

Youth Issues Paper

Prepared by Milwaukee Brighter Futures

OVERVIEW

Milwaukee youth live in an environment that can be extremely challenging and dangerous. At the same time, the majority of young people live in families where their parents are trying their best to provide them with a safe, stable, and supportive living environment, encourage their success in school, and protect them from negative influences and risky behavior. Youth development programs which focus on building assets rather than treating deficits are generally more successful in the long run. For that reason, Milwaukee Brighter Futures encourages program investment for prevention and intervention programs that are widely accessible to community residents, provide opportunities for youth to develop sustained trusting relationships with caring adults, and provide education and skills development that is evidence-based and culturally appropriate.

ISSUES FACING YOUTH IN MILWAUKEE

General Indicators of Youth Well-Being

- *Juvenile Delinquency:* Between 2002 and 2008, the number of referrals to Milwaukee County Children's Court dropped 29% from 4,847 to 3,425. The number of youth committed to juvenile corrections also dropped 29% from 300 in 2002 to 214 in 2008.¹
- *Child Abuse and Neglect:* The number of substantiated maltreatment cases dropped 23% between 2002 and 2007 (the last year for which data are currently available), from 2,188 cases to 1,692.²
- *Births to Teen Mothers:* Births to teen mothers dropped 10% between 2001 and 2007 from 2,326 to 2,085 although there is some indication that, after several years of decline, births to teen parents are again increasing.³
- *Education:* The number of students dropped out of the Milwaukee Public Schools has decreased 10% between the 2000-01 and 2007-08 school years, from 3,038 to 2,376.⁴ At the same time, the high school graduation rate for 2005-06 was 78.8% which was significantly lower than the statewide graduation rate of 89.3%.⁵
- *Poverty:* In 2006, 27.7% of children in Milwaukee County lived in families with incomes below the poverty level, up from 23.7% just six years prior in 2000.⁶ Rising unemployment will increase the number of children living in poverty.

¹ Milwaukee County Delinquency and Court Services, May 2009.

² Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, Child Abuse and Neglect Reports, 2002-2007

³ Wisconsin Department of Health Services, Vital Statistics

⁴ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

⁵ WisKids Count 2007, Wisconsin Council on Children and Families

⁶ Ibid

- *Homelessness*: An estimated 2,400 Milwaukee Public Schools students are homeless on an annual basis. The Milwaukee Continuum of Care Shelter System counted 1,282 children who had lived in emergency shelters at some point during 2008.⁷

There are several positive trends in Milwaukee that may be the result of the community’s efforts to develop and maintain a strong neighborhood-based youth and family development structure through support from Community Development Block Grant, Milwaukee Brighter Futures, Safe and Sound, United Way and other resources. Critical areas of concern require attention and program support, namely the high rate of child poverty and homelessness along with continuing concerns regarding educational attainment, alcohol and other drug abuse, and involvement in violent and other risky behavior.

Specific Youth Issues

The following information is taken from the results of the 2007 Milwaukee Brighter Futures Youth Survey which included 439 youth, ages 12-17, who represented all segments of the community in terms of gender, age, grade in school, and ethnicity/race.

Key result from the 2007 Milwaukee Brighter Futures Youth Survey ⁸	Percent
Violence/Danger	
Youth who rode in a car with someone who had been drinking 1+ times in past 30 days	35%
Youth who carried a weapon such as a gun, knife or club 1+ times in the past 30 days	21%
Youth who were in 1+ physical fights in past 12 months	58%
Youth who had been hit, slapped or physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend in past 12 months	14%
Youth who said they felt safe in their neighborhood	15%
Alcohol and Other Drug Use	
Youth who had alcohol 1+ times in the past 30 days	30%
Youth who used marijuana 1+ times in the past 30 days	25%
Youth who said it was very easy or fairly easy to obtain alcohol	59%
Youth who said it was very easy or fairly easy to obtain marijuana	64%
Sexual Behavior	
Youth who have had sexual intercourse	59%
Youth who have had two or more sexual partners	45%
Youth who used a condom the last time they had sexual intercourse	68%
Youth who had been pregnant or had gotten someone pregnant	13%
Youth Beliefs and Behavior	
Youth who agree that they “can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations”	74%
Youth whose parents ask where they are going and with whom they will be all or most of the time	80%
Youth who talk to parents or trusted adult when they have a problem	20%

Key issues that are evident from the survey data include:

- High incidence of involvement in physical violence including fighting and weapon carrying which strongly suggests that youth are frequently in situations where they feel unsafe. Feeling vulnerable to violence and concerns about having participated in or been witness to violence are concerns that are frequently expressed by youth.

⁷ Milwaukee Continuum of Care, Homeless Management Information System

⁸ Brighter Futures Youth Survey, 2007

- Ready access to alcohol and marijuana through older siblings, other family members, friends, and sales from retail outlets (in the case of alcohol). Although 30-day use is not significantly higher than in the rest of the state, the fact that one-third of youth have used either alcohol and/or marijuana in the past 30 days is cause for concern.
- High rates of sexual activity among youth including a significant percentage who have had sexual intercourse with two or more partners. This is an area of concern both with regard to teen pregnancy and the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases.

YOUTH NEEDS

Youth needs fall into five key areas:

1. Safe and stable families – youth need to live in family environments that meet basic needs for housing, food, clothing, and health care and that are safe in terms of being free from child abuse and neglect and domestic violence.
2. Vocational preparedness – youth need education and academic support that will provide them with necessary knowledge to be productive citizens and good parents and prepare them for post-secondary skills training or college and they need employment opportunities to provide them with income as well as practice in developing good work habits and skills.
3. Delinquency prevention – youth need information, support, activities, and intervention that will deter them from involvement in delinquency, violence, and gang activity and that will prevent recidivism among youth offenders.
4. Alcohol and other drug abuse prevention – youth need education, support, activities, and intervention regarding their use of tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs so they are able to make sound decisions regarding their AODA behavior and seek help when needed.
5. Teen pregnancy and STD prevention – youth need opportunities to envision a long-term future that requires that they not become teen parents along with education regarding resistance skills, abstinence and contraception education, and appropriate health care and counseling.

EFFECTIVE PROGRAM APPROACHES

Effective youth programming has the following characteristics:

- **Accessibility:** Program location, hours of operation, and participation requirements support accessibility by a broad spectrum of the community.
- **Dosage:** Programming is provided on a frequent basis, ideally 3-5 days per week, so that activities are readily available for youth and families seeking activities or assistance.
- **Culturally-appropriate:** Programs are provided by staff which reflect the cultural composition of the target population, include persons of different ethnicities/races in their governance, and are located in diverse neighborhoods.
- **Relationship-focused:** Emphasis on building sustained trusting relationships between youth and trained, caring adults is a critical component of effective programming and is a necessary prerequisite to the effectiveness of evidence-based practices.
- **Evidence-based practices:** Programs incorporate approaches, curricula, and materials that have been proven effective through rigorous evaluation and/or documented theory.

- Comprehensive: Programs provide diverse, as opposed to single purpose, opportunities for youth involvement and are capable of helping youth and their families address other issues through direct service or referral to community resources.
- Sustainability: Programs are supported by fiscally sound, well-run organizations and have multi-year funding available to insure that successful programs are sustained; participants are able to trust that the program will be an ongoing resource.

Specific program recommendations:

1. Ongoing support for neighborhood-based youth development network in Milwaukee, specifically those organizations which provide easy access to high quality prevention and intervention programming on a daily or near-daily basis;
2. Sustained investment in organizations which emphasize the development of strong, mentoring relationships between trained staff and youth;
3. Support for prevention and intervention strategies that help youth develop self-esteem, self confidence, and goal-setting and attainment skills;
4. Program support for interventions targeted at dealing with the aftermath of violence – within the family and the larger community – as a strategy for preventing future violent behavior.
5. Investment in life skills development including programs dealing with improving educational achievement and the development of good work skills.