

Testimony in Support of the Campaign for Inclusionary Zoning's Proposal,
case number: 04-03

Name: Aqiyla Edwards

Address: 3023 14th ST., NW apt #907 (Columbia Heights)

Organization: YARG (Youth Action Research Group)

I am here today because mandatory inclusionary zoning will address my concern about the effects of displacement and lack of affordable housing of DC residents.

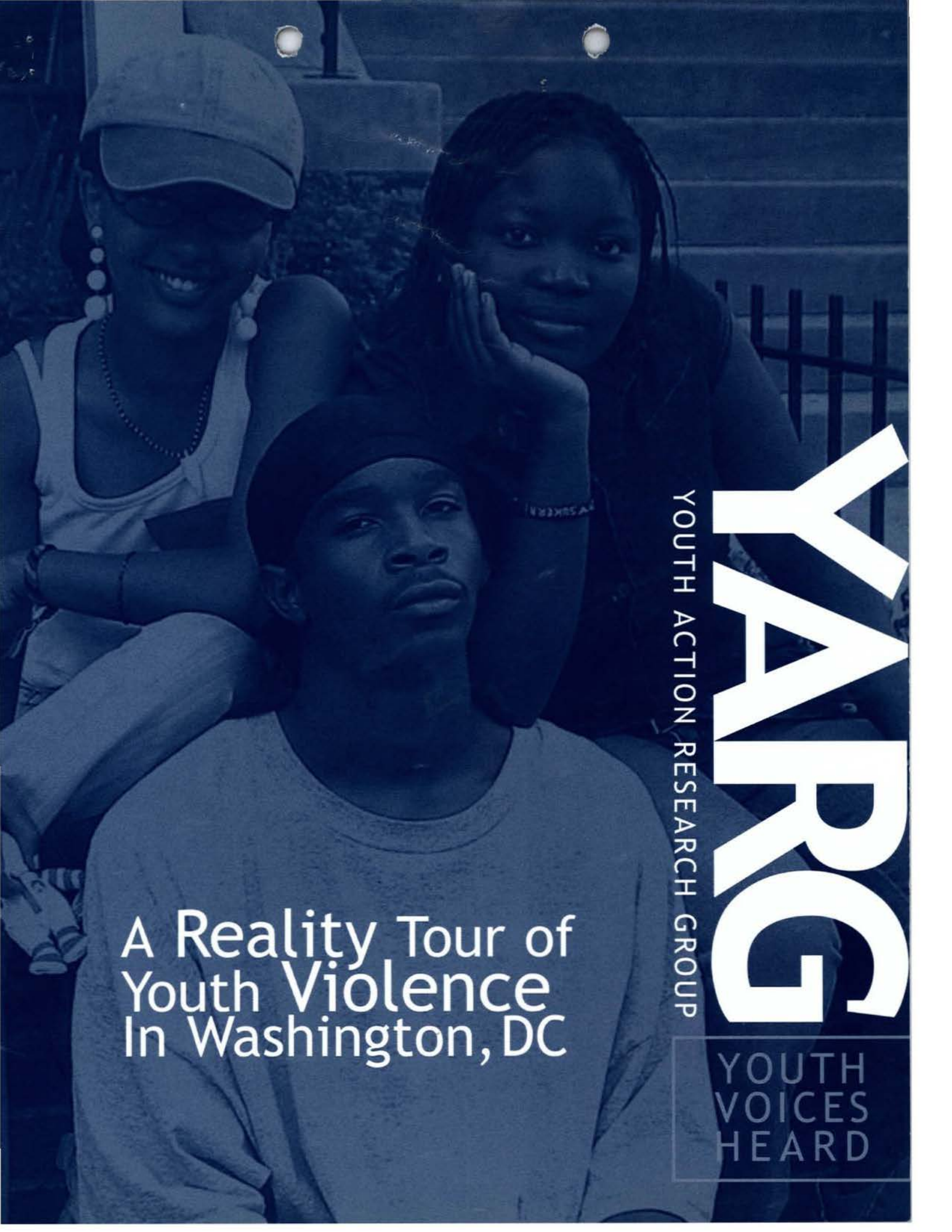
When they built the Columbia Heights metro station, which is across the street from my apartment building, the property value on my building went up. Developers came and wanted to buy our building. They were just going to evict us out of the building, but according to the guidelines they said that we could get a tenant association within 45 days to try to buy the building, in which we ended up forming the Trinity Towers Tenant Association. My parents were a part of getting people together to talk about purchasing our building. The people in our building elected a president and treasurer and a board of directors, and this company came and bought the building for us and we ended up staying. I feel there needs to be affordable housing in Columbia Heights to insure that low income residents are able to stay in the neighborhoods that they already reside in, and not evicted due to gentrification.

The message that the city is sending to young people and their families is that the city doesn't care about them, and all they care about is pushing low-income people out of the city and bringing in upper-middle class "people of higher status" and turning DC into this ultimate hotspot. When developers come to your neighborhood and start pushing low income people out of their buildings to build some seven-dollars-for-a-small-cup-of-coffee shop, especially if they already have one in their community, instead of making housing more affordable and renovating the buildings that are falling apart, you feel a sense of powerlessness especially as a young person because you don't have any say-so about what you want done with your community.

I would like to see the mixing of different incomes so that low income people would be able to live in nicer homes, to be able to afford them, and recommend that the policy makes sure that the affordable housing be put in the same building or an area on site. The Campaign for Inclusionary Zoning Proposal needs to be passed to ensure that working families in DC are able to stay in their communities.

ZONING COMMISSION
District of Columbia

CASE NO. 04-33 **ZONING COMMISSION**
EXHIBIT NO. 111 **District of Columbia**
CASE NO. 04-33
EXHIBIT NO. 111



A Reality Tour of
Youth Violence
In Washington, DC

YOUTH ACTION RESEARCH GROUP

YAROG

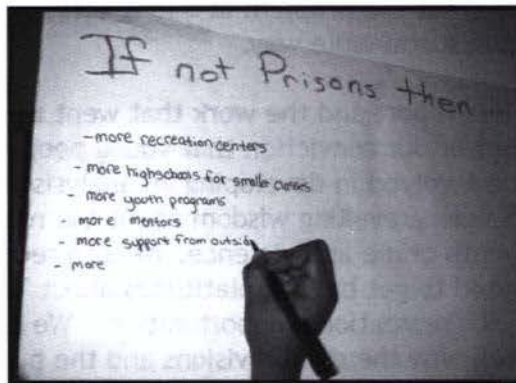
YOUTH
VOICES
HEARD



Get Involved!

Come to YARG's next meeting!

Just call us at 202-462-5767 (ask for Danielle or Jackie), stop by our office at 1419 V. St NW #401 or email us at yarg4justice@yahoo.com. We can tell you when our next meeting is and answer any questions you might have about YARG!



A Reality Tour of Youth Violence In DC

By the Youth Action Research Group

Nate Allen, Hawi Chibessa, Sukeria Cooper, Aqiyla Edwards, Duane Fon, LaKeisha McKinley, Denisse Rodriguez, and Rafael Vigil

Edited by Natalie Avery, Danielle Kurzweil, and Jackie Vélez



The Youth Action Research Group
Aqiyla Edwards, age 14, LaKeisha McKinley, age 16, and Denisse Rodriguez, age 16

What is YARG?

YARG is a youth centered organization in which teens from all over D.C. come together to talk about the issues that affect their lives, such as school policies, gentrification, youth violence, youth employment, and much more. We focus on making change by organizing to build our power. We use our own experiences and research to create change in our lives and communities.

What do I get by joining YARG?

- ❖ Earn Community Service Hours and/or Internship Credit by attending YARG's meetings and events!
- ❖ Broaden your knowledge about how decisions that affect you and your neighborhood are made!
- ❖ Meet and interact with other teens, adults, and youth organizations!
- ❖ Be a part of making real decisions—you'll be taken seriously and treated with respect!
- ❖ Learn leadership and organizational skills for school, work, and college!
- ❖ Build your resume for jobs and/or college!
- ❖ Learn about yourself!

What would I actually DO if I was a member of YARG?
 YARG has three committees: the Organizing Committee, the Outreach Committee, and the Youth Run Media Committee.

Youth Organizing Committee

Working for real policy change in DC

Main task: Work with YARG staff to develop and plan an issue based campaign to address youth violence in DC.

Outreach Committee

Building our membership

Main task: Come up with creative ways to convince more and more young people to join YARG.

Youth Run Media Committee

Making youth voices and experiences heard

Main task: – For fall, this committee will work to finalize and put on the Youth Violence Reality Tour developed by our summer youth staff. Starting in the spring, this committee will also publish regular newsletters and air our own radio show!

What's that you say? You want to join YARG, but don't know how?

It's Easy!! Just call us at 202-462-5767 (ask for Danielle or Jackie), stop by our office at 1419 V. St NW #401 or email us at yarg4justice@yahoo.com. We can tell you when our next meeting is and answer any questions you might have about YARG!



Introduction

LaKeisha "Beautiful" McKinley, age 16

Open Your Mind and Close Your Eyes

Open your mind and close your eyes
And listen to children's cries
Open your mind and close your eyes
And listen to the words of the wise
Learn to love those you despise
And listen to your conscience as it
constantly tries
To warn you what you do affects you
what's ahead
So don't bite the hand from which you are
fed
Open your mind and close your eyes
Don't be the person who always denies
What they truly feel inside
Don't open your eyes and close your mind
Cause that's when you soon will find
The bright future you had is left behind

by LaKeisha McKinley

There are always many sides to a story. But the question is—whose story is believed the most? Whose story gets repeated the most, gets the most air play, gets taken the most seriously? This summer, YARG examined the problem of youth violence. We looked at the story that gets told most often to explain youth violence. The story we hear most, that gets the most air play, that gets taken most seriously, goes all around the problem but never addresses the root causes. The people who get blamed for the problem and those who are most affected don't get heard. Youth and youth workers aren't often asked to be part of writing the story because people think they don't care.

This summer we ran focus groups with youth who experience violence or know people who have. All of the youth we talked to were Black or Latino and live in neighborhoods all over DC. We talked to youth because we think their experiences and ideas can help people understand what to do to stop youth violence.

We think it's important to examine these issues from the perspectives of youth, parents, and families because they are in the middle of violence and experience it every day.

How We Collected Our Information

Rafael Vigil, age 16

At the Youth Action Research Group, we use action research to gather our information. Action research is better than traditional research because people get involved in the process. We hope that we can get more people involved by doing action research, because we ask young people and adults what they think by interviewing them and doing focus groups. Also, by doing action research you don't get bored because you are not just reading from a book. You get to meet other people like young people who are affected by the problem and have been involved with it. These young people are trying to find solutions to the problem.

Interviews with Youth Workers and Community Leaders

We did interviews to get people's perspectives about youth violence and to see what they think are the root causes and solutions to youth violence. We also did interviews to get feedback about what the government's solutions are and what they think the government should do to try to fix the issue of youth violence. We interviewed:

- ❖ **Fani Cruz:** Latino Parent Support Coordinator for the Columbia Heights/Shaw Family Support Collaborative
- ❖ **Jeremie Greer:** Weed and Seed Coordinator for the Columbia Heights/Shaw Family Support Collaborative,
- ❖ **Linda Leaks:** Director of the District of Columbia Grassroots Empowerment Project (EmpowerDC!),
- ❖ **Elizabeth McIntire:** Columbia Heights ANC Commissioner,
- ❖ **Clark McKnight:** Project South Community Director and Columbia Heights resident for 44 years,
- ❖ **Priscilla Mendizabal:** Former Bell Multicultural High School student and Columbia Heights resident,
- ❖ **Roger Newell:** Campaign Communications Specialist for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters,
- ❖ **Roy Turner:** DC resident for 31 years,
- ❖ **A DC Department of Recreation worker** who wishes to remain anonymous, and
- ❖ **Two former Bell Multicultural High School JROTC students** who recently returned from Iraq, who wish to remain anonymous.

Focus Groups with Over 70 Young People

Focus groups bring groups of young people together to do activities, get feedback on an issue, and find solutions to that issue. We did focus groups with over 70 young people from the Latin American Youth Center, Mary's Center, Sister to Sister/Hermana a Hermana, the Youth Education Alliance (YEA), and the Young Women's Project (YWP).

Our Agenda for the Focus Groups

Introductions and Ways of Being

First, we introduced ourselves and told the group who we were, what YARG is, and what we were doing this summer. Next we went over the agenda. After that, we talked about the ways we wanted to be with each other during the focus group, for example we always use "one mic" meaning one person should speak at a time.

Icebreaker

The first activity was called the icebreaker. We asked the group to say their names and one thing that is important to them. We do icebreakers to help everyone in the group learn each other's names and to "break the ice" so that we feel more comfortable with each other.

Negative 411

The second activity was called Negative 411. We asked them to split up into two or three groups depending on how many people there were. Then we gave them some commentary to read from other people about youth violence. After they finished reading, we asked what they thought about what the person wrote. This activity got the group to speak out about the harmful things people have been saying about youth and how these attitudes cause youth to be stereotyped.

Tree of Youth Violence

The next activity was called "Look into our eyes" and that was a tree that we drew. We asked the group what they thought were the effects of youth violence and what were the root causes of youth violence. The leaves of the tree were what youth violence looked like to them, and the roots were the root causes. We did this activity because we wanted to know how other young people felt about youth violence and what they thought were the real root causes of youth violence.

But, Why?

With the same activity, we had another part called "But Why?" What we did there was pull key root causes off the tree and break them down. This activity helped us to get into a deeper conversation about root causes.

Youth Organizing

Then we did another activity called youth revolution. What we did was ask the participants to close their eyes and then we read out loud two stories about youth organizing*. After reading the stories, we asked them if they thought it was possible for young people to organize and make real social change like in the stories. Then we told them that these stories were actually true.

Evaluation

Last, we did an evaluation and asked what we could improve for the next focus group. In all of the focus groups that we did, I think all the participants liked the activities and were excited about having good conversations. Most of the participants gave their opinions because they wanted to express themselves and tell everybody what they think should be done about youth violence. Some of the participants said a lot and they kept talking because they wanted to throw in everything that they had so that other people could hear it. Most of the participants had never been asked for their opinions before because some people don't care what they have to say and what solutions they give.



*Youth Organizing Stories

One was about a group of young people that walked into a Best Buy and got harassed, searched, and prevented from entering the store. Then another group of white young people walk right past them and into the Best Buy. Then the first group of students got mad and they organized a protest outside the store and a top official from Best Buy gave an apology. The second story was about the Justice 4 DC Youth Coalition, which is a coalition of youth and adults in DC who are working to bring more youth voices to decisions that are made about juvenile justice. They are organizing to close Oak Hill, the juvenile detention center in DC, so that it can be replaced with something better, safer, and more humane like a treatment center for youth who get in trouble with the law.

Current Solutions to Youth Violence: Zero Tolerance Policies in Schools

Sukeria Cooper, age 16

Zero tolerance policies in schools basically means that schools have NO tolerance for what they see as “disruptive” behavior by students, and might include expelling students from school for things like wearing a bandana or play fighting in the hallways. Students start to get confused by these rules because of the way they are enforced. What schools don’t understand is that if a rule doesn’t make sense to a student, they are going to question it or think it’s not important. They are going to ask why is this the rule and who is it helping? Especially when other-wise good kids make a mistake and all of a sudden they find themselves expelled from school.

At Paul Junior High, I was expelled for smoking on school property and possession of drugs. What really happened though, I was in the bathroom with my friend. She had a blunt and lit it up to smoke it. I took it from her and put it out. Later on, my friend gave the blunt to another girl. This other girl went with one of her friends to the bathroom and they were caught trying to smoke the blunt. I explained to the principal, vice principal, and head of discipline that I did not want to have anything to do with that blunt. I had taken it from my friend and put it out. But the principal said it didn’t matter—I was still there and I had touched it. So I was expelled from school for the rest of the year. They let me get my work for the rest of the year, which was like two months, and I had to do it all on my own. Surprisingly, I still passed that year with A’s and B’s, and only one C, which was due to the fact that my math teacher did not let me take my finals.

I thought that was really unfair, because I was in a bad situation. But I tried to help the situation—I put the blunt out because I didn’t want my friend to get in trouble. Also, I didn’t want her to start a fire or something. This was one of the worst things to ever have happened to me. I felt so alone because everyone was mad at me and I am a good girl. And it’s like they isolated me. What I feel like they should have done instead is first they should have listened to us and tried to understand what really happened. They made it seem like we were the worst people in the entire school when really they just needed to talk to us. We

understood that smoking is wrong but they made us feel like we were the worst criminals. I think that talking to us and giving us in-school suspension would have been much better than expelling us.

Also, zero tolerance policies stereotype young people in schools and on the streets. If you do something wrong, if you get locked up once, after that you are considered a criminal. It doesn’t matter what the crime was or what you do when you get out. That’s what everybody knows you as. You’re nothing good anymore. It’s assumed that we do wrong and that we don’t learn any lessons from it. Also, youth are stereotyped who haven’t and aren’t going to do

anything wrong. They think they know that you are in a gang because of how you dress. If the boys have on big pants, long t-shirts, or a bandana, you’re in a gang. For the girls, it’s if you wear anything that is gang-colored then you are in a gang. As one of our focus group participants said, “Back in the 60’s for old people, it was crazy for them to listen to rock, and for the girls to wear curly hair, and for girls to wear stockings, and for them to smoke. Back then that was

Youth are constantly sent the message that they are bad and telling people often how bad they are, we are just pushing that person to convince himself that he can’t do anything good. We are not focusing on who they are, or what they really want. We are not really building and supporting them the way we should.

- Fani Cruz, Latino Parent Support Coordinator,
Columbia Heights/Shaw Family Support Collaborative

a crime, that was looking really bad. So now this is our style. We like graffiti, we like rap, we like black, red, gray. We have a special style, ok? Now because adults don’t like it they’re going to go around and stereotype people, and that’s not right.” They also stereotype you for how you act in public. You know like when you are with your friends hanging out, you like to act a fool, and you’re joking around and you get loud, they think you’re in a gang.

Zero tolerance policies are not helping the problem they’re hurting the problem, because expelling students for minor offenses takes away something important to them. Being in school is important because it prepares you for life. Most youth have insecurities, and if someone is stereotyping them on top of that, you are going to feel even worse. When other people don’t believe in you, it makes you feel like you aren’t important at all. If young people feel like other people already believe these things about them and no one cares, then they’re going to feel like, “It doesn’t matter what I do”.

Current Solutions to Youth Violence: *Incarceration, Fining Parents and Police Profiling*

Hawi Chibessa, age 17

Overall rates of youth violence have declined over the last ten years in Washington DC. But now in 2003-2004 there has been a spike in youth violence. There's been a lot of media coverage of this year's increase in youth violence and gang activity. City leaders are also talking a lot about this problem and trying to come up with solutions.

When city leaders talk about youth violence they blame parents and the young people themselves.

So, the solutions city leaders keep coming up with are punishment: incarceration, fining parents, taking away parent's driver's licenses, and police profiling. Many residents support these kinds of solutions.

Incarceration

Oak Hill is DC's detention center for "troubled" youth located in Laurel, Maryland. As the Justice for DC Youth Coalition points out, 100% of the youth in Oak Hill are Black and Latino. Most youth locked up at Oak Hill are there for nonviolent offenses including "status offenses," like running away, breaking curfew, and truancy. It costs more to keep someone at Oak Hill for a year than it does to send them to Harvard University. And youth who are there for status offenses are warehoused with other youth who have committed harsher crimes. Young people get harassed and abused by guards and are forced to stay in the worst conditions.

This summer we talked to youth and community leaders who are affected by the harsh

proposals being considered by the DC council. Many we talked to believe that the proposals will make the problem of youth violence even worse than it is because they don't address the root causes. As Jeremie Greer, the Weed and Seed Coordinator for the Columbia Heights/Shaw Family Support Collaborative puts it, "Unfortunately a lot of proposed solutions I've heard about aren't very positive. Going back to the debate around the juvenile justice legislation, a lot of the solutions that have been proposed are more punitive—trying young people as adults, fining parents, long mandatory minimums for youth. I don't see the answer. When you lock youth up at Oak Hill and put them at the same place as youth who have committed harsh offenses, you train young people to become better criminals. That's what our juvenile justice system does. It creates better criminals. When they get out, it's a gateway to the adult criminal justice system."

One focus group participant said, "When they send them to jail just for being a gang member, they come out worse, they come out hating people, because some bad stuff happens in jail."

The young people we talked to know that Oak Hill is not the solution and they wonder why 100% of the youth in Oak Hill are Black or Latino. "White teenagers," said one participant in our focus group, "they're not angels, they do these things too. If they do get caught, they go to rehab, they go to treatment. I want to know why they get to go to rehab, and they're saying we have to go to jail. They don't really give us a chance."

Continued on next page

"I think the government is unwilling to recognize that there may be another reason why parents aren't there for their children, that what they do affects everyone else. I think they do know that people are struggling, but they don't care. They are the ones that raised the rent, so they know that people got to work extra hours to pay for it. They are unwilling to take any of the blame."

— Youth focus group participant

The solutions should not be to invest in jail. Instead, create places where people can build skills and grow as a person. Invest in the schools, in recreation centers. Invest in the youth and they will see the results.

- Fani Cruz, Latino Parent Support Coordinator, Columbia Heights/Shaw Family Support Collaborative

It is also really hard for young people who are going through this because you don't have anybody to talk to, especially people who have already experienced this. You don't want to talk to your friends and tell them that you are about to be put out of your building because you feel so embarrassed.

The message this sends to young people and their families is that the city doesn't care about them and all they care about is pushing low-income people out of the city and bringing in upper-middle class "people of higher status" and turning DC into this ultimate hotspot. Clark McKnight, Project South Community Director and a resident of Columbia Heights for 44 years told us, "This whole gentrification thing that's taking place in DC is to benefit a certain class of people on a certain economic level. It's not for everybody. This is why you see a lot of lower economic people have to move. You've got people in this city who are retired living on less than \$10,000 a year. You have couples now that are married working two jobs who are struggling in the \$20 - \$25,000 a year bracket. The changes that have been made are sometimes moving faster than people can fathom and by the time you realize what is going on, if you blink, it's past you."

When developers come to your neighborhood and start pushing low income people out of their buildings to build some seven-dollars-for-a-small-cup-of-coffee shop, especially if they already have one in their community, instead of making housing more affordable and renovating the buildings that are falling apart, you feel a sense of powerlessness especially as

"Young people are in a position where they haven't been able to control their own destiny. Not feeling like you have a say invokes more fear than someone who has influence. It's like being a train racing down the track, and you have no control, you're along for the ride. I think the youth have more fear than anyone else."

—Jeremie Greer, Weed and Seed Coordinator, Columbia Heights/Shaw Family Support Collaborative

a young person because you don't have any say-so about what you want done with your community.

Denisse- We were also constantly being moved from place to place because of rising rents and the lack of affordable housing. Based on my experience of being evicted, I felt like I didn't have a home. I felt lost and confused. Because of the fact that I didn't have a stable place to live, I didn't feel stable mentally. I wanted a place where I felt comfortable and I couldn't find it and I felt frustrated and it built up inside. I couldn't concentrate in school and I also felt powerless because I couldn't do anything about it.

This thing overall really leads to depression. And it branches off into violence, suicide, and joining

gangs. One youth we talked to said, "If you really don't have any control over how your community is run, you are going to want to have some type of control in any type of way." Clark McKnight also told us that, "[Being in a gang] empowers you. I used to be in a gang too. You feel really good when you see a bunch of people scared of you. And then when you've got that gun in your belt, you feel really powerful then, because you know you have the power of life and death." This quote from a DC recreational center worker speaks for itself, "The same boy that just punched somebody out for saying something about his mom, will be the only one to sit down and close his eyes for a couple of seconds before he eats. It's a strange dichotomy of these kids who have extreme innate respect. But they react the same way they get treated."

Really, the first violence is the violence of taking someone's neighborhood. So the city does the first violence. Then, when the violence happens it is partly an expression of "You don't care about me, I don't care about you. And if I burn it down it's not mine. I'm not destroying mine. Because you have already shown me, it's not mine."

This is a brutal and fundamental impoverishment of the community that has never been mitigated. Now, how can you impoverish people at that scale and then say what's your problem, how come you're not keeping up?

—Mindy Fullilove, Author of *'Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It'*

Youth Speak Out About Youth Violence: The Solutions Need to Involve More affordable housing to prevent the displacement of communities:



If houses were more affordable then families would not have to worry about living uncomfortably, and living conditions would be improved.

-- Lakeisha



They would feel like they are loved and supported because their community would feel more like a family.

-- Denisse



Stable neighborhoods would make the community feel more welcome instead of making them feel like they aren't wanted.

-- Aqiyla

Our Analysis of Youth Violence: *The Failures of DCPS*

Nate Allen, age 18

The DC Public School System is falling apart. It's under funded. It's mismanaged. The school buildings are falling down and trashy. At the same time this problem gets worse, the city seems to be focusing more on locking up DC youth.

Conditions in DCPS are bad. Many Classrooms are overcrowded and dirty. The bathrooms are dirty—with broken toilets that don't flush. Some students don't even use them, they are so gross. Gyms and fields are old and not kept up well. Schools don't have the insurance to have good sports programs. Many schools don't have enough lockers for students. The textbooks are old and out of date and torn. There aren't many opportunities to take art and music programs. And when you do take them they lack supplies and space. Science labs are old and out of order. Their supplies are broken and out of date. They need more and better books. Priscilla Mendizabal, a former Bell High School student and resident of Columbia Heights told us, "In the suburban school where my cousin goes, if you want to play soccer, you want to play basketball, you know whatever you want to do, you want to go into theater—its all there, at the school. All you have to do is sign up. Here in DC, the facilities are old. What are kids supposed to do?"

These conditions send a message to students that says the city doesn't care about them. One of the focus group participants we talked to told us, "No one pays attention to what we want out of an education. You aren't going to take school seriously if the school is falling apart. You aren't going to want to go to school if there aren't enough bathrooms for everyone to use. You aren't going to want to go

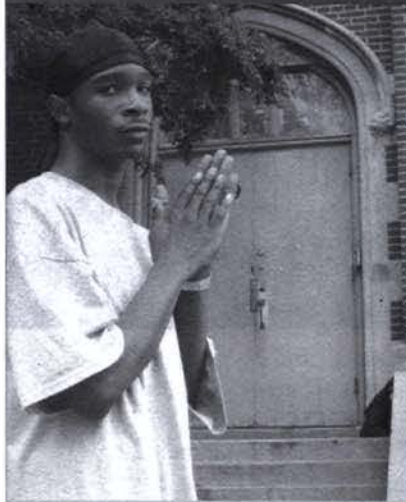
to school if the teachers leave 20 minutes before you do." Many young people we talked to compared DCPS to schools in the suburbs. Priscilla Mendizabal also told us, "I have a niece. When she was living in DC she was starting to get into things she wasn't supposed to get into. I noticed that when she moved to Maryland, all the sudden, she changed. She was doing more things in the community and through school—she had more structured time." Another youth told us, "I used to live in Virginia. I went to a Fairfax County Public School and it was like 900 students and everybody knew everybody. You felt safe. We didn't even need metal detectors or any of that stuff. It was clean and there was a recreation center literally like two minutes from there, so they would take us to do things. When I came to DC, I was like, 'Oh my god, am I going to jail or am I going to school?'"

Also, many students feel categorized as "bad." Many students are labeled and sometimes punished for the way they dress. Some students we talked to were kicked out for wearing bandanas or certain clothing associated with gangs. This happens to students who aren't even in gangs.

City leaders focus more on punishing youth who get in trouble rather than fixing the problems in DCPS. They do not recognize the links between the serious problems in DCPS and youth violence. They blame youth and families—they think it's the homes we come from—and they don't take time out to understand what's really going on. As Roger Newell from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters puts it, "The fact is that they are willing to spend the amount of money that they spend keeping folks locked up as compared to spending that same amount of money making sure you've got a quality education in a public school."

Our Analysis of Youth Violence: *The Lack of Quality Youth Recreational Programming in DC*

Nate Allen, age 18



I See Bad and Good

I see too many dyin'
tears falling and people
crying
everyone wants peace
But no one's trying,
young killing young,
old killing old
I never thought life would
be easy
living in a world so cold,
I see a future of change,
but not the way to get
their
people
showing love and life's
wealth shared,
no more violence
no more war
I see a vision of peace
and that's what we should
fight for.

-- Nate Allen

When I was growing up, when I was about fifteen, I didn't really have lots of places to go to have fun. I was mostly in the house. I wanted to make money, I wanted to work. I didn't like to ask people for money. To me, if you ask somebody for money, it's like you owe them something. I had this friend who had an uncle that was involved in drugs and he would take drugs from his uncle. And he said, if you sell this, you get twenty dollars. So it got me thinking, if I sold twenty or thirty of those, I would have a lot of money.

To me, it wasn't serious at first. What made it serious was when a friend of mine got shot who was doing the same things I was doing. And I thought, that could be me. I looked at it and I said, he survived, but I might not be dealt the same cards, my hand might not be the winning hand. In a game of cards, someone always has to lose. It could have been the end of my game. I was also thinking, "What if my mother found out about what I was doing?" Because I realized if something happened to me, I'm my parents' only child. I thought about my life.

When I was nine, I used to write, and people used to tell me if I keep writing I'll improve. If I could make sales hustling and start off with a small amount of money, and I saw how I could make more money, I could do the same thing with my writing skills, and they would get even better. As soon as that came to my head, I stopped.

I was in class one day and a friend of mine asked if I could rap. I told him, yes. Then he asked me to freestyle. I told him I couldn't freestyle, I'm just a writer. So his advice to me was to try. I tried and the next thing, I expected him to laugh at me. But he encouraged me. After that, the next day he introduced me to Steve Jones who introduced me to The Midnight Forum.

The Midnight Forum is a non-profit organization that empowers youth through hip hop. They use art, music, and business management to help young people stay off the streets.

It changed my life because I like music and they give me plenty of opportunities to be heard. And when they say that I am going to be able to perform in front of people, it happens. It's different from other youth programs because they show they care, they keep you involved, because they stay in contact with you, and they train you to do things that you want to do. I also learned that it's not easy to own your own business—you have to have a business plan on paper. They walk you through the steps and train you.

Recreation centers need to be nurturing places, but they're not. Just the other day, one of the site managers here strangled a girl. These two kids were beefing, the manager was on the telephone. He put it down. He had his hands around her neck, then he dragged her down the corridor, threw her on the tumbling mats, and came back like nothing had happening. And this started because a boy was touching the girl's backside...and the girl ended up getting thrown by the site manager. I realize it's not the kids, but the structure around them.

- DC Department of Recreation worker
who asked to remain anonymous

After getting involved in the Midnight Forum, I realized there was something better for me to do other than putting my life on the line. Now as I continue to be involved with the Midnight Forum I have done over 15 performances, been in school and city newspapers, and been involved in recording a compilation CD that has been placed in stores for others to hear. I am proud of this and I thank God and my parents for pushing me to do my best and never giving up.

If you want to show youth that there is a better life other than the streets, DC needs to have more youth programs that involve the things that we like to do, like computer programs and driving schools where young people are learning hands on stuff that they want to do.

Youth Speak Out About Youth Violence: The Solutions Need to Involve:

More youth involvement and decision making in designing quality recreational/after school programs:



Youth would spend time at the recreational centers if they are helping to come up with the ideas for the program and how it is run. -- Denisse



Youth being involved with decision making would make programs better than what they are because we know what we want in order to fulfill our needs and how to make the overall atmosphere better as well. -- Aqiyla



If youth were more involved in decision making they would make the programs more interesting. -- LaKeisha



Because if youth have a say in decision making then more youth would want to join programs. -- Sukeria

Our Analysis of Youth Violence: *Youth Jobs and Job Training Programs in DC*

Aqiyla Edwards, age 14

Having a good job keeps young people off the streets, keeps us busy and active, gives us something to do, and you get paid for it, of course. But the problem is that they make a hassle of all the stuff you have to go through to get the job, such as running place to place to two orientations all across town, and having all this stuff to have to prove, like your family's income and all that.

When I applied to the DC Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) I had to go way over to H street and I had to wait like 15 minutes—even though I went early to beat the crowd. Then the secretary typed in all my information and she gave me this pink slip which is a receipt saying that you turned in all your stuff, like your proof of DC residency, your birth certificate, a social security card, a proof of your family's income, and my report card. She told me that I would get a letter in one month saying whether I was approved for the job. It ended up taking three months, and I got it finally at the end of the school year and I was stressed because I had just applied to this job at YARG and I didn't know yet if I got it and the lady made it seem like since I hadn't heard from SYEP in three months that I hadn't gotten that job either, so I was like well, now I don't have a job for the summer.

So, when I finally got the letter three months later, the letter said I had to go to an orientation for like two hours. To the orientation we had to bring our school ID, and they make you sit in this room and watch this video about the EBT

card, which is how you are paid. They put your money on this card and you can take it out at an ATM machine. Then they give you this paper that is like what is a sick day and what is not a sick day, and like about your attitude (they assume that you are going to have a bad one) and stuff like that. Then you go home. Then like two weeks later they mail you another form telling you where you need to go—but this wasn't the job yet, first I had to go to this place for them to tell me where I was going to be working and what my hours would be. Also, you don't get any say in where you are placed, like if it's inconvenient for you or way across town or like an hour from your house. So like for me, my form told me to go to all the way over to S street. So my mom and I walked all over up and down the street and back to the metro and we couldn't find the place and we finally had to give up and go home.

I know the story is confusing, because the whole situation was confusing. Nobody wants to have to go through all this hassle to get a job and it is really discouraging for someone who is trying to get their first job, and you are only 14 and you can't really be traveling all over the city. I wanted a job because I needed serious money for school. Because we have all these trips that I have to pay for if I want to go. Also, you don't want to go back to school with the same clothes that you left school with. You also have to buy personal items and stuff like that and you get tired of asking your parents for stuff.

Continued on next page

Also young people want a job that gives them real skills for another job that doesn't require three masters and a Ph.D since some might not be college bound. As Roger Newell told us, "There are jobs here in the city that pay real good money but folks that graduated from DC Public Schools are knocked out of the loop. The problem is that the training academies to prepare folks for those types of jobs were set up outside the city. If you want to be an elevator mechanic, you have to go out into the counties. And most of the training facilities are located where there isn't any public transportation. So if you don't have a car you can't get out there to get trained. If you can't get trained, you don't get the job."

One of the few options presented to low income youth who don't go to college is the military. A former Bell Multicultural High School student and veteran of the Marine Corps shared with us, "They [military recruiters] used to come to our high schools and just walk around and

talk to the students about what they want to do in the future and talk to you about the military. I knew I didn't like school at all, I knew I wouldn't get into college. The

recruiter, I used to know him. So when I got out I used to see him around and he was like, 'Yo, what's up, what are you doing, you just got out of high school?' So I decided to join the Marine Corps." The young man we talked to ended up in Iraq. This is one of the things he said about his experience coming back,

"Now, you come back from war and in your mind you have different thoughts and you have to adapt back again to the civilian life. And people look at you like, he's so young, he's been in the war. They look at you and they don't know."

DC needs more alternatives for young people to have good paying job opportunities other than the military. They talk about us hanging on the street but make it so nerve wracking and in some cases impossible to go and get a job. Two other youth I know spent all summer applying for jobs, and they never did find one. It's discouraging.

In addition to jobs bringing in money, they bring in a socialization that goes with working with other people—getting up and going to work—and that's important to keeping a community together.

- Roger Newell from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters

Youth Speak Out About Youth Violence: The Solutions Need to Involve:

More living wage jobs for parents and youth:



If they have better jobs, then they would not have to work three jobs. With better paying jobs, parents would have enough time to spend with their kids. - *Denise*



If parents had more time for their kids, then they would be able to provide more support and guidance to them. - *Hawi*

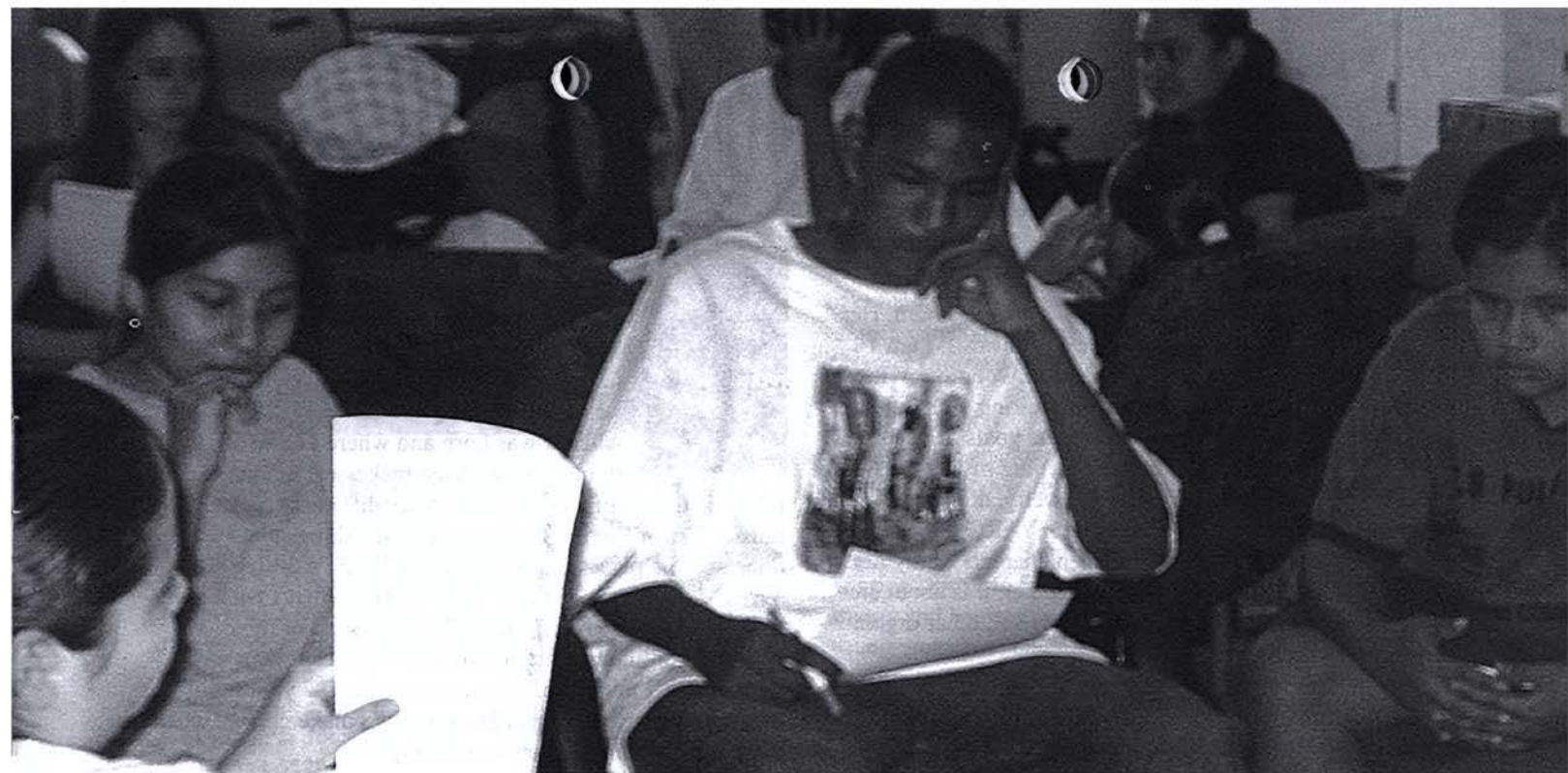
More choices for jobs after school:



JROTC recruitment in schools pressures young people into thinking that it is their only option after high school. Having more choices for jobs encourages youth and empowers us to see the wider field of activities and opportunities. - *Aqiyla*



To show that youth can be successful right where they live. Show youth they can make their neighborhood better without pushing them out. - *LaKeisha*



Youth Organizing: *Finding Solutions to Youth Violence*

Why are you a youth organizer?

I'm a youth organizer because I feel I play an important role in society. I know for a fact that my voice will be heard and make a difference eventually!! – *Denisse*

Because I want to help make changes in my community. – *Nate*

I am a youth organizer because I care about problems in my community and I want to find ways to help. – *Sukeri*

What are skills youth can learn through organizing?

The skills that we learn through organizing are facilitating meetings, speaking up, and communicating better with people. – *Raphae*

Youth can learn how to network and interact with other organizations, and how to have your voice and opinions heard. Through youth organizing, youth learn skills that they can use in the job market and college. – *Aqiyla*

Why should other young people become involved with the youth organizing movement?

Because they'll learn about themselves, their history, their community, their rights, and a whole lot more. – *Hawi*

Other young people should become involved with the youth organizing movement because their own lives will change by solving the problems that are in society. – *Raphael*

So they can be a part of what they want to see changed. – *Nate*

How do you think youth organizing can impact youth violence in DC?

I think they can make a change, because the youth in DC care. – *Nate*

If more youth were organizers, they could target their anger verbally. They would be the solution to their own problems. – *LaKeisha*

How have you grown/what have you learned through the process of creating this Youth Violence Reality Tour?

I have learned how to speak up more to people and to have confidence in myself. – *Raphael*

I've grown as a person and realized how important my role is in society. After doing all of the interviews, I got a chance to listen to other young people and their views/perspectives on youth violence. – *Denisse*

When young people go astray, it means that there is something wrong with that society as a whole. It is wrong to blame the victim. Young people are going to have to unite together and tell the world that you are not going to be the scapegoat any more.

– Clark McKnight, Project South Community Director and resident of Columbia Heights for 44 years

Meet the YARG Staff



Aqiyla Edwards, Age 14

On November 6, 1989 a star was born. Her name was Aqiyla Imani Edwards. I am 14 years old and a student at Woodrow Wilson High School. I am an aspiring 10th grader who hopes to achieve the goals of becoming an entrepreneur and owning my business-creating and selling jewelry, doing hair or other fine arts and crafts. Working with YARG has been an exciting experience to add to the open chapters of my life. To me, it is not just getting people together, it is about creating a bond and networking with others and other organizations to try to help bring change.



Denisse Rodriguez, Age 16

My name is Denisse Rodriguez. I attend Bell Multicultural High School. I am now a senior, and after high school I plan on going to Montgomery Community College to start off. I will eventually attend a university in Florida. I have basically lived everywhere back and forth from DC to Maryland. What makes me unique is that I'm humble and unpredictable/spontaneous. I love taking pictures traveling, listening to music, and most of all writing poetry. I look up to my mother because she has lot strength. I think that is important for DC youth to organize. If they don't issues in various communities are going to continue to build up. It's also important for young people to be able to give their input on policies within our communities.



Hawi Chibessa, Age 17

Hello! My name is Hawi and I'm 17 years old. I am soon to be a senior at Bell Multicultural High School. I can't wait to go to college. I was born in Ethiopia. My parents moved me and my brother and sister eight years ago to DC. They said we would have better educational opportunities here in the US than anywhere else. What I loved most about Ethiopia was the nice breeze and weather. That's one of the things that makes me unique- Where I'm from. Organizing to me is coming together and taking action to make a positive change. It is important for DC youth to organize because our voices are not being heard.



Nate Allen, Age 18

My name is Nate Allen and I go to Bell Multicultural High School. I'm 18 years old and I'm in the 11th grade. My plans after high school are to go back to school and learn more. I love the fact that DC was where I was born and where I have been through a lot. What makes me unique from others is that I am an artist that writes different types of music. When I write, I talk about all the things that I have done and the places that I have been. While working at YARG I have learned that I can do what I want to do as long I have the discipline and a good state of mind. My definition of an organizer is someone who can work well with others. I think that it is important for DC youth to organize because they will know how to make change when there is a problem in their community.



Rafael Vigil, Age 16

My name is Rafael Vigil. I'm from El Salvador and I'm sixteen years old. I go to Cardozo High School and I'm in the 10th grade. After high school I plan to work in a well paying job. What I like the most about my country is the beach, my grandfather, and the weather. I have been in DC for 2 years. I moved to DC, because I wanted to live with my grandmother. What makes me unique from others is that I'm funny, but also serious, and I can dance to Spanish music, Merengue and Bachata. What I learned about myself while working at YARG was how to speak to other youth. I think that it is important for young people in DC to organize because they could have a better future just by organizing.



Sukeria Cooper, Age 16

My name is Sukeria and when I graduate from high school I plan to go to college and study psychology. I am from Jamaica, and I love the weather and the beaches. I have been in DC for eight years. I moved to DC because my family moved me here. My sense of kindness makes me unique. I look up to my mother because she is single and still manages to support, love and take care of me. I learned that I have great listening skills while working with YARG. Organizing means a group of people getting together to make a change. We need adults to believe in us and tell us we can do it.



We'd Like to Thank the Other Youth Organizations That Helped Make this Report Possible and Tell You a Little Something About Them...

Youth Organizing Groups

Youth Education Alliance (YEA)

Mission: YEA is a youth-led group of teens and young adults who know that they have the power to make a change. YEA exists for the benefit of DC Public High School Students.

Contact Information:

Ann Caton & Jonathan Stith
T: 202.544.5520

Young Women's Project (YWP)

Mission: The Young Women's Project is a multi-cultural organization that builds and supports teen women and girl leaders so that they can improve their own lives and transform their communities. YWP takes young women through a process where they realize and develop their own power; trust and support each other; and use their skills and knowledge to create projects that strengthen the broader community. Our program is guided by love, a belief in the power and abilities of teen women, and a commitment to involving young women in every level of organizational planning and leadership.

Contact Information:

Gemma Smith & Jean Garcia
T: 202.332.3399
E: ywp@youngwomensproject.org
www.youngwomensproject.org

The Midnight Forum

Mission: The Midnight Forum empowers youth to generate positive changes through Hip-Hop within their communities.

Contact Information:

Dominic Painter
T: 301.949.0698
E: contact@midnightforum.org
www.midnightforum.org

Justice 4 DC Youth Coalition

Mission: J4DCY is a coalition of youth, youth providers, policy advocates, parents, and concerned residents who are working for a more fair and effective youth justice system in the District. We are trying to shift the city's focus from punishment and incarceration to education and youth development. To advocate for a more fair and effective youth justice system

in DC that provides a comprehensive and effective continuum of community-based programs and reduces the city's reliance on incarceration as a response to juvenile delinquency.

Contact Information:

Retta Morris
T: 202.588.9300
E: Info@justice4dcyouth.org
www.justice4dcyouth.org

Sister to Sister/Hermana a Hermana

Mission: Sister to Sister/Hermana a Hermana (STS/HAH) is an arts and leadership organization that works with girls and young women of color, ages 9-18, living in the Columbia Heights and Shaw neighborhoods of Washington, DC. we shape the world... one girl at a time. Nosotras formamos el mundo... una nina a la vez

Contact Information:

Tania Alfaro
T: 202.332.4200 ext. 134
sts_hah@yahoo.com

Youth Service Providers

Latin American Youth Center

Mission: The Latin American Youth Center is a multicultural community based organization that supports youth and families in their determination to live, work, and study with dignity, hope, and joy. The LAYC achieves its mission by providing comprehensive and culturally sensitive social supports, opportunities in education and employment, and through advocacy and social enterprise.

Contact Information

Alex Arevalo- Gang Outreach Worker
Franklin Peralta-Outreach Worker
Jasmin Benab- Girls Youth Leadership Program Coordinator
Catalina Talero- Youth Advocacy Coordinator
T: 202.319.2225
E: info@layc-dc.org
www.layc-dc.org

Mary's Center for Maternal and Childcare

Mission: The mission of Mary's Center is to build better futures through health care, education, and social services that embrace our culturally diverse community.

Contact Information:

Laura Nino & Sara Marques
T: 202.483.8196
E: info@maryscenter.org
www.maryscenter.org

Shout Outs From YARG!

Thanks to these dedicated, inspiring young people for participating in our action research project this summer:

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