

2019 STATUS UPDATE ON MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRLS IN GREATER WORCESTER



investinggirls.org

OUR HISTORY

The **Investing in Girls Alliance** (IIGA) has been working to improve the status of middle school aged girls since 2007. The then Mayor's Youth At Risk Taskforce identified rising violence among middle school aged girls as a growing concern. They tasked Worcester's girl serving organizations to develop a coordinated response, and the Alliance was born. IIGA is made up of representatives from local and state government agencies, public schools and colleges in the Greater Worcester area, non-profit and private organizations.

INVESTING IN GIRLS ALLIANCE VISION, MISSION AND PRIORITIES

Our vision is to improve the lives of girls in greater Worcester and ensure local girls grow up to be happy, healthy and productive

Our mission is to improve services for middle school girls in central Massachusetts through research, education, advocacy and collaboration

The Investing in Girls Alliance has three priority areas we believe are central to the well being of middle school aged girls;

- ***Health and healthy relationships***; addressing physical, behavioral and sexual health
- ***Economic empowerment***; addressing career readiness and financial literacy
- ***Violence and safety***; addressing relationship and community violence and promoting safe behaviors and environments for girls.

The work of IIGA centers around four key strategies; **Data and Research** to effectively measure the well being of local girls and understand their current and emerging needs, **Public Education** to raise community awareness of the unique needs, assets and challenges of middle school aged girls, **Promoting Best Practices** through networked training and peer sharing and **Advocacy** to secure gender equitable policies and sufficient resources for girls by aligning with like partners across the state including the MA Commission on the Status of Women and Girls.

This 2019 Status of Girls Update is a result of our **Data and Research** strategy. IIGA provides this gender specific data to support our alliance members, and community partners as they continue to provide quality programs for our middle school girls. These programs are critically important as they provide the protective environment and relationships that help girls mitigate the risks they face and support their healthy development through the crucial middle school years.

OUR METHODOLOGY

The data points in this report update the 2012 *Gaps to Opportunities* report and are derived from the Greater Worcester Middle School Regional Youth Health Survey (RYHS) from 2015 and 2017. These data were aggregated for middle schools in the greater Worcester region (WRYHS includes data from Grafton, Millbury, Leicester, Shrewsbury and Worcester) and divided into boys and girls for our reporting purposes. When possible, tests of statistical significance were used to determine changes occurring over various years of the data. For the purposes of this research middle school is defined as ages 10-14, with students in grades 5-9.

To supplement regional data, focus groups were conducted in summer of 2018 with middle school girls; qualitative data is included in this report. A quantitative survey about healthy relationships was conducted in Dec/Jan 2018/19 to update data collected in 2012 and is also included in this report.

This report also makes use of other publicly available data such as the School Health Policies and Practices Study (2014, 2016), County Health Rankings (2017) and more. All sources are cited in the endnotes.

OUR FINDINGS

This report identifies findings from ‘greater Worcester’. This is the same group of communities that participate in the Greater Worcester Regional Youth Health Survey; including the communities of Grafton, Millbury, Leicester and Shrewsbury. In 2017, 4417 middle school youth primarily between the ages of 12-14 and in grades 7th and 8th participated in the survey; 49.4 % identified as female. Investing in Girls Alliance member programs also contributed to the findings in this report. These programs are located predominantly in the city of Worcester, but also serve girls from the communities directly surrounding Worcester. The girls represented in both survey and focus group data in this report are ages 10-14, encompassing the middle school years.

For a snapshot of the population of girls IIGA seeks to impact, we can look at the Worcester Public School District Profile. Of the 7271 students in middle school grades in the Worcester Public Schools; 1818 are in 6th; 1765 in 7th, and 1841 in 8th grade. Of these, 48.4% are girls, or a little over 3500. As a district, Worcester identifies 57.2% as economically disadvantaged, 18.8% are students with disabilities and 34.2% are English language learnersⁱ.

Worcester is a diverse city with a growing population. Of the 2017 population of 185,677 people; 69.5% are White, 20.8% Hispanic, 13.6% Black, 7.1% Asian and 4.3% identified as two+ⁱⁱ. The most common foreign languages in Worcester, MA are Spanish (28,346 speakers), African Languages (6,419 speakers), and Vietnamese (5,499 speakers). Worcester also has a relatively high number of Other Indo-European (3,280 speakers) and Portuguese (2,946 speakers). 78.5% Worcester residents were born in the US; 21.5% were foreign born.ⁱⁱⁱ

Overall, middle school aged girls growing up in greater Worcester have access to a community that is growing in both size and diversity. Girls in greater Worcester are living in an increasingly complex technological landscape as well, a trend that has accelerated since our first assessment in 2007. We'll explore more about what we know in the topic sections below.

HEALTH

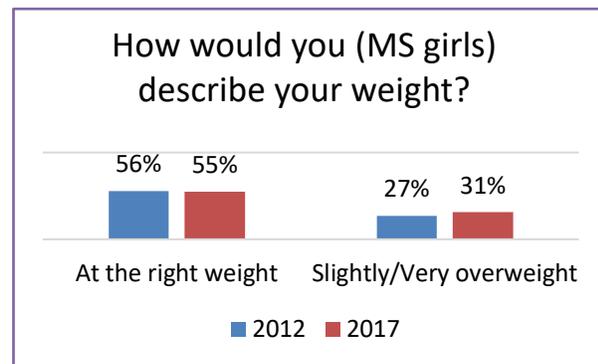
What we've learned about physical health

In this section of the report, IIGA presents data over time on how girls describe their weight, how physically active girls are and their healthy eating behaviors.

First, let's look at some context regarding families in Worcester County. According to the County Health Rankings.org (road map), 22%, or more than one in five families, report physical inactivity (no physical activity of 60 minutes or more in a week. This in spite of 94% reporting they have access to exercise opportunities.



Since our last assessment^{iv} in 2012, girls' description of their weight as slightly or very overweight has risen at a statistically significantly rate ($p < 0.10$) from 2012 to 2017 from 27-31%. In 2017, 31% report being slightly to very overweight, yet half of the middle school aged girls reported that they were trying to lose weight. This shows that girls who are at the right



weight are still trying to lose weight, which raises concerns about self-image and self-esteem. In fact, 77% of middle school aged girls report they exercised in the past 30 days in hopes it would help them lose weight.

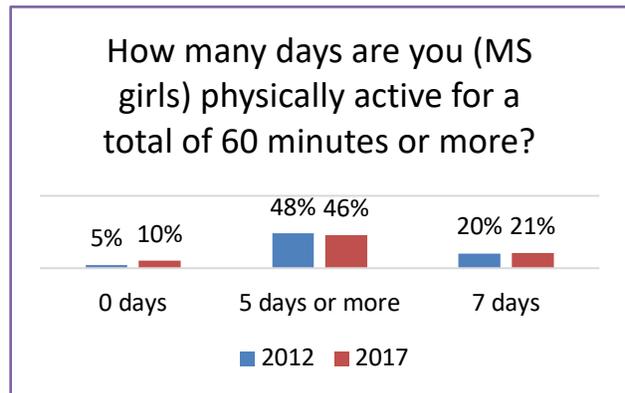
In Massachusetts, only 25% of PE teachers report having professional development in weight assessment, compared to 44.5% nationally^v. While this suggests a potential gap

in school settings, it also points to opportunities for girl serving organizations to positively impact on how girls think about and manage their weight in out of school environments.

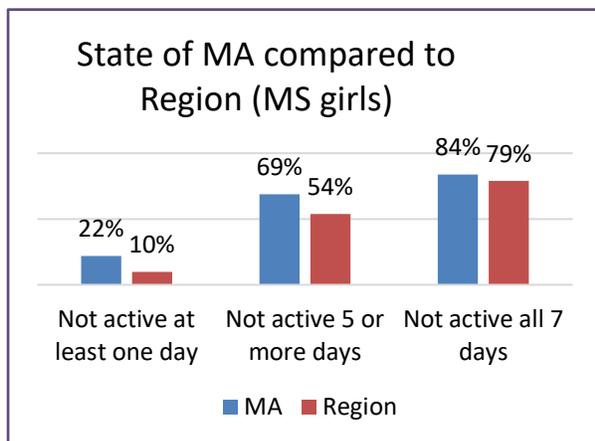
In the overall report, (combined group of boys and girls); 29% reported no intentional physical activity. In this, representing girls; 10% reported no intentional physical activity. While girls are less likely than boys to have no physical activity, more girls are reporting no physical activity than in 2012. This increased report of no physical activity has implications for girls overall well being; physical, behavioral and mental health.

Girls in our region are doing better in being physical active compared to their peers across the state, with only 10% vs. the state’s 22% reporting no days with physical activity

Of our girls who are getting physical activity; middle school girls report that these activities are the most popular: swimming 76%, active games and play 66%, walking 63% and bicycling 62%. It is important to note that all of these activities have specific requirements, including groups of participants or lifeguard supervision, as well as a facility to actually do these activities.



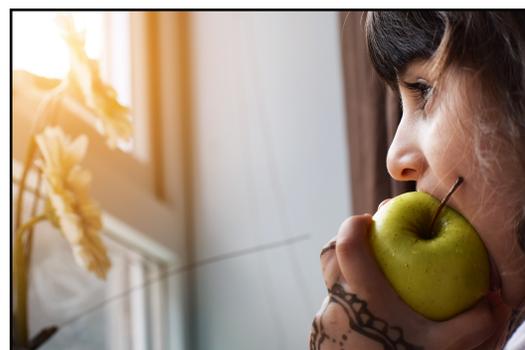
While physical activity is a good indicator of girls’ health, IIGA is also interested in girls’ nutrition. In the broader environment, it is important to note that 10% Worcester County families report food insecurity, and 5% of these families report limited access to healthy foods compared to 4% across the state and 2% across the nation^{vi}. In 2017, 7.5% of our girls reported that they were hungry but didn’t eat because there wasn't enough food. This is similar to the



7% of middle school students who reported they are hungry without access to food in the YRBS research. Access to food is a problem for our girls and their families: in the 2018 Worcester County health rankings Worcester has a score of 8.5 on the food environment index, compared to the Massachusetts of 9.2^{vii}. This has implications for girl serving programs; attending to nutrition and food access are important components for organizations to consider. Kids Café at the Boys & Girls Club is one local way youth are provided healthy

accessible food in the community. It may be helpful for IIGA programs to do a simple assessment of access to nutritional food and education available to middle school aged girls to learn more about this issue.

The regional youth survey does ask girls to respond to a few nutrition questions. However, the information received spurs IIGA to want to understand more about what might be behind these food related behaviors as reported by our middle school girls. Only 1 in three girls report eating breakfast every day (35.6%), in contrast, 48.7% of boys report they eat breakfast every day. This is a significant difference and it raises



questions about why. Is it out of personal choice or lack of access to food? It would be good to further explore this issue with girls in our programs. Fewer than 1 in 4 middle school girls eat

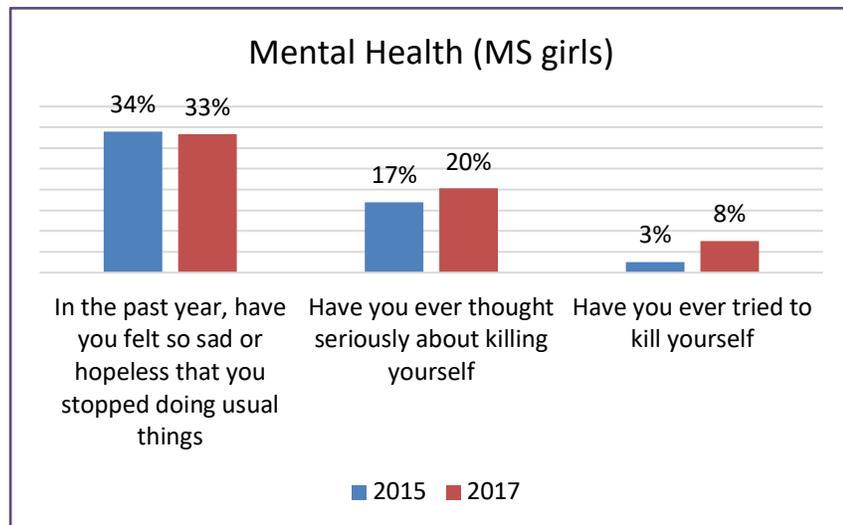
dinner with their family 4-5 times per week (22.8%)^{viii}. We know from research that family dinners can be a protective factor for a number of youth risk behaviors^{ix}, so it is another area worth exploring further. Why are girls not eating dinner with their families? Is it a matter of busy schedules, cultural factors or not having access to food?

The final area IIGA explored in relation to physical health is girls’ sleep behavior. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine has recommended that children aged 6–12 years should regularly sleep 9–12 hours per 24 hours and teenagers aged 13–18 years should sleep 8–10 hours per 24 hours.^x Our findings indicate that over half of middle school aged girls in greater Worcester are getting less than 8 hours of sleep (1095 girls getting <8 hours = 52%). What we don’t know is why girls are not sleeping enough. We do know through informal reports from program staff and girls themselves that many of our girls take their phones to bed with them and may be disturbed during the night by text messages. We also know that exposure to screen time and particularly digital light can interrupt sleep behaviors. Additionally, our local girls reflect a national trend in girls reporting they are over committed, overwhelmed and stressed out.^{xi} Staying constantly connected is one important component of this stress. The relationship between technology and lack of sleep is important for girls and our programs to understand. This would be a good area to explore further and consider program level education about the importance of good sleep habits for every aspect of well being, not just physical health.

What we learned about behavioral health

Behavioral health includes mental health and substance misuse. National trends indicate an increase in depression and suicidality in teens and particularly girls and young women. A national study completed by Child Trends highlights a disturbing increase in suicidality in all students, but particularly in female students. Female high school students reported seriously considering suicide at nearly twice the rate of their male counterparts in 2017 (22.1 and 11.9 percent, respectively).

The rate of females seriously considering suicide has increased significantly since 2009, when it was just 17.4 percent. This is a 27 percent increase. The rate among males did not significantly change (10.3 percent in 2009 to 11.9 percent in 2017).^{xii}



In the 2017 regional study, we found that one third (33%) of our middle school aged girls report feeling sad or hopeless compared to 26% of the combined group of girls and boys. When responding to the question “Have you ever thought seriously about killing yourself?”, nearly twice as many girls as boys answered they had (20.39% of girls compared to 11.59% of boys). When asked if they had

attempted suicide, more than twice as many girls than boys reported a suicide attempt 7.64% girls compared to 3.61% of boys. Further, this 7.64% of girls reporting a suicide attempt also more than doubled from 3% in the 2015 survey.

While the number of girls thinking seriously about suicide has increased and attempts have increased exponentially, the number of girls who report “feeling sad or hopeless” hasn’t really changed between 2015 and 2017. This is important to unpack a bit. If we consider what we look for as key indicators for mental health issues and suicide risk, we think about the first question; feeling so hopeless and sad they stop usual activities. While the number of girls feeling sad and hopeless may not be increasing, the numbers of girls strongly considering or

IIGA members bring a continuum of services and support from prevention through treatment. One essential component of the Alliance is ensuring the safety net is there for our girls across the continuum of risk. We also want to build community protective factors to support healthy development for girls through the middle school years as we ensure girls who need additional supports have equal access to needed services and treatment.

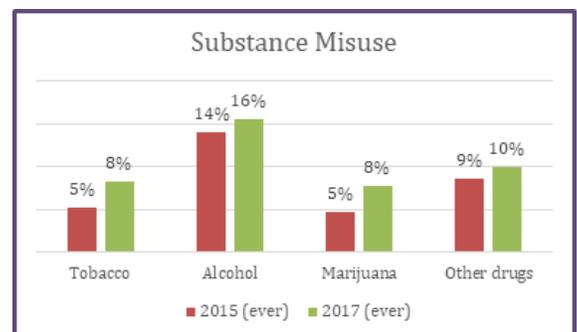
acting on those feelings is escalating. This is really important for parents, teachers, youth workers and peers to understand. It indicates the need for more focused intervention over time to address what may not be an escalating number of depressed girls, but rather a deepening of the seriousness of depression in girls who are currently experiencing it.

A final data point in relation to mental health is this confusing data from the regional survey. While almost 20% of middle school girls in 2017 reported that they have not received information in school on mental health; even more (22%) say they are not sure. This is an area where we can certainly improve, if only to be more intentional and clear

about mental health promotion and education. Due to a long history of stigma around issues of mental illness, many are reticent to talk about mental health at all. Clear and specific information on how to support mental health personally, with peers and family, is important. The move by Worcester Public Schools to adopt a social emotional learning approach is a big step in the right direction. IIGA programs might consider how to build similar compatible programs and activities to amplify the learning girls are getting in school.

What we learned about substance misuse

A look at the following chart reveals a concerning trend- middle school youth report increased use of tobacco, alcohol, marijuana and other drugs over a two year period. While not a large increase; IIGA did see a small percentage of youth reporting opioid use (within the “other drug” column) for the first time since the Alliance been tracking middle school data. The numbers are very small; they don’t allow for comparisons, but the fact that opioid use is being reported at all by middle school students is a concern. We will want to track this closely over time, given the backdrop of the opioid crisis we are seeing in older young adults and adults.



This new equity in substance misuse for girls and boys is a local, as well as global concern^{xiii}. In fact, a 2016 study found teenage girls in the United States now start to drink alcohol sooner than boys do^{xiv}.

Girls serving programs may want to consider how to engage girls in discussing this trend and what it means to the girls and their families. We may find opportunities to discuss gender stereotypes, marketing practices and other influencers, and how these dynamics have shifted over time. A focus on health promotion with a gender lens may be effective in helping girls reverse this concerning trend.

What we learned about sexual health

We would like to acknowledge and thank the Worcester Impacts Sexual Health Taskforce (WISH) for the below summary and current data and the work they have done in the community to ensure all middle school girls know what they need to know to make good decision about their sexual health and intimate relationships.

The following is an excerpt from the WISH public information shared in advocacy efforts to support comprehensive sexual health education in the Worcester Public Schools:

From the very first assessment completed by IIGA back in 2007, both Worcester girls and their parents identified sexual health and healthy peer and intimate relationships as a top priority. In the 2007 report, 73% of girls surveyed identified peer pressure and sexual health as major challenges facing girls.



This was consistent when we looked at the data again in 2012.

The sexual health outcome data at that time also indicated serious problems. Worcester's teen birth rate among 15-19 year old girls was 23.2/1,000 girls, nearly twice the state rate (12.0/1,000 girls). There were health inequities along racial and ethnic lines; although Latinos comprised only 21% of the population, 56.4% of teen births were to young Latinas^{xv}. IIGA's research also highlighted the societal costs of early childbearing in terms of increased tax burden and increased likelihood of school dropout for young parents.

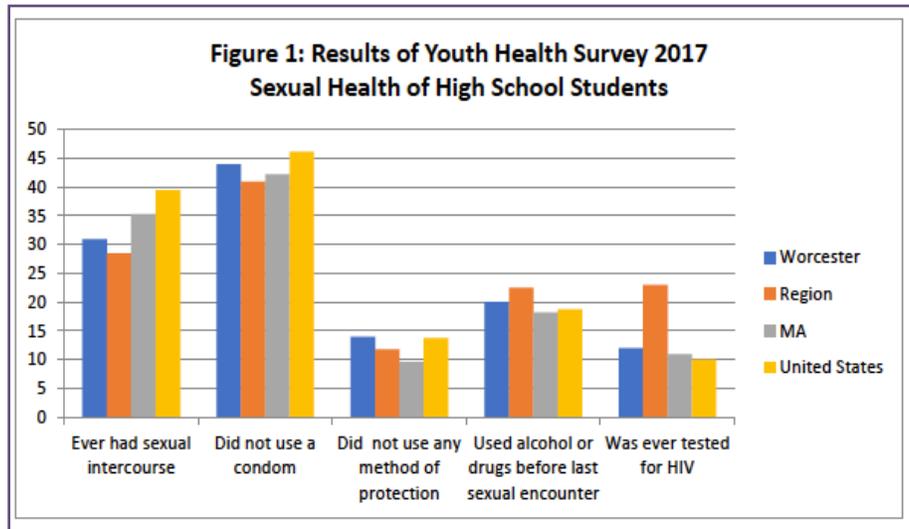
Youth sexual health, without question, continues to be an urgent issue in Worcester. Recent figures tell this story: 31% of Worcester high school youth report that they have had sexual intercourse. Of those that have had sex:

- 52% have with more than one partner
- 44% did not use a condom
- 20% drank alcohol or used drugs the last time they had sex
- 14% reported that they did not use any method to prevent pregnancy during last sexual intercourse
- When compared to sexually active youth in the region, Worcester youth were more likely to have ever had sexual intercourse, more likely to not have used a condom, more likely to not have used any form of protection; less likely to have used alcohol or drugs before intercourse; and much less likely to have ever been tested for HIV (See Figure 1).

Other indicators provided by WISH include:

- There are 223 pregnant or parenting young women in Worcester schools, including 55 in 7th or 8th grade.
- Worcester has one of the highest teen birth rates in the state at 13.2% (2016).
- Worcester’s chlamydia rate is 1.6 times higher than the state’s.
- Worcester’s gonorrhea rate is 2.25 times higher than the state’s.
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) disproportionately affect young people.

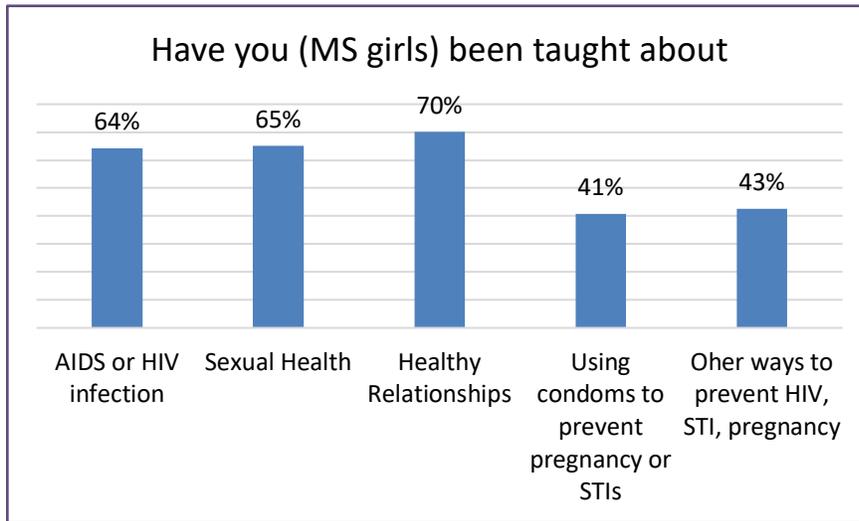
Compounding these public health issues is the fact that Worcester does not offer comprehensive sexual health education in the schools. A proposal was made to WPS school committee to adopt a comprehensive Health curriculum; the Michigan Model, for middle school students early this year (2019). While this is a fine overall health



curriculum; the sexual health modules are very limited and have not shown evidence of effectiveness. At a February 2019 school committee meeting there was a recommendation to accept the Michigan Model without the sexual health component, which was not evidence based, and to add supplemental information later. Students, parents and community members expressed serious concerns about the lack of an adequate solution to the urgent need for comprehensive sexual health education at the meeting. In response the school committee and district leadership agreed to study the issue further, including learning about how to make their adopted curriculum both evidenced based and inclusive of all youth regardless of their sexual orientation and gender expression. The district and school committee will identify a curriculum that meets upcoming DESE standards by the fall of 2019.

What we learned about healthy relationships

To further underscore the above need for comprehensive sexual health education in the

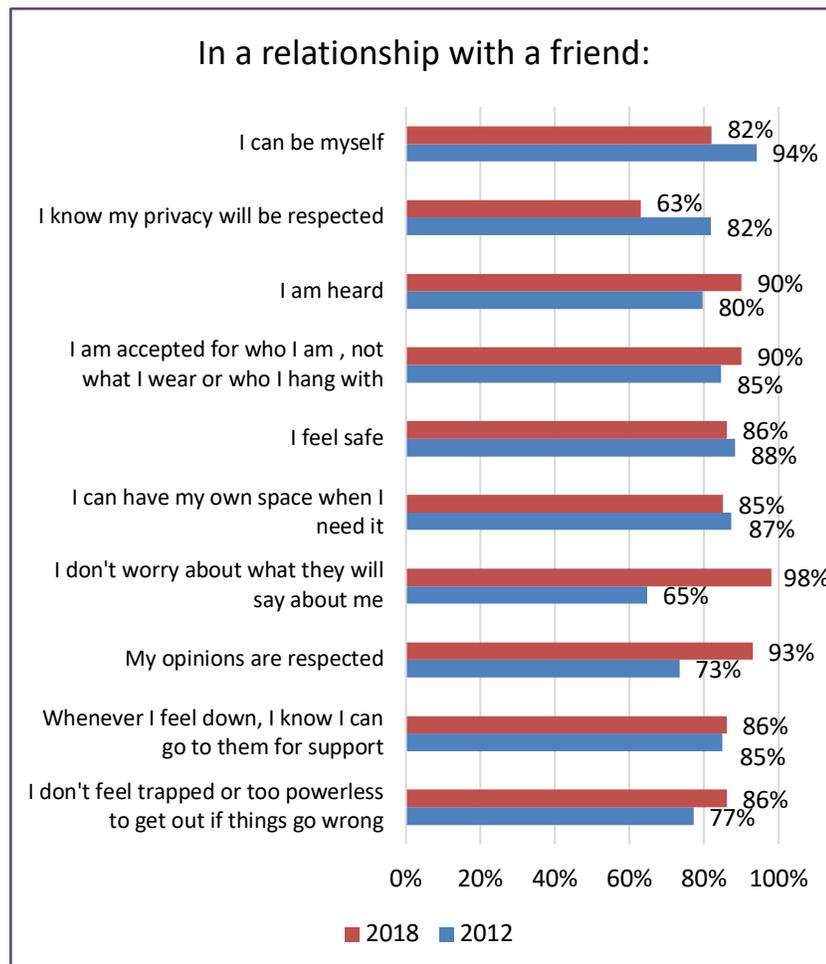


schools, the 2017 middle school girls survey data reveals girls are not receiving information they need to make informed choices. While 65% of girls report being taught about sexual health and AIDS and HIV infection, 35% - more than 1 in 3 - middle school girls report they have not received this information in school. Even more concerning, only 41% report learning

about how to use condoms to prevention pregnancy and STIs, and only 43% report being taught other ways to prevent pregnancy and STIs.

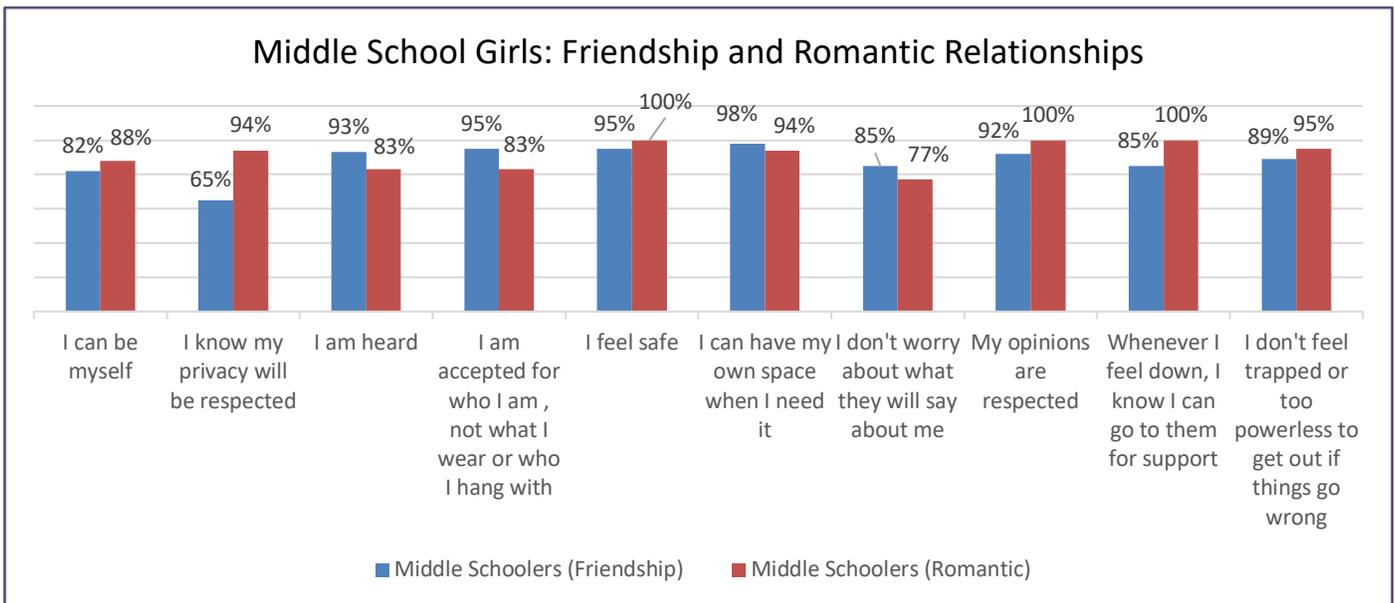
Overall 7% of middle school students reported having had sexual intercourse, when disaggregated by gender; 4.23% of girls and 9.78% of boys reported having had sexual intercourse. Put into the context of healthy relationships, just 70% report being taught how to have healthy peer and intimate relationships.

Data collected by IIGA around the skills of healthy relationships with friends and intimate partners allows us to look at what girls are learning as they navigate the complex



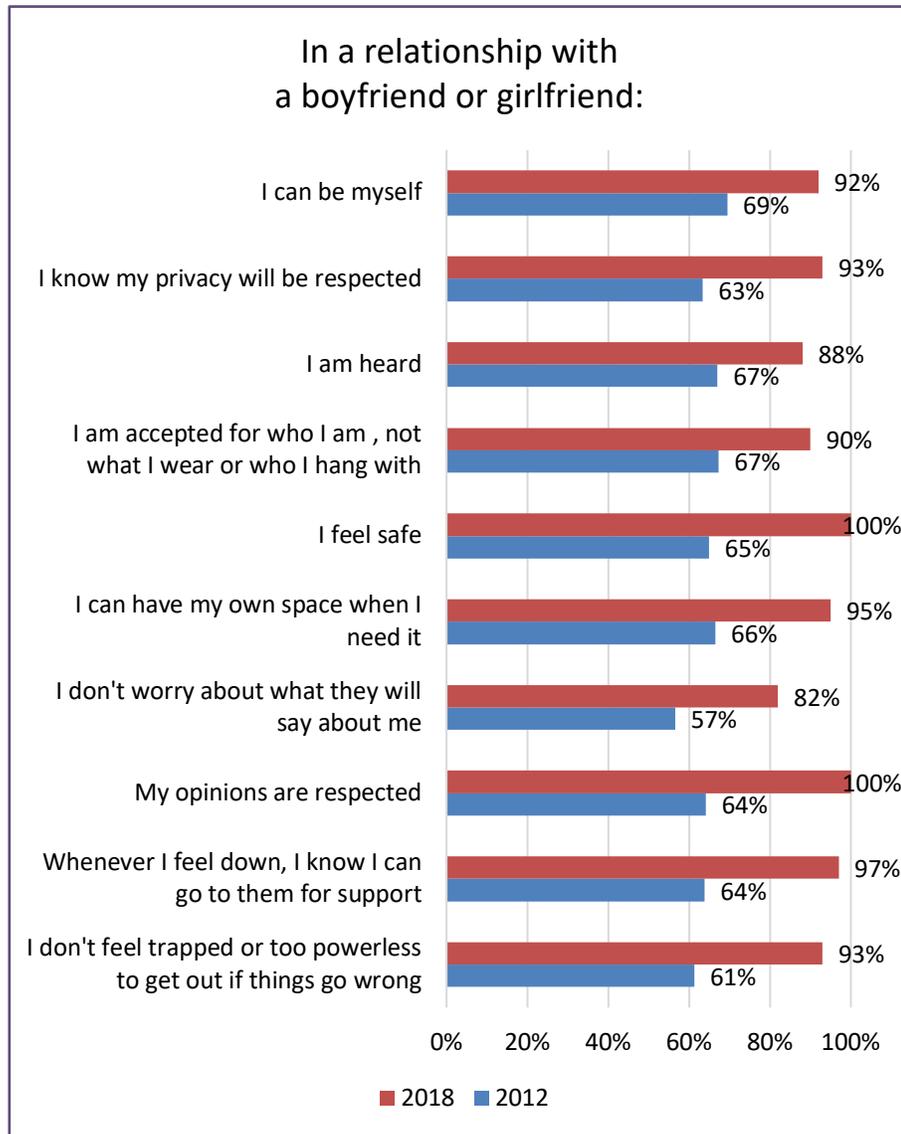
developmental road through puberty. IIGA strives to ensure girls, and all our youth, have accurate and age appropriate information to make positive decisions regarding their intimate and sexual relationships. Especially because we know that the risks girls face can have implications for a lifetime. Comprehensive sexual health education provides not only accurate and age appropriate information on mechanics of sexual development and intercourse, but also the emotional and relationship skills that provide a foundation for developing and maintaining positive relationships.

Since the very beginning IIGA has been committed to helping girls have healthy relationships with peer and romantic partners. A recent survey of girls in IIGA programs compared their relationship skills with those of girls in 2012. In 2012; 94% of girls agreed with the statement; “I can be myself” compared to only 82% of girls in the recent survey. 82% of middle school girls reported “I know my privacy will be respected” by friends in 2012; today that response dropped to 63%. Conversely, in 2017 more girls reported feeling that they are heard in relationships with friends (90% vs. 80% in 2012.) A big jump was reported in girls who said they “don’t worry about what their friend will say about them (98% vs. 65 % in 2012). There was also a significant jump (20% from 2012-2018) in girls’ saying their opinions are respected with friends and that they don’t feel trapped or powerless (9% increase). In several areas girls report feeling about the same across these two surveys, these include; feeling safe, having their own space and feeling they can go to their friend/s when they need support.



IIGA took a deeper dive into this gathered data, and looked across middle and high school aged girls’ responses. High school girls are more likely to say they can be themselves with their friends; and that they know their privacy will be respected. However, high school girls are less likely than middle school girls to feel they are heard, accepted; and say that they have their own space.

The same IIGA informal survey asked girls, “in a relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend” if they agree with the same statements as above. Girls in 2018 reported much higher levels of agreement than in 2012, with every statement; indicating an increase in the number of girls reporting they have attributes of healthy romantic relationships. The highest at 100% was feeling safe and having their opinions respected. The lowest, while still a high 82%, were worrying about what they will say about me.



ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

IIGA looks at economic empowerment through two lenses; girls success in education and/or in training programs that prepare them for well-paying future careers, and girls financial literacy (understand credit, have a plan to support their future education/training). This perspective on what supports girls economic empowerment is rooted in research. IIGA worked closely with the Simmons School of Management, Center for Gender in Organization on a large study of Girl Scouts in the Northeast (New England, New York and Pennsylvania.) The initial 2012 study^{xvi} entitled “Dreaming Big: What’s Gender Got to Do with It?” engaged a less than representative diversity of girls; 73% identified as caucasian; yet the findings are still worthy of note. They found that middle school girls are ambitious, but they are surrounded by a gendered landscape that promotes stereotypic messages about what girls can and should do or not do. As a result, they make many career choices that reflect those gendered messages. Research shows that middle school girls lack a clear understanding of the concrete steps necessary to get to the careers of their choice, or how their current school activities relate to future careers.

Connecting girls to career choices that help both improve the world around them and are financially secure can help them make the connection between their current practice and their futures.

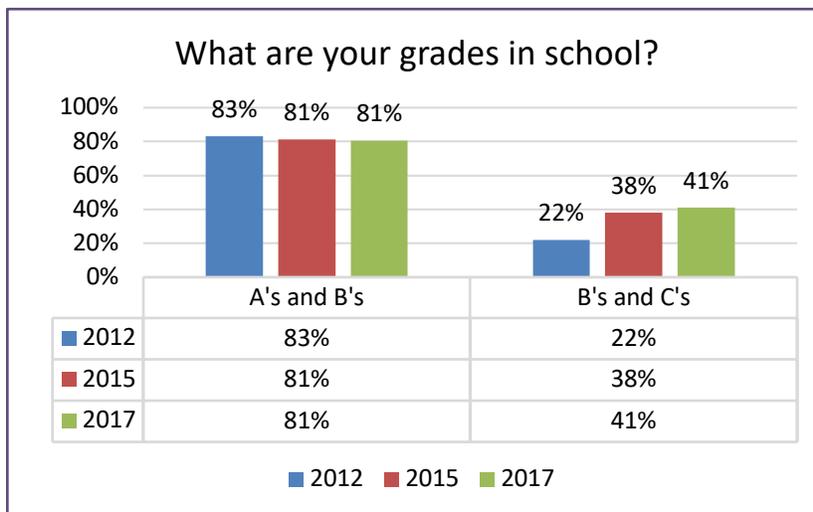
A follow up study in 2015, “Dreaming Big-Examining the Career Aspirations of Girls of Color”^{xvii} addressed the lack of diversity in the first study. IIGA member organizations were asked to engage their middle school aged girls to assist in securing a more representative group of girls. This study consisted of 60.6% of girls who identified as white/caucasian. The following findings highlight the important difference that race can play in girls career goals and pathways:

- More girls of color say that having children won’t interrupt their future work.
- Girls of color share some of the same career goals as girls who identify as white, but “being respected” and financial goals are comparatively more important.
- All middle school girls need guidance relating to career choices.
- Girls of color have higher confidence than boys
- Girls who participate in multiple girl serving organizations, whether over time or at the same time, have the highest confidence.

The Dreaming Big study highlights what the Investing in Girls Alliance (IIGA) is all about. We work together across multiple organizations to ensure all our middle school aged girls can build the pathway toward a thriving future.

What we learned about education and future expectations

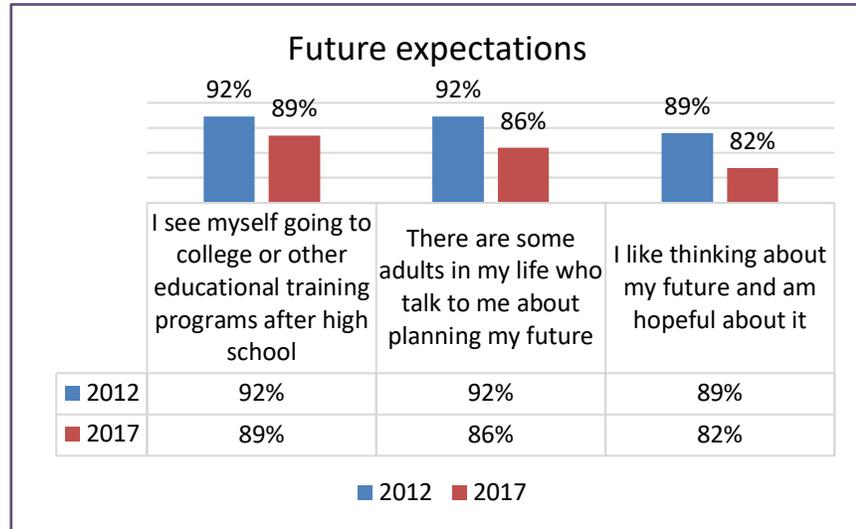
IIGA has been looking at education data for middle school aged girls since 2012, giving a 5 year data perspective. Those girls who are doing very well (receiving A’s and B’s) has stayed at just over 80% over the past five years. Girls at this top of the grade range do significantly better than boys at receiving A’s or B’s (48.8% vs. 35.6%), this is consistent from 2015 to 2017.



Overall, more girls report receiving A and B grades compared to boys. The number of girls receiving B’s and C’s is increasing; indicating that girls who were previously getting D’s and F’s are also improving. 90% of girls in a previous survey reported feeling like they were “doing their best” at their schoolwork. (2007, 2011). These positive trends

in education imply that school is a safe space for girls, that they believe education is valuable and they are connecting academics to future careers.

A look back over five years of IIGA data shows an overall decline in the future expectations of middle school girls. Girls in 2017 reported less aspirations of attending college or other training, fewer girls report having someone to talk with about their future and fewer report that they like thinking about their futures and are hopeful about it.



It would be helpful for IIGA to gather additional input from those who work with middle school aged girls (teachers, youth workers, guidance counselors), and girls themselves to hear what might be impacting girl’s expectations. Engaging girls in our programs in focus groups and mini surveys, may help to identify those programs that offer girls support for holding high expectations and build on those successes.

What we learned about financial literacy

In 2016, an IIGA working group took a closer look at where girls are education to support their financial literacy. The group identified a few excellent programs in the region such as Women’s Initiative’s Dollar Scholars and the integration of college financial planning in multiple girls serving programming around the city. The group identified challenges in regard to scope (are we reaching enough girls?) and dosage (are girls getting enough information over time appropriate to their development?). IIGA is working on identifying a series of ‘what girls need to know’ benchmarks for middle school aged girls in hopes of expanding and extending the opportunities for girls to gain confidence and learn important information to confidently manage their financial lives.

VIOLENCE AND SAFETY

Since the beginning, IIGA has kept a steady focus on violence and safety for middle school aged girls. In this section we will look at data reported by girls about their own behaviors and experiences, as well as data from law enforcement and juvenile justice about indicators of risk for future violent behaviors.

In 2016, IIGA pulled together a working group to examine local needs and assets regarding the impact of violence, safety on middle school girls. This process confirmed the need for increased prevention programming and a better coordinated community safety net for middle school aged girls.

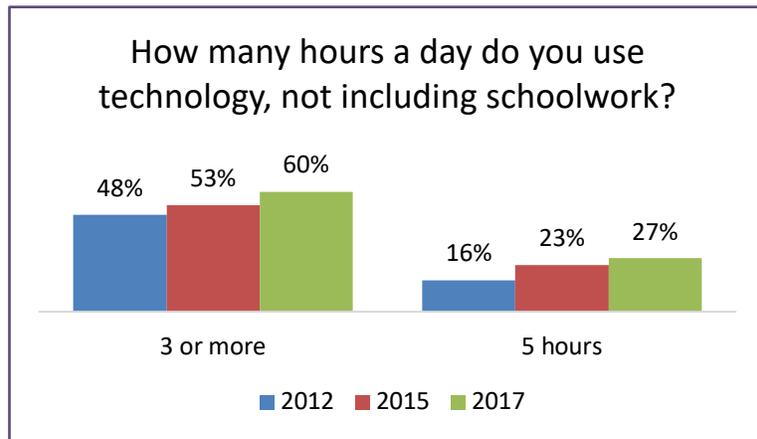
Challenges and needs identified:

- A gender and age specific lens is not currently present in our community for **girls**
- Multiple efforts exist, however they are not organized in to a systematic response for girls
- There is not enough data about cultural differences and needs for higher need or higher risk sub populations of girls

Lessons learned from this working group include:

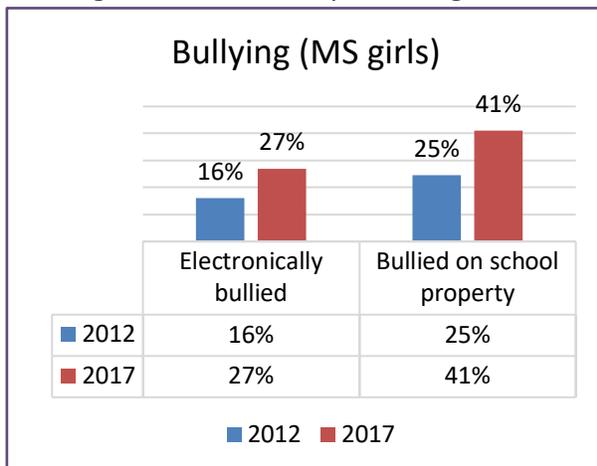
- Parental involvement is key, but there is a need to identify effective models that will work here
- Need to address root causes and engage in prevention **early**
- Summer is a particularly vulnerable time for girls
- Increased financial resources are needed to support violence prevention for girls
- Programs need training in implementation of best practices

The number of middle school girls engaged on social media and use of technology continues to climb. This is important because social media is the arena where some violent and bullying messages are conveyed. The trend from 2012 as reported in the WRYHS is significant and consistently rising. For all youth in 2017, 78% report used a screen for more than two hours a day, not related to schoolwork. For middle school girls in 2017, as seen in the chart below; 60% report using technology 3 or more hours a day; a 12% increase since 2012.



For girls that report using technology more than five hours a day, not for schoolwork, there has been an 11% increase in that same period.

Bullying continues to be a major concern for our girls; as seen in the below chart. For middle school girls, those who report being bullied on electronic devices (cell phones or computers and tablets) has risen 11% in the past five years; a statistically significant increase ($p < 0.01$).

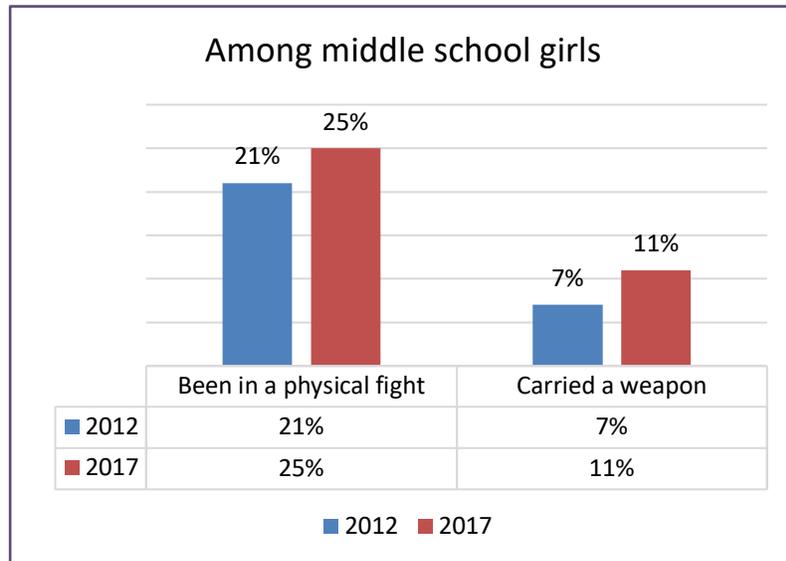


The percentage of girls that report being bullied on school property is up a staggering 16% in that same period of time (also statistically significant). Compared to all youth (20% report electronic bullying and 36% report being bullied on school property), it's clear that bullying impacts girls at a higher rate. In spite of a serious focus on bullying in the past decade, the numbers of girls impacted continues to rise. The Worcester Public Schools

identified girls as the priority population for the 2019 Bullying Prevention and Education Conference.

Two additional data points that describe violent behaviors among middle school girls are having been in a physical fight and carrying a weapon. For all youth, 36% report being in a physical fight, and 19% report carrying a weapon. Among middle school girls, the percentage is lower, 25% and 11% respectively. In 2012, 21% reported having been in a physical fight, rising to 27% in 2017, a statically significant increase. In 2012, 7% of girls reported carrying a weapon, rising to 11% in 2017, also significant. This upward trend continues to be a concern.

In early 2018, IIGA heard from concerns from our partners in the Worcester Public Schools that violent behavior among middle school aged girls is steadily increasing. In response to these concerns, IIGA re-convened the violence and safety workgroup. The Worcester Youth Violence Prevention Initiative, a group that has focused almost completely on males, shared the following police data, which reinforces the concerns



reported above. Arrests for females under 25 steadily rose in 2017; continuing a concerning trend –in 2015 21% of female arrests were under age 25. This rose 3% to 24% in 2017. This data aligns with anecdotal information that females are increasingly involved in serious violence. WYVPI has identified that early police contact is a significant factor when identifying high and proven risk youth targeted for intervention. For females; it appears that 35.8% or 194 individual females had contact with police at age 14 or under. Seventy, or 12.9%, of these females made first contact with police at age 10 or under. The average age for girls under age 14 to have police contact was 11.6 yrs. Thirty-two of the females arrested over the past two years were 14 years old or younger. In the past year, juvenile justice reform has eliminated arrest as an option for children under 12.

Over the summer of 2018, IIGA held focus groups with girls in IIGA member girl serving programs to understand more about their conflict resolution and coping skills. Girls report multiple skills to deal with conflict, including; walking away, reaching out to a trusted person, apologizing and talking it out, having adults help mediate between sides, not using your hands, compromise and trying to listen, taking responsibility, being the better person, and being respectful.

Surprisingly, girls reported that sometimes fighting solves a problem. At the same time they listed several successful coping strategies when they experience anger. These included: talking

to a friend, sibling or family member, talking with youth program staff and/or coaches, playing on phones or other electronics, watching TV, writing or reading, listening to music, going for a walk, as well as safe expression of anger including punching a pillow, screaming, crying or doing exercise or sports.

The focus group also asked about the role of social media for girls. Girls reported mixed feelings about social media; acknowledging that it can be a support because it's a way to reach out to friends or family when in need. At the same time, girls report that social media is a place where conflicts can be exaggerated and amplified. Girls understand that social media allows people to communicate things they wouldn't communicate in person and that sometimes it can make fights worse due to third party opinions, fake accounts, sub tweeting and taking over another person's account.

Girls were also asked about where they felt safe and unsafe. The list covers girls experience and perception of safety; meaning some of the items listed were thought of as being scary, even though the girls may not have personally experienced in these place (such as 'the woods'). Other places were clearly listed from personal experience, such as being alone, in their neighborhoods or in public or crowded places. Middle school girls reported feeling most safe at home in their rooms, at friends' homes, in church and with their families.

Understanding the increase in girls' violence adds questions: are other factors at play such as lower tolerance of violent behaviors in school environments and an increase in reporting? Are other environmental factors impacting this rise? IIGA will be working with alliance programs to determine how the community can increase protective factors and alternative strategies for girls who are caught up in violent behaviors.

Endnotes

ⁱ MA DOE Profile Worcester MA:

<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=03480000&orgtypecode=5>

ⁱⁱ US Census:

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/worcestercitymassachusetts,worcestercountymassachusetts/PST045217>

ⁱⁱⁱ Worcester Data USA profile: <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/worcester-ma/>

^{iv} IIGA Gaps and Opportunities Report 2012

^v School Health Policies and Practices Study (SHPPS) 2012-2016.

^{vi} County Health Rankings.org (road map)

^{vii} *ibid*

^{viii} WRYHS

^{ix} Sen, Bisakha The relationship between frequency of family dinner and adolescent problem behaviors after adjusting for other family characteristics. *Journal of adolescence*, 2010 ISSN: 1095-9254, Vol: 33, Issue: 1

^x Paruthi S, Brooks LJ, D'Ambrosio C, et al. Consensus statement of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine on the recommended amount of sleep for healthy children: methodology and discussion. *J Clin Sleep Med* 2016;12:1549–61.

^{xi} Rachel Simmons; *Enough As She Is* 2018

^{xii} [Child Trends / Blog / Data Point / The Rate Of High School-Aged Youth Considering And Committing Suicide Continues To Rise, Particularly Among Female Students](#) Blog The Rate Of High School-Aged Youth Considering And Committing Suicide Continues To Rise, Particularly Among Female Students Nov 12, 2018 Author: Natalia E. Pane

^{xiii} Malbergier A1, Cardoso LR, Amaral RA, Santos VC. *Braz J Psychiatry*. 2012 Mar;34 (1):16-23. Gender parity and drug use: are girls catching up with boys?

^{xiv} Dr. Hui Cheng April 3, 2016, *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research*, online

^{xv} Teen birth data: MA Department of Public Health 2013 Birth Report; Worcester population demographics: 2010 US Census

^{xvi} *Dreaming Big: What's Gender Got to Do with It? The Impact of Gender Stereotypes on Career Aspirations of Middle Schoolers*, Copyright 2012, Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management

^{xvii} *Dreaming Big: Examining the Career Aspirations of Girls of Color*; Copyright February 2015, Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management