Reducing Juvenile Involvement in Violent Crimes: Perspectives From DC Youth, Families, And Community Members

A Report to the DC Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC)

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A.Executive Summary

Purpose and Approach

This study was commissioned by the DC Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC) to deepen the understanding of youth-involved violent crime in the District by centering the voices of those most affected—youth, families, community members, community-based organizations, and agency representatives. The study was guided by four areas of inquiry:

1. What is driving youth to engage in violent crimes?
2. What approaches are effective in discouraging youth involvement in violent crime?
3. What forms of accountability are seen as fair and appropriate for youth who engage in violent crime?
4. To what extent are youth and families aware of services and supports, and what barriers limit access?

Data Collection

Between fall 2024 and spring 2025, the study team conducted a total of 10 focus groups and 5 key informant interviews.

Focus Groups

- (3) Justice-system-involved youth: Securely confined youth ages 12-17 currently involved with the D.C. juvenile justice system.
- (3) "At-risk" youth: Youth ages 12-17 residing in D.C. neighborhoods with high levels of violent crime, not currently system-involved but at elevated risk of exposure to or participation in violent crime.
- (1) Family members of justice-system–involved youth: Adults (18+) caring for or closely related to justice-system-involved youth in Washington, D.C.
- (2) Community members: Adults (18+) living in neighborhoods across Washington, D.C., with a concentration of participants from Wards 5, 7, and 8.
- (1) Community-based organization staff: Staff members of nonprofits and community-based organizations in Washington, D.C., serving youth and families.

Agency Interviews

- Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA)
- Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC)
- Department of Behavioral Health (DBH)
- Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS)
- Metropolitan Police Department (MPD)
- Office of the Attorney General (OAG)

All data collection was conducted in accordance with trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate protocols. The study was reviewed and approved by the University of Southern Maine IRB (#2024-285). Participant quotations in this report are attributed using citation codes described in Appendix A.

Findings

Findings are drawn directly from the perspectives of youth, families, community members, community-based organizations, and agency representatives who participated in the study. They reflect participants' lived experiences and perceptions, supported by relevant research evidence.

Finding 1: Economic instability and unmet needs increase youth vulnerability to risk-taking and violence.

Finding 2: Gun accessibility, neighborhood violence, and retaliation cycles drive persistent youth violence.

Finding 3: Peer influence, lack of belonging, and online conflicts intensify youth tensions.

Finding 4: When school feels unsafe or irrelevant, youth disengage and are more vulnerable to violence.

Finding 5: Education that connects to real-life job opportunities deters violence.

Finding 6: Access to trustworthy mental health care is critical to prevention.

Finding 7: Safe, connected neighborhoods decrease the perceived need for youth to carry weapons.

Finding 8: Strong parental, mentor, and peer bonds discourage violence.

Finding 9: Youth and adults express distrust and fear of policing.

Finding 10: Participants support proportionate, tiered systems for youth accountability.

Finding 11: Participants prioritize rehabilitation and reintegration over punishment for youth.

Finding 12: Families often report that services arrive too late to be effective.

Finding 13: Youth and families distrust systems but rely on community-led supports.

Finding 14: Families view service systems as fragmented and often retraumatizing.

Actions for Consideration

Building on findings, the study identified several areas for consideration. These considerations combine participant perspectives with supporting research and examples from other jurisdictions. They are not prescriptive recommendations but highlight potential directions for strengthening the District's response to youth violence. Some of this work is already underway locally, and the considerations are intended to build on and reinforce existing efforts.

Consideration 1: Expand meaningful career pathways and paid youth employment

Consideration 2: Target prevention for high-risk youth and neighborhoods

Consideration 3: Strengthen reintegration supports for justice-involved youth

Consideration 4: Advance a coordinated trauma-informed systems approach

Consideration 5: Invest in equity-focused research and service mapping

Conclusion

The study highlights both the conditions that drive youth violence and the supports that deter it. Findings underscore that safety is rooted not only in enforcement, but also in stability, opportunity, and a sense of belonging. While no single solution exists, coordinated investments in trauma-informed supports, opportunities, and accountability can move the District toward more effective and sustainable responses to youth violence.

B. About this Study

About the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC)

The Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC), an independent agency, serves as a forum for identifying challenges and generating solutions to enhance public safety and the fair administration of justice for District of Columbia residents, visitors, victims, and justice-involved individuals. The CJCC facilitates information sharing and collaboration, conducts research and analysis, and provides training and technical assistance on behalf of its District and federal member agencies.

The Juvenile Justice Committee (JJC), a subcommittee of the CJCC, comprising agencies related to juvenile justice, health, human services, and education, serves as the executive body for the juvenile justice system. As the executive body, the JJC sets priorities and strategic objectives to address issues related to juvenile justice.

Rationale for the Study

The premise for this study was the 2023 increase in D.C. violent crime, particularly youth violent crime involvement. During the JJC's 2023 strategic planning process, the JJC identified a need to better understand the drivers of youth involvement in violent crime, barriers to accessing support services, and strategies for prevention and appropriate accountability. The JJC then tasked the CJCC with engaging individuals closest to the problem – youth, their families, and the community – to research the key drivers and potential solutions to youth violence. Relying on interviews and focus groups with justice-system-involved youth, their families, community members, organizations, and representatives from agencies providing youth services, this report is grounded in a stakeholder research methodology to identify factors contributing to youth violence in the District while exploring mitigation strategies.

Stakeholder research has been employed in various studies on juvenile justice-system involvement, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the needs and solutions for justice-involved youth, their families, and communities. Analysis of these projects shows that ethical stakeholder research can generate impactful research for better health outcomes of justice-system-involved individuals (Wurcel et al. 2023), better contextualize specific risk factors such as delinquency and alcohol abuse amongst youth (Curcio, Knott, and Mak 2015), and involve victims in processes such as restorative justice (Wood 2013). However, much stakeholder research focused on juvenile justice system involvement only includes relevant professionals and practitioners, not the affected juveniles, their families, or community members. By centering youth, family, and community voices, this research will ideally contribute to District-wide dialogue by providing insight into sustainable solutions for addressing the root causes of D.C. youth violence

Study Overview

Recognizing the complexity of these issues, the JCC sought to engage affected populations to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying challenges and to develop effective, community-driven solutions. The JJC specifically sought to understand: (1) the drivers of youth engagement in violent offenses; (2) barriers to the access of services and support; and (3) recommendations for addressing youth engagement in behaviors that lead to justice system involvement.

To meet these objectives, CJCC contracted with Opportunity Consulting, a DC-based consulting firm, to conduct an IRB-approved study between August 2024 and July 2025 designed to:

- Gather perspectives of justice-system-involved youth, their families, community members, and representatives from agencies providing youth services through focus groups and interviews,
- Analyze perspectives to identify the factors contributing to youth engagement in violent crime,
- Explore strategies to mitigate these violent behaviors, and
- Conclude with a report of findings and recommendations.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to gather insights from individuals and groups most directly impacted by youth violence in Washington, D.C.

The study was conducted under the approval of the University of Southern Maine Institutional Review Board (IRB #2024-285) and set out to answer the following research questions established by the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council:

1. What is driving youth to engage in violent crimes, such as robberies, carjackings, and shootings?
2. What are effective approaches for discouraging youth involvement in violent crime?
3. For youth who engage in violent crime, what are appropriate and fair ways to hold them accountable for their actions?
4. To what extent are youth and families aware of services and support available to them, and what barriers exist to accessing these services and supports?

These research questions served as the foundation for the study's design. The core research questions directly informed the development of focus group and interview discussion guides. Each guide was structured to elicit perspectives relevant to the established research questions, while allowing participants to raise additional themes that reflected their lived experiences.

Between fall 2024 and winter 2025, the research team conducted 10 focus groups in Washington, D.C., with the following segments.

- (3) Justice-system-involved youth: Securely confined youth ages 12-17 currently involved with the D.C. juvenile justice system,
- (3) “At-risk” youth: Youth ages 12-17 residing in D.C. neighborhoods with high levels of violent crime, not currently system-involved but at elevated risk of exposure to or participation in violent crime,
- (1) Family members of justice-system–involved youth: Adults (18+) caring for or closely related to justice-system-involved youth in Washington, D.C..
- (2) Community members: Adults (18+) living in neighborhoods across Washington, D.C., with a concentration of participants from Wards 5, 7, and 8, and
- (1) Community-based organization staff: Staff members of nonprofits and community-based organizations in Washington, D.C., serving youth and families.

Focus group recruitment was conducted through purposive sampling in collaboration with District agencies and community-based organizations, supplemented by direct outreach efforts by the research team. Each focus group followed a structured, IRB-approved discussion guide and was facilitated by trained researchers using trauma-informed best practices.

In addition to the IRB-approved focus groups, the research team conducted five background interviews with leaders of District agencies. These interviews were scheduled through direct outreach in coordination with CJCC and were intended to provide contextual and policy-level perspectives. Because these interviews did not involve community members and did not pose the same ethical considerations, they were not part of the IRB study protocol. Interviews were conducted with the following agencies:

- DC Criminal Justice Coordinating Council
- DC Department of Human Services
- DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services
- DC Office of the Attorney General
- DC Public Defender Service

Data collection included audio recordings and transcription (where permitted), as well as detailed note-taking. Analysis began with the development of a deductive codebook, derived from the research questions and relevant literature. Researchers applied this codebook in initial rounds of coding, with inter-rater reliability checks conducted to ensure consistency. As new themes emerged, inductive codes were proposed and underwent a structured review process before incorporation into the final codebook. Following this process, all data were re-coded using the expanded codebook. Key findings were synthesized through thematic analysis, which identified recurring patterns and informed the study’s conclusions.

Full details on research design, participant recruitment, facilitation, data management, and the analysis process are provided in Appendix A.

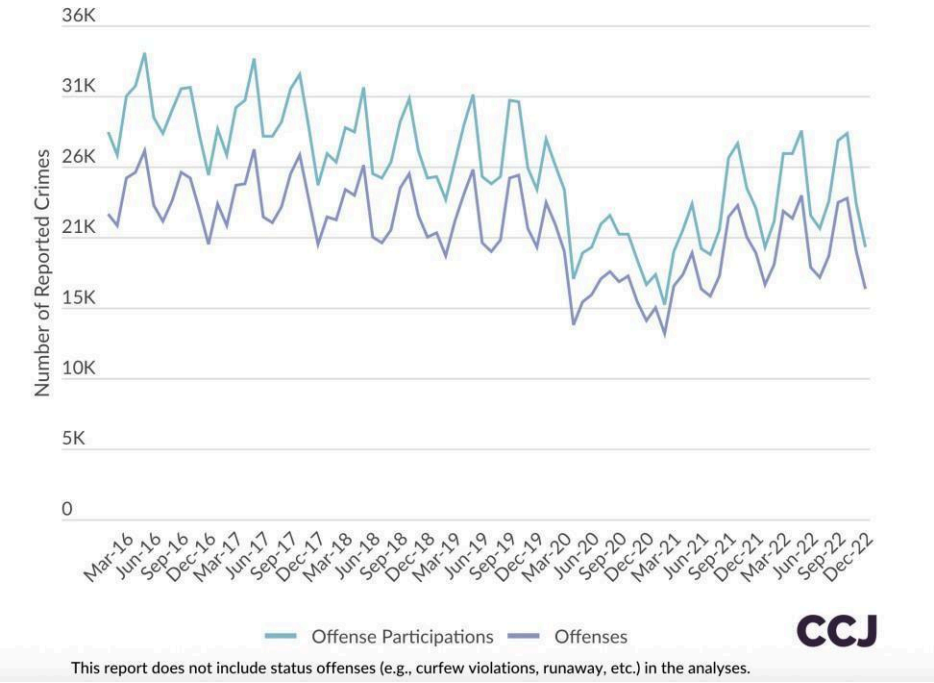
C. Background

The Youth Violent Crime Landscape

Data on youth violent crime over the last few years portrays an inconsistent landscape. Prone to spikes, valleys, and rapid fluctuations, the changing frequency of youth perpetuated violence— particularly firearm-involved crime—has created a difficult environment for analysts, policymakers, and criminal justice-related professionals. This dynamic has been particularly intense in D.C., with the District experiencing a spike in youth-perpetuated violence and a subsequent slate of targeted legislation and policy directives.

Trends in youth violent crime over the last few years have prompted municipal and national policy debates. Nationally, from 2016 to 2022, the total number of incidents of juvenile offending decreased by 14%, and the number of juveniles involved in these incidents decreased by 18% (Lantz and Knapp, 2024). This can be segmented into three periods: a subtle decrease in both metrics from 2016 to 2019, a sharper decrease from 2019 to 2020, and a lesser increase from 2020 to 2022—a general trend across most juvenile crime data (Lantz and Knapp, 2024).

Figure 1: Frequency of Juvenile Offending and Offense Participations, 2016 – 2022.



Lantz, B., & Knapp, K. G. (2024). *Trends in juvenile offending: What you need to know.* Council on Criminal Justice. https://councilonj.org/trends-in-juvenile-offending-what-you-need-to-know

A similar dynamic occurred in D.C., with the District experiencing a post-COVID spike in youth-perpetuated violence and a subsequent slate of targeted legislation and policy directives. In 2019, there were 585 juvenile arrests for violent offenses (MPD, 2025). That number fell to 347 in 2020, before slowly climbing to a 2023 high of 641 juvenile arrests for violent crimes—a trend that mirrors the national juvenile violent crime data (MPD, 2025). This increase sparked district-wide concern that catalyzed this research. Since that high point, the total number of juvenile arrests for violent crimes has fallen to 496 in 2024, and, as of September 2025, is on pace for an even lower annual total in 2025 (MPD, 2025). While there has been an increase in juvenile violent crime arrests since the 2020 low, it is important to note that the 2024 totals have now fallen below the 2019 total juvenile violent crime arrests.

Reported crime data often does not include the age of the perpetrator, as the age listed in police reports is based on the imprecise perspectives of witnesses, if any witnesses are available. A proxy measure, such as juvenile arrests, must thus be used to discuss juvenile violent crime. However, the juvenile violent crime arrest total does not perfectly reflect the total number of juveniles involved in violent crime. Arrests are not made in all instances of violent crime, meaning not all juveniles who commit violent offenses are arrested (MPD, n.d.).

Although juvenile violent crime arrests are currently lower than they were in 2019, District residents and lawmakers were alarmed by the spike in juvenile arrests for violent crimes since 2022 and the increase in juvenile crime as a percentage of total D.C. crime. In 2019, Juvenile arrests accounted for 28% of all D.C. violent offense arrests, but by 2023, juveniles comprised 36% of those arrests (MPD, 2025). There are reasons for optimism, pertaining to both the overall prevalence of violent crime and the percentages of juvenile arrests. In 2024, D.C.'s total violent crime reached a 30-year low, dropping 35% since 2023 (MPD, 2025). As a percentage of all D.C. arrests for violent crime, juvenile arrests also decreased to 29% (MPD, 2025). While there was concern about an increasing percentage of violence being perpetuated by juveniles, it is unclear whether that trend will continue.

The overall 2023 increase in violent crime and the particular spike in juvenile perpetration caused a flurry of legislative action. In Summer 2023, D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser signed the Prioritizing Public Safety Emergency Amendment Act (PPSEA) and implemented the Juvenile Curfew Enforcement Pilot program (O'Neal 2024). Among other requirements, PPSEA increased certain felony penalties and required new reporting by the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council. The Curfew Enforcement Pilot program modified policy so that youth collected in focus areas who were violating curfew would be brought to the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services instead of the MPD District station. The following March, 2024, Mayor Bowser signed the Secure D.C. Omnibus Amendment Act, also known as the "Secure D.C. Act," which modified over 100 provisions of D.C. law (Tanner, 2024). A few components specifically address juvenile justice processes. Supporters are hopeful that these aspects will decrease juvenile violent crime in D.C., while critics contend that the bill will increase the incarceration rates of youth and Black residents while failing to address the root causes of the District's violence (Gelman, 2024). In April 2025, continuing the ongoing governmental response to youth violence, Mayor Bowser and MPD announced the establishment of an inter-agency Juvenile Investigative Response Unit intended to identify risk factors and intervene in youth conflict to prevent youth violence escalation (*Mayor Bowser and MPD Announce Launch of Juvenile Investigative Response Unit to Continue Driving Down Crime,* 2025).

Policy in D.C. can be informed by national research on broad juvenile justice system involvement and the subset of youth violence perpetuation. In studies of youth justice involvement, the term delinquency is often used alongside the terms violence and antisocial behavior. While not all delinquent acts are violent, the broad category of delinquency still provides empirical relevance as it includes violent acts and is often a predictor of future violence (Tremblay, 2006).

Overall, youth violence is associated with poverty at the household and neighborhood level (McAra and McVie, 2016). With varying effects when measured at age 10, 14, and 16, antisocial behavior, gender, poor family management and familial conflict, low academic performance, peer delinquency, gang membership, community risk, and exposure to criminally involved adults all predicted youth violence (Herrenkohl et al., 2000). Research shows that the interactions of familial structure and the familial-neighborhood social integration affect the likelihood of youth violence and the efficacy of familial deterrence strategies (Knoester and Haynie, 2005). According to life-course theories, interpersonal dynamics shape youth development, and a survey of research studies explores the complex ways that familial abuse, maltreatment, and neglect affect a youth's likelihood of delinquency (Fagan et al., 2019).

Many dynamics can serve as either risk or protective factors, depending on the quality of care and service received by youth. For example, parental rejection and lack of warmth increase the likelihood of juvenile delinquency (Fagan et al., 2019), while parental involvement and affection decrease the likelihood of juvenile delinquency and arrests (Ripley-McNeil, 2021; Fagan et al., 2019). Similar dichotomies exist related to education, mental health care, peer relationships, and access to positive future-oriented activities. In all these areas, comprehensive services that foster prosocial behavior decrease youth violence, whereas insufficient access to quality services and care exacerbate the risk of violence.

It is unclear to what extent research from the CJCC and other national sources informed current laws in D.C., such as the Secure D.C. Act, or programs like the Juvenile Investigative Response Unit. While this section provides a brief overview of the youth violence landscape in D.C., additional national research is discussed in detail throughout the findings and considerations sections of this report. It is used, where relevant, to ground this report's findings and considerations in the broad landscape of research on the causes and effective deterrents of youth violence.

D. Findings

Introduction

The findings presented in this report are drawn directly from the perspectives of youth, families, community members, community-based organizations, and agency representatives who participated in focus groups and interviews as part of the study. Their voices provide critical insight into the factors that contribute to youth violence in the District of Columbia and the supports that may prevent it. While the analysis centers these perspectives, it is important to acknowledge that both research participants and researchers bring their own experiences and subjectivities, which shape how insights are shared and interpreted.

In several cases, the findings highlight inverse relationships between drivers of youth violence and protective deterrents. Instability and trauma that push youth toward risk (Finding 1) are mitigated by timely, trusted mental health care (Finding 6). Cycles of neighborhood violence and weapon-carrying (Finding 2) are countered by safe, connected communities with strong collective efficacy (Finding 7). Social pressure and online amplification that escalate conflict (Finding 3) are offset by consistent, trust-based support from families, mentors, and prosocial peers (Finding 8). And when school is perceived as unsafe or irrelevant (Finding 4), education that connects to paid, real-world pathways can restore purpose and reduce risk (Finding 5).

Participant quotes are included throughout the report and are referenced using citation codes; a description of these codes is provided in Appendix 1. The analysis is organized around the study's four guiding research questions, with each section summarizing major themes and illustrating them with participant quotes and supporting research.

Research Question 1: What is driving youth to engage in violent crimes, such as robberies, carjackings, and shootings?

This research question seeks to understand the underlying conditions and motivators that increase the likelihood that youth in D.C. will engage in violent crimes like robberies, carjackings, and shootings, thereby helping identify systemic drivers into which policymakers and practitioners can intervene.

Finding 1: Economic instability and unmet needs increase youth vulnerability to risk-taking and violence.

Participants across youth, family, and community focus groups consistently identified poverty and unmet basic needs as key drivers of youth involvement in violent crime. Youth violence is associated with poverty at the household and neighborhood level (McAra and McVie 2016). When young people lack access to food, clothing, or housing, they often make decisions rooted in survival. As one male youth explained, the behavioral driver was not the enjoyment of crime, but rather the absence of opportunity: *"You think that people are out here… committing crime for fun?"* (AR). An incarcerated youth reinforced this idea, sharing how *"if I'm broke, I don't have any money, and I see a man coming down the street who has (lists brands) on, I'm going to get him because I need money"* (JSIY). When asked what the district could do to reduce crime, one male youth replied,

"Just giving everyone money" (JSIY), while another suggested, *"Try to reduce poverty"* (AR). These comments highlight the economic conditions that shape choices, where immediate needs often outweigh long-term considerations.

Families added to this perspective, describing how young people want jobs but encounter barriers when trying to access them. One parent observed, *"Help kids get jobs. Most of these kids don't want to be in the streets; they just don't see another way to get money"* (Families). Another explained the frustration their child faced: *"They are filling out applications and never get a call back. Then they feel like, 'why bother,' and the streets always have something for them to do"* (Families). These accounts reflect how repeated rejection and lack of employment pathways can leave youth discouraged and vulnerable to alternatives that sometimes involve violence.

Community members also pointed to instability at home and the lasting impact of trauma. Many young people grow up in households marked by conflict or neglect, and some have spoken directly about how these experiences continue to shape them. As one female youth participant stated, *"We have trauma… it doesn't go away"* (JSIY). Adults in the groups noted that when these issues remain unaddressed, they contribute to frustration, disengagement, and risk-taking behaviors.

Research supports these accounts. Exposure to violence and symptoms of psychological trauma have together been shown to account for more than half of the variation in self-reported adolescent violent behavior (Singer et al., 1995). Food insecurity is associated with higher levels of youth bullying perpetuation and victimization (Edwards & Taub, 2017). The World Health Organization further identifies limited job opportunities, economic instability, and family conflict as consistent drivers of youth violence worldwide (*Youth Violence* 2024). Persistent poverty and lack of opportunity are well-documented risk factors for youth violence. In D.C., local data indicate that youths experiencing homelessness are 1.6 times more likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system, underscoring how instability at home can push teens toward illegal activities (Partin, 2022). By contrast, in one quantitative model, researchers found that providing young men with cash transfers led to a statistically significant reduction in the likelihood of physical fights (Stacy et al., 2024). Together, these findings suggest that unmet needs, instability, and trauma form an environment that increases disengagement and elevates the likelihood of risk-taking among young people.

Finding 2: Easy access to guns, neighborhood violence, institutional underprotection, and cycles of conflict and retaliation contribute to ongoing violence, with many youth carrying firearms primarily for protection.

Youth, families, and community members described firearms as central to the cycle of violence. Many emphasized that access to guns is straightforward, with weapons circulating in neighborhoods in ways that make them readily available to young people. One participant described it simply: *"Everybody can get one if they really want to"* (AR). Families acknowledged this reality, noting that even children in middle school knew where to find a gun if they wanted one.

The most common reason young people gave for carrying firearms was protection. A participant explained, *"We don't carry because we're trying to start stuff, we carry because we don't want to get caught without it"* (AR). In neighborhoods where violence is common, young people often feel that being unarmed makes them more vulnerable to harm. This logic reflects an environment where the expectation of conflict shapes everyday behavior.

Notably, perceptions of neighborhood safety differed by gender. Girls spoke about feeling unsafe and exposed in their communities, with one young woman stating, *"We can't even walk outside without looking over our shoulder. It's scary out there"* (AR). Another added, *"It doesn't feel safe anywhere… you're just always watching"* (JSIY). Boys, by contrast, often described their neighborhoods as safe precisely because of the protective stance they and their peers take. One participant explained, "*We make it safe. Nobody's going to mess with us in our own block"* (AR). Another added, *"It's our neighborhood, so it's safe. We don't have to worry like that."* (JSIY). These differing views reflect how gender shapes both the experience of threat and the strategies young people adopt to feel secure.

Community members described cycles of retaliation as a central driver of ongoing violence. When one incident occurs, it frequently leads to another as people seek to "get back" at those who harmed them or their friends. Several participants noted that youth often feel institutions cannot or will not intervene until after violence has occurred. As one community member explained, *"By the time they come, it's already too late. So people take it on themselves"* (CM).

Research aligns with these accounts, with significant research demonstrating the geographical concentration of crime and violence (Braga et al., 2017). In D.C. specifically, youth living on the 25 "hot blocks" with the highest incidences of gun violence have an increased predicted probability of becoming involved in the justice system (Partin, 2022). In urban areas with concentrated poverty, youth violence often emerges as a form of street justice due to formal justice system failures, social distrust, and inter- and intra-neighborhood dynamics (Bushman et al., 2016). This relates to studies that document how perceptions of insecurity, mistrust, and ecologies of danger, stemming from both community dynamics and law enforcement relations, contribute to youth firearm carrying and usage (Wilkinson & Fagan, 2001). The gender differences noted in the focus groups are complicated, with research suggesting that women are generally more fearful of crime than men are, but both genders have complex relationships between neighborhood perceptions and fear regarding crime and safety (Johansson & Haandrikman, 2023). These insights suggest that access to guns, combined with cycles of conflict, environmental contexts, and divergent experiences of safety, reinforce patterns of youth violence.

Finding 3: Peer pressure, lack of belonging, and social media conflicts can escalate tensions and lead to violent behavior both online and in real life.

Young people described peers as both a source of belonging and a source of pressure that could push them toward violence. For boys, especially, the expectation to stand their ground was constant. One male youth participant explained, *"If somebody tests you and you don't do anything, everybody sees you as soft."* (AR). In their accounts, avoiding conflict was not only difficult but socially dangerous—walking away risked ridicule, harassment, or further targeting. This dynamic was described as related less to initiating harm and more to protecting a fragile reputation or even future safety.

Girls, while also aware of these dynamics, highlighted the influence of social media as a motivator for youth violence. For them, online disputes were described as the spark that often ignited real-world fights. *"It starts on Instagram and then we see each other outside, and now it's something big,"* a teenage girl recounted (AR). Others added that online arguments were amplified because so many people were watching. Conflicts were not private disagreements— they unfolded before an audience, where reputations were at stake and insults or threats could not be easily ignored.

Families frequently expressed concern about this online-to-offline escalation. Parents described being unable to monitor or intervene until disputes had already spilled over into the community. One caregiver stated, *"They beef on the internet all day and then take it to the streets. We can't stop it because it's not happening in front of us until it's too late"* (Families). For community members, the issue was not just peer pressure or technology itself but the absence of alternative spaces where young people could feel recognized and affirmed without conflict (CM).

Research underscores these observations. Studies show that adolescent aggression and rejection are often cyclically influential; however, those who feel rejected by peers are more likely to have increased antisocial behavior and future aggression (Dodge et al., 2008). Bullying victimization also increased the likelihood of youthful delinquent behavior, as defined by weapons carrying, engaging in or threatening to engage in fights, attacks, or robbery, selling of illegal drugs, and arson or intentional destruction of school property (Cullen et al., 2008). There is additionally an increasing occurrence of online youth bullying and violence, with social media facilitating disinhibition, reduction in youth accountability, and an increase in deviant behavior (Patton et al., 2014; Cheng, 2023). The limited immediate feedback and regulatory signals on social media can lead to rapid escalation and involvement in offline violence (Cheng, 2023). Together, these insights suggest that peer dynamics and online interactions do not just reflect youth culture but actively shape when and how violence occurs.

Finding 4: When school feels unsafe or irrelevant, youth are more likely to disengage, leaving them unsupervised and vulnerable to violence.

For many participants, schools were not perceived as protective environments. Instead, they were often described as spaces where the same threats found in the community appeared in classrooms, hallways, and bathrooms. Girls spoke most directly about this. One explained, *"We are fighting in school too, it's not just outside"* (JSIY). This concern for personal security also affected boys, with many expressing some version of

"School isn't safe anymore"(JSIY). These comments, echoed by others, underscore how the vulnerability felt in neighborhoods followed youth into school buildings, where security and adult intervention were seen as limited.

Boys often framed their disengagement by focusing on the lack of relevance between what they were being taught and the futures they envisioned for themselves. As one male youth put it plainly, *"Why sit in class if it doesn't get me a job later?"* (AR). For many, school was not just unsafe—it was unhelpful, disconnected from the practical needs of finding work or building stability. There were also significant racialized dynamics to the school experiences expressed by the youth. As one male youth felt, *"School doesn't teach us real life stuff. They want us as Black people to be dumb"* (JSIY). This complicated sense of irrelevance, repeated across multiple groups and based on both pedagogy and identity, helped explain why some youth described being mentally absent or inattentive even when they were present in classrooms.

Parents described how these perceptions of school safety and relevance combined to create disengagement over time. A caregiver explained, "*If they don't feel like school means anything for their future, they're not going to go. Then they're on the streets during the day*" (Families). Community members reinforced this point, noting that once students begin skipping school, they become more visible and accessible to peers and adults engaged in conflict or crime (CM). The structure that the school could provide instead left them unsupervised, deepening their exposure to risky environments.

These accounts align with research findings that have been established for decades. Truancy and dropout rates are strongly correlated with delinquency, negative health outcomes, and academic difficulties, as well as involvement in crime (Weathers et al., 2021; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). This is partially because the combination of truancy and subsequent punishment contributes to a collection of exclusionary school practices—such as suspensions and expulsions—which increase delinquency, academic failure, and criminal involvement (Weathers et al., 2021; Christle, Jolviette, and Nelson, 2005). Both truancy and exclusionary practices are disproportionately likely to impact low-income students and students of color, subsequently increasing those populations' likelihood of becoming involved in the justice system (Sanders, 2022; Weathers et al., 2021). The combination of student perceptions, attitudes, opportunities, and academic ability also shapes whether schools act as protective or risk environments. Youth violence and delinquency are associated with both a lack of academic achievement (Christle, Jolviette, and Nelson, 2005) and low attachment to school (McAra and McVie, 2016).

Perceptions of school as unsafe are linked to higher absenteeism and eventual withdrawal (Cornell & Mayer, 2010). In the 2023-24 school year, 40% of students in D.C. public schools (DCPS) were chronically absent, while an additional 28% had at-risk attendance levels (Coffin and Mason, 2025). Fifty-six percent of DCPS high school students were chronically absent (Coffin and Mason, 2025). Correlationally, when students accrue substantial unexcused absences and repeat academic grade levels, they have an increased likelihood of involvement in the juvenile justice system (Partin, 2022). The focus group voices illustrate these patterns, suggesting how school can lose its protective role when it fails to feel safe, purposeful, or connected to real opportunities.

Research Question 2: What are effective approaches for discouraging youth involvement in violent crime?

This research question aims to identify the most effective strategies for discouraging youth from engaging in violent crime by strengthening protective factors and reducing the conditions that place them at risk across various settings, including schools, families, peer groups, and neighborhoods.

Finding 5: Education that connects to real-life job opportunities and a path to future stability can deter youth from engaging in violent crime.

Youth participants pointed to a need for sufficient jobs and relevant education as key deterrents to violence. "*Better pay for summer jobs, better opportunities, get paid to go to school, get people help in getting licenses to get skills,*" suggested one justice-involved teen, listing ways to steer peers away from crime (JSIY). When young people see a tangible link between what they learn and a stable career, it gives them hope for the future and less incentive to seek money through illegal means. In focus groups, some youth explained that they disengage from school when it feels unsafe or "irrelevant" to real life, leaving them unsupervised and vulnerable. "*School isn't what the older people think it is... they're not teaching us what we need to know*," one adolescent noted, highlighting a disconnect between curriculum and practical skills (AR). Both youth and adults called for more hands-on learning opportunities – from vocational programs to paid internships – that align with students' interests and life circumstances. For example, a parent in one group suggested bringing back trade education: *"I think we need more vocational schools. They took that away… college is not for everybody"* (Families). Such ideas reflect a desire for education to better support young people in transitioning to employment and stability.

This qualitative insight aligns with research on the power of education and employment in crime prevention. Studies consistently show that when young people gain access to meaningful work opportunities, their involvement in violence drops. Participation in summer youth employment programs has been linked to reductions in youth violent crime arrests during the months of program participation (Heller, 2014; Modestino, 2019; Kessler et al., 2022). In a randomized study in Chicago, even a brief summer job led to a 43% decrease in violent crime arrests among teen participants during the 16-month period following their participation in a summer youth employment program (Heller, 2014). The experience of having a job, along with the paycheck and confidence that come with it, appeared to have a lasting impact on those who participated in the program. Similarly, community-based programs that combine education with support services have shown promise. A meta-analysis found that "successful youth development programs consistently featured opportunities for participants to build self-efficacy skills and engage in community service" (Zeldin, 2004, p. 630). Research from academic and community-based neighborhood youth centers suggests that by offering job training, tutoring, and basic needs assistance, they can help reduce youth violence by addressing the underlying conditions, such as poverty and hopelessness, that often precipitate crime (D'Inverno and Bartholow, 2021; Abdul-Adil and Suárez, 2022).

Finding 6: Access to mental health care is critical to discouraging youth violent crime.

Unaddressed trauma and mental health issues emerged as significant factors in youth violence, while timely, accessible care was highlighted as a protective factor. Many young people in the focus groups described how *"pain built inside of young people"* from repeated exposure to violence eventually surfaced as aggression, while families stressed that counseling or therapy offered earlier could have helped de-escalate situations before they reached crisis (AR).

However, youth and families emphasized deep distrust of mental health systems as a deterrent to seeking help. *"You can't trust a therapist,"* one male youth said, explaining that some providers *"act like they understand and then they report you"* (AR). This sentiment echoed across groups, where young people expressed skepticism that professionals could relate to their experiences. *"Nobody is going to help if there's nobody to trust,"* another participant added, underscoring how credibility matters in whether youth engage (JSIY). These views align with research documenting that minority youth are less likely to use mental health services due to stigma, perceived irrelevance, and fear of judgment (McMiller & Weisz, 1996; Abram et al., 2008). In the context of violence prevention, this distrust means that formal services may fail to reach those who need them most.

In one longitudinal study, each additional exposure to an adverse childhood experience was associated with a 35% to 144% increase in the likelihood of an adolescent engaging in violent behaviors (Duke et al., 2010). Studies also indicate that when youth do access services they trust, outcomes improve. Trauma-informed and community-based mental health interventions have been shown to promote resilience in youth exposed to adverse experiences (Yule et al., 2019). Multisystemic Therapy, for example, which involves family and community contexts, has significantly reduced violent reoffending among adolescents (Borduin et al., 2009). Although more empirical research is needed to understand different youth engagement strategies, the current literature suggests that programs that prioritize trust, relatability, and cultural responsiveness through community-based co-design with youth tend to achieve stronger engagement and impact (Axford et al., 2023). Focus group participants themselves said they were more willing to talk with adults who share their backgrounds, signaling that credibility and familiarity are protective factors in themselves.

In short, mental health care can act as a powerful deterrent to youth violence by providing youth with the tools to process trauma and regulate responses before conflicts escalate. Yet stigma and distrust remain substantial barriers. Addressing these perceptions—by embedding care in trusted settings and ensuring providers understand youths' lived experiences—is critical to strengthening the protective role of mental health support in Washington, D.C.

Finding 7. Safe, connected neighborhoods reduce the conditions that lead youth to carry guns or engage in violence.

Youth in the focus groups often described carrying guns as a defensive choice rooted in fear, not aggression. *"The vibe of the area… They feel like they have to protect themselves,"* explained one 16-year-old when asked why even younger adolescents arm themselves (JSIY). Others described shootings, robberies, and "beefs" as routine, creating cycles where one act of violence begets another. A female youth noted, *"I moved into a ghetto neighborhood… There was shooting around, so I just stayed in my house,"* illustrating how an unsafe environment restricts normal adolescent activities (JSIY).

By contrast, when neighborhoods feel safe and cohesive, the pressure to carry weapons is greatly reduced. Several older participants recalled earlier times when D.C. neighborhoods were more tight-knit, with adults watching over children and community events providing safe outlets. *"I just feel like a lot was taken from our kids... Back in the day, we had recreation for children…We had so many programs for kids. We were always active. We had villages,"* one family member reflected, contrasting past recreation opportunities with the current scarcity (Families).

Research supports these community accounts. Neighborhoods with high levels of trust and mutual accountability—what scholars refer to as "collective efficacy"—consistently exhibit lower rates of violent crime, even in low-income areas (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Conversely, disadvantaged communities with high levels of social disorganization and strain are linked to higher youth violence (Antunes & Manasse, 2021). Natural experiments further demonstrate the protective impact of safe neighborhoods: when families relocate from highly disadvantaged areas to more stable communities, the rate of violent offending arrests among males decreases significantly (Fagan & Catalano, 2013). These findings underscore what participants conveyed—that safe, connected neighborhoods reduce fear, diminish the perceived need for weapons, and act as a protective factor against youth violence.

Finding 8. Strong parenting, family support systems, and positive, trust-based relationships with peers and adults can discourage youth from engaging in violent behavior.

Across all groups in the study, one message was paramount: the presence of caring, consistent people in a young person's life is one of the strongest shields against violent behavior. Youth repeatedly credited their families, mentors, or friends with keeping them on the right path. *"Two of my cousins. My best friend… keeps me in check,"* one at-risk teenage boy shared, acknowledging how his own support network steers him away from trouble (AR). In another group, an incarcerated male youth stated that he now actively encourages his girlfriend to stay in school, as he recognizes the value of mutual support in their peer relationship (JSIY). These personal stories reinforce that when youth have someone to talk to, to guide them, and to care about their future, they are far less likely to hurt others or themselves.

Participants described how, in the absence of positive influences, teenagers often seek acceptance and validation elsewhere – sometimes from peers involved in crime or older individuals who lead them astray. A family member painted a vivid picture of this dynamic: *"[Young boys] get lost… and all it takes*

is one older guy that pulls them to the side and now they feel they belong" (Families).

Focus group contributors emphasized several facets of effective family and mentor support. First, consistent parental engagement and supervision were cited as critical. Many juveniles who had been involved in violence mentioned chaotic home lives – absent fathers, overwhelmed mothers, or constant moving from place to place. In contrast, those with more stable home environments described parents or guardians who set clear rules but also took the time to listen and provide emotional support. One participant in our study noted that some parents only become deeply involved once their child has legal troubles, whereas early involvement might have prevented the child from entering the system altogether. Caregivers noted that some parents only became more deeply engaged once their child was already involved in the justice system. Others linked this timing to the broader reality that mentoring and support programs often become available only after an arrest, leaving families without preventive options (Families).

Participants highlighted the role of trust-based relationships with adults outside the immediate family. Teenagers, especially those who may reject their parents' authority, often benefit from mentors, coaches, teachers, or extended family members who can relate to them in a different way. Importantly, youth in the study expressed an aversion to overly formal or forced mentorship programs. They responded better to adults who shared lived experience and offered guidance in a genuine, respectful manner. Describing a particularly impactful mentor, a 17-year-old justice-involved boy said, "*He's been through what we've been through. Every day I wake up and I want to be this man.*" One teenage boy said youth like him need *"better examples of other people's lives who became better"* – essentially, role models who show that change and success are possible (JSIY). Such examples suggest that trust-based relationships with adults, whom youth perceive as genuine and relatable, may support better choices and discourage involvement in violence. Research indicates that opportunities for building social trust between youth and adults in schools and the community are crucial for fostering a climate that discourages youth violence (Brezina, 2008). This also contributes to increased future expectations, which decreases a youth's likelihood of violent bullying perpetuation (Stoddard, Varela, and Zimmerman, 2015).

A recent meta-analysis of mentoring programs suggested that mentoring has positive effects on reducing youth delinquency, with a particular impact from programs that emphasize strong emotional support between the mentor and mentee (Tolan et al., 2014). Nationally, youth are much more likely to report having an informal mentor (through relatives, teachers, pastors, youth workers, etc.) than a formally arranged mentorship relationship (DuBois, 2021). Focus groups provided local context to this data. Some youth gave credit to siblings, uncles, or family friends for keeping them grounded. Others, such as a female youth in a juvenile facility, suggested that there should be *"more community support groups… basically mentors and stuff to have for activities"* in her neighborhood (JSIY).

Positive peer relationships were acknowledged as a deterrent to violent behaviors. While negative peer pressure can serve as a motivator for youth involvement in violence, positive peer influence can guard against it. Several teens mentioned that they rely on peers to talk them out of impulsive decisions. One focus group respondent noted that good friends help each other manage everyday struggles and

emotions without resorting to crime. This aligns with research showing that prosocial peers are a protective factor: adolescents with non-delinquent friends are less likely to engage in violence (Logan-Greene et al., 2011). Moreover, structured group activities can reinforce healthy peer networks. For example, a longitudinal study found that middle-schoolers who spent more time in supervised extracurricular activities and constructive peer interactions had lower rates of delinquency (Gottfredson et al., 2004).

Research Question 3: For youth who do engage in violent crime, what are appropriate and fair ways to hold them accountable for their actions?

This research question examines how accountability for youth who engage in violent crime can be structured in ways that are both appropriate and fair, balancing developmental considerations and context with the need for consequences.

Finding 9. Youth and adults express a distrust and fear of policing, and do not currently view police as a productive part of the justice system.

Distrust of law enforcement was a strong and consistent theme across the focus groups. Youth participants described police not as protectors but as a source of fear, recounting stories where officers assumed guilt, escalated tensions, or treated them unfairly. Several young people explained that they avoid contacting the police even in emergencies. One teen put it plainly: *"The police don't make me feel safe, it feels like they might shoot me at any moment,"* capturing the uncertainty and risk they associate with police encounters (JSIY). Parents and community members echoed these concerns, saying they warn their children not to seek help from police out of fear that the situation will worsen rather than improve.

This lack of trust is not unique to D.C. Prior research shows that young people of color disproportionately perceive police as biased or adversarial, which diminishes the perceived legitimacy of the justice system (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009). Studies also show that frequent negative encounters with officers contribute to what scholars call "legal cynicism," where young people doubt the fairness or purpose of legal authorities (Sampson & Bartusch, 1998). Henning (2021) argues that this deep skepticism undermines efforts to promote safety and fairness, since youth who view police as adversaries are less likely to cooperate or accept the outcomes of justice processes.

For many participants, distrust translated into a view that police are not a productive part of accountability. Adults spoke of their frustration with police presence in schools, where youth often felt criminalized for ordinary misbehavior. Youth said that heavy surveillance and stop-and-frisk tactics made them feel like suspects simply for being outside. These perceptions reinforce research findings that punitive policing strategies can erode community relationships and foment perceptions of racial bias in minority communities (Fagan, 2002).

The consequence, as participants described, is a fractured system where police are not seen as partners in accountability but as barriers to it. For youth who do commit violent acts, this dynamic complicates efforts to hold them accountable in ways they perceive as fair. Instead of seeing police and justice institutions as legitimate, many youth approach them with suspicion, avoidance, or outright fear.

Finding 10. Youth, families, and community members call for an accountability system that considers context, intent, and their stage of development in a tiered system that balances public safety and opportunities for change.

Across focus groups, participants emphasized the importance of holding youth accountable in ways that acknowledge differences in context, intent, and age, while also ensuring that consequences are sufficiently strong to deter repeat offending. Participants emphasized the need for a tiered system, one that distinguishes between an impulsive fight, a first-time offense, and a premeditated act of violence. They argued that treating all offenses the same undermines fairness and ignores the developmental realities of adolescence. *"It's not the same if you're defending yourself versus just doing something. The system should see that."* One youth participant explained, stressing that circumstances should shape consequences (AR).

At the same time, both youth and adults acknowledged that current consequences —such as probation or short-term sanctions —may not always be sufficient to hold young people accountable. There was some concern that leniency could invite repeated offending. As one male youth put it, *"I'm going to keep doing it if I just get a slap on the wrist"* (JSIY). Parents and caregivers expressed worries rooted in concern for youth wellbeing. Several said they wanted their children held to account to prevent dangerous behavioral escalation. One parent described calling the police on their own child for stealing cars, reasoning, *"If you don't come and get him, he might end up dead"* (CM). For these adults, accountability—even through detainment—was viewed as sometimes necessary to save a child's life. Yet, families also expressed concern that long-term incarceration would be counterproductive, describing it as harmful rather than rehabilitative.

Youth themselves expressed a full range of these tensions: while some youth criticized *"slaps on the wrist"* as ineffective, others stressed that fairness meant recognizing why an incident happened in the first place. The result is a community perception that accountability in D.C. is uneven, sometimes too weak to deter repeat offending and at other times too punitive to promote rehabilitation. Public opinion research echoes these perspectives: while a small percentage of the population advocates for harsher adult punishments for youth, most of the public prefers to address youth behavior within a separate juvenile justice system (Applegate, Bolin, and Ouellette, 2023). Some youth expressed a desire for fairness and opportunities to learn from mistakes rather than being permanently judged by a single act. For example, teens talked about not wanting one fight or one bad decision to define their future. Others share comments focused more on frustration with the justice system broadly, or on a sense that consequences can feel arbitrary.

Research provides important context. Neuroscience and developmental psychology demonstrate that adolescents are more likely than adults to act impulsively; however, there are effective and developmentally appropriate rehabilitative interventions to deter future youth criminal behavior (Steinberg, 2009). Henning (2021) argues that accountability measures should reflect these differences, ensuring that youth are held responsible in ways that encourage growth rather than permanent

exclusion. Studies that control for offending histories and demographic characteristics show that incarcerated youth have higher rates of rearrest and reincarceration compared to youth placed on probation and community-based alternatives (Mendel, 2023). Prosecution of youth in adult criminal court also significantly increases the likelihood that the adolescent will commit future violent crimes (Soler, Shoenberg & Schindler, 2009). Based on statistical predictors of recidivism back into detention facilities, further research has suggested that mental health screening and community-based intervention during juvenile adjudication would help reduce reincarceration (Mallett, 2013).

Taken together, the comments and research suggest that appropriate accountability is about fairness as well as calibrating consequences to deter reoffending. Their call for a 'tiered system' echoes aspects of the current juvenile legal system but emphasizes the need to ensure that consequences balance accountability with opportunities for change. Participants' reflections reflect this complexity and suggest a desire for accountability measures that are proportionate and developmentally aligned to strike a balance between public safety, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

Finding 11. Participants favor rehabilitation, reintegration, and community service over punitive measures, emphasizing that once sentences are served, youth should have access to pathways for employment and long-term stability.

When asked about what accountability should look like, the majority of participants emphasized approaches centered on rehabilitation rather than punishment. Both youth and adults spoke about the importance of giving young people chances to repair harm and rebuild. *"Well, more beyond the consequences, I think there has to be an opportunity to do better,"* one participant explained (JSIY). Youth pointed to community service or short-term detainment as acceptable if paired with supports that help them succeed afterward. Adults similarly stressed that sentences should not mark the end of opportunity.

Some youth were blunt about the dangers of overly punitive responses. *"At least give them a second chance at life. Imagine going to jail at 16 and not coming home until you're 60. You might as well kill yourself,"* one male justice-involved youth said (JSIY). For them, fairness required not only consequences but also hope for reintegration. One male youth described the reality that faces many youth if they don't have opportunities for productive reentry: *"Man, I just did five years, I'm going to get a job and live a regular life,"* they think to themselves. But, *"now they can't live a regular life. They can't get a job because of their record. It's basically a setup. They might as well go rob a bank because they can't do what a regular person does [anymore]"* (JSIY). Families and community members echoed this by calling for education, vocational training, and mentoring as pathways that could reduce recidivism.

Research reinforces these perspectives. There is significant evidence that deterrent sentencing and harsh punishment do not effectively reduce youth crime or violence (Crofts, Delmage, and Janes, 2023; Cesaroni and Bala, 2023; Streib, 1996). Incarceration and social sanctions often steer youth towards relationships with other deviant peers (Johnson, Simons, and Conger, 2004), and incarceration in an adult facility increased recidivism rates (Kurlychek, Kijowski, and Gagnon, 2024). Additionally, literature

reviews suggest that the length of incarceration is negatively associated with future employment and increased recidivism (Johnson, Simons, and Conger, 2004). Barnert et al. (2015, p. 1368)) found that youth describe needing "love, attention, and discipline" in order to turn their lives around.

Overall, the consensus across groups was that punishment alone does not provide justice or safety. Once a sentence is served, participants insisted that young people must be given real opportunities to reenter society. In the words of one caregiver, *"They did their sentence, now they need a chance to move forward."* (Families). Rehabilitation, reintegration, and access to employment were consistently described as essential protective factors, making them the community's preferred vision of accountability.

Research Question 4: To what extent are youth and families aware of services and support that are available to them? What, if any, barriers exist to accessing these supports and services?

This research question aims to assess both the level of awareness that youth and families have of existing services and supports, as well as the barriers that may prevent them from accessing or benefiting from these services.

Finding 12. Families express frustration that services that could have provided productive early intervention are often only made available after a crisis or arrest.

Families across the focus groups expressed deep frustration that support services arrive too late. Parents recounted experiences where they sought help for behavioral or emotional concerns but were told that real services would not be available unless their child entered the justice system. One parent described it plainly: *"They don't come until after something bad happens, after your child's locked up"* (Families). Another recalled asking about mentoring programs but was told her son didn't "qualify" because he hadn't yet been arrested. This pattern left families with the impression that preventive options are scarce and that support is primarily a response tied to system involvement rather than being available proactively.

This theme resonates with existing research on youth systems. The American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association have raised an alarm regarding the reactive rather than proactive system of youth mental health care, which is leading to increasing frequency of emergencies and severity of issues (Sorter et al., 2024). Relevant stakeholders have also emphasized the need for intentional and proactive service provision to address the effects of adverse childhood experiences (Bethell et al., 2017).

The frustration expressed by families highlights a structural issue: early intervention is crucial, yet the pathways to access it remain limited. Families emphasized that this lack of preventive support can set children on a path toward justice involvement that might otherwise be avoided. The sense that "help only comes after the fact" has left many caregivers skeptical of the system's ability to protect youth at the moments when it could matter most.

Finding 13. Youth and families often distrust formal systems and instead seek services from community-based organizations or trusted individuals with established relationships, but these preferred supports are not sufficiently funded to be part of an efficient service ecosystem.

A consistent theme across the focus groups was distrust of formal systems. Youth expressed suspicion toward therapists, counselors, and government providers, describing them as untrustworthy and sometimes harmful. "*A therapist can't help anything. Okay, you talk to them the wrong way, the police are going to be at your front door with a warrant,"* one male youth participant explained, showing how disclosure to professionals could feel like a risk rather than support (AR). As discussed in Finding 6, another added, *"They try, but nobody's going to help if there's nobody to trust"* (JSIY). However, this concern extended beyond solely juvenile interaction with mental health practitioners. Families echoed a similar distrust of government actors and professionals, suggesting that official agencies often feel like surveillance or punishment rather than safe places to seek help.

Instead, participants described turning to community-based organizations, mentors, pastors, or neighborhood coaches—individuals and groups with established credibility and trust. Families explained that these supports were effective precisely because they were rooted in shared experiences and long-standing relationships. As one parent described, *"There are programs out there, but you don't hear about them unless somebody you know tells you"* (Families). The informal networks of trust, however, were seen as fragile. Many of these organizations lacked steady funding, leaving them vulnerable to closure or unable to expand to meet the demand that families said they preferred.

Research supports these accounts. There are racial and ethnic disparities in service use amongst detained youth, with evidence showing that African American and Hispanic detainees previously received fewer services than non-Hispanic white youths—a pattern reflected in the non-detained general population (Abram et al. 2008). However, these disparities may stem from factors such as poverty, sociocultural barriers, and a lack of sufficient minority providers (Abram et al. 2008). As a result, youth and families often turn to community-based supports, but those providers lack the resources and visibility to function effectively within an efficient service ecosystem. Formal services exist, but youth avoid them; community supports are trusted, but they are underfunded. Families and youth described this gap as a central barrier to getting the help they need when they need it.

Finding 14. Youth and families who seek help often experience limited service capacity, institutional siloing, and information-sharing barriers, creating a hard-to-access system that leads to delays, waitlists, and retraumatization.

For families and youth who do attempt to seek help, the system itself was often described as overwhelming and inaccessible. Parents spoke of calling agencies only to wait weeks for responses, or being shuffled repeatedly between departments. *"You're lost again because you're sitting there waiting,"* one caregiver stated, describing how being placed on long waitlists left families stranded without timely support (Families). Youth and parents also emphasized the retraumatization that comes from having to retell painful stories again and again when referred from one provider to another. As one

parent put it, *"You have to relive it every time you talk to someone new."* (Families).

Awareness was also a significant barrier. Families described being unaware of existing programs until they stumbled across them through personal connections or community events. One parent recalled attending a city-sponsored fair where dozens of programs were represented, saying, *"How come we didn't know about this?"* (Families). This sense of invisibility reinforced perceptions that information about services is not reaching those who need it most.

Existing research literature corroborates these experiences. Abram et al. (2008) found that systemic inefficiencies, siloed agencies, and fragmented referrals are particularly burdensome for minority youth and families, discouraging continued engagement. For youth placed on probation, structural barriers contribute to inequity in accessing court-ordered probation services, in turn increasing juvenile confinement for technical probation violations (Fountain & Mahmoudi, 2021). A recent study found that over half of youth with high adverse childhood experiences or distress symptoms were not receiving any clinical behavioral health contact (Finkelhor, Turner & LaSelva, 2021).

In the focus groups, families described obstacles not only as frustrating but as harmful: delays in service can mean missed opportunities for early support, and repetitive intake processes can compound trauma rather than relieve it. Participants' accounts highlight a central contradiction: services are technically available, but their structure makes them difficult to access. Youth and families who are already struggling must navigate a maze of silos, limited capacity, and poor information sharing, often without guidance. This system design leads to discouragement, retraumatization, and, in some cases, withdrawal from seeking services altogether. For those who want help, the barriers themselves become part of the harm.

E. Actions for Consideration

The following considerations highlight potential strategies and approaches that emerged from the study's findings and from supporting research. They are offered as areas that city leaders may explore further to strengthen protective factors for youth, families, and communities. Importantly, these considerations are not intended to suggest that such efforts are absent in the District today. Many programs, policies, and initiatives are already underway. In such cases, the priority is to ensure that these efforts are sustained over the long term, supported by cross-agency insight and coordination, and elevated as priorities, consistent with the recommendations of this research and existing literature. Rather, these reflections provide a synthesis of participant perspectives, evidence-based practices, and case examples from other cities that may help inform ongoing conversations about how to best support youth in Washington, D.C.

Consideration 1: Expanding Meaningful Career Pathways and Paid Youth Employment Opportunities

Youth and families in the study consistently pointed to the lack of stable and meaningful employment opportunities as a driver of disengagement and, ultimately, violence. Many young people explained that while they wanted to work, current options often felt insufficient: pay was too low to be meaningful, and opportunities were too short-term or disconnected from real career pathways. Parents echoed this sentiment, saying that employment is one of the most effective ways to keep youth busy, motivated, and out of harm's way.

As discussed in Finding 1, research strongly supports the perspectives that poverty contributes to youth violence (McAra & McVie, 2016). Evidence from summer youth employment programs across multiple U.S. cities indicates measurable reductions in violent crime and arrests during program participation (Heller, 2014; Modestino, 2019; Kessler et al., 2022). Importantly, there is some evidence that reductions in violence can extend beyond the program's summer. Literature also suggests that part of the benefits from employment programs may stem from the development of "soft-skills"—such as conflict resolution, goal setting, and networking—that are important for job-readiness, sustained employment, decreases in violent behavior, and stronger social connections (Heller, Pollack, & Davis, 2017).

Boston offers a model worth noting. Its SuccessLink program connects young people to paid internships during the summer, with a dual focus on job-readiness and exposure to career pathways. SuccessLink has been credited with reducing youth crime during peak summer months while also providing skills and experiences that support long-term stability (Modestino, 2019). All participants earn at least minimum wage, reinforcing the value of youth work and making the program financially meaningful for families. Other large cities, including Chicago and New York City, have adopted similar approaches, ensuring that youth employment programs guarantee at least the local minimum wage.

Actions for Consideration

- **Expand year-round employment models.** Opportunities could include paid in-school internships, afterschool placements, micro-internships, and weekend jobs offered in partnership with city agencies, nonprofits, and local businesses.
- **Increase wages for youth employment programs to bring them closer to D.C.'s minimum wage.** Youth participants in focus groups frequently cited low wages as a reason to forgo the city's youth employment programs. Current wages in the mayor's summer employment program — $6.25 per hour for 14–15-year-olds and $9.00 for 16– 21-year-olds — are far below the current minimum wage of $17.95 per hour. While it may not be feasible to match the minimum wage outright, aligning pay more closely with it would make opportunities more meaningful and competitive.
- **Dedicate targeted resources for the highest-risk youth.** With limited capacity, setting aside dedicated jobs, internships, and training opportunities for high-risk and justice-involved youth can help maximize protective impacts.
- **Provide wraparound supports for older youth.** Youth who are parenting, justice-involved, or experiencing housing insecurity may require additional supports alongside employment — such as childcare, mentoring, transportation assistance, or case management — to participate and thrive.

Consideration 2: Targeting Violence Prevention Strategies Toward High-Risk Youth Through Coordinated Wraparound and Community-Based Supports

Youth justice system involvement in the District is statistically more likely for juveniles living on blocks with the highest incidences of gun violence (Partin, 2022). The impact of neighborhood concentrated violence was echoed by focus group participants. They noted that violence often clusters in the same neighborhoods and among the same peer groups, creating cycles of retaliation and re-victimization. Families and community members emphasized that the most at-risk youth require targeted, coordinated support that goes beyond traditional programming.

Evidence from violence prevention research supports this targeted approach. A Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS) engages the small subset of youth most likely to perpetrate or be victimized by gun violence, combining credible community leadership, law enforcement coordination, and wraparound services. A recent Baltimore pilot found that 96.7% of participants did not recidivate and 95% were not revictimized, while independent evaluation by the University of Pennsylvania showed a 25% reduction in homicides and nonfatal shootings and a 33% decrease in carjackings, with no spillover or increase in arrests (Braga et al. 2024). At the individual level, hospital-based violence intervention programs have shown promise for reducing the risk of re-injury and future involvement in violence among system-involved youth (Nofi et al., 2023).

Beyond a formal GVRS, District youth may benefit from further incorporating community-based organizations and initiatives into violence reduction planning and service provision. Participants and research together point to the importance of integrating credible messengers and community-based

organizations into these strategies. Development of social trust between youth and adults—whether through schools, mentorship, or community engagement—has been shown to reduce violence and delinquency (Brezina, 2008; Zeldin, 2004; Tolan et al., 2014). Academic centers that research and collaborate with community-based intervention services have found that support with food, rent, and case management assistance has been successful in reducing violence by addressing the broader conditions of instability that place youth at risk (D'Inverno & Bartholow, 2021). In short, targeting prevention efforts to the highest-risk youth and neighborhoods, providing support and funding for community-based centers and initiatives, while coordinating across systems, creates opportunities to interrupt cycles of violence and provide pathways to stability.

Actions for Consideration

- Implementing a **juvenile-focused, inter-agency violence review** to identify the youth most at risk of involvement in youth crime early and connect them with services.
- More closely integrating **hospital-based intervention programs** and similar approaches to identify vulnerable youth at critical moments, provide targeted interventions, and reduce the likelihood of revictimization.
- Leaning on the credibility and influence of **community leaders** already doing violence interruption and mentorship work.
- Refocusing some violence interruption programs to work **directly with youth before** they are justice-system-involved.
- Expanding **community hub models** that centralize community-based organizations and government services in the neighborhoods most affected, with sustained investment over time.

Consideration 3: Strengthening reintegration supports for justice-involved youth by enhancing mental health care, housing and financial assistance, employment opportunities, and opportunities for mentors who reflect their lived experiences.

For many young people in D.C., involvement with the justice system presents long-term challenges that persist long after the conclusion of their case or sentence. Families in the study described barriers to housing, jobs, and basic support that can leave youth feeling disconnected and vulnerable to reoffending. Research underscores that the likelihood of recidivism increases with earlier first contact, longer sentences, and more prior arrests (Cottle, Lee, & Heilbrun, 2001). Incarceration, particularly in adult facilities, has been found to increase recidivism rates, while also limiting future employment opportunities and strengthening ties to deviant peer groups (Johnson, Simons, & Conger, 2004; Kurlychek, Kijowski, & Gagnon, 2024).

Mental health care emerged as a critical need in both the literature and the focus groups. A fifth of detained youth report difficulty accessing mental health services (Abram et al., 2008), and many have undetected needs (Maschi et al., 2008). Barriers such as stigma, communication challenges, or requirements for an admission of guilt can prevent youth from engaging with care (Kutcher &

McDougall, 2009; Bryan, Freer, & Furlong, 2007). Research shows that family trust and support are key predictors of whether services are used effectively (Harrison, McKay, & Bannon, 2004). Youth also emphasized that services need to feel engaging, fun, and co-designed to earn their buy-in (Jolivette et al., 2015; Axford et al., 2023).

Beyond mental health, material supports can play a protective role. Financial instability and housing insecurity were described by participants as obstacles to successful reentry. Evidence suggests that direct cash transfers to young men reduced their likelihood of abusing prescription medication or becoming involved in physical fights (Stacy et al., 2024). Similarly, restorative justice programs have shown promise in reducing reoffending by reshaping how youth perceive violence and accountability (Stewart & Ezell, 2022; D'Souza & L'Hoiry, 2019). Multisystem therapy is consistently identified as one of the most effective interventions for reducing recidivism; however, other combined approaches, such as therapy paired with vocational training, also improve outcomes (May, Osmond, & Billick, 2014; Borduin et al., 1995; Tolan & Guerra, 1994).

Taken together, these findings suggest that successful reintegration requires more than one type of service. Mental health support, material stability, vocational opportunity, and trusted mentorship all play interdependent roles in helping justice-involved youth build positive futures. As participants noted, mentors who reflect their lived experiences — whether credible messengers or adults with similar backgrounds — are especially effective in connecting with youth who are skeptical of formal systems.

Actions for Consideration

- Improving data **tracking to better gauge the effectiveness of non-detention alternatives** so D.C. knows what is working and can scale it.
- Providing **housing support and financial assistance** for returning youth, addressing root causes that fuel recidivism.
- Increasing **government and private-sector employment opportunities** for returning citizens.
- Ensuring that youth are connected to **post-detention services before release**, including help navigating healthcare coverage.

Consideration 4: Expanding on current practices towards a more coordinated, efficient, and trauma-informed systems approach across all youth-serving agencies through improved agency coordination and hand-offs, mandatory training, continuum of care practices, and policy reform.

Across the study, families and youth described challenges in accessing services that often felt fragmented, delayed, or retraumatizing. Participants spoke about the difficulty of navigating siloed agencies and repeatedly retelling traumatic experiences to new providers. These accounts reflect broader research indicating that coordination among youth-serving systems is crucial for delivering timely and effective care.

Research supports these concerns. Studies indicate that when a single agency takes responsibility for youth care and coordination across government entities is strengthened, youth are significantly more likely to receive services that meet their needs (Chuang & Wells, 2010; Unnithan & Johnston, 2012). Evidence also shows a strong link between child welfare and juvenile justice involvement, underscoring the importance of coordination and prevention efforts to break the cycle of system involvement (Wiig, Tuell, & Heldman, 2013). Community-based, trauma-informed services can also reduce violence and arrests. For example, park-based afterschool mental health programs (D'Agostino et al., 2019) and Urban Youth Trauma Centers (Abdul-Adil & Suárez, 2022) have demonstrated measurable reductions in youth violent behavior and involvement in the justice system.

Other cities offer useful examples of how trauma-informed system changes can be implemented in practice. In 2020, Baltimore enacted the Elijah Cummings City Healing Act, which required all agencies to implement training on the science of trauma and how to respond appropriately. This shift in government practice moved from asking "what is wrong" with a young person to asking "what has happened" to them, reframing how agencies interact with children and families. New Jersey's ARRIVE Together pilot paired police officers with mental health professionals when responding to calls involving mental health distress. Data from 2021 to 2023 showed a reduction in the use of force, fewer arrests, and increased service uptake among those affected by New Jersey's ARRIVE Together pilot, while also improving police-community trust (Ray, 2023).

Actions for Consideration:

- Implementing **mandatory citywide trauma-informed training** for employees across all youth- and family-serving agencies.
- Embedding **trauma-responsive practices and policies** so agencies avoid re-traumatizing youth and families.
- Using trauma-informed approaches in **cross-agency Continuum of Care planning** to coordinate services between justice, health, human services, and education systems.
- Hiring more **school-based mental health practitioners** as early access points into coordinated care.
- Engaging **communities and youth directly** to integrate their lived experience into system design.
- Exploring a **youth-focused, resident-led public safety advisory committee** to ensure ongoing feedback and accountability.

Consideration 5: Conducting additional research to better understand which populations would most benefit from services and resources, and who currently has access to these services.

Throughout this study, families and youth described challenges in learning about and accessing the services available to them. While many programs technically exist, participants noted that gaps in awareness, accessibility, and cultural responsiveness leave significant portions of the population without meaningful support. Additional research is needed to better understand which groups of youth and families are benefiting from current investments, and who is being left out.

Evidence suggests that disparities in service use are driven by multiple factors. Although there are racial and ethnic disparities in mental health service usage, there are varying theories on the roles of cultural practice and stigmatization in affecting service uptake (Shim, 2009). Other studies highlight structural and systemic drivers: poverty, sociocultural barriers, and the lack of minority providers all contribute to unequal access to support (Abram et al., 2008). Families in focus groups also pointed to issues of efficiency. They described how inconvenient service hours, scheduling barriers, and the lack of follow-up when appointments are missed reduce the likelihood that parents pursue help for their children (Harrison, McKay, & Bannon, 2004).

Understanding these dynamics in the D.C. context is crucial for advancing equity and promoting justice. Without clear data on who is being served and who is not, it is difficult to ensure that resources are targeted to the young people who would most benefit. Additional research could clarify how disparities manifest across different racial, geographic, and family circumstances, and highlight which practices are most effective in reaching and retaining high-need youth.

Actions for Consideration:

- Conducting **targeted research** to identify which populations would most benefit from services, and who currently has access.
- Mapping **service delivery** and equity across the city to pinpoint gaps.
- Using demographic and disparity data to understand which groups are underserved — and why.

F. Conclusion

This study was undertaken to support a clearer understanding of youth violent crime in the District of Columbia by gathering insights directly from those most affected: young people, family members, community-based service providers, and government agency staff. Four guiding areas of inquiry shaped the study: 1) identifying drivers of youth involvement in violent crime; 2) surfacing ideas for deterrence; 3) exploring beliefs about appropriate accountability for youth who commit violent offenses; and 4) examining barriers in access to services and supports. While the research was initiated in response to a sharp increase in youth violent crime in 2023, recent data show that overall violent crime has declined in the District, even as youth violent crime arrests have remained stable or edged upward. Because arrests are not made in most violent offenses, it is difficult to determine with certainty who is committing these crimes with certainty. This uncertainty underscores the importance of listening to those closest to the issue to gain perspective on the conditions shaping youth involvement in violence.

Through a series of focus groups conducted with youth and adults across the District, participants consistently described a confluence of factors contributing to youth-involved violence. These include prior exposure to trauma, a lack of stable housing and income, the absence of trusted adult relationships, and unmet behavioral health needs. Youth shared experiences of disconnection and mistrust of institutions, and frequently cited the need for respect, safety, and belonging as central to their choices. In several cases, carrying weapons or affiliating with peer groups involved in conflict was framed as a protective response to perceived threats rather than an intent to cause harm. These findings suggest that any response to violence must attend to the lived experiences that shape decision-making, particularly for youth navigating compounding forms of instability.

Ideas for deterrence frequently focused on providing alternatives, including consistent access to employment, safe and engaging activities, supportive peer networks, and strong relationships with adults, which were among the most commonly cited protective factors. Participants recommended that interventions be visible and accessible in the spaces youth occupy, including schools, neighborhoods, and digital platforms, and be delivered by individuals who can build trust over time. Some participants emphasized that deterrence efforts should not rely on formally assigned mentors or police surveillance but should instead create real pathways to stability and success. Yet, there was broad agreement that accountability should be meaningful, developmentally appropriate, and oriented toward long-term behavior change.

Rather than emphasizing punitive measures alone, participants stressed the value of structured support that helps youth understand the impact of their actions and provides opportunities to reintegrate into school, work, and community life with the necessary supports in place. For many, the purpose of accountability was not to impose punishment, but to create the conditions under which youth could reflect, grow, and adopt new behaviors. This required clear expectations, consistent

responses, and trusted adults who could guide young people through the process. Some participants raised concerns about disparities in how consequences are applied across different groups of youth, while others noted that accountability without sustained support often fails to produce lasting change.

Ultimately, this study identified several barriers that hinder access to services designed to support youth. These include confusion about available resources, difficulty navigating fragmented systems, long waitlists, eligibility criteria that exclude high-need youth before they commit violent crimes, and inconsistent coordination between service providers. Youth and families often reported being unaware of available support services or unsure about how to access them. Participants called for stronger cross-system alignment, improved outreach, and more flexible, responsive programming that can meet youth needs in real time.

The insights gathered here do not offer a single solution, nor do they attempt to generalize all youth experiences. Instead, they reveal patterns that suggest key areas for ongoing attention, including sustained investment in efficient and trauma-informed supports, more consistent and equitable accountability systems, credible and accessible deterrence strategies, and the reduction of bureaucratic barriers to services. As the District continues to respond to youth violence, with current trends showing progress, it will be critical to align interventions with the nuanced realities described by those closest to the issue. This report is offered as one contribution toward that effort, rooted in the belief that listening carefully to youth and communities yields insights that can inform more effective and equitable approaches to public safety and youth development.

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Appendix 1: Methodology

1. Study Design

Research questions

This qualitative study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is driving youth to engage in violent crimes such as robberies, carjackings, and shootings?
2. What are effective approaches for discouraging youth involvement in violent crime?
3. For youth who engage in violent crime, what are appropriate and fair ways to hold them accountable for their actions?
4. To what extent are youth and families aware of services and support available to them, and what barriers exist to accessing these services and supports?

Overview Of The Qualitative Approach

The study employed a qualitative, semi-structured research design to capture the perspectives of individuals and communities most directly impacted by youth violence in the District of Columbia. Data collection consisted of ten focus groups with diverse community segments and five key informant interviews with District agency leaders.

Focus groups were organized by stakeholder type, including justice–system–involved youth, "at-risk" youth, family members of justice–system–involved youth, community residents, and staff from community-based organizations. Youth participants ranged in age from 12 to 17 years old, while adult participants were 18 and older. Participants represented wards across the city, with the greatest concentration in Wards 5, 7, and 8. To capture gender-specific experiences, separate focus groups were held with male and female justice-system-involved youth.

Each session followed an IRB-approved discussion guide tailored to the participant group, while allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions. Sessions were facilitated by trained researchers using trauma-informed practices and supported by notetakers to ensure that discussions were accurately documented.

Key informant interviews complemented the focus groups by providing policy and system-level perspectives from agency leaders. Taken together, the focus groups and interviews offered both community- and institutional-level insights to inform the study's findings.

Justification For Using Focus Groups To Gather Community Insights

This study was designed to supplement ongoing District efforts to address and mitigate youth-committed violent crime by centering the lived experiences of those most directly impacted. The study aims to supplement traditional data sources by providing on-the-ground insight into the factors contributing to youth violence and the ways that communities in Washington, DC, respond to these challenges.

Focus groups were selected as the primary method of engagement to ensure that participants' voices were

uplifted in a structured environment that allowed for shared storytelling, identification of common experiences, and discussion of community-driven solutions. Focus groups allow participants to build upon each other's ideas and highlight collective perspectives that might otherwise be obscured. This approach was crucial for understanding the intricate relationships between safety, involvement in the justice system, family dynamics, and community resources. By facilitating open dialogue among participants, the research team aimed to generate findings that reflect authentic community perspectives, priorities, and recommended actions for reducing violence and supporting youth.

The decision to conduct focus groups was additionally informed by the need to align with trauma-informed, community-driven practices. Sessions were designed to minimize risk, including thorough consent and assent practices, partnering with trusted community partners, ensuring private and accessible focus group sites, attention to focus group composition, and use of audience-specific discussion protocols.

IRB Approval and Modifications

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the University of Southern Maine Institutional Review Board (IRB #2024-285) under expedited review procedures. The IRB determined that the study presented minimal risk to participants.

- ***Initial Approval - December 2, 2024***

  The University of Southern Maine IRB approved the core protocol, which included 10 focus groups segmented by audience type: justice-system-involved youth (securely confined), "at-risk" youth, family members of justice-system-involved youth, community members of high-violence neighborhoods, and representatives of community-based organizations (CBOs). Study instruments and recruitment materials were customized for each participant segment. The protocol includes detailed provisions for obtaining informed consent and assent, as well as protections for securely confined youth and incentive structures.

- ***Modification Approval - January 17, 2025***

  The IRB approved an administrative modification to update the research team roster. This change removed a former research team member from the CJCC and added a CITI-certified facilitator to support the implementation of focus groups. No substantive changes were made to the study design, recruitment, or study instruments.

- ***Modification Approval - April 8, 2025***

  A protocol modification was submitted to expand recruitment to include post-deposition youth currently living in the community, increase the total number of permitted focus groups to eleven, and update staffing lists. The modification added recruitment procedures for post-disposition youth, updated informed consent and assent materials, and included new study instruments specific to this segment.

2. Participant Recruitment

Identification of Stakeholder Groups and Participants

The study sought to capture insights from a cross-sector of stakeholders with direct or indirect experiences of youth-committed violent crime in the District of Columbia. The following groups were targeted for recruitment:

- **Justice-system-involved youth:** Male and female youth aged 12-17 years old under the care of the Department of Youth Rehabilitative Services and securely confined at the New Beginnings Youth Development Center
- **"At-risk" youth:** Male and Female youth aged 12-17 years old living in neighborhoods with a high level of violent crime
- **Family members of justice-system-involved youth:** Adults (18 years and older) caring for or closely related to justice-system-involved youth
- **Community members:** Adults (18 years and older) residing in neighborhoods in Washington, DC, disproportionately affected by violent crime
- **Community-based organizations (CBOs):** Staff and representatives of organizations serving youth and families, including violence interruption groups and service providers.
- **Post-deposition youth (planned, not implemented):** A focus group for youth who are post-deposition and living in the community was approved, but not convened due to insufficient recruitment.

Inclusion Criteria

Youth Participants: Ages 12-17, residing in Washington, DC, either securely confined, post-deposition living in the community (planned), or residing in high-violence neighborhoods. All youth were required to provide assent with parental/guardian consent.

Adult Participants: Age 18 and older, either family members of justice-system-involved youth, residents of target neighborhoods in Washington, DC, or representatives from community-based organizations serving youth and families in Washington, DC.

Exclusions

Some individuals were excluded from the study to align with the IRB-approved protocol, maintain minimal risk, and ensure the study sample reflected the intended stakeholder groups:

- Youth under the age of 12 and above the age of 18
- Individuals under the age of 18
- Individuals living outside of Washington, DC
- Individuals unable to provide informed consent or assent
- Individuals without lived experience related to violent crime, the justice system, and/or youth/family service delivery

Recruitment Strategy

Participant recruitment followed a purposive sampling strategy. Purposive sampling is a qualitative recruitment approach in which participants are deliberately selected because they meet specific inclusion criteria and can provide rich, relevant insights on the research topic. This method was elected because the study sought to capture voices from stakeholder groups most directly impacted by youth violent crime, well-positioned to address the study's research questions, and often underrepresented in policy discussions.

Recruitment was carried out in partnership with District agencies (e.g., Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services) and community-based organizations that had existing trusted relationships with the target populations.

- **Agency Collaboration:** For justice-system-involved youth, recruitment was coordinated through the DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services. For District agency interviews, recruitment took place through direct outreach to agency leaders, facilitated by the DC Criminal Justice Coordinating Council.

- **Community Partner Referrals:** "At-risk" youth, family members of justice-system-involved youth, and community members were recruited in partnership with DC community-based organizations that serve youth and families in DC.

    - XLNLIFE LLC facilitated outreach to members of the Anchored in Strength Family Support Group to recruit family members of justice-system-involved youth and community members.
    - Guns Down Friday Inc. identified and recruited "at-risk" youth participants through outreach to their youth members.
    - Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative supported the recruitment of community members from the Congress Heights Senior Wellness Center.

- **Direct Outreach:** Research team members attended partner organizations' meetings and events to recruit participants directly, distributing flyers and explaining the study to potential participants. To recruit representatives from community-based organizations, organizations were contacted directly.

- **Trusted Messenger Engagement:** Recruitment relied on credible messengers and organizational staff to extend invitations, building trust and reducing barriers to participation.

- **Accessibility and Supports:** Recruitment materials were written in plain language and distributed through flyers and partner channels. Supports such as transportation support and flexible scheduling were offered to maximize participation.

Data Collection Overview

In total, the study engaged 75 participants through a combination of five key-informant interviews with agency leaders and ten focus groups with target community segments. The focus groups were held in diverse areas of the District, in accessible and private locations, including community centers and youth development centers, ensuring that participants could contribute in safe and comfortable settings. Recruitment efforts intentionally sought representation from across the city to capture a broad set of perspectives while centering the voices of those most directly impacted.

Focus Groups				
Date	**Segment**	**Citation Code**	**Location**	**Number of Participants**
12/6/2024	Justice-System- Involved Youth (Males)	JSIY	New Beginnings Youth Development Center, 8400 River Road, Laurel, MD	9
12/6/2024	Justice-System- Involved Youth (Females)	JSIY	New Beginnings Youth Development Center, 8400 River Road, Laurel, MD	4
12/18/2024	Community-Based Organizations	CBO	Virtual, Via Zoom	9
1/10/2025	Community Members	CM	Congress Heights Senior Wellness Center, 3500 Martin Luther King Jr Ave SE, Washington, DC	10
1/22/2025	"At-risk" Youth (Males)	AR	Guns Down Friday Community Space, 1000 South Capitol Street SE, Washington, DC	4
1/22/2025	"At-risk" Youth (Males)	AR	Guns Down Friday Community Space, 1000 South Capitol Street SE, Washington, DC	6
1/22/2025	"At-risk" Youth (Co-Ed)	AR	Guns Down Friday Community Space, 1000 South Capitol Street SE, Washington, DC	8
1/27/2025	Family Members	Families	DYRS Achievement Center, 450 H ST. NW DYRS AC, Washington, DC	6
2/3/2024	Community Members	CM	DYRS Achievement Center, 2101 Martin Luther King Jr Ave SE, Washington, DC	6
5/6/2025	Justice-System- Involved Youth (Males)	JSIY	New Beginnings Youth Development Center 8400 River Road, Laurel, MD	8

Agency Interviews	
Date	**Agency**
10/29/2024	DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services
10/31/2024	DC Department of Human Services
11/1/2024	DC Office of the Attorney General
11/4/2024	DC Criminal Justice Coordinating Council
2/7/2025	DC Public Defender Service

Informed Consent And Ethical And Security Considerations

The research team followed IRB-approved procedures to ensure that all participants were fully informed, able to participate voluntarily, and protected from harm.

Before each session, facilitators walked participants through the study protocol in plain language, answered any questions, and emphasized participants' rights, including the ability to skip questions or withdraw at any time without consequence. Written consent forms (for adults) and assent forms (for youth, with parental/guardian or DYRS-authorized consent as applicable) were signed prior to participation. These forms outlined the purpose of the study, participant rights, recording and notetaking procedures, and confidentiality expectations. Participants were explicitly asked not to repeat what they heard outside the group. While there is always some risk that a participant could share others' comments, confidentiality was reinforced both in the consent/assent forms and in the group's ground rules.

All focus group facilitators completed specialized CITI training on research with vulnerable populations, including youth and prisoners, and received additional training in trauma-informed facilitation practices.

Key elements of the informed consent and ethical considerations included:

- **Voluntary participation:** Participants could decline to answer questions or withdraw at any point without penalty.
- **Consent and assent:** Signed forms outlined the study's purpose, participant rights, procedures, and confidentiality. Parent/guardian consent was obtained for youth.
- **Confidentiality protections:** First names or pseudonyms were used; participants were asked not to share others' contributions; all notes and transcripts were de-identified before analysis; only IRB-approved research team members had access to collected data.
- **Minimizing risk and distress:** Trauma-informed practices were applied, breaks and referrals for mental health support were available as needed.
- **Recording practices:** The majority of sessions were audio-recorded with consent. For sessions with justice-system-involved youth, detailed written notes were taken.
- **Incentives:** Structured in alignment with IRB guidance to ensure they were appropriate for the participant segments and not overly persuasive.

- Justice-system-involved youth: Certificate of participation and one additional 30-minute phone call
- "At-risk" youth: $15 gift card to a fast casual restaurant
- Family and community members: $25 Visa gift card
- CBO representatives: No incentive

Special Considerations for Youth Participants

Youth were recognized as a particularly vulnerable population in this study, and specific safeguards were designed to protect their rights and well-being. In addition to signed parental/guardian consent, each youth provided assent affirming their understanding and willingness to participate. Facilitators took extra time to review the study's purpose and expectations in age-appropriate language. Youth participants were reminded that:

- Participation was voluntary, and they could stop at any time without consequence.
- They could not share details of their individual cases
- They should respect the confidentiality of other participants

To further protect youth participants:

- Sessions with securely confined youth were not audio recorded; instead, note-takers captured detailed, de-identified notes and summaries of the discussions.
- Sessions were held in safe, private settings. For sessions with securely confined youth, DYRS staff members present during the sessions were provided guidance on appropriate engagement and confidentiality rules of the focus groups.
- Facilitators were trained on engaging with vulnerable populations, including youth and prisoners, and received additional training on trauma-informed facilitation practices.

These protection measures allowed youth to share their experiences and insights while minimizing legal, emotional, and privacy risks.

3. Facilitation and Discussion

How Focus Groups Were Conducted

All focus groups were conducted using IRB-approved discussion protocols tailored to each stakeholder segment. Sessions were held in private, accessible locations, including community centers and youth development centers. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes and included up to 10 participants, a facilitator, and one to two note-takers.

Facilitators began sessions by reviewing signed consent and/or assent forms and reminding participants of their rights. Ground rules emphasized respect for others' perspectives and, for justice-system-involved youth, a specific instruction to not discuss details of their individual cases or involvement in a crime.

Sessions followed a standardized format:

- Introductions and icebreakers to build comfort and rapport, and, for youth participants, to assign pseudonyms.
- Review of study purpose and confidentiality, including acknowledgment that while researchers would maintain strict confidentiality, there remained a risk that another participant could share what was said.
- Core discussion guided by protocol questions, including prompts for probing and follow-up
- Closing summary and discussion, where the dedicated notetaker recapped primary points of discussion, and participants could add clarifications or final thoughts.
- Distribution of incentives in line with IRB guidance.

Discussion Guide: Development and Key Topics Covered

Discussion guides were developed for each stakeholder group: justice-system-involved youth, "at-risk" youth, family members, community members, and CBO staff. While protocols were customized for each segment, all protocols were designed to be developmentally appropriate and accessible and to address the study's core research questions. Key topics included:

- **Neighborhood safety and contexts:** how participants experience safety in their communities and where they feel safe and unsafe
- **Risk factors and drivers of youth violent crime:** perspectives on why youth engage in violent crime and enabling factors for involvement in violent crime
- **Protective factors and deterrents to youth violent crime:** supports, resources and experiences that deter youth from involvement in violent crime
- **Fair and appropriate accountability measures for youth offenders:** views on fair and effective responses to youth violent crime
- **Support services and access barriers:** where participants currently seek help, challenges to accessing services, and recommendations for city investments.

Facilitator Selection and Training

Facilitators were recruited and screened to ensure that they had the skills and background necessary to lead sensitive conversations with diverse community members, including vulnerable populations. Candidates were identified with demonstrated experience in youth and community engagement and qualitative research methods. Candidates were screened to assess their facilitation skills, ability to manage group dynamics, and ability to implement trauma-informed practices.

Selected facilitators were screened and approved by the CJCC and University of Southern Maine Institutional Review Board and underwent a structured training process before conducting sessions.

Training included:

- **CITI Program Certification:** All facilitators completed human subjects research training through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), including additional modules specific to research with children and prisoners.
- **Trauma-Informed Facilitation**: Facilitators were trained to recognize signs of distress, de-escalate tension, and create supportive environments where participants felt safe to share sensitive experiences.

- **Discussion Guide Familiarization:** All facilitators studied approved focus group protocols for each participant segment to ensure consistent delivery, neutrality, and use of probing questions.

See details on members of the research team in Appendix B.

4. Data Collection and Management Procedures

Notetaking Procedures

In addition to a facilitator, each session was supported by a trained notetaker. During the sessions, notetakers documented the discussion in real time, using numeric identifiers to avoid recording names. Notes included substantive comments, group interactions, and non-verbal cues, which were later reviewed alongside audio recordings for analysis.

Audio Recording and Transcription

All focus groups, except for sessions held with justice-system-involved youth, were audio recorded with participant consent to ensure accuracy and allow for robust analysis of qualitative data. Recordings were captured using secure, encrypted platforms. Following sessions, recordings were transcribed by a secure transcription service approved by the IRB. Transcripts were cross-checked against notes for accuracy, and de-identified by removing names and any other potentially identifying information. Once audio recordings were transcribed, they were promptly destroyed to maintain confidentiality.

Data Security and Storage

Data management procedures were designed to ensure strict confidentiality and security:

- **Digital Storage:** All digital files, including notes, transcripts, and digital consent forms, were stored in a secure, password-protected SharePoint drive managed by the research team.
- **Physical Storage:** Original handwritten notes and signed consent/assent forms were maintained in a secure, locked filing cabinet at the research team's office. Access to these physical records was strictly limited to authorized members of the research team.
- **Access:** Access to raw data was limited to IRB-approved and CITI-trained personnel.
- **Transfer:** Any transfer of files occurred through encrypted channels; raw data was never shared by email.

Data retention and destruction

In alignment with IRB requirements and best practices:

- **Retention period:** Data will be retained for up to 1 year following the conclusion of the study.
- **Destruction:** After the retention period, all transcripts and notes will be securely and permanently destroyed. Written notes and consent/assent forms will be shredded.

5. Analytic Framework

In this study, we employed a mixed coding approach, integrating deductive codes derived from existing research and policy frameworks with inductive codes that emerged organically from focus groups and interviews. This approach ensured that the analysis was both grounded in established knowledge and responsive to the stakeholder insights.

Initial Deductive Coding Framework Reflects Research

Before analyzing the focus group data, we established an initial set of deductive codes based on prior research and policy reports relevant to juvenile justice and youth violent crime. The following table outlines this initial deductive coding framework, which included 35 codes.

Deductive Code	Deductive Code Description	Summary of Relevant Research	Supporting Research
Economic Resources	Lack of access to financial resources to thrive	Lack of access to financial resources contributes to justice system involvement, with poverty at both the household and neighborhood levels increasing risks such as homelessness and violence.	Partin (2022); McAra McVie (2016).
Family Instability	Relationship with parent(s) and child and/or care of child is unstable, inconsistent, or nonexistent.	Exposure to violence or abuse, neglect, sibling and parental substance abuse, removal from home, lack of caregiver/parental warmth, and parental rejection are all associated with increased risk of juvenile delinquency and violence.	Partin (2022); Fagan et al. (2019); Cullen et al. (2008); McAra and McVie (2016).
Social Media Influence	Power to affect opinions, behaviors, and decisions using social platforms (e.g. Tik TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat)	Social media influences juvenile deviant behavior through planning, consumption of norm-violating content, disinhibition, and reduction of accountability and consequence, and peer influence. There is additionally an increase in online violence, both limited to the internet and reflecting in-person violence.	Cheng (2023); Patton et al. (2014).
Peer Influence	Feeling like doing the same things as others in the same age and/social group in order to be liked or respected -- link between deviant peer groups and deviant youth behaviors	There is a correlation between deviant peer influence and crime, and indications that prosocial peer and school relationships can protect against violent behavior.	Logan-Greene et al. (2011); Johnson, Simons, and Conger (2004).
Mental and Behavior Health	The psychological and emotional well-being of individuals internalizing behaviors (e.g. stress, anxiety, depression) and externalizing behaviors (PTSD, emotional dysregulation, substance abuse)	Internalizing, psychiatric, and specific learning disorders showed no increased likelihood of juvenile justice system involvement; however, experiences of victimization and stress did increase later violence.	Partin (2022); Logan-Greene et al. (2011); McAra and McVie (2016).
Bullying	Repeated actions of intentionally hurting someone or a group (verbal, physical, social, cyber)	Bullying victimization has a direct effect on subsequent delinquency.	Cullen et al. (2008).
Educational Experience	School based consequences or disciplinary actions taken by schools, such as detentions, suspensions, or expulsions; Grade retentions; chronic school mobility	Grade retention, unexcused absences, and low school achievement all correlate with or predict youth delinquency. Suspensions and exclusionary dropout practices lead to increases in school dropouts, which in turn is correlated with juvenile justice involvement.	Partin (2022); Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2005).

Deductive Code	Deductive Code Description	Summary of Relevant Research	Supporting Research
Childhood Maltreatment	History of child abuse and/or neglect in juveniles	Maternal prenatal substance abuse, childhood abuse, neglect, and maltreatment all predicted increased likelihood of justice system involvement.	Partin (2022); Fagan et al. (2019).
Neighborhood Environment	Living in neighborhoods with high incidents of gun violence or a "hot block" where incidents of criminal violence pose an elevated risk	Living on “hot blocks” with high levels of gun violence increased the likelihood of juvenile justice system involvement.	Partin (2022).
Future Uncertainty	A view of the future as uncertain or unpredictable or lack of confidence in their survival - a focus on short-term gains with less concern/focus/interest in long-term consequences	Feelings that school was an irrelevant waste of time were correlated with violence perpetration.	McAra and McVie (2016).
Lack of Exposure to Alternatives	A limited exposure to people and environments outside of their immediate community -- few to no expectations or ambitions beyond what they regularly observe.	Low aspirations and expectations are related to drug use, offending, and violence, while future expectations can reduce the perpetuation of violence and bullying.	Stoddard, Varela, and Zimmerman (2015); Knight et al. (2017).
Access to Guns	Any references to the availability, ease of acquisition, or presence of firearms among juveniles	Easy access to firearms was highly related to violent offending, even after controlling for demographic factors or behaviors such as past violence, drug use, and selling drugs.	Ruback, Shaffer, and Clark (2011).
Mentor/Truste d Adult	Someone who provides guidance, support, and encouragement in a young person's life	Parental warmth and involvement, and adult mentorship, all have positive effects on decreasing delinquency, arrests, drug use, and aggression.	Ripley-McNeil (2021); Fagan et al. (2019); Tolan et al. (2014).
Family Support Services	Resources or services to address the emotional, physical, and material well-being, including family counseling services	Participation in intensive early childhood programs with long-term follow-up reduces crime.	García, Heckman, and Ziff et al. (2019).
Food Support	Programs and services that provide food assistance (food banks, school meal programs, other benefits)	Food-insecure children are more likely to have higher levels of destructive, withdrawn, aggressive, and distressed behaviors, and be more involved as both victims and perpetrators of bullying.	Edwards and Taub (2017); Ashiabi and O’Neal (2008).

Deductive Code	Deductive Code Description	Summary of Relevant Research	Supporting Research
Cash Assistance	Monetary assistance (vouchers)	Young men receiving cash assistance were less likely to partake in unhealthy behaviors such as alcohol and drug consumption, physical aggression, and carrying weapons.	Stacy et al. (2024).
Housing Support	Programs for housing support (shelters, rent assistance, or housing subsidies)	Relocation assistance from highly disadvantaged neighborhoods to higher-income, safer neighborhoods decreased violent offending and arrests for men.	Fagan and Catalano (2013).
Afterschool Programs	Structured programs outside of regular school hours, which might include sports, arts, tutoring, or clubs	Involvement in after-school activities for youth twelve and older has been shown to decrease engagement in risky behaviors and arrests.	D'Agostino et al. (2019); Zeldin (2004); Gottfredson et al. (2004).
Prevention Programs	Preventative Initiatives/interventions that target risks and negative outcomes (youth groups, community services, educational campaigns, family support services)	Positive effects from self-efficacy youth development, peer-related risk knowledge interventions, individual psychotherapy with vocational orientation guidance, and school- based family intervention programs. Multi- system therapy has been the most effective for reducing recidivism.	Sullivan et al. (2012); Fagan et al. (2019); May, Osmond, and Billick (2014); Tolan and Guerra (1994); Fagan and Catalano (2013); Zeldin (2004).
Behavioral and Mental Health Services	Services and interventions aimed at supporting mental health, including counseling, therapy, and psychiatric services	Positive effects for school-based interventions which tackle bullying, victimization, and reduce PTSD symptoms. Increased benefits for multisystemic therapy over individual therapy.	Borduin et al. (1995); McAra and McVie (2016); Stein et al. (2003).
Workforce Training/CTE/ Job Placement	Employment programs (vocational training, career and technical education (CTE), or job placement services)	Summer youth employment programs in multiple cities showed decreases in violent crime arrests for participants during the summer.	Kessler et al. (2022); Modestino (2019); Heller (2014).
Recreational Facilities	Recreation facilities that provide young people with opportunities to play sports, participate in the arts, and engage in other safe activities	Participation in sports decreased anti-social and aggressive behaviors.	Jugl, Bender, and Lösel (2023).
Youth Agency	Voice, actions, and behaviors that foster student advocacy	Violent behaviors become an act of agency when self-efficacy is not positively directed. Engagement in school activities, fostering student-voice and shared-learning, and involvement in the adult world can increase student sense of community.	Logan-Greene et al. (2011); Zeldin (2004).

Deductive Code	Deductive Code Description	Summary of Relevant Research	Supporting Research
Community-Based Support Systems	Comprehensive services/interventions provided within the community setting (Healthcare, counseling, education, and social services)	Community-based treatment shows more potential for long-term change in juvenile offenders than traditional punitive interventions. Half-day preschool enrollment showed reductions in later juvenile arrests for violent crimes.	Stanton and Meyer (1998); Fagan and Catalano (2013).
Rehabilitation Services	Reforming and reintegrating Interventions focused on youth development	Openness to change and willingness to reconsider life options were key to the reentry process. Limited analysis of transitional living services did not show an impact on recidivism.	Abrams (2012); Abrams, Shannon, Sangalang (2008).
Restorative Justice	Approaches in conflict resolution that focus on repairing harm (mediation, reconciliation services)	Public perceptions of restorative justice vary from practitioner perspectives; however, they depend upon overall notions of justice's purpose. Restorative justice can change perceptions on violent and organized crime, while reducing future offending in cases of interpersonal and domestic violence. Additionally, restorative justice can be an alternative to punitive disciplinary measures in urban schools when institutionally, financially, and culturally supported.	Paul (2015); Stewart and Ezell (2022); D'Souza and L'Hoiry (2019); Mills et al. (2019).
Court Involvement	Youth interactions with the judicial system, including trials, juvenile court proceedings, and legal representation	Half of DC juvenile victims and perpetrators of shootings and homicides were already known to the criminal or juvenile justice system, and many arrested three times previously. Juveniles with earlier legal interaction, longer incarcerations, and more arrests are more at risk for recidivism.	Gun Violence Problem Analysis (GVPA) Report (2024); Cottle, Lee, and Heilbrun (2001).
Detainment	Holding someone in law enforcement custody or in a juvenile detention context, prior to or instead of a trial	Among DC juvenile homicide and shooting victims and perpetrators, 20% were under active supervision, and 30% had been under active supervision. Length of sentence is negatively associated with future job stability, which in turn is negatively related to criminal activity.	Gun Violence Problem Analysis (GVPA) Report (2024); Johnson, Simons, and Conger (2004).
Community Services	Resources or services provided as community support?	Youth involved in the juvenile justice system often have multiple unmet service needs. Prosocial youth development can be enhanced by service involvement of youth, their families and communities.	Maschi (2008).
Youth Voice	Perspectives, experiences, and actions shared	Youth voice is critical to buy in for intervention and treatment frameworks and programs.	Jolivette et al. (2015).
Trust the Services can Help	Perceptions that the services will be relevant, effective, and meet their needs	African American and Latino parents are 0.37 times as likely to contact professional mental health services for their children. Parents' overall trust in service efficacy predicts mental health service usage.	Harrison, McKay, and Bannon (2004); Abram et al. (2208).

Deductive Code	Deductive Code Description	Summary of Relevant Research	Supporting Research
Awareness and Knowledge of Services	Understanding of available programs and resources; awareness of sources of information (schools, community centers, social media)	Many detained youth express uncertainty about how to access mental health services.	Abram et al. (2008).
Accessibility of Services	Accessibility of locations and transportation to be able to physically get to the services; availability of services to meet needs regarding hours of operations, waitlists, etc.	One in five detained youth felt it was too difficult to access services.	Abram et al. (2008).
Communication Barriers	The services are accessible based on communication modes and language accessibility	Most juvenile offenders have poor communication and language skills, suggesting challenges with verbally mediated intervention and communication of service availability.	Bryan, Freer, and Furlong (2007).
Stigma in Accessing Services	Negative perceptions, stereotypes, or judgments that individuals or communities may attach to people who access support services	Use of services was dictated by perceived need for treatment rather than race or ethnicity. Additionally, evidence shows that racial disparities in service use stem from external factors such as poverty and sociocultural barriers. Programs requiring admission of guilt perpetuate stigma associated with mental illness and incarceration.	Abram et al. (2008); Kutcher and McDougall (2009).
Trust in Government and Service Providers	Level of confidence and belief that individuals or families have in the ability, reliability, and intentions of organizations, professionals, or institutions that offer support services	Racial disparities in parental outreach to mental health services may be related to distrust of service professionals and government agencies.	McMiller and Weisz (1996).
Economic and Financial Constraints	Limitations or challenges individuals or families face due to insufficient financial resources or economic barriers	Socioeconomic status and familial composition were the greatest determinants of outpatient mental health service usage.	Pumariega et al. (1998).
Lack of Coordination Among Providers	Absence of effective communication, collaboration, and alignment between different organizations, agencies, or individuals offering support services (e.g., fragmented services, inefficient communication, overlapping services without coordination, siloes, etc.)	Issues of differing treatment views, decision-making power, informed consent, and lack of informal relationships inhibited cooperation among agencies. Receipt of behavior and mental healthcare for youth increased with single-agency accountability or inter-agency administrative data sharing.	Unnithan and Johnston (2012); Chuang and Wells (2010); Wiig et al. (2013).

Deductive Code	Deductive Code Description	Summary of Relevant Research	Supporting Research
Bureaucratic Challenges	Obstacles and inefficiencies encountered when navigating complex, rigid, or overly formalized systems and processes within organizations that provide support services (e.g., lengthy applications, complicated criteria, excessive documentation, repeated requests for the same information, etc.)	Parents list inconvenient hours, scheduling difficulties, wait lists, and lack of provider contact as reasons for not accessing services.	Harrison, McKay, and Bannon (2004).

- **Preparation:** We created an initial codebook that included the predefined codes, descriptions, and examples of how to apply each code in the provided structured spreadsheets. The coding team was trained to ensure they understood the context, initial coding framework, and expected procedures.
- **Inter-rater reliability:** The coding team independently applied the initial code set to the shared transcript before an inter-rater reliability meeting was conducted to identify and resolve discrepancies, update the codebook, including code set instructions, and ensure all coders understand the refined deductive coding framework.
- **Deductive coding framework applied to full dataset:** The coding team independently applied the refined deductive coding framework to their caseloads of transcripts.

Coding Framework Expanded to Reflect Inductive Insights

While applying the deductive codes, we remained open to new themes that emerged naturally from participant discussions and reflected lived experiences, unexpected challenges, and perspectives not fully captured by the existing research.

- **Inductive Insights:** During this process, the coding team noted statements that were candidates for new inductive codes that were either unclassified (because they did not fit an existing code) or reflected emerging patterns within existing codes (e.g. subcodes).
- **Codebook Expansion:** The coding team met to discuss the curated code suggestion log, organized by thematic cluster. For each proposed new code, they determined if the code would be added: because it was distinct and added value or because it a) aligned to the research, b) represented notable volume within the collected data, or 3) directly answered one or more research questions; orDiscard: because it was redundant or did not provide any of the above values.

We expanded the codebook to standardize definitions and integrate them into the codebook.

Inductive Code	Description	Illustrative Quote
Parenting	Parenting approach does not provide sufficient guidance, discipline, or accountability to mitigate the risk of crime.	"I don't think my mother's ever going to be a better parent... I'm a big advocate for myself. When I don't want to be in a situation, like, I run away from home and do these things to escape from home, but they don't want to hear it." (JSIY)
Negative Adult Influence	Adults influencing youth to participate in criminal activity, including conduits for their own activity	"I've seen parents hand their kids guns. How are you supposed to tell them not to do it when the grown-ups show them that way?" (Families)
Lack Of Positive Adult Relationships	Lack of positive adult relationships outside of the family unit to provide motivation, guidance, or effective services	"We need more mentors. Too many kids don't have anybody older who really cares about them." (AR)
Lack Of Community Connections	Youth and families lack strong and supportive connections to individuals and institutions in their local neighborhood/community	"It's like everybody is just for themselves. There isn't any block unity anymore." (CM)
Lack Of Peer Connections	Feelings of isolation from peers or lack of positive peer relationships	"I didn't really have any friends like that. That's why I stayed in the house most the time." (AR)
Boredom	Lack of engaging activities or stimulation that leads youth to seek excitement or meaning through violent or risky behaviors	"There isn't anything to do… when you're bored, that's when people get into stuff." (AR)
Lack Of Respect For Formal And Informal Authority	Lack of respect for parents, school officials, or laws (e.g., truancy)	"They don't listen to teachers, don't listen to police, they don't listen to anybody." (Families)
Drugs	Relationship between drug activity and violent criminal activity	"Half the violence you see comes from people being high, off pills, off weed, off drink." (AR)
Desire For A Car	Role of cars in violent crime activity	"People are stealing cars because they don't have anything else. That's the new hustle." (AR)
Interpersonal Conflict	Violence stemming from personal disputes or "beef," where youth retaliate for a perceived wrong or protect themselves from anticipated harm	I feel like most of the violence is from retaliation… it could start off by something petty and then it just steps from there…" (AR)
Tough Crime Laws	Implementation and enforcement of stricter laws, including curfews	"If the laws were tougher, people might think twice." (CM)

Inductive Code	Description	Illustrative Quote
Cash Assistance And Material Support	Monetary assistance (vouchers, etc.) and provision of material needs that reduce the perceived need to commit a crime	"[We need] better ways to make money so people don't have to keep stealing." (AR)
Wraparound (Community-Based) Services	Comprehensive services/interventions in community settings (healthcare, counseling, education, social services)	"When we had therapy and tutoring all in one place, that kept my son straight." (Families)
Family Relationships And Strong Parenting	Commitment to valued family members and strong parenting style, including discipline and accountability that minimizes interest in crime and health respect for laws, authority, and systems	"The only reason I'm not out here like that is because of my grandma. She doesn't play." (AR)
Youth Programs	Structured school and out-of-school programs supporting positive self-concept, enrichment, and peer/adult relationships	"If they had more after-school stuff, like real programs, kids wouldn't be in the streets." (CM)
Violence And Crime Prevention Programs	Initiatives targeting at-risk youth to minimize criminal behavior and educate them about the consequences of crime	"We need programs where people show us different ways to live, not just the streets." (AR)
Community/ Neighborhood Engagement Strategies	Strategies for engaging blocks, neighborhoods, and communities in activities that strengthen ties, relationships, and collective responsibility for youth success	"If you want your child on the straight and narrow, you have to allow a village to help you raise that child." (Families)
Positive Peer Relationships	Positive and healthy relationships and friendships among peers that serve as a positive influence to engage in productive behaviors and that create a sense of belonging	"My friends keep me from doing dumb stuff." (AR)
Youth Efficacy	Independence, self-reliance, and accountability in how youth manage themselves and seek support	"At the end of the day, you have to want better for yourself." (JSIY)
Positive School Experience	Engaging educational experiences that provide young people with positive mindsets, skills, and vision for the future, positive peer and adult relationships, and accountability, or that identify students who are at-risk of unhealthy behaviors that put them at risk	"If school was more interesting, like they taught us stuff we care about, people would show up." (AR)
Future Possibilities	Youth exposure to possibilities for their future	"When you see people go to college or get good jobs, it makes you want to do better too." (JSIY)

Inductive Code	Description	Illustrative Quote
Unjust System	Inappropriate or unjust consequences for criminal activity	“Police treat us like we’re already guilty” (AR)
Weak Crime Law	Current laws and policies are too weak with inconsequential accountability; contribution to continued activity, escalation	“I’m going to keep doing [crime] if I just get a slap on the wrist.” (JSIY)
Parental Consequences	Expectations and consequences for parents of youth who commit crimes	“[If] you don't get that child the help that they need, then it is time for you to get your consequences as a parent.” (CM)
Tiered Sentencing	Sentencing is reduced when violent crime occurs in the context of retaliation or self-defense	“It’s not the same if you're defending yourself versus just doing something. The system should see that.” (AR)
Positive Service Experience	Youth/families feel respected and supported through quality service delivery approaches	“When somebody from the program really listened and helped me get a job, that made me feel like I could change.” (AR)

- **Retest inter-rater reliability:** The coding team independently applied the now expanded coding framework to a new sample dataset. [Compare coded results and calculate intercoder agreement metrics, using three statistical measures: Cohen's Kappa (aim: .6 - .8), Krippendorff's Alpha (aim: .8), or Percent Agreement (aim: 80%)]. An inter-rater reliability meeting was conducted to identify and resolve discrepancies, update the expanded codebook including code set instructions, and ensure all coders understand the expanded coding framework.
- **Expanded coding framework applied to full dataset:** The coding team independently applied the refined deductive coding framework to their 2nd round caseloads, assigned by code cluster.

Thematic Analysis

Once all data were coded, we conducted a thematic analysis to identify overarching themes that integrated both deductive and inductive codes. To do so, all codes were reviewed, along with their description and samples of the respective coded data. From this, the research was organized into eight inductive themes: Environmental and Economic Vulnerabilities; Family Structures and Parenting Influence; Social Embeddedness - Peer, Adult, and Social Interactions; Trauma and Mental and Behavioral Health; Education Pathways and Institutional Data; Future Possibilities; Criminal Legal System; System Navigation and Service Trust (Access to Services).

Each theme housed multiple codes, including those classified as Risk/Motivators and Protective/Deterrents. The data, which was previously coded, was used to justify and explain the creation of each inductive theme. Through collaborative review of this thematic analysis and supportive data, "potential learnings" were generated, which became the basis for this report's findings.

4. Limitations

As with most qualitative research, this project was limited in the quantity of data that could be collected. Interviews require time, resources, and relationships with the appropriate interviewee populations, and thus must attempt to consist of a representative rather than a universal sample. While the interview recruitment protocols specifically sought individuals with direct relation to D.C.'s youth criminal legal system, the voluntary nature of interviewees inherently includes some component of self-selection sample bias. This is most likely to occur in interviews with "at-risk" youth and community members, as recruitment was largely conducted through community-based organizations and credible community members. This implies that interviewees had some preexisting relationship with community organizations. If there is a subpopulation of "at-risk" youth in D.C. that is entirely isolated from the existing service ecosystem, they would have been quite difficult to identify and recruit for this research.

Twenty-one justice-involved youth participated in these interviews, including seventeen young men and four young women. While men comprise a much larger percentage of the overall justice-involved population, the small sample size of justice-involved young women limited the ability to conduct a gender-based analysis. Additionally, the "at-risk" interviews included two male-only groups and one co-ed group, but no female-only focus group. This further limited the ability to conduct a gender-based analysis of the research data.

When interviews were conducted, they all occurred in the focus group model. While the methodology section details the psychological benefits of this approach, it also highlights the trade-offs associated with research limitations. Humans are social beings, and a group setting alters the dynamics of how each individual shares and portrays their story and experiences. Particularly with youth, who are highly socially susceptible, a group setting may change their willingness to be fully transparent. While substantial measures were taken to protect youth safety, the group setting may also have implicitly limited what youth felt comfortable speaking about, as they considered complex power dynamics intertwined with the ecosystem of youth violence.

This research focused on youth aged 12-18, adult community members, and family members. Thus, there is generally a gap in the representation of formerly justice-involved or at-risk young adults. While outside the scope of these interviews, the population of 18–25-year-olds in D.C. who have lived experience related to youth violence and the criminal legal system may provide additional insight into the drivers and consequences of youth violence, and the pathways for rehabilitation after legal system involvement.

Across all interviews, a sufficiently large sample size was achieved to generate high-quality data. However, as is frequently the case with qualitative data, the limited number of interviews restricts the breadth of voices that can be represented in the research. There are certainly valuable opinions from D.C. residents with lived experiences in the justice system, beyond the sixteen community members, six family members, eighteen at-risk youth, and twenty-one justice-involved youth who participated in these interviews.

Ultimately, this research aims to give a voice to D.C. residents most affected by youth violence. The purpose is to provide a platform for their insights, with the intention of helping policymakers address youth violence in the district. However, this research is not a policy study of D.C. agencies, law, or service implementation. While considerations are generated from the insights of interviewees, they should not be interpreted as exhaustive or mandatory. This research lacked the necessary scope to conduct an exhaustive landscape analysis and, therefore, could not generate highly specific policy recommendations. Instead, appropriate leaders, agencies, and community organizations should utilize the voices of affected youth and citizens in this research, along with the general considerations, to inform D.C.’s youth criminal legal system and service provision, while reducing youth violence in the district.

Appendix 2: About the Study Team

The study was conducted by a multidisciplinary team of researchers and facilitators with expertise in education policy, qualitative research, youth engagement, and community-based evaluation. Team members contributed to the design, facilitation, analysis, and overall management of the study.

Principal Investigator

Dr. Iris Bond-Gill: Dr. Bond-Gill is Chief Executive Officer of Opportunity Consulting and an executive leader with extensive experience in youth policy and systems change. Her work centers on improving outcomes for young people through cross-sector collaboration, research, and community-driven solutions. She designed and led the research study.

Co-Investigators

- **Dr. Lyndsay Brown:** Dr. Brown is Chief Strategy Officer at Opportunity Consulting. Dr. Brown has expertise in mixed-methods evaluation and systems-level change. She advised on the qualitative analysis.
- **Annie Crooks:** Ms. Crooks has experience in qualitative research and project coordination. She managed focus group logistics, supported recruitment, and served as a notetaker during sessions.
- **Betty Ivey:** Ms. Ivey is a project manager with extensive experience in education reform and organizational capacity-building. She managed study logistics and conducted interviews with agency leaders.
- **Anannya Sharma**: Ms. Sharma served as a research analyst on this project. She contributed to data collection and analysis and served as a notetaker during focus groups.

Other Research Team Members

- **Hind Berrah:** Ms. Berrah serves as a Juvenile Justice Compliance Monitor for the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council. She provided expertise in juvenile justice systems and compliance and assisted with project coordination.
- **Dr. Kimberly Johnson-Redder:** Dr. Johnson-Redder is a qualitative researcher with expertise in education and youth engagement. She facilitated focus groups, contributed to the development of the codebook, and conducted coding and analysis.
- **Debon Lewis:** Mr. Lewis is Founder and CEO of Transformative Growth Partners with extensive leadership experience in education and organizational development. He facilitated focus groups.
- **Dr. Pamela Shetley:** Dr. Shetley is a facilitator and educational leader with expertise in community engagement. She facilitated focus groups.

- **Dr. Niloufer Taber:** Dr. Taber serves as the Director of Research and Policy for the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council. She contributed to the study design and review of the study's processes and outcomes in the context of CJCC's research and policy work.
- **Francina Victoria:** Ms. Victoria is an experienced facilitator who supported community-based engagement. She facilitated focus groups.

Additional Acknowledgements

This study benefited from the contributions of several partners and collaborators. **Adrian Ali- Caccamo,** a Graduate Research Assistant and Marshall Scholar focused on equitable education systems, provided research and writing support, contributing to the drafting and refinement of report materials.

Community-based organizations coordinated outreach to key stakeholder groups: Anchored in Strength Family Support Group coordinated outreach to family members and local community members; Guns Down Friday Inc. coordinated outreach to at-risk youth participants; and the Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative, in partnership with the Congress Heights Senior Wellness Center, coordinated outreach to community members through the Senior Wellness Center.

About Opportunity Consulting

Opportunity Consulting, a DBA of IBG Consulting Group, is a Washington, D.C.–based consultancy that provides research and strategic advising to local and state agencies, school districts, workforce intermediaries, municipalities, and nonprofit organizations in Washington, D.C. and nationwide.

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