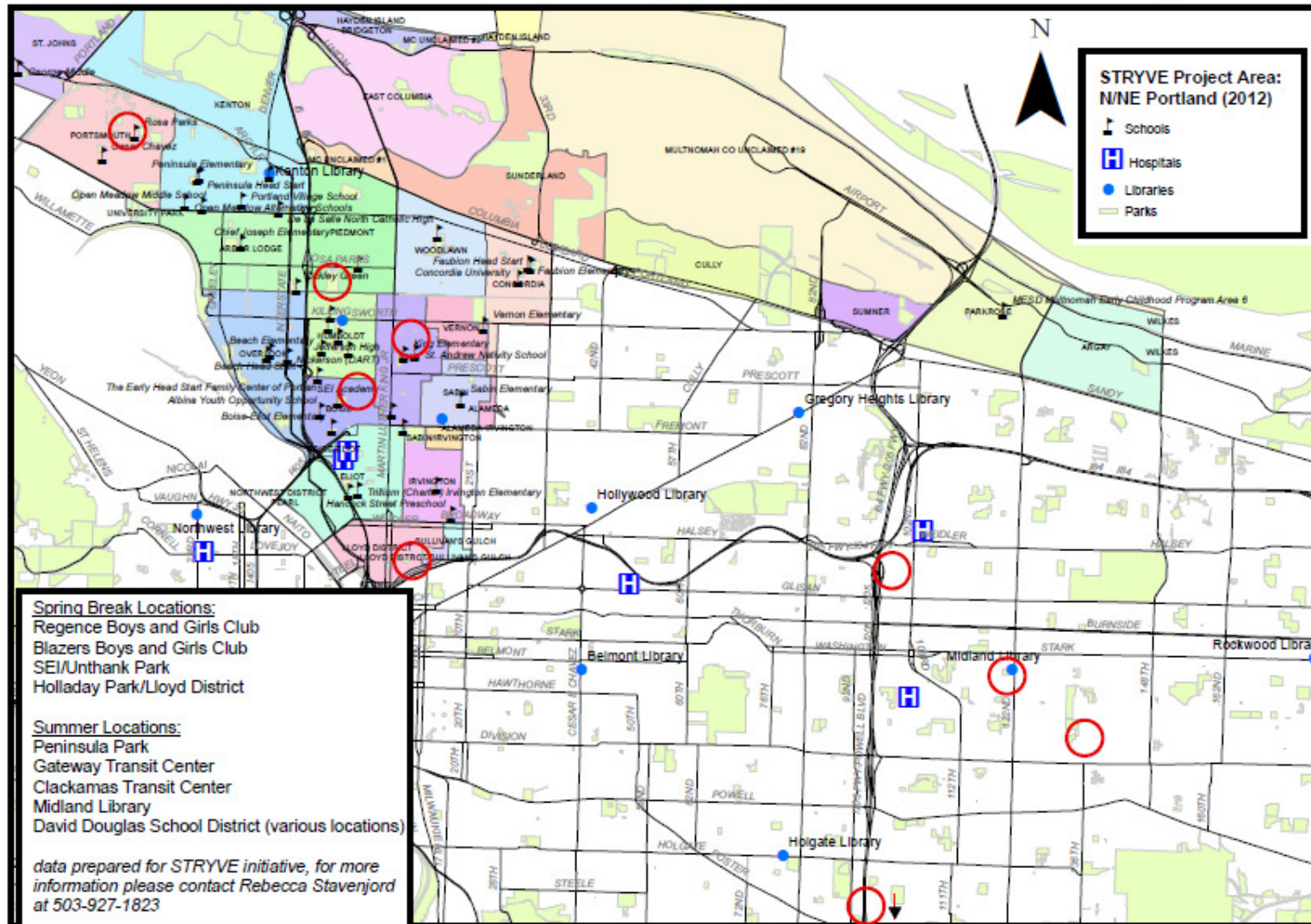
## **References**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC]. (2012). *Youth Violence: Facts at a Glance*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/yv-datasheet-a.pdf>

Prevention Institute & UNITY [Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth] (2009). *A Public Health Approach to Preventing Violence FAQ*. Retrieved from: <http://www.preventioninstitute.org/component/jlibrary/article/id-143/127.html>

## APPENDIX A: MAP OF STREET INTERVIEW LOCATIONS

### STRYVE Youth Street Interviews (Spring and Summer 2013)





## **APPENDIX B: SPRING STREET INTERVIEW GUIDE (FRONT PAGE)**



*A project of the Community Capacitation Center*

This interview is confidential, so how you answer will be kept secret. You can pass on any questions you don't want to answer. We will not ask for your name, age, or other information that can identify you.

**1. What types of violence do youth in your community experience most? (Rank the top 2 types)**

- |                          |                    |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| € Bullying               | € Shootings        |
| € Fighting               | € Violence at home |
| € Dating violence        | € Other: _____     |
| € Robbery and/or assault |                    |

**2. Are there locations where you feel unsafe?**

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**3. What are the things in your community that you feel can lead to violence?**

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**4. If you have little brothers or sisters, what can we do to create a future for them without violence?**

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**5. What are good things around you (groups, people, places) that help young people avoid violence?**

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## **APPENDIX B: SPRING STREET INTERVIEW GUIDE (BACK PAGE)**

This section is completely optional, you don't have to provide any information you don't want to.

What is your age: \_\_\_\_\_

Where do you live within Multnomah County?

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> SW Portland  | <input type="checkbox"/> NE Portland (to 82 <sup>nd</sup> Ave)      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SE Portland (to 82 <sup>nd</sup> Ave)                      | <input type="checkbox"/> East County (162 <sup>nd</sup> and beyond) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mid-County (82 <sup>nd</sup> Ave to 162 <sup>nd</sup> Ave) | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> N Portland   |   |

How do you identify?

Female\_\_\_\_ Male\_\_\_\_

How do you identify? (choose all that apply)

- ☐ African
- ☐ African American
- ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ☐ White/Caucasian
- ☐ Hispanic/Latino/Latina
- ☐ Native American/Alaskan Native
- ☐ Slavic
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Gender Queer
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you identify as a newcomer (immigrant, refugee or other)?

Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C: SUMMER STREET INTERVIEW GUIDE



*A project of the Community Capacitation Center and the Youth Planning Program*

1. What types of violence have you and your friends seen or experienced in your community? *(Rank the top 2 types)*

- € Dating violence
- € Robbery and/or assault
- € Gun violence
- € Home (abuse, domestic violence)
- € Bullying
- € Fighting
- € Gang violence
- € Other: \_\_\_\_\_

2. How do you hear about violence in your community?

- € Media (news, newspaper, radio)
- € Friends
- € Family
- € Online (Facebook, etc)
- € Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. In your opinion, where are places we should avoid and why? *(cross streets, names of parks, specific locations)*

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4. What are the things in your community that you feel can lead to violence?

- € Drugs and alcohol
- € Lack of transportation
- € Gangs
- € Lack of lighting
- € Words, Drama
- € Types of housing
- € Lack of crosswalks
- € Poverty
- € Other: \_\_\_\_\_

5. What are good things around you (groups, people, places) that help young people avoid violence?

- € Community centers
- € Parks and green spaces
- € Sports and recreation
- € Libraries
- € Activities/afterschool programs
- € Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Optional Section – you don't have to provide this information if you don't want to.**

Your age: \_\_\_\_\_

Where do you live within Multnomah County?

- € SW Portland
- € SE Portland (to 82<sup>nd</sup> Ave)
- € Mid-County (82<sup>nd</sup> Ave to 162<sup>nd</sup> Ave)
- € N Portland
- € NE Portland (to 82<sup>nd</sup> Ave)
- € East County (162<sup>nd</sup> and beyond)
- € Other: \_\_\_\_\_

How do you identify? (choose all that apply)

- € African
- € African American
- € Asian/Pacific Islander
- € White/Caucasian
- € Hispanic/Latino/Latina
- € Native American/Alaskan Native
- € Slavic
- € Other: \_\_\_\_\_

- € Female
- € Male
- € Gender Queer
- € Other: \_\_\_\_\_

€ Do you identify as a newcomer? (immigrant, refugee or other) Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_