

IDCE344 Final Report:
Youth Empowerment: *Bridging the Gap*



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

According to a report by the Massachusetts Special Commission on After School and Out of School Time, positive outcomes for youth associated with out of school time programming include improved academic performance, social and development outcomes, building community relationships with youth, increasing civic and community engagement and contribute to healthy lifestyles (Mass Special Commission, pg. 5).

Having embarked on a semester-long project for the past four months, the Youth Empowerment Group in the Practicum course taught by Laurie Ross at Clark University has addressed the issue of youth voice in Worcester, seeking to answer the following questions: What are the gaps that exist between youth and the community organizations that are geared towards serving this demographic? How can youth access these community programs? Finally, how can youth be engaged and youth voice represented throughout Worcester? The community process employed by the Youth Empowerment Group was community-based participatory research.

Through partnership with Director Jesse Edwards of the Youth Opportunities Office, we were able to support the city's assessment of youth service providers for youth, ages 14-21. We did this by conducting surveys and focus groups in order to obtain a youth perspective that would further inform the data gathered from the agencies. We targeted three key groups of Worcester youth as a sample population which were The Hope Coalition, the Worcester Youth Center, and a select group of middle school students.

We identified four key themes through our data collection process from the surveys and the focus groups conducted, which included: activities, employment, schools and Worcester conditions. When looking at the activities in which youth are involved, we found a high level of

engagement among Worcester's youth. Youth identified barriers, deterrents, the aspects of successful youth programs that were important to them, and effective means of communication between youth and the programs. The youth also identified issues related to employment, schools, and Worcester conditions that were not explicitly asked.

In the following pages, we discuss our research and the recommendations for the next steps as identified by the youth, the agencies, and our own research team. We hope that this project can serve as a unifying foundation for authentic voice that empowers youth in the city of Worcester.

INTRODUCTION

Through data gathered via neighborhood interviews and observations, The Youth Empowerment Group highlighted various issues affecting Worcester youth, primarily in the Main South and Piedmont neighborhoods. Many community members reported on the violence, drug use and gangs that threaten youth during out-of-school time. There was also an identified need for more after school programs to keep youth safe during out-of-school time and more meaningful youth activities, including those that are bilingual and those that promote nutrition.

Youth involvement in after and out school programs has shown to provide a positive impact in their local community. From interviews with local Worcester residents, our group identified four key issues within Worcester: poverty, safety and health, more diversity, and the lack of after school programs and access to those programs. To narrow our focus we decided to focus on after-school programs and access to them programs. In Worcester there are over 150 programs for youth but many are being underutilized. In order to discover the reason for the lack of program use, our group proposed a work plan to assess what programs were available in Worcester and to eventually provide a place where both youth agencies and youth could directly communicate and see what programs were in Worcester. In that way we hoped youth would find a way to effectively use out and after school programs in Worcester.

To determine which programs were in Worcester our group focused on creating an inventory for youth focused programs that occurred outside of school. To use this inventory effectively, it was our hope that we could show which programs Worcester was rich in and show which programs Worcester was lacking in. We began to work with Jesse Edwards, the director of the city's Youth Opportunities Office, to create an inventory youth programs in Worcester

which would receive the city's assessment survey. Although this survey was an important first step to assessing program availability in Worcester, our group felt it was important to ensure the youth had a direct influence on this project. Through our connection with Laurie Ross, we were afforded great success with connecting to a community partner. Our survey was released to the youth who participate in the HOPE Coalition and the Worcester Youth Center. In order to provide a youth voice with our project, our group released a survey to youth involved in after school programs and held focus groups. With both of these steps we asked the youth what programs they participate in after school, how they get there, and what they feel is missing in Worcester for youth.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The Youth

Our interest really began from looking at young people, and how the environment around them fosters growth. We wanted to observe how after school programs in Worcester serve youth and how this affects them. Urie Bronfenbrenner describes the relationships between youth and their environment in much of the same way that we approached it. He sees youth as agents of their own change, but also looks at how the microsystems and ecosystems around them can actually disempower them rather than empower. Microsystems are the systems that young people directly connect with, such as family, peer groups and neighborhoods. All microsystems are connected by mesosystems, which are those who interact between them such as school and parents. Ecosystems are the systems that the youth have no direct contact with, but that affect their microsystems. For example: where parents work.

We came from a very Social Justice Youth Development framework, looking to come from the youth themselves up. We are looking mostly at the microsystems and mesosystems that affect youth, and looking at how to empower them from the bottom up. We were very concerned with delivering the voice of the young people to our partner, and in result provide a bridge between them, the youth office, and the agencies that serve youth in Worcester.

Focus Groups

Conducting focus groups were a key component to our research, as discussed. Before targeting particular youth, we discussed literature as well as our takes on how the focus groups should happen. Israel, et al.'s book Methods in Community-Based Participatory Research for Health describes focus groups as an effective participatory strategy that is a “vehicle to capture

the voice...[that can lead to the] exchange [of] ideas, express opinions, and assert differences/commonalities” (146). Israel recommends recruiting with flyers and letters with follow-up 2-3 days prior. There should be formal introductions, a note taker, a clear agenda, ground rules established, and the participants should be informed of the results. The location should be in neutral territory and a place that is easily accessible. Facilitators should meet directly after the focus group to debrief and themes should be identified.

Surveys

Survey implementation was also a key component in identifying the issues that young people in Worcester are facing. The survey (attached) was a quick and simple way to gather data with as much bias factors removed as possible. The survey's were anonymous, and held both open-ended and close ended questions. Within the close-ended questions, we included all possibilities we thought the youth would answer, but also included a space to share any differing answers. For example, the following question: 1. How do you find out about after-school programs? (please pick all that apply). The answers provided were (a) brochures or flyers, (b) spoke with a friend, (c) media such as local radio or TV, (d) located in your neighborhood, (e) other family members or friends have attended this program, (f) church, (g) community bulletin boards, (h) an adult told you about the program, (i) newspaper ads or articles, (k) notices in community newsletters, (l) internet/website, (m) your school and (o) Other (please specify). The purpose of this was to coordinate the question with a similar question that was asked of the agencies on how they get their information out to the young people. We did not want the youth to simply list one way they hear about programs and not include others.

METHODOLOGY

Our methodology for this project began with the partnership of the Director of the Youth Opportunities's office, Mr. Jesse Edwards. We assisted him in gathering information from over 150 agencies, providing an array of social, educational, and health services for the youth population of Worcester who are between the ages of 14-21. Other pertinent information, including address, all contact information, and name of Executive Director was also collected. After gathering all of this data, the information was compiled by our group into a spreadsheet document and then given to Mr. Edwards. He then utilized this database to distribute a mass survey to the local agencies using the internet.

During the distribution and data collection of this survey to the agencies, our group devised a strategy to obtain information directly from the youth community to evaluate the parallels, as well as the divergences among the two groups regarding issues of access to information about the agencies, quality of services, and participation in activities/programs of the organizations. Given that this project derives from a Community-Based Participatory Research approach, two prominent methods, (i.e. survey and focus group,) within the social science realm were chosen to obtain in-depth information.

Using a survey and a focus group allowed the project to collect quantitative and qualitative data, providing us with correlating responses between the two data sets, strengthening the overall findings of this plan. Prior to constructing both the questions within the survey and focus groups, our participants were selected from two local community youth organizations, (HOPE Coalition and the Worcester Youth Center,) and one local middle school. The description of the participant population, as well as the description of the survey and focus group is below:

Participants

The youth all reside within the city of Worcester, Ma. and are between the ages of 14-21. The racial and ethnic make-up of the youth participants consists of African-American, Latino, Asian, and White. A small percentage of the youth that participated within the projects current attend Middle School, while the majority of the participants attend High School. The majority of the youth that participated within these two data collection tools are actively involved in a community organization, called the HOPE Coalition or Healthy Options for Prevention and Education Coalition, is a collaborative community program that promotes youth empowerment through activities, such as youth-led initiatives in the areas of drug prevention, teen sexual awareness, and school drop-out prevention. Other participants attend the Worcester Youth Center, a local organization that offers educational, health, and recreational services to youth, in addition to being the only free “drop-in” center for displaced youth.

The smallest group of the participants within this project attends a local middle school... [the name of the middle school has been asked to be excluded from the report for the anonymity of the young participants.] It is important to note here that the youth that were chosen as participants do not reflect the entire population of the youth community of Worcester, as they are in school and very active in either after-school programs affiliated with the school or local community organizations. Populations, such as school-dropouts, were not included in this process as the time-frame for this project was restrictive and attempting to develop contact with the populace was difficult.

Survey

The survey that was constructed consisted of six questions. They were comprised of open-ended and close-ended questions, centering on how students access information about youth services in Worcester, activities that youth participate in, what programs and/or activities

the youth would like to see implemented, and what issues or problems they felt influenced their decisions to not participate in those programs. In administering this survey to our identified community, 45 participants completed the survey; further analysis of the survey's findings is described in more detail within the analysis section of the document.

Focus Groups

A total of four focus groups were conducted with the youth participants. The questions that were asked during the focus groups largely reflected those from the survey. Examples of the questions asked are “What do you do during your out of school time?,” “What are some of the places that you could go, but don't?,” “Why don't you attend these places?,” “What types of activities do you like to do?,” and “If you could change opportunities for youth outside of school, what would you like to see happen?”

Provided that the structure of focus groups allows participants to elaborate on their feelings or ideas, when new issues or themes emerged, the facilitators of the focus groups would encourage the participants to discuss them in detail. This allowed our group to discover more topics of concern that influences the central focus of this project. The first focus group that was conducted involved eight of the youth from the local middle school. The second and third focus groups were facilitated on the same day with the youth of the HOPE Coalition. The second focus group consisted of about 12-14 youth, whereas third focus group contained about 17 youth. The fourth and final focus group consisted of 10 participants.

FINDINGS

The following data is what the youth identified in the focus groups. We separated the data into four related themes: Employment, Schools, Worcester, and Youth agencies.

Employment

- Can't find jobs
- Age restrictions
- Not youth-friendly jobs
- Stable
- Growth
- Maturity
- Flexibility
- Summer hours
- School year hours
- Treat youth as real employees
- Not just fast food jobs
- Trans- no way to get to jobs

Schools

- “waste of time”- not reality
- Teachers: disrespectful, need motivated teachers, need better health/sed ed. Teachers
- Guidance counselors need to be more invested and informative
- Funding for teachers to help with activities (i.e. anger management)
- More interesting classes: art, home ec., health (have been cut)
- Youth voice in school
- Home-schooling
- School daycare and school lunches
- Drop-out prevention and help for dropouts
- Suspension rates
- “Too much regulation on what is taught”
- More field trips
- Better college prep.

Worcester

- Prostitution
- Racism
- Police brutality
- “Ghettoness”

- Litter & clean up parks
- Gangs, violence and drugs
- Neighborhoods (safe/unsafe)
- Unity (lack of): rude people
- Graffiti
- Housing conditions

Youth Council concerns + Recommendations

- Don't believe it's a reality
- Want influence on policy decisions
 - Voting
- School committee
- Direct connection to higher powers
- Power to do outreach
- Youth on council able to speak for all youth
- Mall, driver's ed, festivals, gym, sports, trans*
- More daycare/pregnant teen services

The following data is what the agencies identified via surveys. We separated the data into three related themes: Transportation, Opportunities, and Communication.

Transportation:

- More routes
- Safer
- Access to large employers (hospitals, malls, etc.)

Opportunities:

- Job retention
- Lack of classes for low-literacy skills
- Out of school, aged-out youth are underserved
- Women underserved in sports
- Youth-led
- Outdoor activities
- Positive experiences
- Need to feel valued

Communication

- Gaps in neighborhoods
- Summer recreation

FINDINGS

The following data was gathered through a six-question survey (see attachment) with forty-five responses.

Ages 14 and 16 were the highest respondents

Top three activities that surveyed **youth reported doing after school were:**

Highest responses:

Community Programs (3):

HOPE Coalition
MLK Committee
Leadership Team
YMCA
Tobacco Prevention
Church
Youth Health Council Computer Class
GSA Group
TAG group at WYC
Moon 2 Moon
Youth Center
Safe Homes
Safe Products in Neighborhoods (SPIN)

At-home recreational activities (1):

Phone
Video Games
Sleep
Hanging Out
Eat
Chill/Relax
Friend's House
Sing
TV
Draw
Read
Art
Music

Sports (2):

Working Out
Baseball
Basketball
Snowball fights
Soccer
Sports
Football
Weightlifting
Dance
Softball
Play Outside

Top Three Places Youth Go After School

Internet was the lowest response.

Highest responses:

Home (1):

Home

Friend's House

Relative's House

Community Programs (2):

Boys & Girls

Church

Library

YMCA

Tobacco Prevention

Great Brook Valley Health

HOPE Coalition

Worcester Youth Center

Art Museum

Girls Inc.

The Bridge

The 45 young people surveyed reported being involved in 50 different youth programs during out-of-school time.

The organizations reported most often were:

HOPE Coalition

Worcester Youth Center (WYC)

YouthNet

Teen Action Group (TAG)

Boys & Girls Club

Youth Health Council

Great Brook Valley Health Center

Girl, Inc.

Team HOW (Health Outreach Workers)

Top Ways that Youth get around:

Walk

Rides from Friends

Rides from Family

City bus

Ways that youth find out about programs

Top Ways:

Formal/informal networks

School

From an adult

From a friend/relative that attended the program

Spoke with friend/relative

Media:

Brochures/Flyers

Other media was not as effective and NO ONE found out about programs through community newsletters – however that does not rule out the possibility that the adults who informed the youth didn't find out that way

ANALYSIS

Activities

There are four themes that stood out from our examination of the focus groups and the surveys administered to The Hope Coalition, The Worcester Youth Center, and a group of middle school students. These include: activities, employment, schools and Worcester conditions.

The forty-five young people surveyed reported being involved in fifty different youth programs during out of school time (see Graph I). The organizations reported most often were: The Hope Coalition, The Worcester Youth Center, YouthNet, Boys and Girls Club, Youth Health Council, Great Brook Valley Health Center, Girls, Inc. The youth also participated in T.A.G. (Team Action Group) and Team H.O.W. (Health Outreach Workers) of the Worcester Youth Center. While the youth are involved in a variety of different programs, the high frequency of youth involved in The Hope Coalition and The Worcester Youth Center can be attributed to the sample we targeted.

When youth were asked the top three activities they were involved in after-school hours, at home recreational activities was the top choice, sports ranked second, and community

programs ranked third (see Graph II). The top three places that youth went after-school included: home, community programs and sports as a distant third. Note that there are 46 responses to a survey administered to 45 young people (see Graph III). The reasons for this are that on the open-ended survey questions asking what do they do/were do they go after school, there were some duplicate responses between the two questions, for instance, the place there were some action answers, and for some action answers, there was place answers.

When asked in the focus groups what was important for them when it comes to youth programs, the youth noted: consistency, order, attendance and organization. Consistency refers to program funding and sustainability, while order and organization refer to the structure and facilitation of these programs. Attendance related to the number of youth that frequented the programs, such as in new programs where very few if any youth members attended.

The top three barriers to participation identified by youth were: transportation, time conflicts, and locations too far from home (see Graph IV). Time conflicts could be attributed to youth we targeted who were already involved in programs, whereas this answer could differ if we had targeted uninvolved youth. The barrier of the program being located too far from home could be attributed to the inaccessible and unsafe transportation. When elaborating on transportation barriers, the youth stressed that they felt unsafe using public modes of transportation. When walking or riding their bikes, poor sidewalk conditions and unsafe drivers were deterrents to youth participation in community programs. Related to the barrier of transportation, the agencies identified the need for more bus routes, specifically to increase access to large employers in the city such as: malls and hospitals.

Some of the other deterrents to becoming involved in youth programs were brought up in the focus groups, and included: costs, time conflicts, safety, communication, location, too

much of an academic focus, and lack of consistency due to lack of funding. In relation to communication barriers, youth expressed difficulties in accessing information about opportunities, specifically, community service. The top three most popular modes of transportation for youth included: walking, riding with friends, or riding with family members (see Graph V).

When youth were asked how they find out about after-school programs, they used their informal and formal networks to access information about youth programs. The most popular networks were friends, family members, and school. The most popular form of media that the youth used was brochures and flyers (see Graph VI).

Employment

In relation to the theme of employment, the youth reported that jobs, in general, did not seem to cater to youth and their needs. Furthermore, access to employers was limited due to inaccessible and unsafe transportation.

Schools

There were structural and lack of support services offered in schools. In relation to structural issues, the youth found teachers and administered to be disrespectful and discriminatory. The agencies also recognized that the faculty and staff of the school did not represent the demographics of the student population. Poor services included guidance, prevention skills, life skills, and the agencies recognized that there was a lack of classes to address low-literacy skills. Specifically, the youth from the focus groups addressed issues around dropouts. Not only did they see a lack of services aimed at preventing drop-outs, but also addressed the needs for more support for those students who do end up dropping out.

Worcester Conditions

The youth identified two themes within the conditions of the city of Worcester, the visible conditions and the social conditions. Included in the visible conditions were litter, graffiti, poor housing, and unclean parks. Social conditions included prostitution, racism, police brutality, gangs, violence, drugs, and an overall lack of unity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are four sets of recommendations concerning Worcester youth that we would like to identify from different community perspectives, including that of the youth themselves, agencies, The Worcester Youth Council, and our own recommendations.

Youth would like to see a mall that caters towards youth, free driver's education courses, festivals, open gyms and more sports opportunities, more pregnant and teen mother services, and overall better transportation.

The agencies identified the need for more women's sports, youth-led programs, outdoor activities, positive experiences for youth and the need for youth to feel valued.

In relation to The Worcester Youth Council, the youth are skeptical that the council will become reality. They want the council to have influence on policy decisions, specifically in having a right to vote. They would like to have influence on the school committee and a direction connection to higher powers. They would like to have the ability to perform outreach, and they believe that the youth council should be able to speak for all the youth they represent.

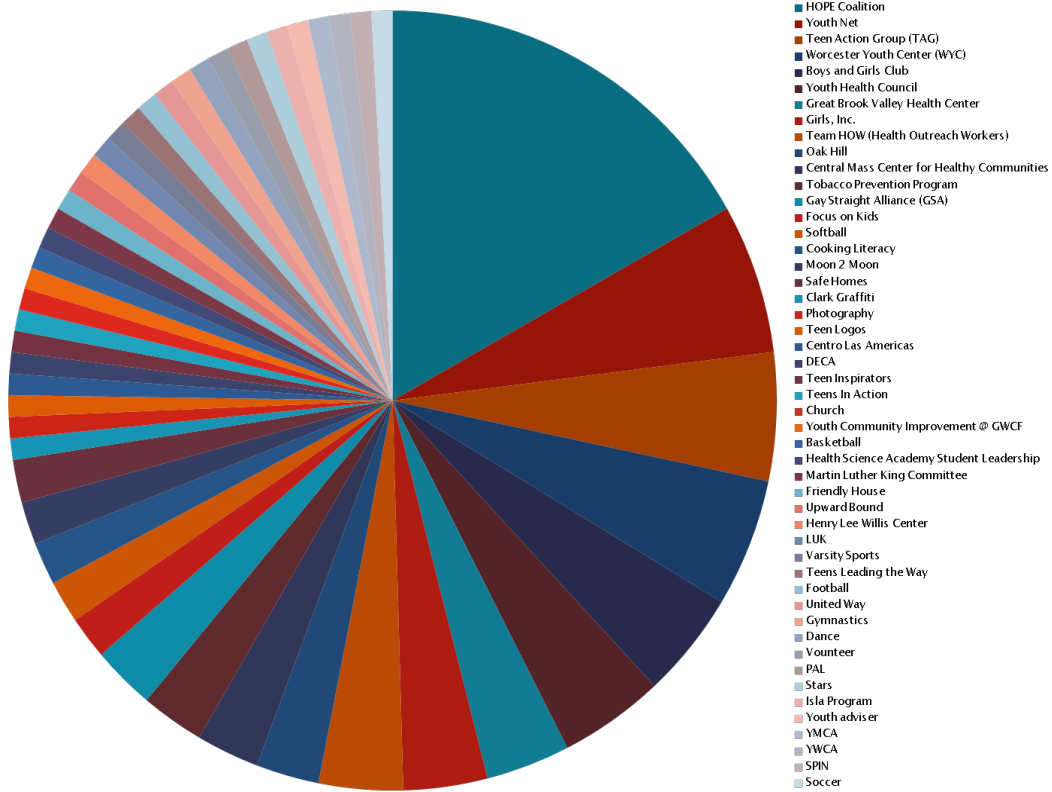
Our recommendations concerning Worcester Youth would include reaching out to youth who are uninvolved in programs or drop-outs. We would like to see the commitment for a youth voice in the city to be authentic and catering to the needs that the youth have identified in this study.

CONCLUSION

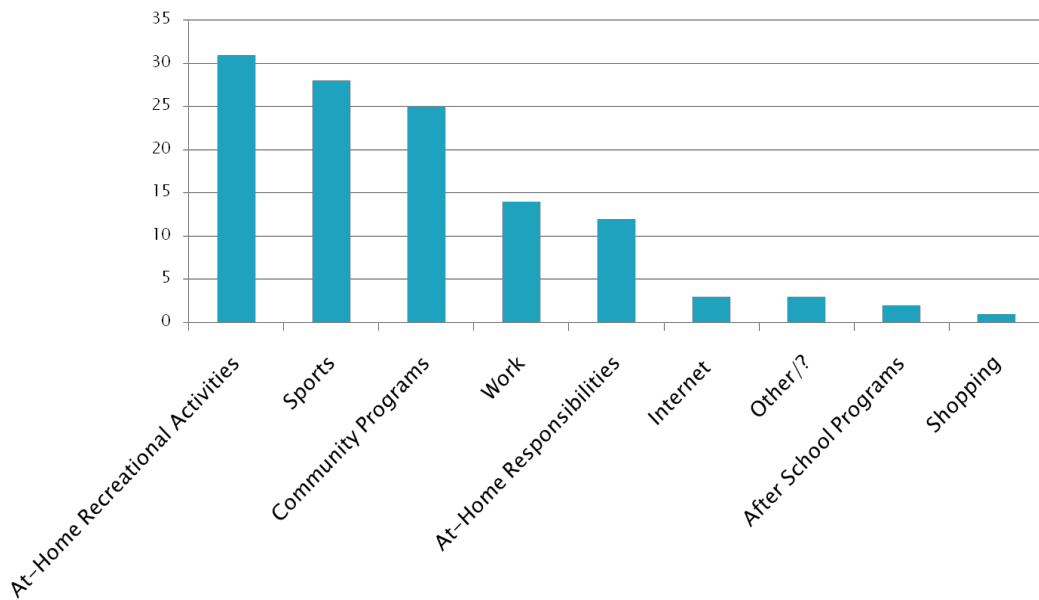
Through the findings of this research project, we hope to create a foundation for further data collection regarding the needs of young people in Worcester. We advocate active youth involvement in the research process in order to create an authentic and unified approach to address the needs of young people in the city of Worcester. In order for this process to be effective, agencies, youth, and city officials must share seats at the table, creating partnerships to promote sustainable and authentic youth engagement. In doing so, we hope to bridge the gap between the youth and those who serve them.

Attachment I – Graphs

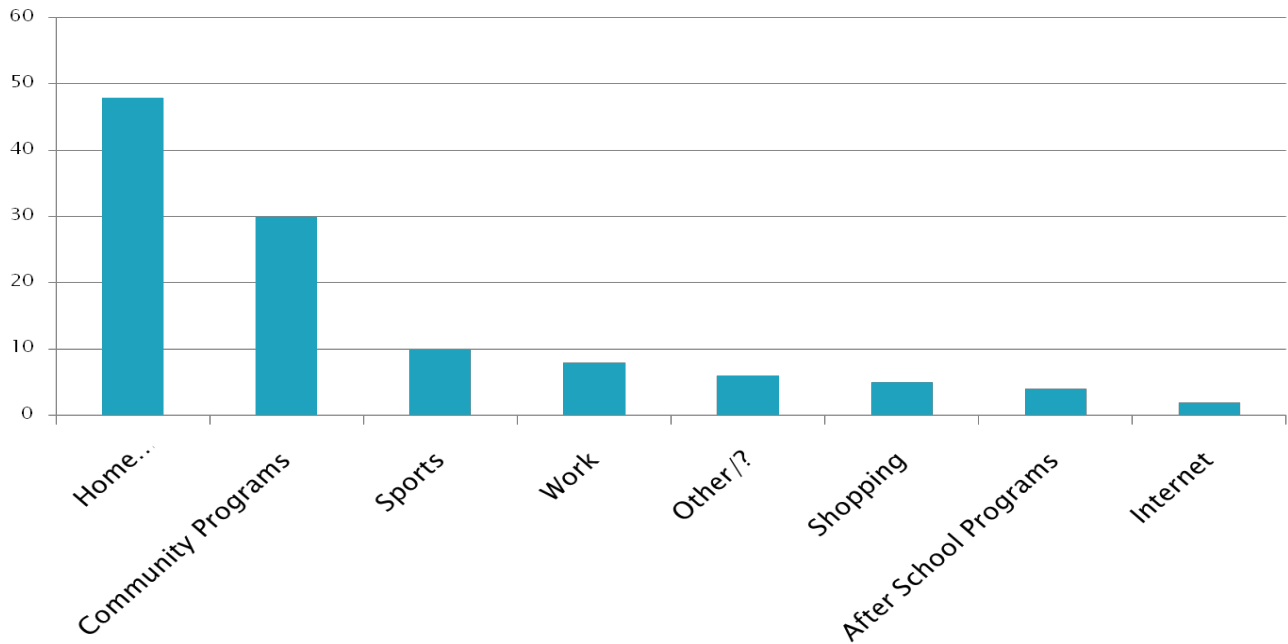
Graph I – Youth Involvement



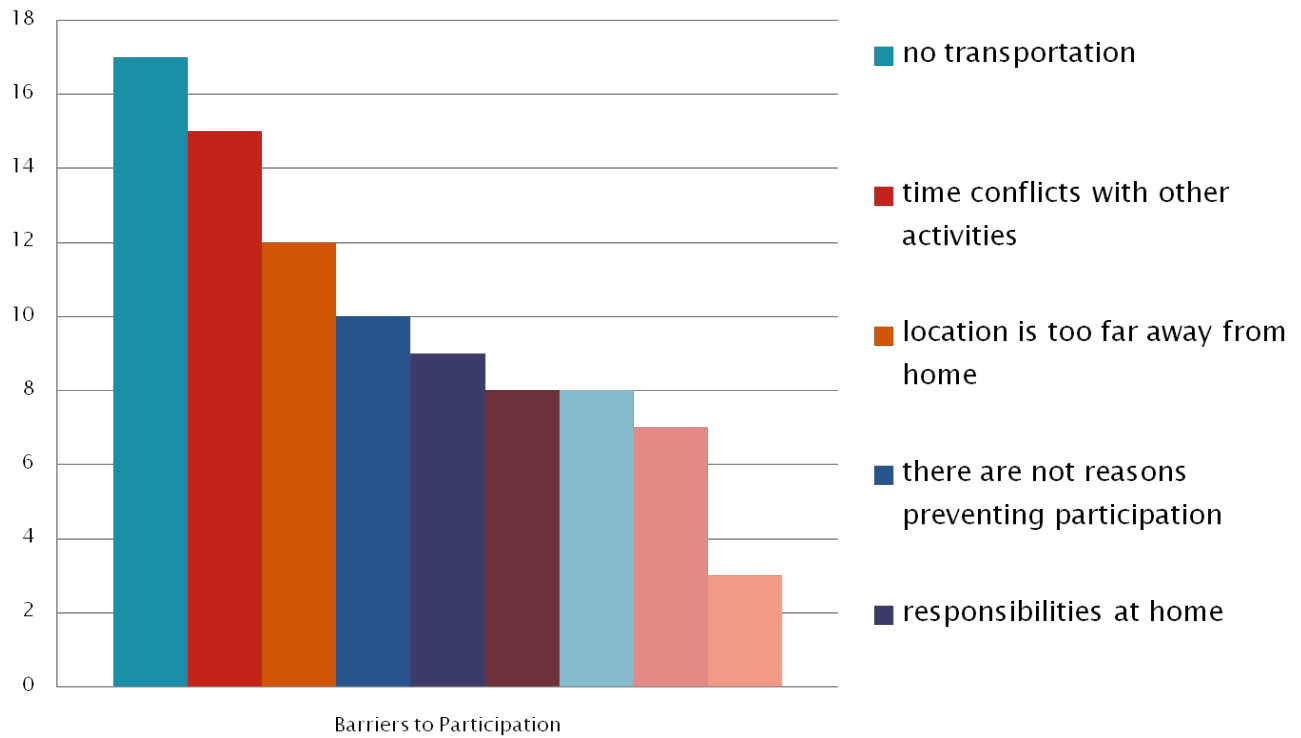
Graph II – Top Three Activities Youth do after-school



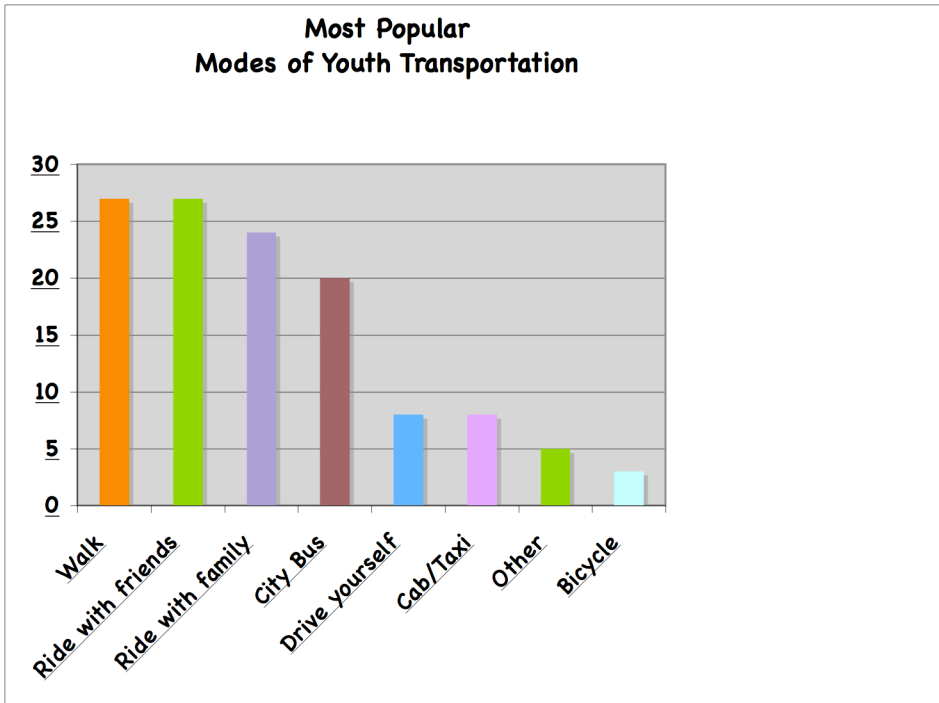
Graph III – Top Three Places Youth go After-School



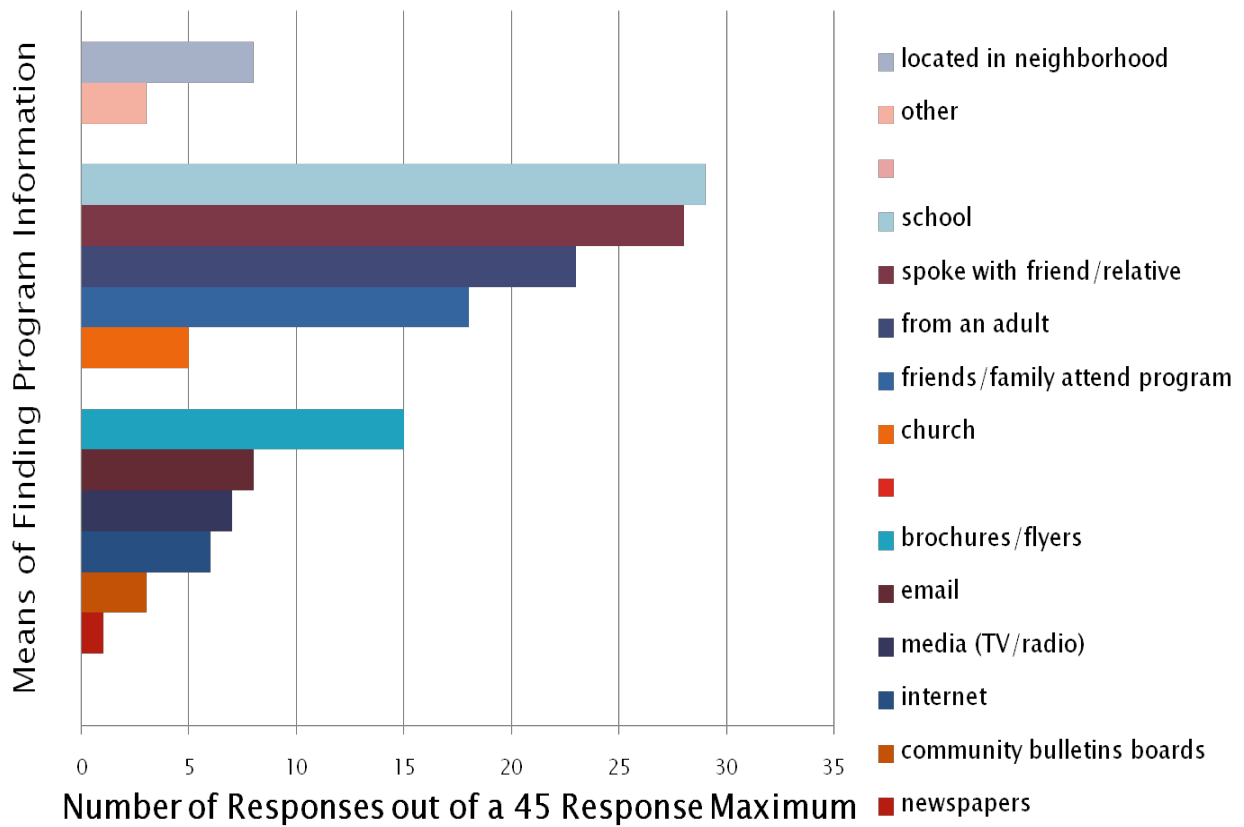
Graph IV – Barriers to Youth Programs



Graph V – How do youth get to programs?



Graphs VI – How do youth find out about programs?



Attachment II – Youth Survey

Youth Survey

What school do you attend? _____
Age _____ Grade _____

1. How do find out about after-school programs? (please pick all that apply)

- a) Brochures or flyers
- b) Spoke with friend or relative
- c) Media such as local radio or TV
- d) Located in your neighborhood
- e) Other family members or friends have attended this program
- f) Church
- g) Community bulletin boards
- h) An Adult told you about the program
- i) Newspaper ads or articles
- k) Notices in community newsletters
- l) Internet/website
- m) Email
- n) Your School
- o) Other (please specify) _____

2. What are the top three activities you do after-school?

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

3. Where are the top three places you go after-school?

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

4. How do you get to the places you go after-school (circle the ways you use the most)?

- A. walk
- B. city bus (WRTA)
- C. cab/taxi
- D. bicycle
- E. drive yourself
- F. ride with friends
- G. ride with family
- H. skateboard
- I. other (please specify) _____

5. Please list any programs/organizations that you participate in (use the space below)?

6. Out of the options below, please circle any barriers that prevent you from participating in the programs/organizations that you would like to be a part of. If there is nothing stopping you from participating in the programs you would like, please circle option H: There are no reasons why I can't attend the programs that I wish.

- A. I do not have transportation to the program
- B. The program cost too much money
- C. The time of the program conflicts with other activities that I am involved in
- D. The program is too far away from where I live
- E. The time of the program is too late or too early for me to attend
- F. I cannot attend because of school responsibilities
- G. I cannot attend because of my responsibilities at home
- H. There are no reasons why I can't attend the programs that I wish
- I. Other (please specify) _____

Appendix II

Focus Group Questions (5-7 minutes for each question)

1. What do you do during out of school time? Where do you go?
2. What are your other options (where do other youth go)?
3. Why don't you go to these other programs?
4. What types of activities would you like to be able to be a part of?
5. How do you find out about opportunities or programs for youth in Worcester (do you go online? Myspace? other websites)?
6. If you could change opportunities for youth, outside of school, what would you like to see happen?