

Our Block. Our Youth. Our Future.

Investing in Opportunity.
The Impact of Community
Violence in Philadelphia.



**TURNING
POINTS FOR
CHILDREN**

a PHMC affiliate



Our Block, Our Youth, Our Future:

Investing in Opportunity & Community Violence in Philadelphia

Turning Points For Children, CUA 5, An Affiliate of Public Health Management Corporation (TP4C)

Shanee Dunn, BSW, Community Liaison

Shawn L. Woods, Th.D, Strengthening Families Coordinator

Rooted LLC (Rooted)

Anika Carter, LCSW, Co-founder and Director of Programs

Kaniya T. Samm, MPH, Co-founder, and Director of Operations

Author

Anika Carter and Kaniya Samm from Rooted LLC

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We acknowledge the city of Philadelphia and communities alike that share in the collective struggle to end all forms of violence. We hope that the production of this report serves as an extended opportunity for its readers to center on the lived experiences of Philadelphia's youth population and reimagine what collective safety from violence could look like.

Turning Points for Children envisions a thriving community for all. Turning Points for Children brings social and health services to vulnerable people. Our work is built on the foundations of wellness, safety, diversity, and collaboration. We believe in the power of resilience and possibility.

For more than 175 years, we have served youth and families in Philadelphia. In the earliest years, services were primarily related to placement (foster care, group homes, residential treatment, and adoption). With the beginning of family support services in the early 1970s, the legacy agencies of Turning Points for Children began to provide in-home and community-based services. Chronic poverty is at the root of many of the issues our families face, so our prevention programs are designed to look especially at difficult family relationships, child abuse and neglect, teen pregnancy, high dropout rates, unemployment, and inadequate health care.

In 2013, Turning Points enhanced its system of care and program offerings by affiliating with Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC), allowing Turning Points to grow and function more efficiently by providing essential administrative functions like information technology, total quality management, communications, and human resources support. Turning Points for Children can access a comprehensive continuum of services through its affiliation with PHMC to connect children and their caregivers in the areas of primary care, behavioral health, financial services, parenting programs, workforce readiness, and early childhood education. We are committed to providing a holistic, client-centered approach to delivering services by a team of care experts who customize care around clients' needs. In 2014, Turning Points was selected by Philadelphia's Department of Human Services as the Community Umbrella Agency for Lower Northeast Philadelphia and West/Southwest Philadelphia. Since then we have acquired two additional Community Umbrella Agencies. These are CUAs 3, 5, 9, and 10.

Turning Points provides its programs and services almost exclusively within the city of Philadelphia. We now serve more than 17,000 clients.

This report was produced in collaboration with Rooted LLC. Launched in 2020, Rooted is a wellness start-up on a mission to improve access to health by providing culturally responsive care for all.

Rooted was founded on a belief that good care shouldn't be hard to find and that health inequities are completely preventable. Due to the lack of accessible care options, marginalized communities face disproportionate rates of co-morbidities and mortalities. Since its founding, Rooted has implemented comprehensive health services, focused on improving the mental and physical health outcomes of our most vulnerable communities.

For more information about TP4C or to make a tax-deductible contribution to support TP4C work, please visit: <https://turningpointsforchildren.phmc.org/> or call: 215-875-8200

To obtain a copy of the report, please contact:
Shanee Dunn, email: sdunn@turningpointsforchildren.phmc.org

To download a copy, please visit: www.rooted.llc

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Executive Summary

“Putting the youth at the center of a much-needed conversation at a time when violence peaked in the city of Philadelphia was necessary. Informed decisions are crucial for the future of what our community will look like.”

-**Shanne Dunn, Community Liaison**

“Our Anti-violence Youth Focus Group shared wisdom far beyond their years. I’m persuaded our future rests in capable hands!”

-**Shawn Woods, Strengthening Families Coordinator**

Across the nation, Black youth are subjected to the devastating realities of endemic community violence. We define community violence as deliberate acts intended to cause physical harm against a person or persons in the community¹. Community violence is experienced in a myriad of ways: physical violence, assault, and emotional violence, and through media. In addition, we recognize that community violence is multifaceted and such deliberate acts can also be initiated through structural methods such as over-policing, economic divestment, and school-to-prison pipelines. Community violence has been recognized as a significant public health problem that affects the entire fabric of the community. Community violence and the structural determinants of health are inextricably linked. Structural determinants of health are the economic and social conditions that influence individual and group differences in health status including mental and physical wellbeing. This social-ecological theory emphasizes social and structural factors that influence youths’ social and developmental outcomes. National data on youth and violence reveal that youth who have higher rates of witnessing or becoming a victim of community violence are at a disproportionate increase of perpetuating cycles of violence in their adulthood. Moreover, national data shows that gun violence during the global coronavirus pandemic has doubled since 2014. For Black youth, the relationship to community violence disproportionately involves unaddressed social-emotional needs. Despite this reality, youths’ experiences and narratives are often left out of the conversations about community violence or reform. In particular, the experience of Black youth in Philadelphia.

Methodology

This report is based on group interviews with youth and adult stakeholders. Statistical data, history, and city and state-level political contexts are based on scholarly literature, literature reviews, and community-based oration. Qualitative data is based on interviews conducted with over twenty individuals, including students, parents, teachers, and leaders from community-based organizations. There were a total of three youth focus group interviews, participants were grouped by age to analyze group-related similarities and differences within each developmental period. A focus group model was utilized to offer an in-depth understanding of the participants and provide participants with a safe and restorative environment. Interview questions were conducted using an evidence-based semi-structured interview schedule that focused on their understanding of community violence within Philadelphia. To highlight both the individual and community experience and the surrounding context, a narrative-based approach was utilized. This approach provided youth the autonomy to share their stories and maintain a sense of empowerment through their voice and language. The Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) theoretical framework was used to develop and implement the youth focus groups. YPAR is an innovative approach to redefining who has the expertise to produce knowledge for our world — not just professional adult researchers but also young people living the issues they are studying.

A licensed mental health clinician and trained mental health professionals were present during each focus group to ensure emotional and psychological safety. To ensure confidentiality the quotes of all youth participants remain unidentified.

Preface:

Why Gun Violence? Why Philadelphia?

This past year in Philadelphia, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Philadelphia's communities have experienced increased gun violence, homicides, and victimization¹. According to the Controller of the City of Philadelphia, there have been 435 homicides to date in 2021, a 14% increase from 2020. There have also been 1,741 shootings, 378 of which have been fatal. As a result of Philadelphia's epidemic of gun violence and other violent crime, government and local law enforcement agencies have developed city-wide initiatives such as "Operation Pinpoint" and "The Philadelphia Roadmap to Safer Communities". While there have been increased efforts to combat the city's growing issue of gun violence and shooting there has not been an equal increase in initiatives focused specifically on community input on violence reduction. Despite the city's best efforts to dramatically reduce homicides and shootings the numbers have continued to rise, peaking during the pandemic.

Gun violence in Philadelphia is largely concentrated in communities that also experience structural violence. Structural violence refers to harm that individuals, families, and communities experience from economic and social structures that prevents them from meeting basic needs; this includes social institutions, relations of power, privilege, inequality, and inequity. Communities that experience high rates of violence are also exposed to extreme trauma. Trauma extends beyond those directly impacted by gun violence to the entire neighborhood. Individuals, particularly young people, who are involved in gun violence often have complex family, social, economic, and community circumstances that contribute to or mediate their involvement in community violence. Understanding some of these factors among youth who directly or indirectly experience violence is key to identifying specific opportunities for prevention and intervention in violence reduction efforts.

This report serves not only to directly center the lived experience of Philadelphia's youth but to also highlight youth-led solutions to the city's growing violence.



A CONVERSATION WITH THE YOUTH

"You are always thinking about what's going to happen next. "You also can't worry about regular stuff, teenager stuff and it can be exhausting." - Youth Participant

"I'm aware of violence and the reasons people make the decisions they do. Its all about your environment." - Youth Participant

"Survival is the root" - Youth Participant

"I feel that Black children are more vulnerable to harm" - Youth Participant

The focus group identified three areas that contribute to the impact of community violence: Mental Health, Protective Factors, and the Environment. These findings were pulled from the thematic narrative of the youth participants and are supported by empirical data nationally and locally. In 2022, Philadelphia has had an 8% increase, specifically in gun violence, compared to 2021. Research and expressions from youth endorse the impact that community violence can have on youth. Nationally, Black youth residing in inner-cities, are more likely to experience higher rates of violent crimes and increased potential of victimization. Our findings explore the collateral experiences resulting from community violence through the youth's narrative.



Findings

Mental Health

Youth growing up in environments with high rates of community violence have shown to have poorer mental health outcomes compared to their peers who do not experience the same adverse experiences. Data shows that youth mental health has seen a sharp increase of 40%, of those who report persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. Increased environmental stressors and global health crises are resulting in higher rates of depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptomology. These responses to the environment can present as hypervigilance, hyperarousal, decreased affect, poor emotional regulation, decreased interest, and engagement, self-injurious behavior, suicidal ideation, etc. In addition, youth reported actively adjusting their way of life to achieve a sense of well-being and safety. This increased awareness of environmental stressors coupled with developmental and psychological development can lead to various mental health concerns. Within under-resourced communities, mental health engagement is statistically lower as a result of access to care, insurance barriers, stigma, and mistrust within the healthcare system. Addressing mental health concerns and establishing healthy outlets of expression and developing coping skills can positively impact the well-being of the youth as well as a proactive measure toward decreasing community violence within our youth population.

The Environment

When youth feel as though their environment has been stripped of opportunity, resources, and value we see an increase in community violence. Due to the number of homicides and shootings over the past several years, many Philadelphians living in communities impacted by gun violence are likely dealing with the negative effects of exposure to violence.

Social environments being primary factors that influence community violence is not a new phenomenon. For generations, communities have begrudged the tragedies and traumas of community violence intrapersonally, interpersonally, and communally. Youth is an increasingly vulnerable population within this social context in which community violence can have long-term effects on their sense of self and engagement within communities at large. Exposure to community violence, as a victim or witness, is associated with several emotional and behavioral problems including posttraumatic stress symptoms, internalizing symptoms, suicidal behavior, antisocial behavior, social withdrawal, substance use, and academic problems. Alongside mental health concerns, the collective relationship with the community can be ruptured resulting in a communal sense of hopelessness and experience of collective trauma. The term collective trauma refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affects an entire society. The environment thus becomes a collection of traumatized individuals responding through their trauma responses. Through this understanding, we can identify sustainable solution-based approaches to address the conditions we live in.

Protective Factors

Students who have protective factors can reduce the likelihood of engaging in activities that can result in negative outcomes. Protective factors are strength-based characteristics that promote positive reinforcements and decrease undesired outcomes. Supporting youth with identifying and establishing protective factors is important for youth to utilize during their social-emotional development.

Protective factors can include family or specific family members, friends, community groups, sporting teams, and religious or spiritual affiliations. Mental health is also a reliable protective factor when youth have positive self-regard and high self-esteem. Utilization of these resources can provide youth with a sense of choice that is commonly inexperienced within unstable environments.

Here is a list of evidence-based protective factors identified by Turning Points for Children as a means to disrupt negative mental and physical health outcomes:

1. Youth resilience
2. Positive social connections
3. Concrete supports in times of need
4. Knowledge of adolescent development
5. Cognitive and social-emotional competence in youth



Recommendations

Youth Engagement

Meaningful youth engagement increases the sense of ownership and attachment for young generations in the community, which develops positive relationships with others and builds deep emotions with caregivers. Youth who have participated in community talks will be more likely to play a decisive role later in their life. Youth are effective change-makers if given proper rights to participate. However, barriers to youth engagement do exist. For example, many young people affected by gun violence in Philadelphia live in disadvantaged areas where few opportunities are available for them to participate, lack of willingness in attending traditional participation activities because the topics are not attractive, and face barriers to accessing information about participating.

Here are a few ways Turning Points for Children is uniquely addressing such barriers and creating opportunities for youth to become effective leaders:

- **Youth Participatory Action Focus Groups**
- **Access Centers:** A Collective Youth Space
- **Teen Cafes:** Words of Wisdom (WOW Talks)

Investment

Financially investing in youth is one of the most important actions to take. Failing to invest in children and youth triggers substantial economic, social, and political costs resulting in negative health outcomes such as early school drop-out, poor labor market entry, poor mental health outcomes, substance abuse, and crime and violence.

Here are a few ways Turning Points For Children is investing in the economic futures of youth in Philadelphia

- **Economic incentives** are given at most events
- **Work Ready** programs for youth aged 16 years old - to 24 years old
- **Lifaset:** A Transitional Age Youth (TAY) program for young people in the foster care system

Family Engagement

Family engagement during the earliest years of a child's life is one of the most powerful predictors of a child's development. Families are children's first teachers and it is the quality of parent-child relationships and interactions that create the foundational skills that children need to be successful in life.

Here are a few ways Turning Points for Children is creating family engagement programs that focus on the importance of positive, interactive relationships between program staff, youth, and parents

- **Youth Conferences and Summits**
- **Back to School Jam:** Annual community giveback event with vendors, resource providers, live entertainment, food, amusements, and a list of other resources
- **Brighter Holidays:** An annual gift distribution that provides children across Turning Points programs the opportunity to experience the joy that comes from receiving gifts during the holiday season
- **Thanksgiving Dinner:** An event focused on bringing families together during the Thanksgiving holiday while also providing Thanksgiving meals

Collaboration

Collaborations should focus on increasing capacity, communication, and efficiency while improving outcomes. The goal of collaborations is to bring individuals, agencies, organizations, and community members together in an atmosphere of support to systematically solve existing and emerging problems that could not easily be solved by one group alone.

Here are a few ways Turning Points for Children is bringing communities together:

- **Black Literacy Night:** An event in partnership with local libraries and literacy organizations to improve literacy in the community
- **HIV AIDS Awareness and Testing:** An event focused on destigmatizing HIV/AIDS and promoting health education on the importance of testing

Conclusion

As the experience of the youth has shown, Philadelphia has an opportunity for change. Yet, the demands and needs of Philadelphia's youth have been undervalued in current reform efforts. Instead, reform efforts look largely to more funding for justice departments. The previously stated recommendations provide an outline for how Philadelphia can reduce reliance on, over-policing of disadvantaged neighborhoods by improving community-level collaboration opportunities, and making social and financial investments at the community level. Impactful and enduring violence reform will only happen with the needs of Philadelphia's youth at the center of advocacy and with sustained investment in the potential of youth as future leaders.

The voices of Philadelphia's youth continue to rise in challenging moments and speak out for justice and change. The youth and adult leaders of Turning Points for Children, Breakthrough and many other youth-focused community organizations are creating opportunities for youth and families throughout the city to invest in themselves and their communities in meaningful ways to disrupt perpetuated cycles of community violence.



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