Stepping up for Girls!

WOMEN'S INITIATIVE

United Way of Central Massachusetts

FROM GAPS TO OPPORTUNITIES: MEETING THE NEEDS OF GIRLS IN THE WORCESTER AREA

A Needs Assessment of Middle-School Girls Conducted for the Investing in Girls Group

Prepared by:
Kathryn A. Wheeler, Ed.D., and Jessica H. Greenstone, M.S.
August 2007

About the Investing in Girls Group

Investing in Girls (IIG) is a consortium of private and state agencies in central Massachusetts that have come together to determine how the local Worcester community can best serve the needs of girls in the modern world. IIG grew out of a task force on youth violence convened by the Worcester mayor's office in 2002. The ultimate goal is to improve the lives of young women in Greater Worcester by improving the effectiveness and efficiency of local services and by building the capacity of the Greater Worcester community as a whole to identify and meet girls' needs.

The group is cochaired by Linda Cavaioli, executive director of the YWCA of Central Massachusetts; Maria Rosado, executive director of Girls Inc. of Worcester; and Donna Jerszyk-Hollis of the Massachusetts Department of Social Services. Organizational affiliates include:

American Red Cross of Central Massachusetts
Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Central Massachusetts/MetroWest
Boys and Girls Club of Worcester
Children's Friend, Inc.
Clark University
Edward Street Child Services
Fred Harris Daniels Foundation
Girls Inc. of Worcester
Girl Scouts, Montachusett Council
Latino Education Institute of Worcester State College
Massachusetts Department of Social Services
Massachusetts Department of Youth Services
Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts—Worcester Center
Quinsigamond Community College
Rainbow Child Development Center
United Way of Central Massachusetts
Worcester Public Schools
YMCA of Greater Worcester
Y.O.U., Inc.
YouthNet
YWCA of Central Massachusetts, Inc.

To date, the work of IIG has been generously funded by the two leading philanthropic organizations committed to its vision and working in partnership. The needs assessment and the research that has gone into it, this report, and the forums and ongoing information-sharing meetings of the IIG are being funded by the Women's Initiative of United Way of Central Massachusetts. The Fred Harris Daniels Foundation is supporting the development of a strategic plan and public education/advocacy campaign. The goal of this collaborative effort is to ensure that this needs assessment and report will effectively leverage existing resources as well as inspire new involvement from community members, funders, and policy makers.

About the Women's Initiative of United Way of Central Massachusetts

The mission of the Women's Initiative is to promote women's leadership and philanthropy to effect positive and measurable change for women and children. Recent funding initiatives and community education events have focused on supporting programs that assist girls in making healthy decisions as they maneuver their way through adolescence into womanhood. These programs are working to reduce the incidence of violence affecting girls by building the confidence, health, and safety of adolescent girls. A new initiative will focus on providing proactive financial literacy education to young women, their parents, and mentors.

This needs assessment report is available online at: www.unitedwaycm.org

About the Authors

Kathryn A. Wheeler is the principal investigator of this project and president of Kathryn A. Wheeler Consulting & Associates. She was the founding executive director of the Girls' Coalition of Greater Boston, a member-driven consortium that provides resources and development opportunities for the adults who work to empower girls. Prior to that, she was a researcher for twelve years at the Wellesley Center for Research on Women in the fields of child care and gender equity in education. She has taught students ranging in age from infancy to graduate school, including a two-year stint on a sailing-school ship, working with youth who were dyslexic. She holds a B.A. with honors in psychology from Pitzer College, and a master's degree and a doctorate in education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where she worked closely with Carol Gilligan studying girls' development and girls' relationships with science. Katie is the parent of three young children, including boy-girl twins.

Jessica H. Greenstone is an educator and diversity specialist. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in applied child development at Tufts University, where she is studying the social, emotional, and intellectual development of girls. She is particularly interested in educational equity and extracurricular programming. Jessica earned her master's degree with honors in learning, teaching, and social policy at Cornell University, where she studied the influence of social messages about gender on girls' self-concepts, and relational aggression among women and girls. She earned her B.A. with honors in women's studies from Douglass College at Rutgers University. Jessica's experience as an educator includes providing training in educational techniques and group dynamics of diversity education, and writing and teaching curricula in the middle school and college arenas. She served for four years as the education director for the New Jersey region of the Anti-Defamation League, where she directed its anti-bias and anti-bullying educational programs in the K-12 school sector throughout the state. In 2000 Jessica was awarded the New Jersey Governor's Leadership Scholars award and grant for an anti-bias middle-school curriculum she had designed.

Acknowledgments

- The authors are grateful for the support of our funders: the Women's Initiative of United Way of Central Massachusetts, which sponsored this needs assessment; and the Fred Harris Daniels Foundation, which is providing funding for the strategic planning process. In particular, we are grateful to Kate Myshrall, Kerry Conaghan, Eve Gilmore, Wendy O'Leary, Kay Bassett, Meridith Wesby, and Fred Daniels.
- Thanks are due the Investing in Girls cochairs, Linda Cavaioli of YWCA of Central Massachusetts; Maria Rosado of Girls Inc. of Worcester; and Donna Jerszyk-Hollis of the Massachusetts Department of Social Services; their help in facilitating relationships with potential collaborators was invaluable.
- We appreciate the hard work of our research team: Liz Blair of Harvard University who did the national literature review; Erin Ellison of Clark University who compiled the literature on local girls, conducted numerous focus groups, and served as a local contact for many connections; graduate students Jeanene Souder of Harvard University who conducted the statistical analyses of the quantitative data; and Dana Sillers of Clark University who helped with recruiting girls and running focus groups; administrative assistant Danielle Gilliland; and HOPE Coalition peer leaders Pep Hayfron, Addie Correa, Yesenia Todd, and Sheniqua Rogers who helped recruit girls and administer surveys.
- Several people gave generously of their time in helping us to recruit participants: Judi Kirk and Patty Flanagan of YWCA of Central Massachusetts, Elizabeth Roche and Kelly Arsenault of Girls Inc. of Worcester, Elsa Rivera of the Latino Education Institute, Barbara Worley and Cynthia Pelletier of Girl Scouts, Montachusett Council, Joanne Gravell of the Child Care Connection, and Suzanne Schwartz of the Worcester Sharks Hockey Club. Thanks too to those who prefer that they and their organizations remain anonymous.
- Alison Baron Streit and Vivian B. Wheeler enhanced the writing of this report with their editorial skills.
- Professors Terrance Tivnan of Harvard University and Laurie Ross of Clark University shared critical advice and resources.
- Sherrill McKeon, Patty Mostue, and Barbara Sargent were important gatekeepers in sharing information and providing access to the Worcester Public Schools.
- We are grateful for the investment of Worcester middle-school principals Bob Jennings of the Sullivan School, June Eressy of the A.L.L. School and University Park School, Rose Dawkins of Worcester East Middle School, Lisa Houlihan and Mary Stappenbeck of Burncoat Middle School, and Roger Jones of Bancroft School. They saw the relevance of this study and opened their doors to let us recruit girls, families, and staff. Without them, our data would be limited indeed.
- Thanks to the girls who field tested the initial surveys: Kerri Hobart, Emily Torman, Emilie Manna, Abby Swanson, and girls at Girls Inc. of Worcester. And we thank the adults of the Investing in Girls group who reviewed the parent and provider surveys.
- Most of all, a special thank-you to all the girls, parents, and providers who shared their stories and perspectives with us in focus groups and surveys.

CONTENTS

Section I

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

Investing in Girls believes that **all** local girls deserve to grow up to be happy, healthy, and productive.

In the summer of 2006, with the vision of improving the lives of 10- to 14-year-old girls in the Greater Worcester area through research, advocacy, and collaboration, the Investing in Girls group joined forces with the Women's Initiative at the United Way of Central Massachusetts and the Fred Harris Daniels Foundation. Independently, each of these prominent local philanthropic organizations had engaged in strategic planning processes to determine where their focus should be and had concluded that among youth, the needs of middle-school girls were the most pressing. With the recognition that all three groups share a commitment to the healthy development of girls and to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of local services for girls, a new partnership was forged. Collectively, the group determined that they wanted to work together to develop a plan to address the identified needs of local girls in ways that supported existing programs and services, but did not duplicate them.

Adults today are more in the dark than ever about the complex realities of girls' everyday lives.

Recognizing that large-scale changes in the world such as the technological revolution have contributed to rapid, ongoing individual and community transformations, the group noted that girls' lives are affected in unique ways and that the gap between the generations has been magnified. We therefore decided that the first step of a strategic planning process involving adults should be a comprehensive needs assessment that would result in a deeper understanding of girls' needs, in both the immediate and the broader context.

To understand how Worcester area middle-school girls compare with girls nationally and to ensure that the needs assessment was grounded in current thinking about girls' issues and gender-responsive programming, we designed the needs assessment to include a review of national research and local data on middle-school girls.

The specific goals of the needs assessment were to:

(1) identify the needs of local middle-school girls and their adult advocates--specifically parents and service providers of middle-school girls;

(2) gather preliminary information on existing support systems and programs;

(3) determine gaps in programs, services, resources, and training; and

(4) explore potential solutions.

Informed by the findings of the needs assessment reported herein, the IIG group has begun a strategic planning process that will culminate in an action plan. The plan may involve expansion of the Investing in Girls group into a more formal girl-focused coalition; establishment of new programs for girls; staff development for adults who work with girls; activities for parents and families of girls; cross-agency collaborations; vehicles for information sharing; public policy education and advocacy; and/or a different product or process.

This report will be useful as a tool for development, implementation, and assessment to ensure that all organizations in the Worcester area serving youth directly or indirectly are gender sensitive and responsive to the needs of young women. Included are schools and universities, community-based organizations, government agencies, philanthropic and research institutions, religious centers, and businesses.

Parents, youth workers, coaches, educators, policy makers, health providers, public officials, researchers, reporters, religious leaders, and community volunteers must focus on meeting the needs of girls both in school and out of school. The findings of this research build a compelling case and a call to action. Girls need tools, skills, and resources to flourish and achieve their full potential so that they can become happy, healthy, productive members of society.

Guide to this Report

The chapters in this report are organized in the following way:

Key Findings: Highlights the main findings related to each key challenge.

Relevant National and Local Research: Synthesizes existing literature and provides a context for understanding findings from this study. It should be noted that some data were difficult to obtain or do not exist; thus, the type and amount of data presented vary from issue to issue.

Where the Girls Are: Findings from Worcester: Presents the results from this study and other local data when appropriate.

Turning Gaps into Opportunities: Presents recommendations for possible solutions to the challenges facing girls, based on the findings of this study. These suggestions are directed at all community members, although some may be more appropriate for particular constituencies than others.

CONTEXT

"As a teenager, adults treat you like you are in between—they treat you like a child, but expect you to act like an adult."

Latina girl, 7th grade

KEY FINDINGS

- Girls' needs, experiences, challenges, perspectives, and resources are often unique and therefore need to be examined separately from those of boys.
- Middle school is a time when many different types of transition occur simultaneously—physical growth, cognitive development, social changes, and school restructuring.
- Easily accessible, currently updated data on girls in the Worcester area are lacking.

RELEVANT NATIONAL AND LOCAL RESEARCH

Why Girls?

Many research studies, programs, and policies address the issues of "youth," as if all youth are the same. Yet substantial research and anecdotal evidence indicate that the lives of girls and boys are molded by different forces and that their perspectives and needs may vary within and across groups. Every girl is shaped by multiple intersecting identities, including gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, immigrant status, religion, abilities, and so on.

The Investing in Girls group, comprising mostly people who work directly with girls, believes that to more effectively meet the needs of girls in the Worcester area, it is necessary to examine their lives and challenges separately from those of boys. We believe it is not constructive to think of girls and boys as being in competition with one another--whether over abilities, achievements, adversities, or resources. We encourage an examination of the needs and experiences of both girls and boys, not to compare them, but to understand and more effectively meet the needs of both. When talking about girls and boys, the goal is not to have an either/or conversation, but rather a both/and conversation that is win-win.

Why Middle-School Girls?

For girls in the Worcester area, like girls in other parts of the country, middle school is a time of transitions, characterized by rapid physical and cognitive growth outpaced only by that of the first year of life. It is also a time of psychological and social change. Peers take a more prominent role in influencing girls, while the role of the family shifts.

Middle school is a time of changing:

- bodies
- minds
- schools
- teachers
- friends
- influences
- family relationships
- sexual relationships

Research across a variety of fields—psychology, psychiatry, education, and sociology, for example--consistently indicates that adolescence is a time of increased vulnerability and stress for girls. (See AAUW, 1991; APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan 1990a, 1990b; Gilligan, Brown, & Rogers, 1990; Harris Interactive/Girls Incorporated, 2006; Harter, 1998; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Machoian, 2005; Orenstein, 1994; Petersen, Sarigiani & Kennedy, 1991; Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2003.) Girls' academic performance often drops off and they are more likely than in younger years to exhibit signs of psychological distress such as a lowered sense of self-worth and competence, dissatisfaction with their body and appearance, eating disorders, anxiety, depression, and thoughts of suicide. Issues affect different subsets of girls differently. For example, White girls are more likely than Black girls to struggle with negative body image; girls of color are more likely to experience poverty; sexual-minority youth are more likely to experience depression and suicide ideation.

By reviewing current national research on girls as well as local data on girls, we can begin to build a foundation for understanding the needs of middle-school girls in the Worcester area. Each chapter of the Key Challenges Facing Girls section of this report reviews recent research on girls' development, experiences, and challenges, focusing on two main questions:

- What does the research tell us about the issues confronting girls across the nation and in the Worcester area?
- What does the research suggest about how to best support girls?

It should be noted that in our examination of the status of girls in the Worcester area, some local data existed but were not available at all, and some were not disaggregated by gender. The fact that local data are disparate and difficult to obtain, do not exist, and/or are not disaggregated by gender is a finding in and of itself. The data gap has implications not only for this study, but for the community, including the Investing in Girls group and its constituents.

Why Is Worcester Special?

Worcester has at least two attributes that make it special in ways that affect middle-school girls: first, its diversity; second, its poverty.

With a population currently estimated to be 176,000, Worcester is the third-largest city in New England. The girls of Worcester are diverse and face diverse challenges. As of the year 2000, the city had 19,829 girls under age 18 and 5,582 girls between 10 and 14 years of age (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a). The County of Worcester had 27,010 girls between ages 10 and 14 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000c).

There are 5,582 girls aged 10-14 in the city of Worcester and 27,010 girls aged 10-14 in Worcester County.

Worcester has a rich history of immigration, and currently its population is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. As of 2000, almost 15% of Worcester's residents were foreign born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000d); 77% of the population was White, 15% Latino/Hispanic, 7% African American, and 5% Asian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b). A high percentage of young people constitute Worcester's population of color. In 2000, 15% of the city's overall population was Latino or Hispanic, but 24% of girls aged 10-14 were Latina or Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000e). Among Worcester public school students in 2005-2006, 33% were Latino (Massachusetts Department of Education District Profiles, 2006). Not surprisingly, many

residents use a language other than English at home. In Worcester's public middle schools, 30-59% of the students speak a first language other than English; at the state level, the proportion is 15% of the population. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Average Student Profile: First Language Not English

	State of Mass.	Worcester Middle Schools				
		University Park	Sullivan	Worcester East	Burncoat	Forest Grove
Students whose first language is not English	15%	59%	46%	42%	38%	30%

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education District Profiles (2006)

Many girls in the Worcester area are poor. The median income for families with children in Worcester is well below the state and national averages.

- Worcester $38,622
- Massachusetts $61,530
- National $48,196 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000f)

Table 2: Average Student Profile: Low-Income Students

	State of Mass.	Worcester Middle Schools				
		University Park	Sullivan	Worcester East	Burncoat	Forest Grove
Low-income students	29%	72%	75%	80%	65%	53%

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education District Profiles (2006)

As seen in Table 2, the percentage of low-income students in the five main public middle schools in Worcester ranges from 53% to 80%, whereas in the state of Massachusetts overall, it is only 29%. In Worcester, as in other communities, poverty disproportionately affects people of color (See Table 3).

Table 3: Percentage of Worcester Families Living Below the National Poverty Threshold, By Ethnicity

15% of White
25% of Black or African American
49% of American Indian or Alaskan Native
32% of Asian
41% of Hispanic or Latino

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000g.

According to Worcester Public Schools data, more than half of 7th and 8th graders are on free or reduced lunch, a commonly accepted indicator of poverty. The fact that so many girls live in poverty and that the schools in Worcester are more racially diverse than the city as a

whole are important trends to be considered by educators and providers serving girls. Directly and indirectly, poverty affects many aspects of girls' lives, and cultural awareness is critical for effective education, services, and programming. Gender issues are not monolithic; gender expectations, roles, and relationships often differ by culture and social circumstances, so schools and youth-serving organizations need to take these factors into consideration when striving to meet the needs of girls.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Raising a Daughter in Worcester

In focus groups and on surveys, study participants cited many advantages to living in Worcester**.** They cited the balance of Worcester's being a city, but being surrounded by rural areas. They appreciated the easy access to cultural activities and institutions of higher education. Parents liked the ethnic and racial diversity in Worcester. Some noted the quantity and quality of school choices, both public and private, and the many excellent teachers who serve as supports and role models not only to students, but to students' families. A substantial portion commented on the good out-of-school time programs that exist locally, including extracurricular school activities, camps, educational programs, and some sports opportunities. A few parents noted the availability of some girl-specific opportunities and organizations. Many out-of-school time providers noted that youth agencies in Worcester work well together, have a rich network, and do a good job of "putting kids first" without letting individual agency needs get in the way.

"Youth agencies in Worcester talk, connect, and work together."
Youth worker at a community-based girl-serving agency

Disadvantages of living in Worcester cited by adult study participants included the lack of a strong public transportation system; not enough programs and services for girls; concerns about safety, crime, poverty, the lack of a neighborhood network to support parents in raising their children, and what they called "urban influence."

Providers commented on an overall "lack of respect for girls" in Worcester, noting that boys often have more power within families, a situation that is disempowering to girls. Compared to boys, girls often have more care-giving responsibilities and are more restricted in what they are allowed to do.

TURNING GAPS INTO OPPORTUNITES

Examine assumptions related to gender that inform current girl-directed programs, services, and other resources. Assess your own organizational structure and the role of women and girls within it to consider what types of role models you are offering.

Create systems for supporting middle-school girls through times of transition, such as the entry to middle school and the anticipation of starting high school.

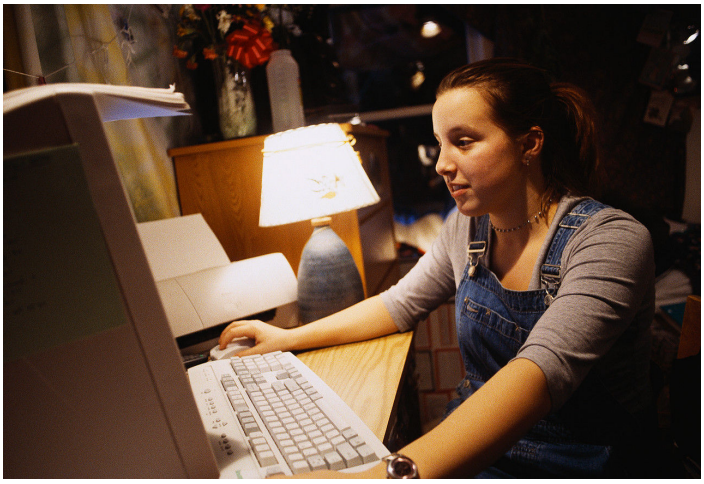
Familiarize yourself with the families and neighborhoods with which you are working. If data are missing, conduct your own local needs assessment to determine what the needs of girls are in the area(s) you serve. Check your assumptions with families and reflect on whether your current services are aligned with their desires and needs.

Identify new ways to support and reach girls living in poverty. Consider the various ways that poverty affects and has the potential to affect youth, including their access to programs and resources.

Design, implement, and evaluate new and existing programs with the unique desires and needs of girls with different identity characteristics in mind. Invite girls to participate in these processes as a way to ensure that their needs are being accurately perceived and effectively filled.

Work collaboratively to develop a centralized system for collecting data about local girls in a uniform, ongoing way. House all local data in a place that is easily accessible to all individuals and organizations who directly and indirectly affect girls through their work. Disaggregate existing local data on youth by gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geographic area, and grade level to work toward an understanding of how best to meet the needs of all girls and all boys. Involve program and service providers, K-12 schools, universities, families, funders, local government agencies, policymakers, and other leaders in this effort.

Review the strengths and weaknesses of current Worcester area infrastructures intended to support and be a resource to girls and their families. Identify gaps, and brainstorm about ways to reduce them. Consider providing a community forum (in-person or online) for youth and families to contribute their ideas, and to begin a dialogue about community building and improvement focused on girls.



METHODS

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Four questions guided this research:

- What are the top issues and challenges facing middle-school girls in the Worcester area?
- What do girls' adult advocates—in particular parents, educators, and service providers—say they need to help them better support girls?
- What are existing local supports and resources and what are barriers to accessing them?
- What potential new solutions could address gaps and barriers?

RESEARCH DESIGN

Using quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain both breadth and depth, this needs assessment explored a range of issues and concerns in the lives of three constituencies: (1) middle-school girls; (2) parents of middle-school girls; and (3) human service providers and educators who work with middle-school girls. To put local findings in context, we examined existing local and national data on girls, as well as the new data we collected and analyzed.

The study had three main components. (See also Table 4.)

1) *a literature review* that included:
   a) synthesis of national research on issues affecting girls, best practices in supporting girls' needs, and gender-responsive programming
   b) compilation, analysis, and summary of local data on girls
2) *focus groups*
3) *surveys*

Table 4: Research Design

	Girls	Parents	Providers
13 Focus Groups with 105 people	***4 groups***	***5 groups***	***4 groups***
	35	45	25
3 Surveys of 336 people	222	58	56
TOTAL	**257 girls**	**103 men & women**	**81 men & women**

In all, this study represents input from almost 450 people, more than half of them girls.

Eligibility for Inclusion

For this study, "Greater Worcester" was defined as the communities surrounding Worcester, including Auburn, Shrewsbury, Millbury, Grafton, Paxton, Holden, Boylston, West Boylston, and Leicester. In this report, when we use the term "Worcester" alone, we are referring to the city of Worcester. "Worcester area" refers to both the city of Worcester and the surrounding communities of Greater Worcester (listed above).

The United States has a generally accepted period that is considered to be middle school—specifically, grades 6-8, with some variations across communities (Gottman, 2007). For the purposes of this study, given that the experience of middle schoolers is qualitatively different from that of elementary school students, we defined middle school in the following way:

- *All girls in grades 6, 7, and 8.*
- *Girls in grades 5 or 9 were included only if there was evidence that their grade level was housed in a middle-school building separate from the local elementary or high school.*

Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted between August 2006 and January 2007. Participants were recruited through members of the Investing in Girls group and their colleagues and represented: a local community-based organization, a national youth-serving organization, a college-based program, a church, and several youth worker coalitions, including the IIG group. (See Appendix, A, Table 1 for more details). One focus group was conducted in Spanish; the rest in English.

The main intent of the focus groups was to obtain information to help guide the design and content of the questionnaires, rather than to elicit in-depth discussion of content issues. However, data that emerged in focus groups were included in the analysis.

Surveys

The surveys were developed based on findings from the national literature, data from previous studies conducted in the Worcester area, and feedback from focus groups and pilot tests. All three surveys were available both online (using Survey Monkey) and in hard copy. Surveys were distributed and collected between December 2006 and April 2007. Participants were recruited through community events, community organizations, religious institutions, professional organizations, and schools. (See Appendix A, Table 2 for more details.) In all, 336 people were surveyed.

In order to better understand the complexity of the issues, we intentionally asked the most important questions in multiple ways on the surveys.

Participants

Recruitment efforts included deliberate attempts to have research participants reflect the overall population of the Worcester area based on:

- race/ethnicity
- socioeconomic status (SES)
- religion
- sexual orientation
- geographic location (neighborhood within Worcester, Worcester vs. Greater Worcester)
- school
- age and grade of girls
- program involvement
- age of parents and providers
- gender of parents and providers
- marital status of parents
- program characteristics
- program structure (coed vs. single sex, multinational agency vs. local)
- girls served by practitioners' programs (age, SES, neighborhood, race/ethnicity)
- adults' relationships to girls (teacher, health care provider, nonprofit administrator, etc.)

Overall, both the focus groups and the adult surveys were diverse in terms of racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, age, and geographic mix of study participants; however, there were relatively few male participants. (See Appendix A, Tables 3, 4, and 5 for demographic information on girl, parent, and provider participants, respectively, and see Table 6 for characteristics of the programs in which the providers work.)

It is important to note that the racial/ethnic demographics of girl and parent survey respondents were quite different: among the girls, 35% identified as White; 58% as Hispanic/Latina, African American/Black, Asian American, African, Asian, and/or Native American/ Alaskan Native; among parents, 80% identified themselves as White; only 20% as people of color.

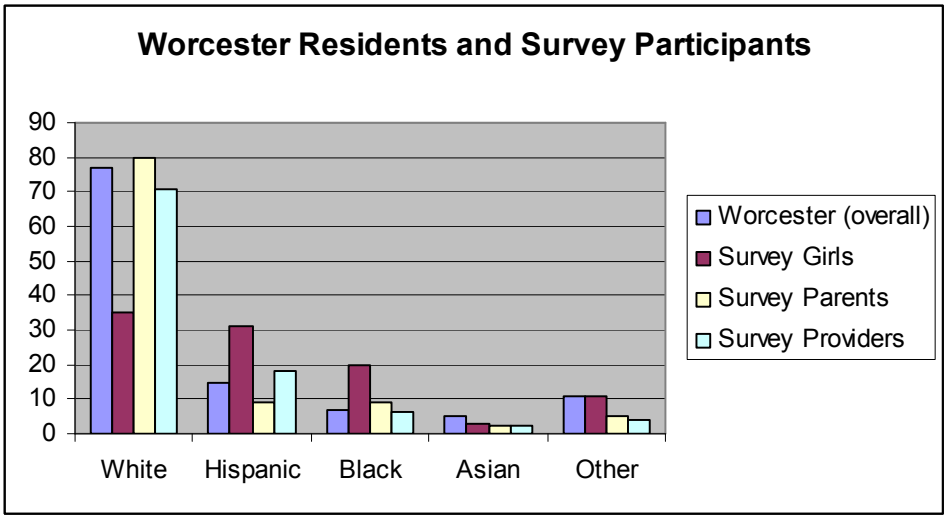


Figure 1: Race/Ethnicity of Worcester Residents and Survey Participants

Among survey respondents--both girls and parents--representation of 7th grade girls was stronger than that of 5th, 6th, and 8th grade girls. This fact may have implications for the interpretation of the data, since in most of Worcester's schools, 7th grade is the first year of middle school. Given the many transitions that occur with a new school setting and structure, the problems may feel more intense and overwhelming. By 8th grade, the content of the problems may shift.

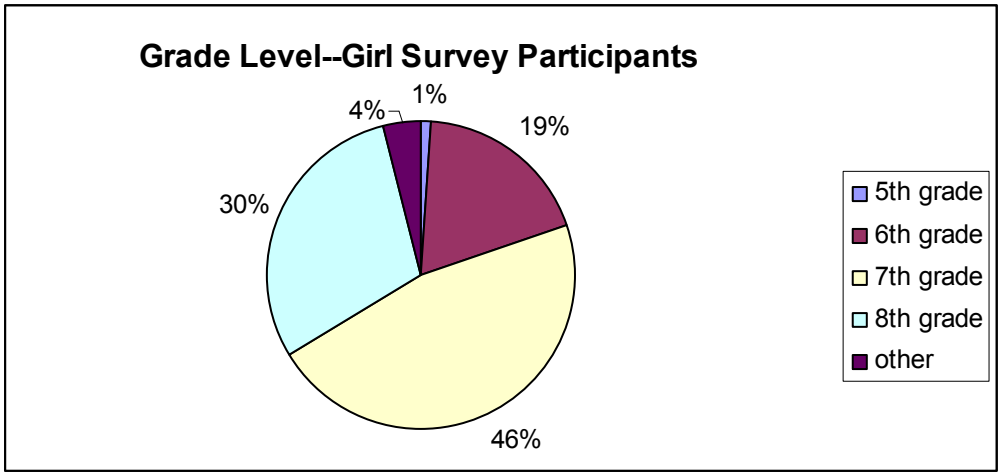


Figure 2: Grade Level of Girl Survey Participants

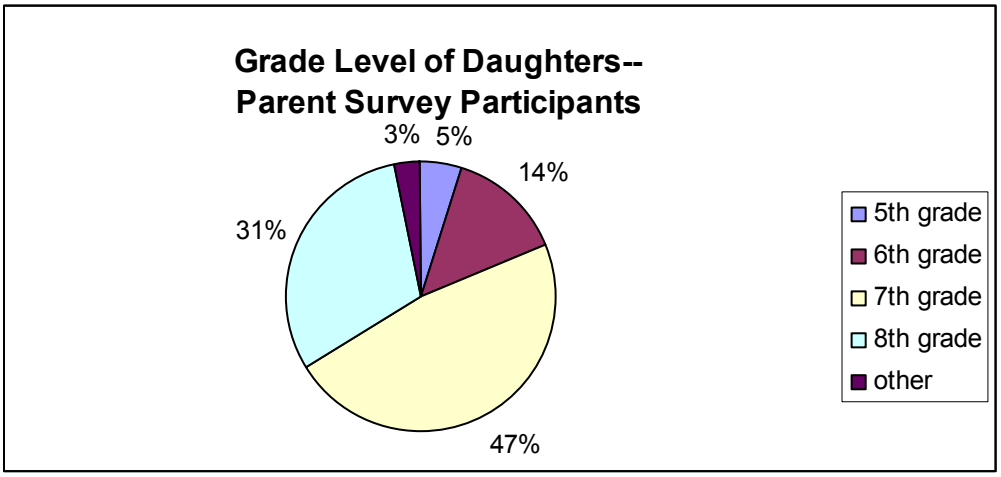


Figure 3: Grade Level of the Daughters of Parent Survey Participants

Girl and parent survey respondents represented all the main neighborhoods within the city of Worcester.

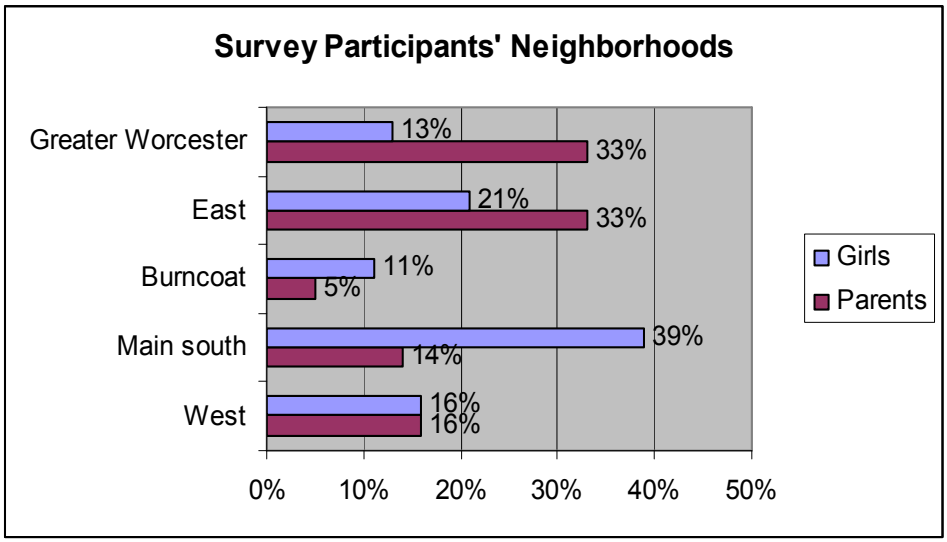


Figure 4: Neighborhoods of Survey Participants

There were significant demographic differences among our survey participants. The vast majority of girls surveyed (87%) were from the city of Worcester, with only 13% from Greater Worcester. Likewise, among parents, the majority (two thirds) were from Worcester; however, the proportion of those from Greater Worcester (one third) was greater than among girls.

Provider respondents worked with girls from each of the main neighborhoods of Worcester; 25% also worked with girls who live in Greater Worcester.

Analysis

Focus group data and data from open-ended survey questions were analyzed using thematic analysis (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Conceptual codes were developed using an iterative process, then tallied and condensed as appropriate.

The quantitative survey data were analyzed using the appropriate statistical tests, specifically descriptive statistics, cross tabs, chi squares, t-tests, and ANOVAs. The standard .05 level of significance was used. Data were analyzed within each of the three constituency groups and across groups.[1]

Section II

Key Challenges Facing Worcester Girls

INTRODUCTION TO KEY CHALLENGES FACING WORCESTER GIRLS

KEY FINDINGS

- The top five challenges facing girls in the Worcester area are: (1) health; (2) sexual health; (3) violence and safety; (4) relationships: peers, peer pressure, and adults not knowing; and (5) education.
- The issues and challenges affecting girls are complex and interconnected.
- Findings that appear to conflict indicate complexity, not ambiguity.
- Several threads weave through the data: (1) the ways that challenges affect girls uniquely; (2) the centrality of relationships in girls' lives; and (3) the ways the multiple transitions that girls are experiencing frame their lives.
- It is difficult to uncover local data about girls.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

As is true of girls' lives, research on girls is complex. The biggest challenges facing girls are all intricately interconnected. Girls' well-being is a global concept. It encompasses all of the other issues girls face: physical, psychological, intellectual, social, sexual, economic, and community health. And girls' well-being is a two-way street; it is both *influenced by* girls' experiences and it *influences* their experiences and outcomes.

Five key challenges facing girls that were consistently raised in the quantitative and qualitative survey data, and in the focus groups, across all three constituent groups. They are: (1) health, (2) sexual health, (3) violence and safety, (4) relationships: peers, peer pressure, and adults not knowing, and (5) education. This study explored the unique ways in which these issues affect girls, and girls in the Worcester area in particular. Each challenge will be discussed in detail in this section of our report.

Interpreting the Data

We determined these challenges based on comparisons across constituent groups, forms of data collection, and variations in question wording. In trying to assess what are the most pressing issues facing girls, we asked respondents similar questions worded in different ways. We presented participants with a list of challenges that might be relevant to them, and asked them to

rate their degree of importance in girls' lives. We also asked them to identify in their own words the two biggest problems facing girls. And to aid the Investing in Girls group in strategic planning, we asked participants to identify which issues were the most critical for adults in the community to pay attention to. We aimed to examine three perspectives by means of the following questions: (1) What do girls view as the most pressing problems facing girls as a group? (2) What do girls see as the most pressing issues affecting them as individuals? (3) What problems facing girls do girls feel adults have the ability to effectively change?

Are the problems girls cite as the biggest ones facing them the same ones they want adults in the community to pay attention to? Not entirely. For example, in response to the open-ended question, girls ranked peer pressure second among the biggest problems facing girls, but only sixth in terms of the most important issues for adults in the community to pay attention to. Perhaps girls do not believe that adults can or will do anything to change peer pressure. Or perhaps--as demonstrated throughout this research--girls believe that adults need to become more attuned to the realities of girls' lives, watching and listening more carefully to understand what issues they are dealing with. Unless they perceive adults as aware of the problems they face in their peer networks, girls may be less likely to identify adults as advocates or potential problem solvers in the peer realm.

In listening to the girls' voices coming through this study, it may be our first inclination to interpret girls as being confused or sending mixed messages. However, we interpret data that may seem contradictory to reflect the complexity of the issues, not confusion or ambiguity. The same things that are sources of happiness for girls, such as relationships with others, can also cause worry, stress, and strife. The apparent contradictions in the data underscore the diversity of Worcester area girls—the intricacy of how girls experience the issues highlighted in this report—and the importance of not painting girls' picture with a narrow brush.

Were girls, parents and providers in agreement about what the biggest problems or issues facing girls are? Generally, yes; but some variation across groups was evident, as noted throughout the key findings. One of the reasons for variation is that parents may not feel that the issues they are concerned about for girls in general are the same issues that are affecting their own daughters. For example, 65% of parents indicated that they are satisfied with the sex education their daughters are receiving, and they did not rank sex education as among the most important issues for adults to pay attention to. Yet parents prioritized sex education as the second most important issue or problem facing girls as a group.

Similarly, there were differences between issues cited as paramount to girls as a group, and those important to them as individuals. Some might be more relevant to certain girls than others. Or girls may choose not to reveal in a survey matters that they consider private. In addition, certain issues might be seen not as "girls' issues" so much as "family issues." For example, given that poverty is a prevalent challenge for many Worcester area families with children, relative to other topics in this study financial concerns[2] were rated low.

While recreation[3] did not emerge as a major concern facing girls as a group, concerns were identified about related issues—specifically, transportation to and from out-of-school time programs, communication in an easily accessible format with parents and schools about existing programs, and a desire for more out-of-school time programs to address specific topic areas where there is a lack (e.g., sports and fitness, career and life planning programs, comprehensive sexual education). That recreation did not emerge as a problem or issue facing girls likely indicates that, relatively speaking, recreation is seen primarily as a support rather than a problem.

Community tension[4] did not arise as a major finding in this study relative to other issues—it was not identified by any parents as one of the top two problems facing girls, and was named as such by only 1% of girls. Only 5% of girls and parents, and 8% of providers, indicated that this is one of the two top issues that adults in the Worcester area community need to address. And of the twelve problems facing girls that we highlighted in our survey and asked participants to rate based on degree of importance to girls, community tension had the lowest rating across all three constituent groups.

This finding does not indicate the absence of community tension in the Worcester area. It may be that community tension exists but was not on people's minds in the context of a study on girls (as appears to have been the case for financial issues). Some participants were more concerned about this issue than others. Our results showed that Hispanic/Latina and Black girls are more concerned about community tension than White girls, and that Latino providers are more likely to report it as an important concern. In light of the issues included in the definition of community tension in this survey, one interpretation of this finding is that the ratings of Hispanic/Latina and Black girls were higher because individual and institutional racism disproportionately impacts people of color, so they are more aware than White people of community tension based on issues of race. Our data also showed that younger girls are more likely than older girls to say that

community tension is important for adults to pay attention to, which may be interpreted in multiple ways: it may indicate that there is more tension among younger than older youth; that younger girls are more tuned in to community tension than older girls; and/or that younger girls are more willing than older girls to speak out about problems, even those shrouded in silence (Gilligan, 1990a, 1990b).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Being a Middle-School Girl

When asked about the advantages and disadvantages of being a middle-school girl, girls' responses centered on the pros and cons of four age-related themes (see Table 5):

Table 5: Advantages and Disadvantages of Being a Middle-School Girl

THEME	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Increased Independence & Responsibility	-New-found freedoms -Seen as more grown up -Trust and respect of adult -Special privileges	-More responsibility -Accountability to others -School is harder -Limited freedom
Relationships with Peers	-More time with friends -Fun social activities	-Relational aggression/ "drama" between girls -Distrust among friends -Sexual harassment
Body Changes	-Clothing and fashion freedom and beautifying activities -Pride in physical appearance	-Menstruation -Puberty
Boys	-Attention from/involvement with boys	-Not having a boyfriend -Not being allowed to date -Fear of rejection -Boys adding complications to friendships with girls

Highlighting the theme of transitions, many of the perceived advantages and disadvantages of being a middle-school girl are age specific. While girls appreciate many aspects of growing up, they are also struggling to cope with some of these aspects. They yearn for access to many of the "perks" associated with being older, yet they want to maintain the less stressful benefits of being young (such as having limited responsibility). Girls' appreciation of the increased trust and respect they sense from the adults in their lives seems to be not only about their desire for material gains, but an indication of their readiness to enter into more reciprocal adult relationships.

The centrality of relationships in girls' lives, with family, peers, and unrelated adults, is also evident in all four issues, as it will be throughout each of the key findings in this report.

How Life would be Different as a Boy

One question on the survey assessed girls' perceptions of how being a girl shapes their daily experiences and their lives overall. When girls were asked how they thought their lives might be different if they were boys, the top three themes that emerged were appearance, physical changes, and freedom and independence. Specifically, girls feel that if they were boys, they would be less concerned with issues related to physical appearance such as what they wear, how they look, and being judged by others in terms of these aspects of their appearance. Second, girls noted no longer having to deal with menstruation, which they perceive as the number one privilege of being a boy. Finally, girls reported the belief that if they were boys, they would benefit from having more freedom and independence, especially with regard to their parents.

Health, sexual health, violence, relationships, and education are issues that affect all of our lives in varying ways and degrees. But as this report indicates, these issues affect middle-school girls uniquely. In searching for ways to serve as resources, allies, and advocates for girls, these complexities are insightful. No one can help us better understand the challenges girls face than girls themselves.
They are the experts on their own lives.

Key Challenge #1

HEALTH

"Sadness, loneliness, and depression—these are 'quiet' issues and may not be as sensational as other problems, and therefore may go unnoticed."
White female parent of a 5th grade middle-school girl

KEY FINDINGS

- Girls, parents, and providers all recognize the centrality of health to girls' well-being.
- Girls are experiencing a range of issues related to mental health, and the adults in their lives want more resources and supports to increase girls' resilience.
- Reflecting national trends, concern with physical appearance features prominently in girls' everyday lives.
- Physical and emotional changes associated with puberty are a source of stress for girls.
- Sports opportunities for girls are limited, and girls want more.
- Prevention and intervention-focused programs are needed.

RELEVANT NATIONAL AND LOCAL RESEARCH

Health is a multifaceted, cross-cutting issue in girls' lives. It is a gendered issue: some health issues are more prominent among girls than boys.

Mental Health

The mental health of middle-school girls is a major concern nationally. It is not uncommon for girls who have been healthy and psychologically resilient to suddenly experience a "drop in self-esteem" along with depression, thoughts of suicide, poor body image, eating disorders, cutting and other types of body maiming, or other mental health disorders or behaviors that threaten their well-being (Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005; Machioan, 2005; Minnesota Women's Fund, 1990). Still other girls begin to abuse substances like alcohol or drugs, or they "act out" by engaging in shoplifting, skipping school, physical fights, or risky sexual behavior. These manifestations of mental health challenges in girls often reflect larger cultural problems such as gender, racial, and socioeconomic inequities, and a media-based culture that devalues and

sexualizes girls and women (APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007; Donnerstein & Smith, 2001; Kilbourne, 1999; Merskin, 2004; Shields & Heinecken, 2002). Many mental health issues go untreated; one study reports that 70% of children who need mental health services do not receive them (Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2006).

> "I don't like the media we have. I am a person, but in the rap lyrics I am degraded as a female. Men choose the way [I'm supposed to] look."
> African American/Black girl, 7th grade

Harris Interactive/Girls Incorporated (2000) found that 60% of girls often feel stressed and 33% often feel sad and unhappy, and that older girls were more likely than younger to describe themselves as stressed and unhappy. In concert with these trends, Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance (YRBS) data are troubling. Thirty-seven percent of 9th grade girls report feeling sad or helpless almost every day for more than two weeks. Among Hispanic females, the proportion is a shocking 47%, versus 33% White females and 37% Black females. Twenty-seven percent of 9th grade females have seriously considered attempting suicide in the past twelve months. In Massachusetts, 12% of girls have smoked before age 13; 19% have tried alcohol, and 7% have tried marijuana (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006), and the YRBS survey concluded that girls who engage in one high-risk or health-compromising behavior are often likely to engage in other risk behaviors too (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006). Girls who fear for their safety have more negative attitudes and are at higher risk for mental health problems than girls who feel safe in their home and school life (Schoenberg, Riggins, & Salmond, 2003).

Physical Appearance, Body Image, and Eating

Girls' physical appearance is disproportionately valued by our culture and by girls, so it is intricately tied to girls' self-esteem (Harris Interactive/Girls Incorporated, 2006; Harter, 1982; AAUW, 1991; APA Task Force, 2007). A recent study of more than 1,000 girls concluded that a girl's appearance is still her most important asset (Harris Interactive/ Girls Incorporated, 2006). The link between media viewing, poor body image, eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression is well documented (APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007; Harter, 1998; Morry & Staska, 2001). Unrealistic, media-driven beauty standards have a particularly potent effect on girls. In addition, girls in school are regularly subject to and engage in evaluation of their appearance and bodies, which has consequences for their self-esteem (Eder, Evans, & Parker, 1995) and thus for their health.

"Girls feel pressured to be model thin, and go about it all the wrong ways."
White girl, 8th grade

Not surprisingly, eating disorders and disordered eating are prevalent among females. More than 90% of clinical cases of anorexia and bulimia are in girls and women and typically begin in adolescence (APA, 2000). If disordered eating such as binge eating, not eating when hungry, and eating unhealthy foods is included, the numbers are staggering: 18% of high school girls report binging and purging (Collins, 2001). Over 25% of 12th grade girls have tried diet pills (Collins, 2002B). Further, one third of girls aged 8-17 have a distorted perception of their weight (Schoenberg, Salmond, & Fleshman, 2006).

Additionally, an increasing number of girls are obese or are at risk for becoming obese (Schoenberg et al., 2006), putting them at risk for other health issues and stigmatization (Meich, Kumanyika, Stettler, Link, Phelan, & Chang, 2006). In Massachusetts, more youth are overweight or at risk for being overweight than ever before (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006).

Nationally, low-income girls and girls of color are at particular risk for being overweight (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006; Schoenberg et al., 2006). Twenty percent of Latino girls aged 11-17, 18% of African American girls, 11% of White girls, and 4% of Asian girls are currently overweight (Schoenberg, et al., 2006). As a group, a higher proportion of Black girls than White girls are overweight; however, they are also more likely to report higher body satisfaction, demonstrating that standards of beauty are culturally defined (Milkie, 1999; Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2004).

Sports

Sports are a "protective factor" and promote girls' health. Girls who play sports are more likely to have a positive body image (Collins, 2002c), higher grades and lower dropout rates (McHale, Crouter, & Tucker, 2001), higher self-esteem, and lower incidence of early engagement in sexual activity (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000; Sabo, Miller, Farrell, Melnick, & Barnes, 1999). Girls in Massachusetts are relatively active; 63% of high school girls have engaged in moderate exercise in the past week (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006). However, research has demonstrated that girls who engage in healthy physical activity are sometimes motivated by a desire to look good and be popular rather than an interest in health per se (Schoenberg et al, 2006).

Girls' level of physical activity tends to decline as they get older. Fifty-seven percent of 8- to 10-year-old girls are active physically each day versus 19% of 16- to 17-year-olds, with African

American and White girls most likely to exercise and Latina girls least likely to do so (Schoenberg et al, 2006).

Studies show that girls participate in sports at half the rate of boys (Play Across Boston, 2001) and that urban youth have one third the opportunities of their suburban counterparts (National Women's Law Center and Harvard Prevention Research Center on Nutrition and Physical Activity, 2004). It is likely that the same trends hold in the Worcester area, and that girls in Greater Worcester have more sports opportunities than city of Worcester girls, but that overall, the number of local girls participating in organized sports is low. As pointed out by the executive director of the Girls' Coalition of Greater Boston, "When girls live in neighborhoods with more McDonald's than grocery stores, it's inevitably more challenging to have a nutritious diet. And when girls do not feel safe in their neighborhoods, it's harder for them to seek out sports and other activities that benefit their physical health" (Kane, 2007).

WHERE THE GIRLS ARE: FINDINGS FROM WORCESTER

On the surveys used in this study, health was defined as:

- Self-esteem
- Body image/eating disorders
- Sadness/loneliness/depression
- Self-harm/cutting
- Drugs/alcohol
- Physical health/disabilities
- Stress

Encouraging News

a) Awareness—Girls, parents, and providers recognize the fundamental role of health in girls' lives. Various aspects of girls' health came to the forefront in this study. For example, in response to an open-ended question, sexual health and sex education emerged as the #1 issue that girls requested adults pay attention to; providers rated mental health issues as the most important for adults to prioritize in their efforts to help girls; and 85% of parents and providers rated health as "extremely important" in girls' lives.

b) Sports—Girls in the Worcester area want more opportunities to engage in sports and enhance their fitness. In light of the national obesity epidemic, the fact that many Worcester area girls fit the profile of those most at risk for obesity, and the fact that exercise offers many potential benefits, this desire is cause for celebration. In an open-ended question, approximately 10% of girls said that participating in sports was one of the best things about being a middle-school girl. Sports and fitness programs were the #1 choice of girls and parents in terms of the types of new

programs they would like to see. And parents identified sports as among the top three "people, things, or activities" that make their daughters feel good about themselves.

***c) Substance Abuse*—**Substance abuse does not appear to be a major issue among middle school girls in the Worcester area--at least, it did not emerge in this study as a source of primary concern. The reason for this finding is unclear.

Challenges and Concerns

***a) Mental Health Issues*—**One third of parents identified mental health as one of the two most serious problems facing girls. As they defined it, mental health includes depression, loneliness, anxiety, self-esteem and self-image, body image, and eating disorders. Likewise, 34% of providers viewed mental health as one of the two most prominent issues facing girls. They described the issues slightly differently from parents—depression often masked as anger, and lack of support and resources to help girls cope with difficult social circumstances and life changes.

Twenty-one percent of parents said they struggle with how to instill self-respect and security in their middle-school daughters. In the words of a parent, one challenge of raising a middle-school girl today is "helping her build and maintain her self-esteem in the face of adversity such as tension in peer relationships, bullying, and sexual harassment."

***b) Preoccupation with Appearance*—**Three quarters of parents and one fifth of providers said that concern about appearance, including beauty, clothing, and fashion, weight, body image, and braces is one of the top three issues their girls worry about most. The most frequently cited worry by girls was also appearance, but they defined it slightly differently: as encompassing body image, dieting, being judged by boys, and appearing "sexy." Forty-seven percent of parents said pressure to wear a certain kind of clothing and accessories is the primary type of peer pressure exerted on girls.

The underlying concern here is the opportunity cost of this obsession with appearance and its effect on body image, self-image, and other types of health such as mental and intellectual health. Excess focus on appearance is a distraction that takes away from energy for academics, sports and other extracurricular activities, genuine relationships, and valuing oneself for other attributes.

"How can you make us feel better about our appearance?"
African American/Black girl, 7th grade

c*) Periods and Pimples*—Menstruation and its associated symptoms were cited as the principal disadvantage of being a middle-schooler. Also mentioned were other age-related changes such as acne, body changes, fluctuating emotions, and breast development. Latina girls in one focus group expressed a desire to know more about health in general, and matters associated with puberty in particular. This request appears to be related to the attention that they are getting from boys: because boys are suddenly interested in them and their bodies, girls feel self-conscious and confused.

d) Physical Health—In response to an open-ended survey question, 17% of girls reported physical health as one of the biggest problems affecting girls as a group, including weight, overall health and fitness, and getting sick as a result of stress.

> "Transitions and changes and education—too much new pressure from multiple areas is what gets girls crazy." White girl, 8th grade

e) *Prevention of Problems*—Providers and parents both expressed concern that in the Worcester area, the focus seems to be on intervention, not on prevention of problems. They complained that since girls in school don't get attention until there is a major problem, treatable issues such as depression grow into larger, more critical issues such as suicidality. Providers viewing health care as a continuum ranging from prevention to intervention clearly expressed a need for more programs on the prevention end.

> "Girls are dealing with adversity in negative/aggressive ways. They need to learn positive actions."
> White female, health/mental health provider

TURNING GAPS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Create additional prevention-focused mental health resources and training to supplement existing intervention-focused support and resources.

Establish more sports programs for local girls, who are clamoring for them.

Listen to girls, parents, and providers who say they want new programs for girls that focus on health and wellness, including fitness, stress reduction, healthy eating, menstruation, and safe sex.

Provide girls with concrete information about the girl-specific changes and challenges they experience with puberty, including physical, emotional, and social components. They need opportunities to discuss these experiences openly and explore their feelings about them.

Help girls resist toxic cultural messages by teaching them media-literacy skills that promote critical thinking about unhealthy sociocultural standards of female beauty and body ideals.

Discuss the powerful cultural aspect of girls' health issues, to empower girls who may otherwise see their individual problems as theirs alone. Help girls, their families, and their advocates to identify and build on girls' strengths and resilience in order to mitigate those negative cultural factors.

Direct new funding to girl-focused health programs such as those currently supported by the Women's Initiative of the United Way and the Fred Harris Daniels Foundation. For example, the Girls Promoting Safety (GPS) program, funded by the Women's Initiative, is a collaboration between Girls Incorporated, the YWCA, the Worcester Public Schools, and YouthNet. This curriculum for Worcester middle-school girls addresses health, nutrition and body image, safety and violence, self-defense, healthy relationships, recreation, and the transition into middle school.

Key Challenge #2

SEXUAL HEALTH

"[We need] sexual health because girls are not doing safe things sometimes."

White girl, 7th grade

KEY FINDINGS

- Girls in Greater Worcester want and need more sex education.
- Menstruation and puberty are prominent in girls' minds.
- Girls express concern about sexual harassment. They report that boys sometimes take advantage of them sexually and violently.
- Girls feel pressured to have sex, and many are sexually active.
- Girls are concerned about unsafe sex, access to birth control, and unintended pregnancy.
- Girls need spaces where they can explore their sexual feelings and identities.
- The needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning girls are rarely addressed.

RELEVANT NATIONAL AND LOCAL RESEARCH

Developmentally, middle-school girls are usually experiencing the onset of menses and the range of body changes that occur with puberty. They are also beginning to feel romantic inclinations toward peers, and are exploring their sexual identities and orientations. All of these factors contribute to the prominence of sexual health as a theme in the lives of middle-school girls. In 2006, a Girls Incorporated survey found that 60% of high-school girls and 40% of middle-school girls worry about sex and romantic relationships. Further, 20% of middle-school girls said they worry about being pressured to have sex and 8% worry about getting pregnant (Harris Interactive/Girls Incorporated, 2006).

As discussed in the previous section on health, and as noted by providers in particular, girls' fashions and portrayals of girls in the media are increasingly sexualized. Girls are experiencing pressure to engage in sexual activity at earlier ages than in the past, and the level of sexual experimentation is more advanced. More teens are engaging in oral sex, often with casual partners (Eagan, 2005). In the words of one young woman, "Giving head [i.e., oral sex] is the new goodnight kiss." Research shows that oral sex is not considered by many youth to "count as sex."

Sexually active teenagers are at risk; they have the highest rate of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) of any age group in the country (Cates et al., 2004) and certainly risk unintended pregnancy. But education can help with prevention. According to the YRBS data, adolescents in Massachusetts who receive HIV/AIDS education in school engage in less sexually risky behavior than those who have not (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006). For instance, among sexually active students, those who have been taught how to use a condom are significantly more likely to report actually using one (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006).

Nationally, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's YRBS data, 29% of 9th grade girls and 62% of 12th grade girls have had sexual intercourse. The percentage of girls who have had sexual intercourse before age 13 is higher among younger students than older (5% of 9th grade girls compared with 2% of 12th grade girls), possibly indicating an upward trend. The percentage is also higher among Black than White or Hispanic girls (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). Twenty percent of 12th grade girls and 23% of 12th grade boys report having had four or more partners during their lives (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006).

When examining these statistics, it is important to remember that many girls have been coerced into sexual activity. The prevalence of sexual abuse,[5] including coercion, incest, rape by a family friend or relative, sexual assault, date rape, partner violence, stranger rape, or gang rape, is far better documented than in previous years, but most likely is still underreported. Thirteen percent of girls who have had initial sex before age 15 describe it as "nonvoluntary," with more describing it as "relatively unwanted" (Albert, Brown, & Flanigan, 2003). Adolescent girls who have been victimized in the past, especially if they have been sexually harassed or violently victimized by male peers, are at greater risk for psychological, physical, and sexual revictimization in their dating relationships (Gagne, Lavoie, & Hebert, 2004). The effects of sexual assault are long lasting and far reaching (Feuereisen, 2005).

Parents are often misinformed about the realities of their children's sexual activities. Only about one third of parents with sexually active children aged 14 or younger know that their child has had sex (Albert et al, 2003).

As developmental psychologist Deborah Tolman (2002) has pointed out, girls in this culture are given few safe spaces to make sense of their sexual feelings or to develop positive attitudes about their sexuality and sexual desire. When adults focus discussion with girls primarily on sexual

intercourse rather than on healthy sexual development and desire, girls are left feeling fear, confusion, shame, and isolation (Tolman, 2002).

WHERE THE GIRLS ARE: FINDINGS FROM WORCESTER

On the surveys used in this study, sexual health was defined as:

- Puberty/body changes
- Sex
- Pressure to have sex
- Teen pregnancy
- Lack of information about sex/reproductive health
- Access to birth control
- Emerging sexual feelings
- Sexual orientation/gender identity questions

Encouraging News

a) ***Sex education***--There is noticeable interest in – and call for – movement around the topic of youth sexuality and sex education in the Worcester area. The Healthy Options for Prevention and Education (HOPE) Coalition peer leaders found sexuality education an important need when they conducted a survey of youth issues in Worcester in 2001 (HOPE Information Packet, 2002). In response, they created a video.

"I like that I am allowed to make more decisions. I am becoming more responsible."
White girl, 7th grade

b) *Teen pregnancy rates*--Massachusetts teen pregnancy rates are lower than the national average and like the national rate, are on the decline, although there are variations by municipality (Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy, 2006). The teen birth rate in Worcester (for girls aged 15-19) was 5.6% in 1994, 3.8% in 2003, and 3.6% in 2004 (Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy, 2006). According to MassCHIP (Massachusetts Community Health Information Profile, 2007), in 2005 there were 42 births to White teenage mothers (aged 10-17), 10 births to Black teenage mothers, and 34 births to Hispanic teenage mothers in Worcester.

Challenges and Concerns

***a) Not enough sex education*—**Girls, parents, and providers identified sexual health as the number one problem affecting girls. Girls in this study were *unequivocal* about their need and desire for more information and discussion about sex and sexual health.

Listening to girls is critical in a climate where girls are experiencing pressure to have sex and *are* having sex regardless of whether or not resources exist. In both focus groups and surveys, girls indicated that they lack information about sexual health, are confused about sex, and have concerns about access to birth control and the risk of pregnancy. In our study, Latina girls were especially concerned about sexual health, compared to other racial/ethnic groups; Caucasian girls were less concerned. Worcester girls were more likely than Greater Worcester girls to report sex education as their biggest problem.

Girls and providers both underscored the importance of this issue by ***designating sexual health as the number one issue that they want adults to address.*** Providers expressed concern that adults are often unwilling to acknowledge that young girls may be sexually active.

In striking contrast, only seven parents of 58 named sexual health as among the top issues that adults in the community should pay attention to, even though 75% of parents rated sexual health as an "extremely important" issue or problem affecting girls and many reported dissatisfaction with the sexual health curriculum in their daughters' schools. Forty-two percent of parents felt that the curriculum was not comprehensive enough, not reflective of girls' realities with regard to sex, neglectful of (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning) issues, and lacking in communication with parents. Parents may be ambivalent about their daughters' sexuality and sexual education, or even about having conversations with them regarding sex. They may also be ambivalent about who should teach their children—schools, families, religious institutions, or peers.

Girls indicated that adults need to be willing to believe girls about what is really happening, what is best for them, and what they need; girls have knowledge, experience, and perspective that adults cannot have.

***b) Need more attention to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) issues*—**A recent needs assessment of the LGBTQ community for the Greater Worcester Community Foundation found that youth support, safety, and parent information to support GLBT youth are high priorities (Freiwirth & Wilbur, 2006). "The data revealed that the current youth programs are not fully able to address the need for GLBT youth support in Worcester County, and that expanded and new GLBT youth programs are urgently needed" (Freiwirth & Wilbur, 2006, p. 24). In a similar vein, when asked what subpopulations of girls have needs that

are unmet by existing local programs, provider respondents in this study most frequently named GLBTQ youth.

***c) Sexual safety*—**Among the perceived disadvantages of being a middle-school girl, girls identified sexual harassment, such as boys making unwanted physical advances, touching them, whistling and catcalling, and "acting like perverts." In one girls' focus group, the girls were very explicit about feeling that boys disrespect girls often. In the words of one girl, "A boy could touch you in the wrong spot, and you can tell adults, but they keep doing it. Sexual harassment and touching is happening."

Girls indicated they want to feel safe and to celebrate their sexuality in ways that are comfortable for them. They want to feel empowered to say no—and to say yes. Girls recognized the importance of sex education and indicated a desire for more opportunities to talk with adults who are willing to enter into reality-based conversations about this sensitive topic. But they said they want more than just designated "safe spaces"; they want safety in the everyday spaces of their lives.

TURNING GAPS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Give girls credit for their wisdom and leadership in asking adults for more information and for in-depth conversations about sex and body changes that occur with puberty, such as menstruation.

Step up to the plate and answer girls' call to action. Offer more comprehensive sex education opportunities in and out of school.

Provide safe spaces and other encouragements for girls and their adult allies to talk in depth about complex issues such as diverse sexual identities.

Be willing, as adult community members, to listen to girls talk about what is really happening sexually and what will help them, even if it's not necessarily what you think "should" be happening.

Work with girls to create a safer community. Educate girls--and boys--about sexual harassment, assault, and abuse in ways that do not victimize girls and/or demonize boys. Empower girls to say no to harassment, abuse, and pressure, and to say yes to being physically, emotionally, and sexually safe, comfortable, and confident.

Key Challenge #3

VIOLENCE AND SAFETY

"[Living in Worcester, I worry about] personal safety for my daughter—for example, out walking in the neighborhood."

White female parent of a 7th grade girl

KEY FINDINGS

- Girls perceive violence, including physical fighting and gangs, as a dominant concern in their lives and want adults to prioritize it.
- Adults worry about girls' safety in the community, citing violence, gangs, crime, poverty, and a dearth of safe spaces for girls.
- Parents, providers, and girls report concerns about safe transportation for girls and its effect on their access to community resources.
- Girls' relationships with one another are sometimes characterized by emotional violence, conceptualized by girls as "drama."
- Social and emotional violence in the peer group, such as gossip, judgment, and bullying, makes the school climate unsafe.
- Girls know that adults in the community care about them and they value this care.

RELEVANT NATIONAL AND LOCAL RESEARCH

For healthy development, girls need to be physically and emotionally safe. When girls have spaces where their safety is virtually guaranteed, they have the freedom to focus on developing age-appropriate physical, intellectual, and social-emotional skills, such as playing games and sports, cultivating unique interests and talents, developing healthy relationships, and exploring the community around them. Violence--whether physical, emotional, or sexual--threatens girls' ability to enjoy life and develop to their full potential.

Girls growing up in families or communities with tension or violence are at risk for delinquency, dropping out of school, risky behaviors, substance abuse, and injury to self or others. However, a growing body of research is identifying factors that contribute to resiliency in youth, a resiliency that leads to positive developmental outcomes despite adverse circumstances.

Violence and safety are intricately intertwined. In this study, we viewed safety and violence as opposite ends of a continuum, with safety defined as the absence of and preclusion of violence, and violence defined as requiring intervention.

The past five years have seen increased national and local attention to girls as both victims and perpetrators of violence. Many girls experience violence as part of their daily lives at home, in

the community, or in school. Exposure to violence can contribute to mental health issues, as well as to erratic school attendance and achievement. The Massachusetts YRBS data indicate that students who are engaged in violent behaviors, either as victims or perpetrators, are less likely to succeed in school (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006). Middle school is often the time when deviant peer groups coalesce, and youth who display antisocial behavior in middle school are most at risk for later gang involvement (Dishion, Nelson, & Yasui, 2005).

Girls who are victims of violence are likely to become violent themselves. While not all victims become violent, in order to understand what appears to be an increase in aggressive behavior in girls, it is helpful to consider the types of violence that girls experience.

Girls as Victims of Violence

Girls experience different kinds of violence. Sexual violence, as discussed in the section of this report on sexual health, is one example. Violence among dating partners is a serious problem for adolescent girls. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2006), 9% of high-school students across the nation report being physically hurt by their boyfriend or girlfriend in the last year. Based on self-report data, 12% of African American high school girls, 9% of Hispanic high school girls, and 9% of white high school girls reported dating violence in the past year.

Many times, girls' criminal behaviors can be viewed as acts of resistance to the abuse and victimization they are experiencing; examples are running away from an abusive home or doing illegal drugs to numb the pain of being abused or isolated (Herrera, 2003). An estimated 896,000 children in the United States are victims of neglect and abuse; 52% of them are girls. Sixty-one percent of child maltreatment victims suffer neglect, 19% are physically abused, 10% are sexually abused, and 7% are emotionally or psychologically maltreated (Children's Bureau, 2004). The highest percentage of victims of rape and sexual assault are youth between the ages of 12 and 19 (Catalano, 2003); three in four adolescents who were victims of sexual assault knew their assaulters well. Almost 30% of girls aged 12-17 who have been victims of sexual assault will suffer post traumatic stress disorder. Witnessing violence can also have detrimental effects on children; approximately 40% of adolescents are afflicted by this experience (National Institute of Justice, 2003).

A rarely considered but frighteningly frequent form of violence perpetrated against adolescent girls is prostitution. Research suggests that the typical age for being seduced into "the Life" is 13 or 14. According to some authorities, that age is falling to 10 or 11 (Friedman, 2005). Each year

between 244,000 and 325,000 American children and youth are vulnerable to becoming victims of various types of sexual exploitation, including child pornography, juvenile prostitution, and sex-related trafficking (Estes & Weiner, 2001).

As teens use the internet more and more for communication, concerns are growing about the potential for them to be exploited or placed in danger. Teenage girls on the internet are vulnerable. Recent media exposés have shown the prevalence of sexual predators seeking sex with children and adolescents through online chat rooms. Girls report being exposed to pornography on the internet and are unsure of the severity of the consequences for online crime. Further, some girls present themselves as older and post provocative pictures as well as personal information on sites like MySpace.com (Girl Scouts, 2002).

> "Web 2.0 was made for middle school girls--social networking, cliques, uncensored opportunity to "talk" and have what seem to be safe crushes. Lots of concerns here as well as benefits."
>
> White male, nonprofit administrator

In schools and on the streets of their communities, girls are also subject to verbal and physical sexual harassment, assault, robbery, and other forms of violence. Nationally, 6 percent of female high school students reported having been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property within the past year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). Nine percent of Black, 10% of Hispanic, and 5% of White females reported not going to school once or more often during a 30-day period because they felt they would be unsafe at school or on their way to or from school. Among females, this reason for missing school was highest among 9th grade females (8%). Girls also experience emotional violence in their relationships with one another, as discussed in the section below on girls and relationships. Moreover, girls who are victims of violence are likely to become violent themselves.

Girls as Perpetrators of Violence and Crime

In 2004, one third of arrests made by the Worcester Police Department of youth under the age of 17 were girls (Worcester Research Bureau, 2005). Among those suspended in Worcester public middle schools in 2004-2005 and in 2005-2006, one third were girls (Worcester Public Schools, 2006). Compared to the state of Massachusetts, Worcester county has a higher proportion of girls among the total population of youth committed to the Department of Youth Services (Tansi/Department of Youth Services, 2006). Furthermore, the proportion of girls committed increased on both the state level and the city level between 2001 and 2005 (Tansi/Department of Youth Services, 2006).

More girls are part of the juvenile justice system than ever before. In Massachusetts, the number of girls in custody of the Department of Youth Services (juvenile corrections) increased by 168% from 1995 to 2005 (Citizens for Juvenile Justice, 2005). Across the nation, adolescent girls account for more than 25% of arrests of young people (Collins, 2002a). But serious violent incidents constitute a very small proportion of the total infractions that are the basis for detention for girls. As of 2001, the fastest-growing segment of girls in the juvenile justice system was girls charged with assault Part of the reason for this increase is that behaviors that were once tolerated, such as relational conflicts with family members, are now criminalized (e.g., adolescents are charged with aggravated assault) (American Bar Association, 2001).

Girls of color are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system, with African American girls represented at three times the rate of their presence in the general population and Latina girls at twice their rate (Citizens for Juvenile Justice, 2005). And Black girls are more likely than White girls to be detained (Porter, 2000; Seahill, 2000). It is important to recognize the role of racism and sexism in the overrepresentation of girls of color being arrested and detained (Villarruel & Walker, 2002; Sherman, 2003).

Once in the system, girls are held in juvenile detention facilities that operate with rules, policies, rehabilitation and recreational programs, and personnel teams designed for boys. Within this system, girls' unique needs are not being met, and they are often denied the procedural or programmatic options that are offered to boys (Levick & Sherman, 2003).

A history of abuse and mental health related issues such as depression and lack of social support puts girls at risk for juvenile delinquency and on a path toward the juvenile justice system (Levick & Sherman, 2003). Seventy percent of girls in the system in Massachusetts report histories of physical or sexual abuse (Citizens for Juvenile Justice, 2005). Additionally, poor academic performance is a significant risk factor relating to early onset of delinquency (The Governor's Prevention Partnership, 2004).

Relationships and Relational Aggression among Girls

Friendships take on increasing importance in middle school and high school. Girls, especially, tend to place a lot of emphasis on social groups in these years. Close, authentic friendships have a variety of benefits for girls, including interpersonal skill development; an understanding of intimacy, sensitivity, and empathy for others; and increased resiliency. Good friendships are inherently satisfying and can help alleviate psychological distress, such as sadness and loneliness. And peer relations can provide stability in a child's life when there is an absence of stable, healthy relationships with parents (Berk, 2006).

Recent research has highlighted not only the strength and importance of female friendships in adolescence, but also the prevalence of "relational aggression," sometimes referred to as social or indirect aggression. It is characterized by manipulation and damage of peer relationships, through behaviors such as gossip and rumors intended to harm individuals and relationships, social exclusion, and threats to terminate a friendship (Brown, 2003; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2002). The forms of violence girls tend to practice are rooted in

relationships, and direct, physical aggression is less commonly exhibited by girls than relational aggression (Brown, 2003; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

One third of girls fear being teased in school, and 38% of girls worry about their emotional safety when spending time with peers (Schoenberg et al., 2003). In today's world, girls' relationally aggressive behavior is often carried out with the assistance of technology—for example, two girls instant messaging a huge group of acquaintances with a nasty rumor about a third girl, sending emails under the guise of being another girl, or posting socially incriminating photographs of a girl on the social networking website MySpace.com.

> "Little consideration has been given to the fact that a girl's social context, the options available to her, and the culture in which she lives will affect how she aggresses. No substantive consideration has been given to the fact that girlfighting might have something to do with the range of injustices and indignities girls experience in their daily lives."
>
> Lyn Mikel Brown (2003, p. 17), Developmental psychologist

Developmental psychologist Lyn Mikel Brown (2003) suggests that girls' relational aggression is fostered by social expectations for women that limit expressions of conflict and emphasize social connection, and that relationally aggressive behaviors are modeled for girls in what they see among women and in the girl-targeted media. Verbal and relational aggression can be socially isolating for girls and can lead to a devaluation of girls' self-appraisal (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001). Peer rejection and victimization both contribute to problems in emotional, behavioral, and academic adjustment (Lopez & DuBois, 2005), and friendships characterized by negative qualities tend to have a ripple effect, facilitating negative interactions with other peers and adults (Berndt, 2002).

Because finding true friends can be complicated for girls--34% of teenage girls worry about finding friends they can trust (Schoenberg et al., 2003)--families play an extremely important role in girls' development. Girls need a network of healthy relationships so that if and when they experience discord in one particular relationship, they remain connected to other people and feel supported, thereby avoiding a path to isolation, loneliness, and possibly depression and self-destructive behaviors.

A local study on middle-school girls and a 2005 Worcester Public Schools paper highlight the connection between victimization and violence for girls, and draw attention to the need for mental health services to address this connection (Pollastri & Cardemil, 2006; Worcester Public Schools, 2005).

Interventions are needed both to prevent peer victimization and rejection, and to protect victims against negative behavioral outcomes (Lopez & DuBois, 2005). Adults can teach girls coping skills to deal with their anger in order to prevent relational aggression (Kluger, 2006), and they play a critical role in fostering resiliency in girls who have experienced relational aggression.

> "Girls are learning that it's OK to be mean and degrade others, and they will carry that belief into adulthood and the scars into adulthood for the victims of bullying. Parents, teachers, adults in the community can take action to help with this issue."
> White/Hispanic/Latina/Black/African American girls' service provider

Psychologist Carol Gilligan (1996) suggests that women can help girls learn how to express a full range of emotions in ways that are not unnecessarily risky to themselves or harmful to others. There is ample evidence that positive relationships between girls and adult women can be mutually enhancing (Debold, Wilson, & Malave, 1993; Spencer, 2006; Spencer, Jordan, & Sazama, 2004; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995). The key qualities of the women in these effective relationships are listening, understanding, and validation (Sullivan, 1996).

WHERE THE GIRLS ARE: FINDINGS FROM WORCESTER

On the surveys used in this study, violence and safety were defined as:

VIOLENCE:
- bullying, harassment, teasing
- date violence/rape
- teen prostitution
- emotional abuse
- physical abuse
- sexual abuse
- violent family relationships
- gang violence

SAFETY:
- safety being out in the community
- riding public transportation
- internet safety
- safety in school and after-school programs

Encouraging News

a) Girls feel that adults care about them—A resounding 79% of girls in this study reported believing that the adults in their families, schools, and communities care about them. They reported confidence that adults will help them if they need help, they are treated with respect by adults, and they

sense that adults are "looking out" for them to keep them safe and out of trouble. Presumably, girls' belief that adults care about them also provides a certain amount of security to girls who experience fear and violence in their lives.

> "I feel [that the adults in my community care about me] because if I am ever verbally hurt they stand up for me. Also, I can always trust them with problems."
> Asian girl, 6th grade

b) Special attention has been given to girls and violence in Worcester—The Mayor's Youth-At-Risk Task Force, the Worcester Public Schools, and local girl-serving agencies have each worked to draw attention to this issue. Outcomes include the creation of the Investing in Girls group, production of a paper on the increasing physical and emotional violence among female students (Worcester Public Schools, 2006), the directing of funds to programs specifically addressing girls' violence (e.g., the Women's Initiative of the United Way of Central Massachusetts on violence in the lives of middle-school girls), and the creation of several new antiviolence programs for girls.

Challenges and Concerns

a) Feeling unsafe and experiencing violence— Violence was ranked as a major issue in this study. Forty-three percent of girls, 68% of parents, and 71% of providers ranked violence as an "extremely important" issue facing middle-school girls in the Worcester area. One quarter of girls rated violence as one of the two biggest problems facing girls, and 23% of parents reiterated this sentiment.

Approximately 90% of both parents and providers rated safety as a problem for girls that is "somewhat important" or "extremely important." Of those parents and providers, 68% and 50%, respectively, said safety is "extremely important." Overall, Worcester parents rated safety a greater concern than Greater Worcester parents.

Girls indicated that they do not feel safe in the community, listing violence as the number two issue that adults in the community should prioritize. Providers echoed this sentiment. However, girls and providers differed in how they conceptualized the violence in the Worcester area that threatens girls. Girls wanted adults to address types of violence ranging from relationship violence to gangs to predators. From the perspective of providers, addressing violence and safety means starting a community dialogue about girls' safety and violence, ensuring girls' safety when they're out in the community, and addressing family violence and lack of safety in schools.

For girls who live in homes where they experience violence, being at home may be detrimental. Although our data did not ask directly about violence in the home, several girls hinted at this possibility (e.g., sexual harassment).

One third of parents reported that lack of safety in the community was a disadvantage of raising a middle-school girl in the Worcester area. They were concerned about the dangers of violence, gangs, crime, and lack of security in school, and worried about their daughters' security when walking in neighborhoods they considered to be unsafe. Several study participants also hinted at

violence near their homes. Kids who live in neighborhoods perceived as "bad" (i.e., dangerous) may be hindered from participating in out-of-school time activities. One provider in a focus group commented on the connection between girls' safety in their neighborhoods and their ability to socialize. "Many kids go home, close the door [to their home], and never open it."

Girls reported that school is not a safe place, citing gangs, physical fights, weapons, and fears of being hurt themselves or seeing their friends hurt in school. Parents' and providers' concerns echoed those of girls. Additionally, girls identified experiences of being labeled, judged, teased, excluded, and being the subject of or involved in the telling of rumors and gossip among peers. As discussed in more detail in the sexual education section of this report, sexual harassment is also a problem girls reported experiencing in school. In one focus group discussion with girls, fear of rape and bodily harm was a dominant theme.

> "There is too much violence; most of the violence is boys. Boys don't respect girls; it's a big problem. It's good for your parents to know if you get into fights so you don't get hurt. They usually find out, but sometimes not."
>
> Hispanic/Latina girl, 8th grade

b) Access to safe, convenient, and affordable transportation—Fear of violence affects girls' mobility. Girls have less freedom to be out and about in the community than do their male peers because of heightened fears about their safety. For example, a local study found that in Worcester, girls have less freedom to go to a park.on their own than do boys. Seventy-four percent of girls aged 8-12 reported that they are accompanied by a family member when going to a park; only 51% of boys reported the same. Interestingly, more girls than boys frequent the parks—42% of girls surveyed compared to 29% of boys (Levenson, 2004). In our study, transportation emerged as an issue that for girls is directly linked to safety, freedom, and access to community resources.

"If my daughter wants to walk somewhere, I require her to walk in groups of three or more; my son, who is younger, is required only to walk in groups of two or more. Don't ask me why."

African American parent of a 7th grade girl

When asked to identify obstacles to attending out-of-school time programs, 17% of girls said "getting to the program," and 19% of girls said "getting home from the program," underscoring transportation as an obstacle. Twenty-eight percent of parents indicated that getting to the program is a big obstacle for their daughters, while 14% felt that getting home from the program was a predicament. Providers in one focus group expressed the feeling that safety-related gaps in services affect girls differently than boys. They suggested, for example, that boys are more likely than girls to be able to walk to and from an out-of-school time program held off school property.

c) Emotional and physical violence in girls' relationships—"Drama" was named by girls as the third highest disadvantage of being a middle-school girl. Girls use the term "drama" to refer to fighting among girls, "problems" between friends such as some friends not liking others, competition among girls, and girls not being "true" friends. One fifth of parents cited their daughters' friendship issues, such as drama and being excluded, as challenges they themselves faced in parenting.

One quarter of parents listed peer relationships as a concern about their middle-school daughters; in this category they included cliques and exclusion, friendship fluctuations, and their daughters' safety while with their friends. Some parents noted that judgments made by girls of one another are more powerful than those that boys make of girls.

"Girls are being judged, whether by themselves or by others, all the time. And sometimes this is hard to put up with."

African American/Black girl, 8th grade

There is concern among study participants, especially adults, about the amount of violence among girls in Greater Worcester. (See Figure 5.)

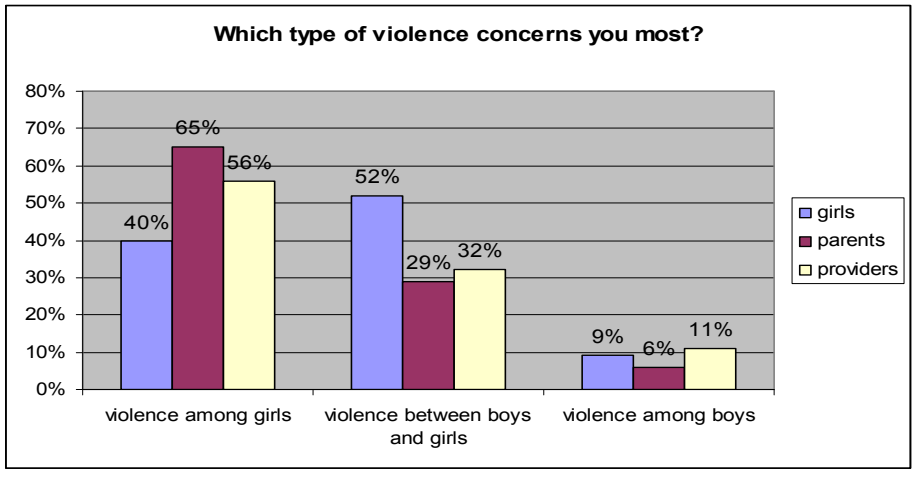


Figure 5: Type of Violence that is of Greatest Concern

Parents and providers rate violence among girls as their biggest concern with regard to violence—unlike girls, who rate boy-girl violence first. It is unclear from our data whether or not girls considered emotional/social violence among girls when they answered this question, or whether they were thinking only of physical and/or sexual violence. It is likely that, as Lyn Mikel Brown (2003) suggests, meanness is now considered to be "normal" behavior among girls, so girls in this study did not consider verbal violence when answering the question. Parents and providers, on the other hand, do consider relational/verbal aggression to be violence, and they are concerned about just how violent and harmful the "normal" relational aggression of middle-school girls can be.

> "Is important to differentiate girl-on-girl violence and boy-on-boy violence. Girl-on-girl violence has a different level of aggression. They don't drop it; it goes on and it's emotional. Often it's an issue over a boy and it simmers."
>
> Youth provider

TURNING GAPS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Address *violence among girls* as well as violence between girls and boys, and violence among boys, when creating curricula, action plans, campaigns, and policies about youth violence.

Take into account various forms of violence that youth are exposed to and perpetrate, including physical, emotional, sexual, and relational. Address the wide range of violent experiences with multi-pronged approaches.

Intensify efforts to prevent violence. Provide professional development trainings, community seminars, and literature to increase knowledge among parents, educators, law enforcement agencies, health providers, and service providers about the pathways to and early indications of victimization and violence.

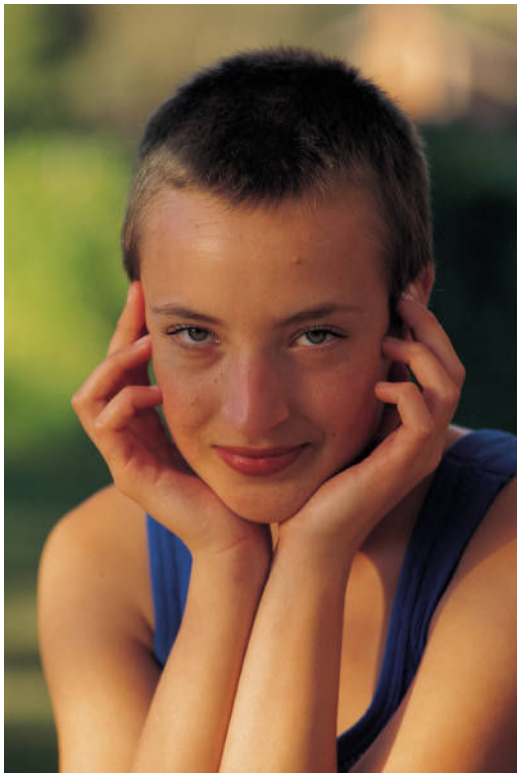
In addition to creating specially designated "safe spaces" for girls, ensure that everyday public and private spaces such as schools, neighborhoods, public transportation, and homes are places where girls can feel physically, sexually, and emotionally safe.

Collaborate across Worcester area public and private agencies to create a plan that ensures girls safe, affordable, and easily accessible transportation to school and out-of-school programs and services throughout the community.

Expand intervention programs for female victims of violence so that they are less likely, in turn, to become perpetrators of violence and criminal behavior. Girls who run away, for example, often need support and resources rather than criminalizing if they are to avoid one of the typical pathways to delinquency.

Allow girls to explore tension and conflict in their day-to-day relationships, particularly those with other girls. Help them express their feelings, and brainstorm ways to create healthier relationships. Teach them assertiveness and how it differs from aggressiveness, and help them to address conflict in more direct, healthy ways. Let them know that relational aggression is violence.

Incorporate instruction about social competency into the core curriculum in middle schools, so that forging healthy relationships becomes an explicit topic of discussion and skill building for all girls and boys.



Key Challenge #4

RELATIONSHIPS

Peers, Peer Pressure, and Adults Not Knowing

"I believe the adults that I know, like teachers, parents, neighbors, etc. care about me because they're always trying to make me do better. They strive to help me accomplish something to the best of my ability, and listen to my problems and try and give reasonable answers for them."

African American/Black girl, 8th grade

KEY FINDINGS

- Girls' relationships with other girls are a source of happiness and support, as well as of worry, stress, and strife.
- Adults care about girls, and girls know and appreciate this fact.
- Romantic relationships with boys are both exciting and confusing.
- Girls, parents, and providers are all concerned that peer pressure leads girls to make unhealthy choices.
- Adults and community members are unaware of many of the day-to-day realities of girls' lives.
- Girls' families are an under-tapped resource. They serve as a source of support and feeling good for some girls, but are surprisingly absent in important ways.

RELEVANT NATIONAL AND LOCAL RESEARCH

In early adolescence, girls' relationships with others have critical implications for their health and well-being. Being accepted by peers takes on increasing importance. Girls begin to look outside of the family for cues on social norms. Relationship networks broaden and become more complex, and the quality of girls' relationships with others impacts their personal and social development. Pressure to conform to gender roles intensifies, and girls' social worlds shift from being primarily single-sex to being mixed gender.

Girls value their friendships. In a study conducted for the Ms. Foundation (EDK Associates, 1996) almost half of girls viewed "being a good friend" as their most important trait, compared to 33% of boys. And girls were more likely than boys to cite problems with relationships as reasons for feeling depressed and talks with friends as a coping strategy.

Balancing the demands and expectations of peers and family may lead to conflict and tension in both arenas, especially for girls from immigrant families who are working to find a balance

between assimilating into mainstream American culture and honoring their family's cultural traditions.

Identity development during adolescence is strongly influenced by relationships with others. Girls look to those around them to answer the question "who am I?" Girls of color, in particular, receive indirect and direct messages about the value of their racial and cultural groups and negotiate the multi-faceted aspects of their identities in relationship with others (Cummins, 1996; Tatum, 1997). The various aspects of their identities can be affirmed and celebrated or ignored and degraded by others in their lives, particularly peers and family. Having positive relationships with others in their identity groups is an important indicator of healthy identity development, and often is associated with concrete outcomes such as academic achievement (Cummins, 1996). Janie Ward (2000) suggests that parents and other community leaders need to teach children of color specific skills to cope with racist messages and acts.

Peer Pressure

While people experience peer pressure throughout their lives, the amount and intensity of peer pressure in the social environment peaks in adolescence. In early adolescence, when time spent with peers begins to increase significantly and finding a place in the social realm becomes a priority, youth are more apt to submit to peer pressure than are older adolescents (Berk, 2006). Peers play an important role in day-to-day matters such as clothing and friendship choices, and healthy relationships with parents provide an important balance, as parents are more likely to influence their children's basic life values and long-term decisions (Steinberg, 2001). Children who feel competent and have a strong sense of self-worth are less susceptible to influence by peers who are engaging in risky or anti-social behaviors (Berk, 2006).

Girls are likely to experience unique types of peer pressure, and a girl's individual characteristics can make her more or less receptive to certain types of pressure. The emphasis on particular beauty and body ideals leads many girls to participate in "fat talk," or critical discussions with peers about themselves and other girls being overweight that take on a competitive tone (Murnen, Smolak, Mills, & Good, 2003). Many girls believe that they are being judged by peers who are influenced by idealized and sexualized media images of women and girls, and feel peer pressure to conform to such an aesthetic even if they believe that the images are unrealistic and undesirable (Milkie, 1999). Harris Interactive/Girls Incorporated (2006) found that over the past

six years, girls feel more pressure to "please everyone and dress right"; additionally, more girls in 2006 than 2001 believe that to be popular, a girl must be thin.

Girls who do not conform are subject to judgment and exclusion. An overemphasis on appearance in groups of girls can also create an environment where being smart is considered taboo, leading some girls to downplay, hide or be embarrassed by their academic achievement in front of other girls (Greenstone, 2006).

Adults Not Knowing

Relationships between teen girls and adults--particularly mothers and other female adults--are complex (Apter, 1990; Taylor et al, 1995). Girls are striving to develop their independence, yet rely on the adults in their lives for many of their basic physical, emotional, and financial needs. In addition, girls are extremely aware that the world that they are growing up in is very different than the one that most adults have grown up in, and they may fear that adults won't understand the context of their lives.

On the other hand, in adopting this stance, girls lose out on the wisdom and commitment of many adults who care about them. From a relational perspective, girls may be reluctant to share news of their lives with adults because they are unsure that they will be really listened to and not judged (Apter, 1990; Debold et al, 1993; Gilligan, Brown, & Rogers, 1990). To understand girls' silence with adults may require understanding why girls self-silence (Wheeler, 1997).

Compounding traditional generational communication barriers, current technology offers many alternatives to face-to-face relationships with adults. Youth may be more likely to use cell phone text messages, internet chat rooms, and online blogs, with each other to communicate worries and make meaning of the social world, making this information more hidden from adults.

Adults also have a responsibility for the gap in communication and knowledge about their daughters' lives. Adults are sometimes too busy, in denial, afraid, or don't know how to read their children's cues and hints. Parents may forget what it was like to be a teenager, or may not want to remember what it was like if it means admitting their daughters are doing some of the same things they once did—or worse. According to Rosalind Wiseman, many parents are naïve about the complex and intricate realities of "girl world," and learning about them takes effort and perseverance (Wiseman, 2003). Many parents also believe that they are more knowledgeable about what is going on for their children than they actually are. For example, parents may think they know where their daughters are and what they're doing, but—as discovered by parents who have used new technologies such as global positioning satellite devices for cell phones, to track their children's whereabouts—they don't (Blanding, 2006).

Many parents today feel pressured to provide their children with the latest technologies so that they are not "left behind," but these technologies can build barriers between children and parents who don't understand current communication technologies and how they can be used (Wiseman, 2006). While some parents set prohibitive rules for teens about their internet use, 43% of teenage girls report breaking parents' rules when they are online and girls report that parents are not computer savvy enough to understand what they do on the internet (Girl Scouts, 2002). Girls report that online bullying is prevalent among their known peers (Kluger, 2006), and many teenage girls do not tell their parents when they are harassed online (Girl Scouts, 2002).

Family Involvement

Although adolescence can often be a time of conflict and distance between teens and their parents, active family involvement and consistent support enhances adolescents' healthy development. Girls who have stable relationships with family members are more likely to reach out to family and friends to get support, while girls who lack these secure connections are more likely to cope by withdrawing and isolating themselves (Schoenberg et al, 2003). Quality family relationships are particularly important to support adolescent girls' self-esteem. Positive support from family and friends, for example, leads to more positive self-evaluations in adolescents of color (Greene & Way, 2005). Good relationships with parents and older siblings can promote resiliency for adolescent girls (Moore & Zaff, 2002).

On the other hand, family relationships can also put adolescents at risk. Violent, abusive, or neglectful childhood relationships with parents lead to negative outcomes for teens who lack adequate support and protective factors (Buka, Stichick, Birdthistle, & Felton, 2001). One study found that 23% of teenage girls say that have less than three adults they could go to if they were in trouble or needed help (Schoenberg et al, 2003).

Recent studies have illuminated the potential mutual benefits of father-daughter relationships. Cultural norms associating men with the realm of work and women with the realm of the home have shortchanged fathers, mothers, and children by precluding fathers' full participation in the family (Debold et al, 1993). Roles have been shifting, and fathers are more involved in their children's lives than in past generations. But father-daughter relationships are vulnerable to weakening when girls enter their teenage years (Dickinson, 2002) and need their fathers most. Father-daughter relationships can serve as models for girls' relationships with other boys and men, fathers influence girls' academic and career success, and fathers impact their daughters' development of self-concept (Kelly, 2002). These realities have guided organizations such as Dads and Daughters to encourage fathers to build strong relationships with their daughters by having frequent meaningful conversations with them, helping to counteract negative messages

girls receive about beauty standards, and taking an active role in their daughters' school and extracurricular activities.

Mentoring

A negative or non-existent relationship with a parent is not an insurmountable obstacle to healthy development. Relationships with adults both within and outside of the family have been found to have a number of benefits for adolescents, including higher self-esteem, greater engagement and performance in school, reduced delinquency and substance abuse, and better mental health (Rhodes, Grossman, & Roffman, 2002). Where there is a specific risk factor, such as a poor relationship with a family member, a relationship with another adult, such as a mentor or teacher can serve as a protective factor with the potential to mitigate negative outcomes (Benard, 1991). Relationships with adult mentors and role models improve children's resiliency and allow children to foster their sense of self (Noam & Fiore, 2004). Long-term mentoring is associated with a decrease in adolescents' use of drugs and alcohol and improved relationships with parents (Rhodes, Reddy, & Grossman, 2005).

Girls are more likely to respond to mentoring relationships that involve a mutual exchange, commitment, and feeling of connection (Liang, Tracey, Taylor, & Williams, 2002; Spencer, 2006). Quality mentoring offers many opportunities to promote positive growth and development.

WHERE THE GIRLS ARE: FINDINGS FROM WORCESTER

On the surveys used in this study, "peer pressure and relationships" was defined as:

- wanting to be popular and to fit in
- pressure to look and act a certain way
- bullying/harassment ("mean girls")
- fighting/bickering among peer groups
- feeling pressured to act a certain way to be popular
- feeling pressured to have sex/engage in other sexual behaviors
- feeling pressured to have a boyfriend or get attention from boys

"Adults not knowing/not wanting to know what is really going on with girls" was defined as:

- teachers don't understand girls this age
- parents don't know what's going on with their daughters and friends
- adults pretend things like substance abuse, eating disorders, sexual activity, or dating violence don't exist
- adults think that the issues middle-school girls face are not important

Encouraging News

***a) Girls value their relationships with each other*—**Girls consider their friendships with other girls to be one of the best things about being a middle-school girl. They value the time they spend together, doing things like going to the mall and to movies, and making new friends.

Fifty-nine percent of girls said that a friend their age helps them when they have a problem, and 82% said that friends make them feel good about themselves. Girls' relationships with one another have the potential to be a source of empowerment, providing strength to girls to defend against adverse factors in their family and social environments. Working together, girls can also bolster one another's healthy development and goals.

***b) Adults care about girls and want to be their allies and advocates*—**The adults in this study want stronger connections with girls and a better understanding of what's going on in girls' lives. Three quarters of parents expressed interest in participating in a parent-daughter program, believing it could help bridge the communication gap and increase understanding between parents and their adolescents. Parents want to be "in the know" about the people their daughters have relationships with, their everyday struggles and hardships, and the factors that contribute to the

strength and stability of their self-esteem. Parents work hard to relate to their daughters even though they may not easily or fully be able to understand their daughters' experiences, emotions, and perspectives. They want their daughters to make healthy choices that will positively affect their futures, and want to limit negative influences in their lives. Providers also express abundant concern for girls' health and well-being, and work hard to provide supports and resources to girls that will help them achieve it. Through collaboration and communication, parents and providers together are a powerful force in girls' lives.

Challenges and Concerns

a) Girls' friendships are fickle and sometimes cause pain—As discussed in the previous section on violence, girls' relationships are often tumultuous. They are at the same time a source of happiness and support, and a source of distress, confusion, and sadness. Middle school is a time when girls' relationships with one another become increasingly affected by other factors in the social realm, like boys, physical appearance, and popularity. Girls are reliant on one another for support to face social and emotional challenges, but their friendships are a source of some of these challenges. The discord emerging in girls' relationships during this time, especially in close relationships, may be a source of vulnerability in combination with other life challenges.

b) Boys— Girls in this study say that what they like about being in middle school, more than anything else, is attention from and involvement with boys. However, boys are also a significant source of worry for girls, with 38% of girls highlighting it as such. They reported concern over not dating or having a boyfriend, fear of rejection, not being allowed to date, and involvement with boys adding complications to existing relationships with girl peers. They also worry about boys' impressions of them.

In relationships with boys, girls are simultaneously learning to understand and manage new emotions in themselves and others, understand and use social cues, question their emerging sexual identities (e.g., heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual), and negotiate the role of these relationships in their social networks. Girls' involvement with boys affects their relationships with girls, sometimes leading to the "drama" that was cited as the third highest disadvantage of being a middle-school girl.

One quarter of parents believe that girls worry a lot about boys, and see boy-related issues such as pressure to have a boyfriend as among the most prevalent types of peer pressure affecting girls.

***c) Peer pressure*—**Half of girls surveyed rated peer pressure and relationships as "extremely important." In their own conception of peer pressure, girls included themselves and their friends doing things they don't want to do; smoking, drinking and drugs; and pressure to conform to a particular cultural model of girlhood through make-up, wearing the latest fashions, and acting in a "certain way."

> "I have seen A LOT of girls trying so hard to fit in, and I know I have tried to fit in at some point."
>
> -White girl, 8th grade

One third of parents believe that peer pressure is among the two biggest problems afflicting girls, and half of parents believe that it is what girls worry about most. Peer pressure and influence was identified by 45% of parents as a concern they had about their daughters, making it the number one concern in this category. A range of issues were reported under this umbrella, such as anxiety that their daughters would become involved with the "wrong crowd," that they were easily influenced by and worry too much about what others think, and that they feel a strong need to be popular and be regarded as "cool."

Parents worry that peer pressure to become involved with boys, become sexually active, experiment with alcohol and drugs, and use internet sites such as MySpace, will lead their daughters to grow up too quickly and make dangerous or poor choices. When asked what types of peer pressure are affecting their daughters, parents observed a range of issues, including pressure to fit in and wear the latest clothes; to "keep up with the Joneses;" to date and to know who is "hooking up" with whom; to "dumb herself down" and not care about schoolwork; and to participate in "older" activities, such as riding in cars, using cell phones, and going out with no adult supervision.

> "She tries so hard to fit in, sometimes she loses herself."
> White Parent of a 7th grader

Like girls and parents, providers also identify peer pressure as an important issue in girls' lives, rating it as the number one subject they believe girls worry about. Specifically, providers think that girls are concerned about fitting in, being popular, being liked by others, and their peers' perceptions of them.

***d) Adults not knowing what's really going on with girls*—**One half of girls, 87% of parents, and three quarters of providers surveyed rated "adults not knowing or not wanting to know what's really going on with girls" as a "somewhat" or "extremely important" problem in girls' lives. One quarter of parents felt that a lack of awareness among parents and community members about issues girls are dealing with is a matter that adults should pay attention to.

"Teachers don't understand you. Parents don't know what is going on between you and your friends."

7th grade girl, Asian American

Girls provided corroborating evidence that adults are sometimes in the dark about what's going on with them. Girls in this study indicated that they aren't always comfortable talking to their parents. Girls in focus groups said that, depending on the issue, they like to talk with a female who is "not too old," but "old enough" to give sound advice—often a slightly older peer.

Moreover, as revealed by the data, parents and girls sometimes have very different perspectives about the roles of various relationships in girls' lives. For example, when asked what three people, things, or activities make girls feel good, parents overrated the importance of families. 87% of parents said family, and 75% said friends. Girls, on the other hand, indicated that friends were more important than family; 82% of girls said friends, but only 52% of girls said family (See Figure 6).

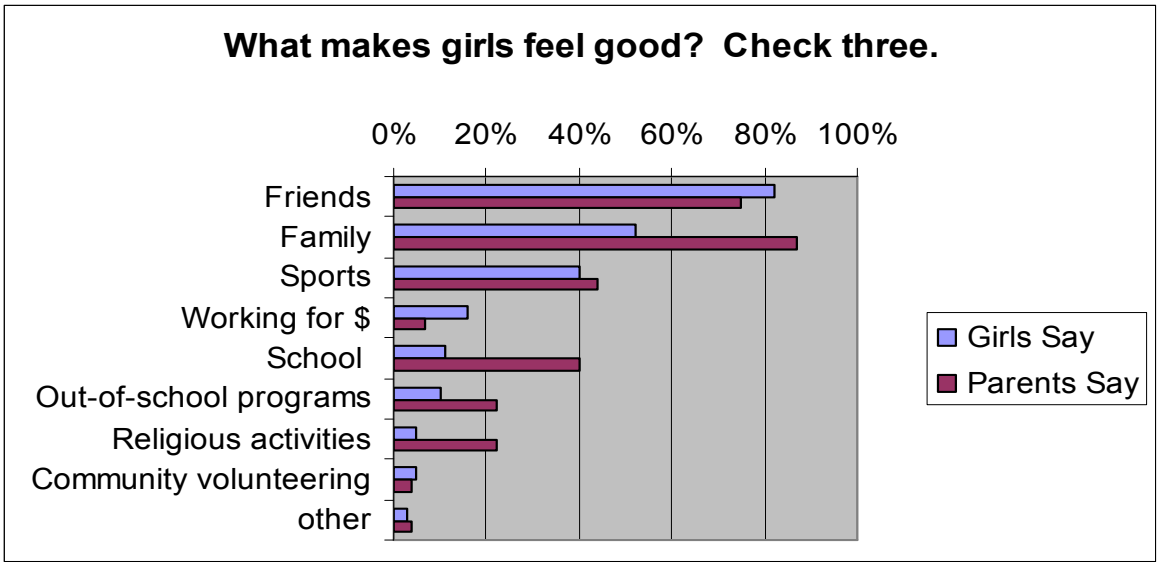


Figure 6: Sources of Feeling Good for Girls

Because they are so invested in girls' well-being, it can sometimes be difficult for adults, especially parents, to see problems affecting their children. Several adults in focus groups complained that in the Worcester area, there is a community as well as individual level of denial regarding what is really going on with girls. As one provider put it, "Adults [in the Worcester area] pretend things like substance abuse, eating disorders, sexual activity, and dating violence don't exist."

However, girls have a strong sense that the adults in their lives care about them. For example, in the words of one 8th grade White girl, "My teacher takes note about which friends influence me in a negative way and guides me toward the right path in order to do well in school so that I can make something of myself." Girls' high regard of their relationships with adults indicates their openness to partnering with adults to work on addressing issues of relevance to girls.

e) Relationships with family—Like friendships with same-sex peers, girls'relationships with families have both strengths and weaknesses. Families appear to be both a source of support and feeling good, yet also seem surprisingly absent in other arenas where they could be playing a more substantial role. Although 52% of girls said that their families make them feel good about themselves, that means that almost half of girls surveyed do not feel this way. In the view of one fifth of providers, family issues, such as divorce, strained relationships between family members, family transitions, and pressures at home, are among the top issues that girls worry about most.

TURNING GAPS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Begin formal and informal dialogues with girls about their relationships with one another. Create opportunities for girls to articulate the benefits and values of their relationships with each other, as well as to identify the outside factors that influence these relationships.

Strengthen relationships with the girls in your life. Ask them to teach you what you don't understand about their lives, and how you can be a source of support to them. **Recognize that the consequences of not knowing are graver than your fear of knowing.** Express your genuine care and concern when conversing with girls about their lives. Reflect on your own experiences as a teenager to find better ways of communicating with your daughter.

Provide opportunities for more cross-generational contact between girls and young women and adults who can serve as role models and mentors. Extended family members, teachers, out-of-school time providers, guidance counselors, and community members are potential allies. Include discussion of the assets of strong ties between girls and adults in their lives.

Talk to girls about the peer pressure they experience. Provide them with tools to help them make healthy choices. Strategize with them about ways to maintain their self-confidence and act in harmony with choices that will promote their well-being.

Create a safe space where girls can talk about what's going on in their lives vis-à-vis boys and help them to understand that having a boyfriend or friends who are boys doesn't mean that they need to reject their female friends. Help them disentangle their sense of self-worth from romantic relationships with boys.

Key Challenge #5

EDUCATION

"Education is the most important challenge girls face–you need it to be successful in life, and to have a good job."

Latina girl, 8th grade

KEY FINDINGS

- Girls recognize that education is a key ingredient to a positive future.
- Girls want to do well in school, yet they struggle with day-to-day challenges.
- Girls look ahead to higher education; they want to go to college but worry about how to get there and how to afford it. They want more career and life-planning programs.
- While some girls report positive feelings about school, others report that school not only feels impersonal, it is not a safe or supportive place.
- Transitions into and out of middle school are tough and might be eased with programs addressing the transitions more proactively.
- Parents want to know more about their daughters' school experiences and to have closer working relationships with teachers.

RELEVANT NATIONAL AND LOCAL RESEARCH

Schools can either expand or narrow girls' dreams and opportunities. They can encourage—or fail to encourage—girls' interests and abilities, self-confidence, and skills. Girls' relationships with members of their school communities are interrelated with their orientation toward education and have repercussions for their futures. Middle schools are important to girls both in the here-and-now and in the long run in terms of how girls feel about themselves, how peers and adults view them, and how well positioned they are for a job or career that they like and that is economically viable.

Decisions that girls make in middle school can have long-lasting consequences, whether or not girls and their families and teachers realize it at the time. For example, the science "pipeline" begins leaking girls in middle school. Research shows

that girls who lose interest in science during adolescence do less well on standardized tests, get lower grades in science, have lower science-related aspirations, are less confident in their abilities in science, and are unlikely ever to pursue a science-related career (Rayman & Brett, 1993; Cavanaugh, 2005; Greenfield, 1997).

In a recent national study (Harris Interactive/Girls Incorporated, 2006), the majority of girls surveyed enjoy school and want to go to college, although half of high-school girls and one third of middle-school girls worry that they will not be able to afford it. Locally, Brownstein and Sagarin (2006) found that, to 85% of girls in the Worcester area, completing school is very important. Sixty-eight percent believe that getting good grades is very important and 66% indicated that college is very important. That is surprising, since many of the girls in the study come from school districts where the dropout rate is higher than average and college attendance is below average.

Schools are both educational and social epicenters for girls. Girls' feelings about "school," including whether or not they feel supported, their willingness to persevere, and their confidence in themselves, are affected by their feelings about their relationships with peers in school and adults in school (Wheeler, 1997). **"Human relationships are at the heart of schooling. The interactions that take place between students and teachers and among students are more central to student success than any method for teaching literacy, or science or math. When powerful relationships are established between teachers and students, these relationships frequently transcend the economic and social disadvantages that afflict communities and schools" (Cummins, 1996, p. 1).**

National data indicate that school is not always a safe place for girls intellectually, socially, or physically. Research has documented a confluence of factors, including sexual harassment, gender bias in the classroom and curriculum, and physical and relational violence, that contribute to a sharp decline in girls' active participation in class starting in middle school (Orenstein, 1994; Sadker & Sadker, 1992; Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, 1992). One study found that 45% of 13- to 17-year-old girls felt their emotional safety was compromised by participating in class (Schoenberg et al, 2003).

When girls feel harassed, unsafe, unsupported, or disengaged, their ability to learn may be compromised (Orenstein, 1994; Stein, 1993) and they may be more likely to drop out of school (Fine 1991; Fine & Zane, 1991)—for some, a sort of protest.

Unfortunately for girls, in early adolescence—when they are at most risk psychologically and most in need of support from adults, including teachers—the structure of school changes. When girls transition from elementary to middle school, they typically have different teachers and

different students in every class; research indicates that this change can be detrimental to girls' self-image and academic performance (Crockett, Petersen, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata, 1989; Simmons & Blythe, 1987; Wheeler, 1997).

As noted in the Violence and Safety chapter, overall, educators have noted an increase in violence among female students in Worcester in recent years (Worcester Public Schools, 2005).

WHERE THE GIRLS ARE: FINDINGS FROM WORCESTER

On the surveys used in this study, education was defined as:

- grades
- dropping out
- how to get into college and be successful
- how to have a successful, fulfilling career
- amount of homework

Encouraging News

***a) Positive feelings about school*—**Girls and parents expressed some positive feelings about their school experiences. Some Worcester area parents perceive the quality and choice of schools as advantages of raising a middle-school girl in the Worcester area. When asked about helpful community resources, parents cited schools most frequently. Parents were more likely than girls to say that school contributes to their daughters feeling good about themselves (40% vs. 11%).

Among girls, 12% noted school-related characteristics, such as moving up in the system toward high school and the opportunity to learn more and be challenged in school, as among the best things about being a middle-school girl. Girls in 7th and 8th grade were more likely than 6th graders to say school helps them feel good. Correspondingly, parents of 6th grade girls were more likely to rate education as a problem for girls, possibly because 6th grade is often the first year of middle school and the transition can be difficult.

Latina girls were more likely than other ethnic groups to report school as a source of feeling good. In light of national, state, and local statistics about the high dropout rates for Hispanic students—at the state level, only 33% graduate, and at the national level only 53% (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004)—this finding is indeed encouraging.

***b) Programs promoting girls' interest in science*—**Worcester appears to have significant interest in addressing the interest and achievement gap in the field of science. A number of initiatives aim to spark girls' interest and preparation in science: the Worcester Polytechnic Institute; the 4 Schools for Women in Engineering; the Women in Science conference through the Ecotarium and the University of Massachusetts Medical School; and the Technology Academy for Girls at Quinsigamond Community College. A number of other local programs emphasize the involvement of youth in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) careers, though

whether they are addressing the unique needs of girls by providing gender-responsive programming is unclear.

Challenges and Concerns

a) School as a source of stress for girls--When rating problems facing girls, a vast majority of girls (71%) and parents (76%) rated "education" as extremely important, as did 56% of providers. Notably, providers working with low-income girls were more likely than those working with middle-income girls to rate education as a major concern. When asked to prioritize the top two challenges facing girls, more girls identified education than did parents or providers. In addition, girls indicated that education was one of the top three issues that adults in the community should address. Girls cited concerns over the quantity and level of difficulty of schoolwork, and reported worrying over completing their homework, getting good grades, and going to college. Parents cited school-related concerns as their number two concern about their middle-school daughters, whom they perceive to be stressed over the quantity of homework and difficult grading standards. Parents also expressed concern about their daughters succeeding in school, and having the motivation and necessary support from the school to do so.

> "School and what happens there is a big concern for girls…It feels hard at school; girls are intimidated and have to posture a lot. They assimilate…they'll act differently to assimilate [if they have to]."
>
> White female provider who works in an all-girls program

b) Scarcity of in-school career, college, and life-planning programs for girls—Girls indicated that they would like more career and life-planning programs, such as academic tutoring, career and college counseling, and learning about budgeting and finances. Parents also indicated a desire for this type of programming for their daughters, and providers confirmed that girls both want and need this type of programming to supplement what they are getting in school. In the words of one provider who participated in a focus group, "Girls want to go to college, but need help getting there."

According to a report of the Worcester Regional Research Bureau (2004), "nonmunicipal, nonprofit organizations" (funded by the federal government as well as by private corporations and foundations) are providing a large share of college and career preparation programming for Worcester public school students.

As youth workers in focus groups pointed out, Worcester area girls from immigrant families may be the first in their families to attend institutions of higher education in the United States and they need help from adults in navigating the system—how to apply, how to find financial aid, what attributes and experiences strengthen a college application, and how to set academic goals and achieve them.

> "College costs way more than I will ever be able to pay for."
>
> White parent of an 8th grade girl

> "There is no preparation for job or college. There is preparation for the MCAS."
>
> White female parent of a 7th grader

c) School environment and lack of resources compromise girls' learning--In response to open-ended questions, girls, parents, and providers described several factors that potentially compromise their daughters' ability to learn in school, including: girls getting distracted by the social aspects of school; boys being a "distraction to learning"; sexual harassment; girls feeling unsupported by their teachers; schools being overcrowded; the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) being the sole focus of schools; and the loss of strong relationships with families. One fifth of parents cited school quality as a disadvantage of raising a middle-school girl in the Worcester area. Parents expressed concern that schools are under-funded, classes are overcrowded, and facilities and staff are so overtaxed that girls get "lost in the crowd," with little attention to how they learn best. As one parent put it, "Everything in school is problem based—if you have a problem, you get help, otherwise [you don't]." Said another, "In school, if you aren't a *real* problem, no one is paying attention."

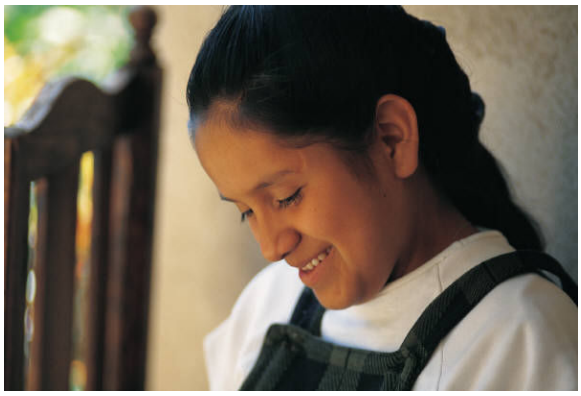
> "[I worry that] she is so worried about the social aspects of school that she will lose focus on the work."
>
> White parent of a 7th grade girl

d) School transitions are a source of anxiety and challenge —The anticipation and reality of the transition from elementary to middle school are challenging for girls, especially given how short middle school is. In the words of one parent, "The middle school transition is for two years only, then a transition again to high school; [even] the first transition is too traumatic."

"Too many girls, when they enter middle school, will try new things just to fit in. It is a very rough transition."

White parent of a 7th grade girl

Parents in focus groups talked about how different the landscape of middle school is compared to that of elementary school; in particular, how much more impersonal it is, how much more is expected of the students, and how much more kids are left to succeed or fail on their own. As an example, a mother pointed out that in elementary school the teachers either assigned students places to sit for lunch or monitored the situation to be sure no one was left out. In middle school the students are left to "find their own way." Parents expressed concern that their daughters don't have the school support system they need and that they, as parents, are "out of the loop" with regard to what's going on with their daughters in school, as in other areas of their lives.



In focus groups, parents spoke nostalgically about feeling more connected to their daughters' schools and teachers when the girls were in elementary school. In the words of one parent, "In elementary school, [my daughter] had only one teacher and the teacher knew her as an individual—and knew our family. That is lost in middle school." Other parents too spoke of working in partnership with elementary school teachers and worried that their children don't get all the help they need in middle school. Parents expressed a desire to know more about what is going on for girls in schools, and to get to know their daughters' teachers better.

To ease the transition to middle school, 71% of parents said they believe their daughters would have benefited from having a girl mentor 2-3 years older to support them in the transition from elementary to middle school. In anticipation of the middle school to high school transition, an overwhelming majority (87%) said that their daughters would benefit from a high-school-age mentor to provide seasoned support for that transition. However, in focus groups, girls' reactions to this idea were mixed. Some loved the idea of having an older student mentor, and some felt that this type of relationship with other girls would be characterized by "drama" and abuse of power. When providers responded to this question, 62% felt it was more critical for girls to have a mentor during the elementary to middle school transition than during the middle to high school transition.

TURNING GAPS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Engage girls in an ongoing dialogue about how school is going for them, whether or not it feels safe, and whether or not they feel supported. Work collaboratively with girls to make appropriate adjustments to curricula and the school environment.

Identify what aspects of school help some girls feel good about themselves. Use this knowledge to work toward an understanding of what is not working for other girls.

Create more in-school and out-of-school programs that focus on college preparation and affordability.

Consider how to best support girls in their transitions into and out of middle school. One possible idea is a peer mentoring program.

Maximize connections between parents and schools as a way to create more dialogue, disseminate information, and increase the likelihood that parents and teachers work together as a team to further girls' educational aspirations.

Section III

Supports and Resources for Worcester Girls

SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES

"Youth organizations and other parents [help me]. They let me know of current issues and resources. They run programs for parent education. They help me realize through conversation that my family is normal with its ups and downs, and that behavior is on a continuum and occurs in waves or phases. I get validation for my parenting techniques or learn of new strategies used successfully by others."

White female parent of a 7th grade girl

KEY FINDINGS

- Same-age girlfriends are the paramount source of support for Worcester-area girls when they have problems, followed by family and other friends.
- Most girls feel that the adults in the community care about them, but one fifth of girls do not. Latina girls in particular are apt to believe they do not.
- Many girls are involved in out-of-school time programs, yet multiple obstacles hinder their participation.
- Girls are seeking more girl-centered programs that are sensitive to their unique needs, interests, and ways of relating to others.
- Parents feel that they have some resources to help them raise their daughters, but they want more resources and support systems.
- There are flaws in the current system for notifying girls and families about available resources. Specifically, there is sometimes a gap between providers' methods for doing outreach and how girls and their families prefer to learn about resources.
- Girls' adult advocates need more resources, support, training, and networking opportunities.
- Parents and providers expressed frustration that information about resources and supports for girls is disparate and sometimes difficult to obtain.

RELEVANT NATIONAL AND LOCAL RESEARCH

A recent report on out-of-school time opportunities indicates that approximately half of teenagers in Boston do not participate in structured or supervised activities during after-school hours (Rublin; Douglas; & Halverson, 2004). This study and others document a sharp drop-off in after-school program enrollment in the middle-school years (Schoenberg, 2007). However research indicates that how youth spend their after-school hours is a determining factor in their safety, skill-building, and social success. There is evidence that youth not only gain from their participation in after-school activities, but that spending their after-school hours engaged in structured, supervised activities is a deterrent to negative outcomes and risk behaviors.

The importance of structured after-school activities

- How youth spend the hours between the end of the school day and the end of parents' work days have critical implications for their health, safety and prosocial development.
- Spending time in consistent, organized, out-of-school time activities is beneficial to youth who are threatened by risk factors.
- The likelihood that youth will become victims or perpetrators of crime, including violent crime, is higher during the after-school time period.
- Youth who spend a lot of time unsupervised are at higher risk for substance abuse and teen pregnancy.
- Structured and supervised after-school programs which limit the amount of time youth are caring for themselves provide opportunities for enrichment in the academic, social and cultural domains.

Sources: Cain, J. (2004); Massachusetts 2020 (2002); Miller, B.M. (2007); Theokas, C., & Bloch, M. (2006); Vandivere, S., Tout, K., Zaslow, M., Calkins, J., & Capizzano, J. (2003)

Recommendations for gender-sensitive programs for girls

- Build "safe spaces" where girls can freely express their feelings, ideas, and their authentic selves, free of fear from judgment or limitations based on social expectations about how girls should act. Guarantee confidentiality.
- Ensure that locations for girl-centered programs and services do not pose threats to girls' physical or emotional safety and that girls do not fear harassment of any kind.
- Give girls leadership roles alongside those of adults. Involve them in program-building from the ground up, including conducting an evaluation of needs, helping to design and lead new programs.
- Create environments wherein girls can explore social factors affecting their relationships with one another, and where they can forge positive, supportive relationships.
- Model equity in leadership and allocation of resources at the organizational and programmatic level by having "women and girls in charge" (Mead, 2001). Provide women mentors to girls who serve as role models for leadership, and who encourage girls to achieve to their full potential by practicing leadership roles.
- Offer opportunities for girls to explore culturally-based traditions and values. Integrate discussions about the intersection of girls' multiple identities.
- Encourage girls to take risks and try new things that they might be intimidated from trying elsewhere, whether in the domains of science and technology, sports, martial arts, leadership, debate, or entrepreneurship.

Sources: Denner, J., & Griffin, A. (2003); Mead, M. (2001); Ms. Foundation for Women (2000, 2001); Wheeler, K.A., Oliveri, R., Towery, I.D., & Mead, M. (2005)

Benefits of mentoring relationships

- Mentoring relationships are structured, consistent, ongoing relationships with caring adults (or college students) aimed at building competencies and character. These relationships can supplement children's relationships with parents, providing additional benefits and sometimes accounting for gaps in parent-child relationships.
- Mentoring relationships are particularly beneficial to youth who are "at-risk."
- Youth who participate in mentoring programs generally have better school attendance records, better attitudes toward school, and may be more likely to attend college.
- Youth who participate in mentoring programs may be less likely to initiate drug and alcohol use, and to participate in anti-social behaviors such as criminal activity and physical violence.
- Participation in mentoring programs may strengthen relationships with peers and family.
- Optimal mentoring relationships have the following characteristics:
    - They are long-lasting (at least 12 months) rather than short-term.
    - Benefits to youth are more plentiful when they are in frequent contact with their mentors and when mentors have relationships with youth's families too.
    - Youth participants have positive perceptions about their relationship with their mentor, and are committed to the relationship.
    - Matches between the mentor and mentee are supervised, and mentors receive formal training.
    - Mentors take cues from youth about what their needs and interests are, and these needs and interests drive program and relationship activities.

Sources: Bowie, L., & Bronte-Tinkew, J. (2007); Jekielek, S.M., Moore, K.A., Hair, E.C., & Scarupa, H.J. (2002); Massachusetts Coalition on Youth Violence Prevention (2006)

WHERE THE GIRLS ARE: FINDINGS FROM WORCESTER

Encouraging news

***a) A majority of girls have someone to turn to when they have problems*—**As seen in Figure 7 below, girls reported that when they have problems, same-age, same-sex peers are most helpful. Parents and other relatives, as well as same-age male friends, were also viewed by some girls as helpful.

Sixth graders were less likely to report that their mothers helped them with problems, but more likely to report that their fathers helped them. Some variations existed among ethnic groups too: Latina girls were more likely to report getting help from their sisters; African American/Black girls from their brothers, and White girls from their fathers. Fathers are more likely than mothers to report that girlfriends are helpful to their daughters.

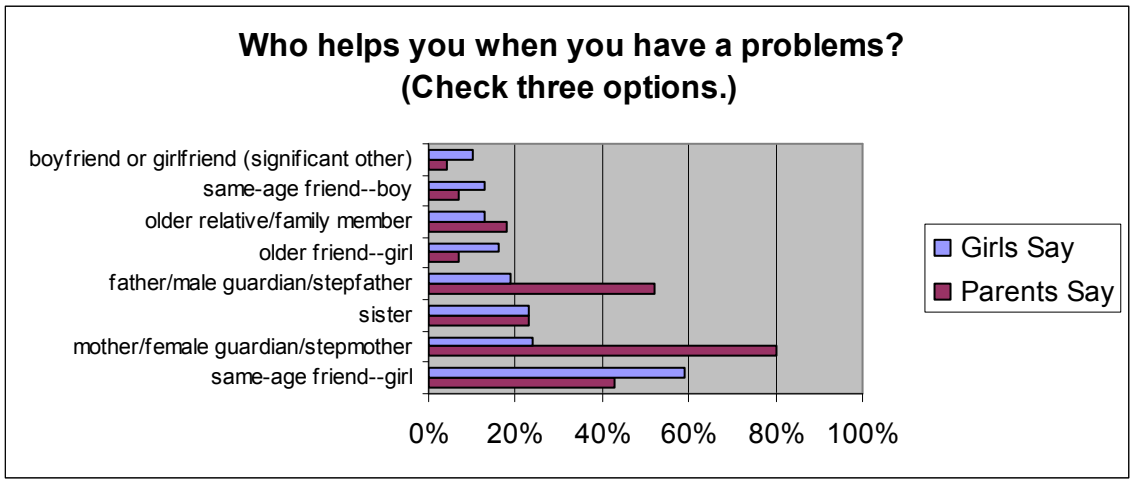


Figure 7: People Who are Sources of Support for Girls When Facing Problems

When asked to rate up to three people who are most helpful to them when they have problems, 59% of girls said their same-age girlfriends. Girls in this study turn to their mothers and fathers almost equally (19% identified fathers and 24% said mothers).

In responding to a question about what would help girls overcome challenges, parents were much less likely than girls to say that talking to a same-age friend would help (25% versus 56%), possibly indicating that parents overestimate how helpful they are to girls when they have problems, or how often girls turn to them with problems.

The vast majority of girls feel that adults in the local community care about them. However, Latina girls are less likely to feel supported.

> "They are there for me in good and bad times…They listen to me and are interested in what I have to say."
>
> 6th grade focus group participant

Girls appreciate the opportunity to talk with other people about the challenges they face. When asked what would make things better for girls and help them overcome their problems, 56% said talking with a friend their age would help and more than half (54%) said talking with an adult would help. Sixth graders were more likely than 8th graders to say that talking to an adult would help, but more likely to want to talk with an older student or mentor. This eagerness on the part of girls to talk with adults or mentors represents an opportunity for women and men to heed the call.

b) Many girls are involved in out-of-school time programs—Of the girls surveyed, 65% are involved in at least one church group, sports team, and/or recreational program such as the YMCA, YWCA, Girls Inc., Girl Scouts, or Boys and Girls Club. Seventy-four percent of parents surveyed had daughters involved in programs. Of the girls who explained their motivations for participating in programs, 10% said it is because the programs are fun and relaxing. Others noted a sense of connection to the mission, love of the activity, and interest in health, weight loss, fitness, or sports. Still others attended for the social aspect of the program, saying, "I meet people and spend time with friends my age." Some girls also feel that participating in out-of-school time programs is a valuable use of their time, reporting that it gets them out of the house, keeps them out of trouble, or gives them something to do after school. Several girls also said that participating in extracurricular programs is "a good thing to do."

c) Parents feel that they have resources—Parents reported feeling that resources are available that they can access to support them in raising their daughters. Some parents commented on the types of assistance and encouragement they receive from the various individuals and organizations listed in Figure 8 below. For example, some parents said they appreciated talking to other parents because they act as sounding boards and remind one another that they are not alone in dealing with challenges related to raising a middle-school daughter. A couple of parents who identified schools as a useful resource indicated that they are informed of their daughters' progress or problems by school personnel. Health professionals, such as medical doctors, psychologists and school counselors, were also cited by some parents who receive information about resources, advice and comfort from talking to them.

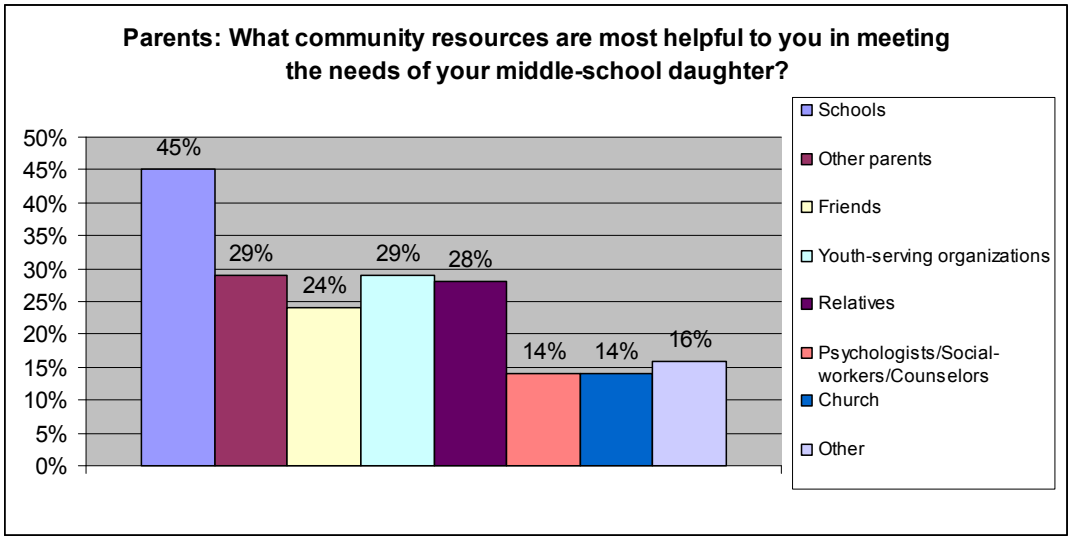


Figure 8: Community Resources Helpful to Parents with Regard to their Daughters

Challenges and Concerns

a) One fifth of girls do NOT feel supported by adults—Twenty-one percent of girls overall say that they do not feel that the adults in their community care about them; this proportion is higher among Latina girls. While it is encouraging that 79% of girls feel supported, it is also important to recognize that a significant proportion of girls do not feel this way, and to brainstorm ways to

ameliorate the problem. Some girls who reported feeling that adults do not care about them indicated that they do not have a relationship with adults in their community, are not treated nicely, or believe that adults do not like them because they are "bad kids."

Providers named several groups of girls whose needs they feel are not being met or who are generally underserved, including girls who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender; girls in foster care; girls in the juvenile justice system; girls from low-income families for whom safe and accessible transportation might be very difficult; girls with developmental disabilities; prostituted girls; Southeast Asian girls; Latina girls; and others.

For adults to build meaningful relationships with girls requires desire, openness, and opportunities to build bridges. Girls, as well as adults, must be willing to engage. In this study, the desire to create deeper, more mutually beneficial relationships than presently exist was demonstrated in subtle ways by adults and girls. Providers stated that they would like to see additional programs to help girls address their problems, and girls and parents both said that talking to adults would be the best way to help them overcome some of their difficulties. However, parents reported a significant struggle in trying to maintain open communication with their daughters. They described a tension between "respecting [their] daughter's space, yet needing to know," and they perceived that their daughters resist confiding in them and sharing their experiences. Girls provided corroborating evidence; in the words of one girl, "Parents want to know what's going on, but depending on the issue, we don't always want to tell them."

b) Multiple barriers hinder girls' participation in out-of-school time programs—Among the obstacles mentioned by study participants were: (1) transportation, (2) lack of time and interest among girls, (3) cost, (4) a shortage of programs for girls who want to attend, and (5) a dearth of easily accessible information about existing programs.

Parents and providers expressed concerns about safety and the lack of public transportation, and their effect on girls' access to their programs. Twenty-eight percent of parents reported that transportation was one of the top two obstacles to program involvement—even more than cost (24%). Echoing these concerns, providers named transportation as one of the two resources that would enable them and their organizations to better meet the needs of middle-school girls. Providers stated that boys are more likely to be allowed to walk home from a youth organization, and that transportation is therefore a more pressing issue for girls than for boys. Data from parents and girls suggested that transportation might be more

of a barrier to girls' participation at certain times of the day, specifically, after-school hours which might conflict with parents' work schedules. In the words of one girl, "Transportation [is a barrier]—my parents work and can't drive me there and back."

"A major barrier to girls' access to programs? Transportation, transportation, transportation." Provider in a girls-only out-of-school program

In focus groups, several parents expressed frustration about the need for more out-of-school time programs and better access to existing programs for *all* girls--not only better transportation methods, but better systems for disseminating information about existing programs. One focus group revealed complaints from parents that existing programs are not reaching those most in need because outreach and advertising are poor. Providers agreed that not all neighborhoods are served as well as they should be by community-based organizations, but they focused mostly on transportation as the reason.

It appears that transportation is not the only issue—parents said outreach needs to be more personal and that outreach by adults from the neighborhood and/or by people who look like the girls they aim to serve would be effective.

Also, parents expressed frustration that because there is no central hub to access information about girl-centered programs, resources, and opportunities, they are sometimes unable to make use of the existing opportunities. In focus groups, providers reported that, much to their dismay, occasionally slots available for girls in their programs go unused.

A number of Worcester-area providers reported enrollment challenges for their out-of-school time programs. They cited competing demands on girls (such as homework), difficulty motivating girls to participate, and some girls not finding it "cool" to participate. One quarter of girls surveyed reported that they are too busy with homework to attend after-school programs and 11% said they don't like the activities offered. However, it is likely that these two issues are interrelated and that girls would be more willing to make the time for programs if they were really interested in what was being offered and had sufficient support to attend (e.g., money, transportation).

c) Girls want more girl-centered programs, whether in girls-only or coeducational settings— Girls want more programs designed specifically with their unique needs in mind and tailored to their interests. One third of girls reported that having more programs, activities, and resources for girls would help make things better for them and help them overcome some of the challenges

they face. Given that girls' top choices on how to overcome challenges were talking to friends their age (56%) and talking to an adult (54%), it is likely that girls' interest in programs, services, and activities is partly linked to the desire to have more opportunities to talk with peers and adults, and that they view programs as a vehicle for doing so.

When girls were asked what three types or topics of programs they would like to see if new programs were to be created, sports was the unequivocal leader (see Table 6). Seventh graders and White girls were most interested in sports programs, 8th graders and African American/Black girls were less so; other groups fell in the middle.

Table 6: Program Content Preferences

- Sports/Fitness (74%)
- Career/Life planning (36%)
- Culture/Heritage/creative arts (33%)
- Health/Sexual health (27%)
- Services for specific populations (26%)
- Special interest (20%)
- Leadership/Community action (17%)
- Self-reliance (14%)
- Mentoring (13%)

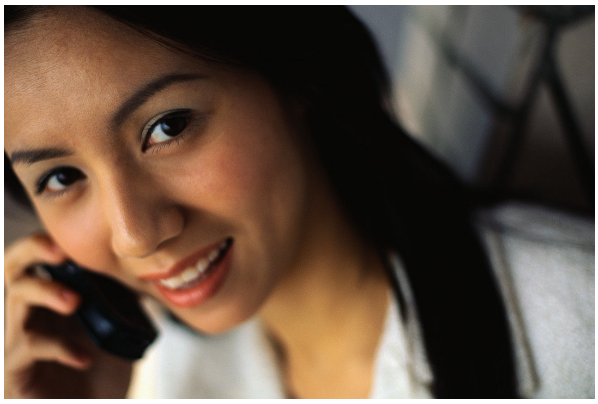
Like girls, parents prioritized sports/fitness opportunities (47%), but were also interested in having their daughters involved in programs focused on: health/sexual health (40%), leadership/action (40%), self-reliance/life skills (38%), and career/life planning programs. Providers, on the other hand, recognized that sports programs are what girls say they want most, but felt that other types of programs would be more in line with what girls really need. Specifically, providers thought it would be best to develop programs that offered health/sexual health (23%), self-reliance/life skills (23%), and career/life planning (16%) skills.

When asked about their preferences for coed or single-sex programs, girls were evenly divided: one third wanted coed; one third, girls-only; and one third, some combination of both. Parents were more likely to prefer some of both.

Girls indicated on the survey that if they were going to participate in a mentoring program, they would prefer to be matched with a high-school age (40%) or college-age (28%) mentor rather than someone older than that. As described earlier, girls' responses to the idea of a peer mentor slightly older than themselves was mixed. In general, younger girls liked the idea, but older girls did not, fearing that their mentors might abuse their "power." Almost 75% of parents think their daughter would have benefited from a peer mentor two to three years older when moving from elementary to middle school, and an overwhelming majority (87%) think she would benefit from a high-school age mentor when moving from middle school to high school.

d) Parents want more resources to help them in raising their daughters. Parents want more resources for their daughters, and they also want more resources for themselves. As described earlier in this report, they struggle with how to help their daughters cope with peer pressure; how to understand and deal with mood swings; how much freedom to give girls and still keep them safe; how to cope with different parenting styles (e.g., worries about letting their daughters go to visit other families where rules about drinking or using the Internet may be more lax); how to preserve cultural traditions; and how to handle their concerns about their daughters' clothing selections, sex education, and friendship choices.

In focus groups and on the surveys, parents indicated a strong desire to connect with other parents, whom they view as critical resources. Those mothers who were involved in a mother-daughter program appreciated the chance to network with other mothers as much as they did the opportunity to spend more "quality time" with their daughters. They liked being part of a network of other parents who know first-hand the challenges they face in raising a daughter and feeling that if they have a concern, they have someone to call.



Among survey respondents, 77% indicated an eagerness to participate in mother/father-daughter programs, and if available, said they would use the following new resources.

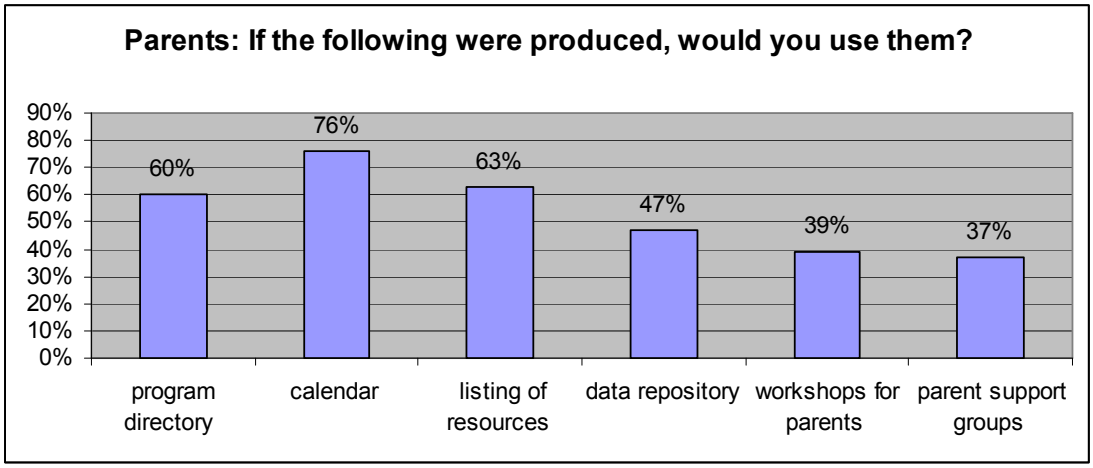


Figure 9: Potential Resources Parents Would Use (check all that apply)

"[A challenge of parenting] is to give your daughters space, but be in their face." Black mother, focus group participant

"[Middle-school girls] think they know it all." Latina mother, focus group participant

e) There is sometimes a gap between providers' methods for doing outreach and the preferences of girls and their families for learning about resources—Providers involved in this study indicated a strong commitment to their work and to their goal of improving the lives of girls and families. But the study also highlighted several ways that the perspectives of providers and families differ, potentially contributing to some of the barriers noted above for accessing and utilizing existing supports and resources.

For example, fewer than two thirds of parents and fewer than three fourths of girls said they have enough information to know what choices are available for girls in school-based and out-of-school programs. This study revealed that the way service providers advertise their programs is not always in concordance with the optimal way girl and parent participants want to receive information about program opportunities, as can be seen in Figure 10.

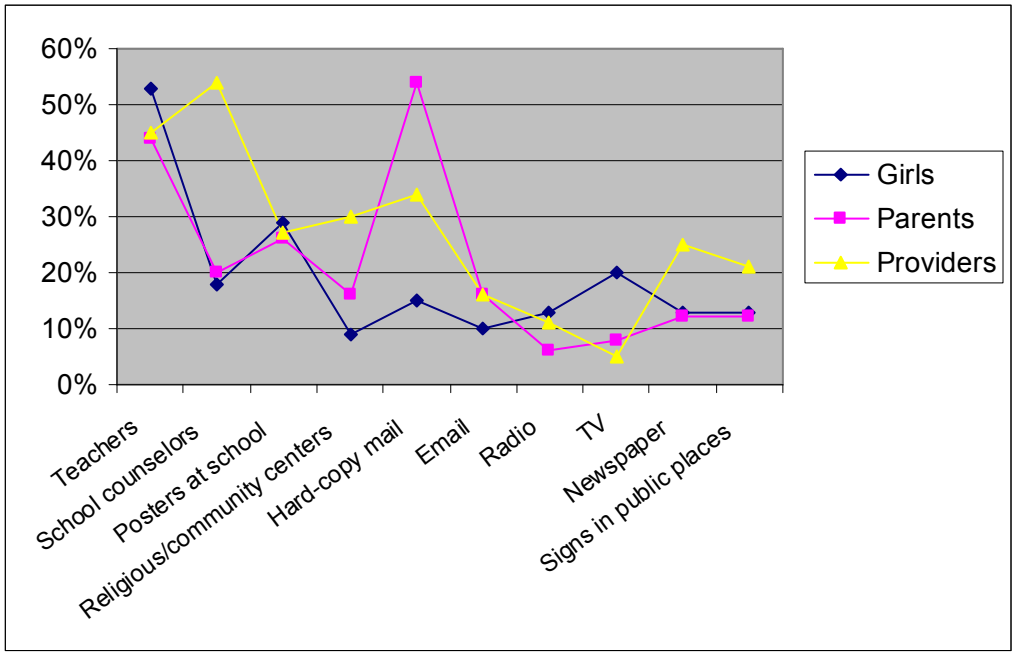


Figure 10: Best Ways to Advertise Programs

Parents' preferred method for obtaining information on programs is through postal mail; followed by teachers and posters at school. The providers we surveyed are more likely to advertise their programs through school counselors (although few girls and parents currently rely on counselors for this type of information), teachers and posters at school, and religious centers (used by few girls or parents) and--less often--postal mail. In other words, some of the ways practitioners advertise their programs are not a match for where girls and families look for such information.

f) Adults providing services for girls need more resources, support, training, and opportunities to connect with one another—Providers in this survey reported several challenges that they and their organizations face in effectively advocating for and meeting the needs of girls. Following barriers to recruiting and enrolling girls, discussed above, providers identified funding

difficulties as a key hardship. Funding shortages hinder their ability to hire and train staff, to design and provide girls-only programs, to conduct ongoing research on girls that would help staff to effectively meet girls' needs, and to have adequate space to run their programs and services. Said one provider: "What do we need beyond transportation? It's money! Good staff [members] are critical to quality programs, and we need money to keep staff. Quality and continuity are important for youth."

Providers expressed frustration at not having a closer partnership with schools. This gap creates barriers for them in accessing girls in need of their services, and in offering those services to girls through the schools. In the words of one youth worker: "We need the school department to *value* youth workers and youth-serving organizations more. They don't value us as equal partners."

Some providers felt that it is difficult to find mentors who are diverse in age to work with girls, mentors who reflect girls' realities in terms of their identity characteristics. Additionally, one quarter of adults who work with or for girls felt they did not have enough information about resources and programs available to girls, and one fifth of survey respondents want more opportunities to network and collaborate with others, deploring the sense of isolation they sometimes feel.

"Access to data – we need data! Basic data would be helpful. Allow us to have access to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data! Get Worcester Public Schools to put the sexuality questions on the YRBS and get them to share it. In other cities, the YRBS data is *public knowledge*. It's disaggregated by city, and here the city doesn't let it out. We *need* risk information and needs information about kids. We work with them too. Data could be more centralized."

Provider, focus group

Providers expressed a desire for a central hub to house all types of information about girls--not only a directory of local programs for girls, but information on local events of interest to girls and their adult advocates (e.g., a Girls Incorporated open house), special events and opportunities for girls (e.g., synchronized swimming at the YWCA), professional development trainings and parent seminars (e.g., a lecture for parents sponsored by United Way), and so on. They want data on girls that they can use in building the case for supporting girls' programs—theoretically and financially. Grant writing, for example, requires up-to-date research on girls. Providers were frustrated at the difficulty of obtaining local data about girls (e.g., results of research studies conducted in their programs). They were excited about the possibility of broader collaboration and advocacy, recognizing that there is power in numbers.

TURNING GAPS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Review Figure 11 below to understand girls' and parents' perspectives on what types of support they think would help girls overcome their problems. Take the viewpoints of both girls and parents into consideration when strategizing about meeting the needs of both girls and their families. Incorporate both people and material resources into helping strategies.

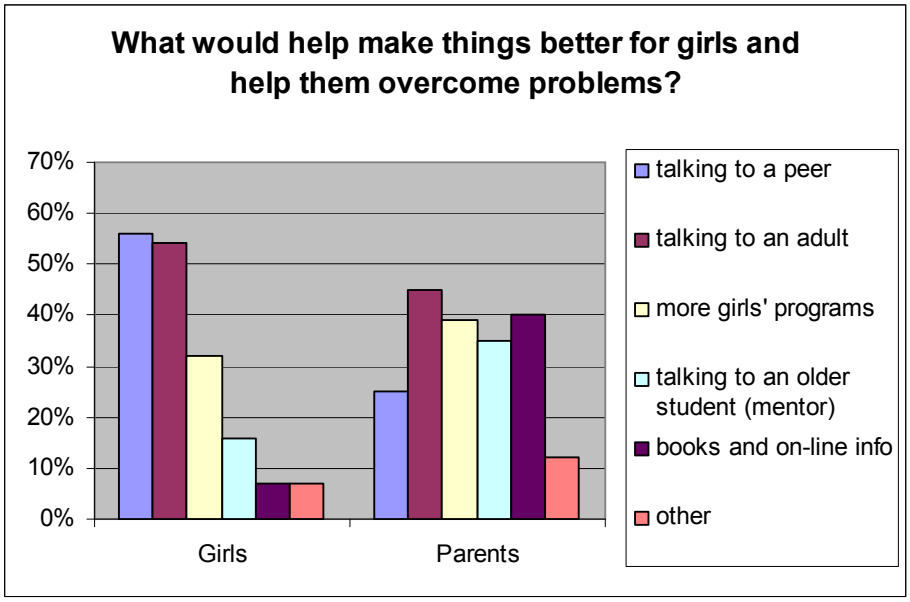


Figure 11: Sources That Can Help Alleviate Girls' Problems

Target girls first and foremost, but also parents when creating new resources or initiatives aimed at alleviating challenges facing girls. (See Figures 12 and 13).

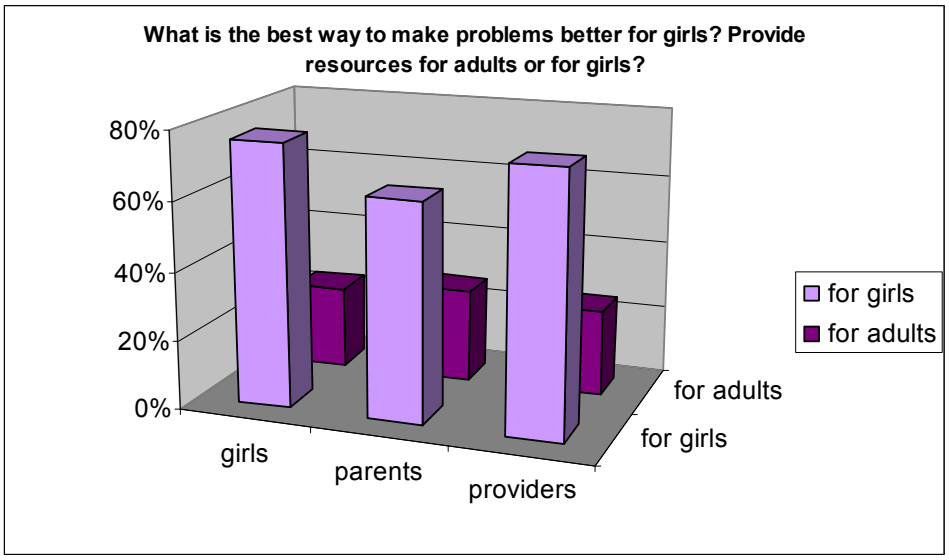


Figure 12: Whom to Target with New Resources, Adults or Girls

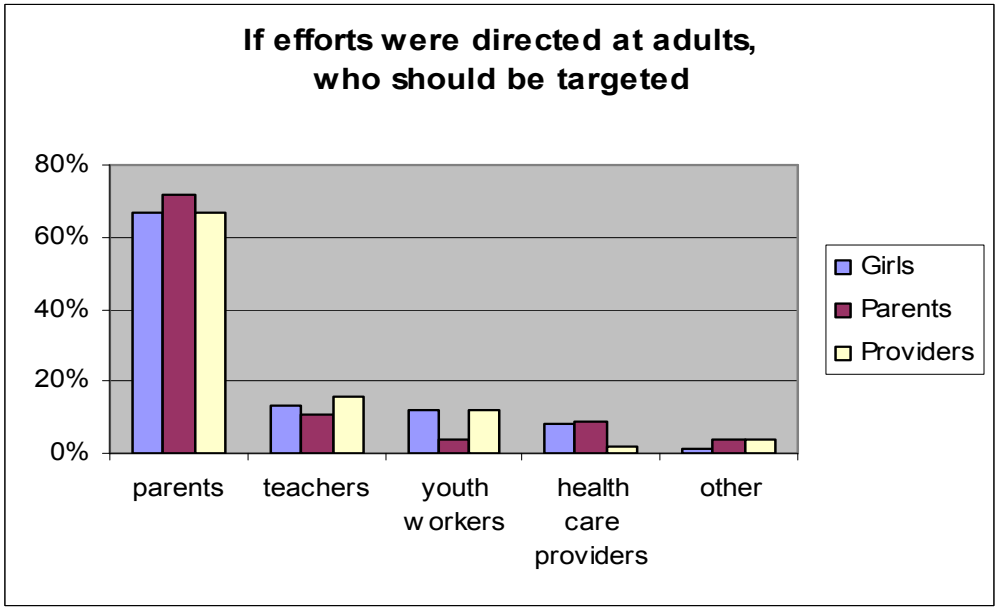


Figure 13: Among Adults, Whom to Target

Identify populations of girls who are not being reached by adults or out-of-school time programs and services. Find new ways of reaching out to girls who are not currently connected to girl-centered services in the community and who do not have active, stable relationships with adults. As a community member, seek opportunities to talk with girls about what's going on in their lives, challenges they face, and how adults can help.

Identify obstacles that are preventing the girls you serve from accessing services intended for them. Assemble a task force that involves families, community members, policymakers, and funders to pinpoint barriers and develop solutions.

Explore the potential of partnerships between schools and community-based organizations to address the transportation gap.

Forge authentic partnerships with girls so that they can be involved in the development, execution, and evaluation of services and programs focused on them. Getting input from girls about what types of programs they want is only the first step toward building a truly gender-sensitive program. Girls need to have leadership roles during each stage of the program-development process. Take their ideas, experiences, and preferences into account when deciding whether a program should be coed, girls-only, or some combination of the two, for example.

Expand out-of-school time opportunities for girls by expanding resources being directed at girls. Consider new initiatives focused specifically on girls' needs.

Consider developing peer mentoring programs for girls to support their transition into middle and high school. Girls prefer mentors who are either older middle-school age (25%), high-school age (40%), or college age (28%).

Offer more programs, services, and resources that include parents as beneficiaries. Provide opportunities for parents to network with one another and share resources and best practices related to their middle-school daughters. Create print and online resources on topics of interest to them.

Plan programs and services with the parent-child relationship in mind. Help both parents and girls see the benefits of strengthening their connection. For example, girls can lead a "Did you know?" workshop for parents, informing them about aspects of their lives that parents may not be knowledgeable about. Parent-child programs can help open lines of communication between adults and girls, and allow both to gain new perspectives on the challenges they each face in relationship with each other.

Support the adults who advocate for girls. Provide more resources, support, training, and networking opportunities for providers of programs and services to girls.

Ensure that outreach efforts are consistent with the preferences of your constituents. In advertising programs, target the places frequented by girls and their families. Work with other individuals and organizations to develop more effective systems for outreach to the targeted constituents. Be attuned to differences in cultural, economic, and neighborhood levels.

Assess the diversity of providers within your organization. When recruiting providers who will serve as mentors to girls, consider the ways that providers act as both "window and mirror" (Style, 1988) to youth. Mentors and role models should reflect important aspects of youth's realities and allow them to envision broad possibilities beyond their current realities.

Develop a central hub to locate information about girls: a program and service directory, local calendar of events and opportunities, community events and forums, fundraising events, professional development seminars and workshops, job and volunteer opportunities, research and publications. Explore the possibility of creating a link to this hub from the websites of all Worcester-area organizations serving girls, including middle schools, community-based organizations, health agencies, government departments, and philanthropic institutions. Notify all parents about this resource so that information can be dispersed easily and in a low-cost way.

Harness the energy and resources of individuals and organizations that are invested in girls' needs, interests, and well-being to strategically research, educate, advocate, and coordinate efforts on behalf of local girls. Use its collective voice to build the capacity of the Worcester-area community as a whole to identify and meet girls' needs.

Advance the challenge that every adult in the community has a responsibility to act as an advocate for girls, in both formal and informal ways.

Section IV

Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS

"Adults should pay attention to how much they don't know!"
--Hispanic/Latina girl, 8th grade

CHAPTER	CHALLENGE OR GAP	OPPORTUNITY
CONTEXT	Girls' needs, experiences, challenges, perspectives, and resources are often unique and therefore need to be examined separately from those of boys.	Design, implement, and evaluate new and existing programs in terms of the unique desires and needs of girls with different identity characteristics. Invite girls to participate in these processes as a way to ensure that their needs are being accurately perceived and effectively filled.
	Middle school is a time when many different types of transition occur simultaneously—physical growth, cognitive development, social changes, and school restructuring. These transitions pose challenges to girls.	Create systems for supporting middle-school girls through times of transition, such as the entry to middle school and the anticipation of starting high school. Peer mentoring programs are one avenue to consider.
	Easily accessible, currently updated data on girls in the Worcester area are lacking.	Work collaboratively to develop a centralized system for collecting data about local girls in a uniform, ongoing way. House all local data in a place that is easily accessible to all individuals and organizations who directly and indirectly affect girls through their work.

CHAPTER	CHALLENGE OR GAP	OPPORTUNITY
HEALTH	Girls, parents, and providers all recognize the centrality of health to girls' well-being. Prevention and intervention-focused programs are needed.	Listen to girls, parents, and providers who say they want new programs for girls that focus on health and wellness, including fitness and sports, stress reduction, healthy eating, menstruation, and safe sex. Ensure that prevention *and* intervention programs exist.
	Girls are experiencing a range of issues related to mental health, and the adults in their lives want more resources and supports to increase girls' resilience.	Create additional prevention-focused mental health resources and training to supplement existing intervention-focused support and resources.
	Concern with physical appearance features prominently in girls' everyday lives.	Help girls resist toxic cultural messages by teaching them media-literacy skills that promote critical thinking about unhealthy sociocultural standards of female beauty and body ideals.
"[One of the biggest challenges of raising a middle-school girl is] giving her support she needs to improve her self-esteem and assertiveness—helping her see herself outside of her social circle." --White parent, 8th grade girl		
SEXUAL HEALTH	Girls in Greater Worcester want and need more sex education, including information about menstruation and puberty. Girls feel pressured to have sex, and many are sexually active.	Offer more comprehensive sex education opportunities in and out of school. Girls need basic information on menstruation, puberty, reproductive health, and safe sex.
	Girls report that boys sometimes take advantage of them sexually and violently, and that sexual harassment is a common experience	Educate girls--and boys--about sexual harassment, assault, and abuse in ways that do not victimize girls and/or demonize boys. Empower girls to say no to harassment, abuse, and pressure, and to say yes to being physically, emotionally, and sexually safe, comfortable, and confident.

CHAPTER	CHALLENGE OR GAP	OPPORTUNITY
SEXUAL HEALTH (cont'd)	Girls need spaces where they can explore their sexual feelings and identities. The needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning girls are rarely addressed.	Provide safe spaces and other encouragements for girls and their adult allies to talk in depth about what is really happening with regard to sexuality, even if it is not necessarily what you think should be happening. Include discussion about complex issues such as diverse sexual identities.
"There are programs out there, but they don't address particular issues of relevance to girls, for example, sex." --Latino parent, 8th grade girl		
VIOLENCE AND SAFETY	Physical violence is a dominant concern for girls and their adult advocates, including physical fighting, gangs, safety in the community, crime, and a dearth of safe spaces for girls.	Intensify efforts to prevent violence. Provide professional development trainings, community seminars, and literature to increase knowledge about the pathways to and early indications of victimization and violence. Work to ensure that everyday public and private spaces such as schools, neighborhoods, public transportation, and homes are places where girls can feel physically, sexually, and emotionally safe.
	Girls' relationships with one another are sometimes characterized by emotional violence, conceptualized by girls as "drama." Social and emotional violence in the peer group makes the school climate unsafe.	Allow girls to explore tension and conflict in their relationships with other girls. Help them brainstorm ways to create healthier relationships, and to practice assertiveness rather than aggressiveness. Let them know that relational aggression is violence.
	Parents, providers, and girls report concerns about safe transportation for girls and its effect on their access to community resources	Collaborate across Greater Worcester public and private agencies to create a plan to ensure that girls have safe access to transportation to school and out-of-school programs and services. Explore the potential of partnerships between schools and community-based organizations to address the transportation gap.
"There are not enough safe activities for girls this age. They need someplace they can go with their friends and enjoy the same interests, but still be in a safe environment." --White parent, 8th grader		

CHAPTER	CHALLENGE OR GAP	OPPORTUNITY
RELATION-SHIPS	Girls' relationships with other girls are a source of happiness and support, as well as of worry, stress, and strife.	Have formal and informal dialogues with girls about their relationships with one another. Allow girls to examine those relationships, including their benefits and the outside factors that influence these relationships.
	Adults, including family members and nonrelated advocates, care about girls, and girls know and appreciate this fact. Yet adults and community members are unaware of many of the day-to-day realities of girls' lives.	Help girls expand their support networks by providing opportunities for cross-generational dialogues and relationship building between girls and adults. Girls can teach adults what they don't know about the complex realities of their lives, and adults can recognize that the consequences of not knowing are graver than the fear of knowing.
	Girls, parents, and providers are all concerned that peer pressure leads girls to make unhealthy choices.	Provide girls with tools to help them make healthy choices. Strategize with them about ways to maintain their self-confidence and act in harmony with choices that will promote their well-being.
	Romantic relationships with boys are both exciting and confusing.	Acknowledge the prominence of romantic relationships in girls' lives. Help girls disentangle their sense of self-worth from romantic relationships with boys.
"I feel comfortable talking to a female relative or friend who is not 'too old' but is old enough to give sound advice." --White girl, 6th grade		
EDUCATION	Girls understand the importance of education. Some feel positive about school; others feel disconnected and unsafe. Girls want to do well in school, yet face day-to-day struggles.	Identify what aspects of school help some girls feel good about themselves. Use this knowledge to work toward an understanding of what is not working for other girls. Work collaboratively with girls to make appropriate adjustments to curricula and the school environment.
	Girls look ahead to higher education; they want to go to college but worry about how to get there and how to pay for it.	Create more in-school and out-of-school programs that focus on college preparation and affordability.

CHAPTER	CHALLENGE OR GAP	OPPORTUNITY
EDUCATION (cont'd)	Parents want to know more about their daughters' school experiences and to have closer working relationships with teachers.	Maximize connections between parents and schools as a way to create more dialogue, disseminate information, and increase the likelihood that parents and teachers work together to further girls' educational aspirations.
"Can you prepare us for everyday life in the future in a fun way?" --African American girl, 7th grade		
SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES	Many girls are involved in out-of-school time programs, yet multiple obstacles hinder their participation. Girls seek girl-centered programs that are sensitive to their unique needs, interests, and ways of relating to others.	Identify obstacles that are preventing the girls you serve from accessing services intended for them. Assemble a task force that involves families, community members, policymakers, and funders to pinpoint barriers and develop solutions.
	Parents want more resources and support systems to help them raise their daughters. Professional girls' advocates need more resources, support, training, and networking opportunities.	Offer more programs, services, resources and networking opportunities for girls' adult advocates, in particular parents and providers of services and programs for girls.
	There is sometimes a gap between providers' methods of outreach and how girls and their families prefer to learn about resources.	Ensure that outreach efforts are consistent with the preferences of the constituents. Work with other individuals and organizations to develop more effective systems for outreach to the targeted constituents. Be attuned to differences in cultural, economic, and neighborhood levels.
	Parents and providers are frustrated that information about resources and supports for girls is scattered and sometimes difficult to obtain.	Develop a central hub to locate information about girls: a program and service directory, a local calendar of events and opportunities, community events and forums, fundraising events, professional development seminars and workshops, job and volunteer opportunities, research and publications.

In sum, the needs assessment data underscore the importance of a building an alliance that is concentrated on girls' unique needs in the Worcester area. More specifically, this study reveals the need for: (a) new programs and services for girls to address identified gaps; (b) a networking collaborative involving providers, funders, and researchers representing public and private organizations that facilitates the exchange of information, resources, and ideas; (c) an information hub where programs, events, and opportunities for girls and their adult advocates can be found; (d) education and advocacy to increase public awareness of girls' issues; (e) staff development for providers working with middle-school girls; (f) increased outreach to families of girls; (g) parent education and networking; and (h) a data repository for local research on girls.

Every adult in the community has a responsibility to act as an advocate for girls, in both formal and informal ways.

Appendix

APPENDIX

Table 1: Focus Groups		
GIRLS	**PARENTS**	**PROVIDERS**
Summer program (12)	Worcester Community Action Council (25)	Youth providers (10)
Church youth (5)	Church (6)	Youth providers (5)
Girl Scouts (8)	Girl Scouts (4)	Investing in Girls Group (10)
Latino Education Institute	Latino Education Institute (5)	Investing in Girls Group (10)
	Latino Education Institute *in Spanish* (5)	
Total Number of Participants		
35	45	25 (with some overlap)
Total Number of Groups		
4	5	4
GRAND TOTAL: 13 focus groups; 105 people		

Note: Attempts were also made to conduct a focus group with system-involved girls in a Department of Youth Services facility, but due to complications in accessing the system, (e.g., the fast turnover of girls, challenges in getting parental consents), it did not materialize.

Table 2: Recruitment Sites for Survey Participants	
YWCA First Night Event	United Service Executives (USES)
Worcester Sharks Hockey Games	Investing in Girls Group
Women and Girls in Sports Event	Y.O.U., Inc.
March Madness basketball	Youth First listserv
Women and Girls Talk	United Way of Central Mass.
Dance competition at the DCU Center	Child Care Connection/Family Services of Central Mass.
Stop & Shop Supermarket	Hope Coalition
Rosalind Wiseman lecture at Bancroft School	Citizens Schools after-school program
Girls Incorporated (Lincoln House and Worcester House)	Burncoat Middle School
Boys and Girls Clubs	University Park School
YWCA	A.L.L School
YMCA	Sullivan Middle School
Girl Scouts--Montachusetts Council	Worcester East Middle School
Worcester Jewish Community Center	Bancroft School
Latino Education Institute	Worcester Academy
Family Health Center	Worcester Public Library
Planned Parenthood	Mailed in
YouthNet	Online
Worcester Church	

Table 3: Demographics of Girls Surveyed			
Age (years)	**Grade**	**Race/ethnicity**	**Neighborhood**
10-11: 15%	5th: 1%	White: 33%	West: 15%
12-13: 68%	6th: 19%	Hispanic: 31%	Main south: 37%
14-15: 16%	7th: 47%	Black: 20%	Burncoat: 11%
	8th: 30%	Asian American: 3%	East: 20%
	9th: 3%		Greater Worcester: 13%
			Unknown: 4%
TOTAL: 222 girls from more than 18 venues			

Table 4: Demographics of Parents Surveyed						
Parent Age (years)	**Sex**	**Marital status**	**Race/ ethnicity**	**Neighbor-hood**	**Daughter's age** (years)	**Daughter's grade**
21-30: 14%	F: 81%	Single, widowed, divorced: 28%	White: 80%	West: 16%	10-11: 16%	5th: 5%
31-40: 35%	M: 19%	Partnered/ Married: 64%	Hispanic: 9%	Main south: 14%	12-13: 60%	6th: 14%
41-50: 45%		Other: 7%	Black: 9%	Burncoat: 5%	14-15: 24%	7th: 47%
51-60: 5%			Asian American: 2%	East: 33%		8th: 31%
61-70: 2%			Other: 5%	Greater Worcester: 33%		Other: 3%
71+: 0%				Other: 0%		
TOTAL: 58 parents from more than 10 venues						

Table 5: Demographics of Providers Surveyed			
Provider age (years)	**Sex**	**Race/Ethnicity**	**Role with Girls**
21-30: 30%	F: 91%	White: 71%	School administrator: 27%
31-40: 18%	M: 9%	Hispanic: 18%	School teacher: 15%
41-50: 25%		Black: 6%	Health/mental health worker: 15%
51-60: 20%		Asian American: 2%	Youth worker: 13%
61-70: 7%		Native American/Alaskan Native: 2%	Researcher: 7%
71+: 0%		Other: 4%	Advocate: 7%
TOTAL: 56 providers from more than 14 venues			

Table 6: Demographics of Girls Served by Provider Participants' Programs				
Ages (years)	**Racial/ ethnic characteristics**	**Income levels**	**Neighborhoods served**	**Program structure**
10-11: 52%	White: 95%	Low income: 69%	West: 48%	Coed: 77%
12-13: 80%	Hispanic: 96%	Lower-middle: 24%	Main south: 82%	Girls only: 23%
14-15: 71%	Black: 89%	Middle-middle: 7%	Burncoat: 55%	
	Asian American: 71%	Upper-middle: 0%	East: 55%	
	African: 63%	Upper-income: 0%	Greater Worcester: 45%	
	Asian 52%		Outside Worcester, Within Mass.: 25%	

References

REFERENCES

Albert, B.; Brown, S.; & Flanigan, C.M. (2003). *14 and younger: The sexual behavior of young adolescents*. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

American Association of University Women. (1991). *Shortchanging girls, Shortchanging America.* Retrieved from http://www.aauw.org/research/SGSA.pdf Washington, D.C.

American Bar Association & National Bar Association. (2001). Justice by gender: The lack of appropriate prevention, diversion and treatment alternatives for girls in the justice system. Retrieved from http://www.abanet.org/crimjust/juvjus/justicebygenderweb.pdf

APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2007). *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls.* Retrieved from http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization_rep.pdf

American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *The diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, 4th ed. (DSM-IV-TR).* Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

Apter, T. (1990). *Altered loves: Mothers and daughters during adolescence.* New York: Fawcett Columbine.

Benard, B. (1991). *Fostering resiliency in kids: Protective factors in the family, school and community.* Portland, OR: Western Center for Drug Free School and Communities.

Berndt, T.J. (2002). Friendship quality and social development. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 11*(1), 7-10.

Berk, L.E. (2006). *Child development*, 7th ed. Boston: Pearson.

Blanding, M. (2006, May). Big mother. *Boston Magazine*, pages unknown.

Bowie, L., & Bronte-Tinkew, J. (2007). Recruiting mentors in out-of-school time programs: What's involved? Washington, D.C.: Child Trends Research-to- Results. Retrieved from http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2007_01_22_RB_RecruitMentors.pdf

Brown, L.M. (2003). *Girlfighting.* New York: New York University Press.

Brown, L.M., & Gilligan, C. (1992). *Meeting at the crossroads: Women's psychology and girls' development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brownstein, J., & Sagarin, J. (2006). *The girls have spoken: Final report to the Fred Harris Daniels Foundation.* Worcester: Children's Friend, Inc.

Buka, S., Stichick, T., Birdthistle, I., & Earls, F. (2001). Youth exposure to violence: Prevalence, risks, and consequences. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *71*(3*),* 298-310.

Cain, J. (2004). *Effective hours after school*. Retrieved from http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/literacy/cain.htm

Casey-Cannon, S., Hayward, C., & Gowen, K. (2001). Middle-school girls' reports of peer victimization: Concerns, consequences, and implications. *Professional School Counseling, 5*(2), 138-47.

Catalano, S. (2004). Criminal Victimization, 2003.Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. Retrieved from http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/cv03.htm

Cates, J. R., Herndon, N. L., Schulz, S. L., & Darroch, J. E. (2004). *Our voices, our lives, our futures: Youth and sexually transmitted diseases.* Chapel Hill, NC: School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Cavanaugh, S. (2005). Educators revisit girls' loss of math, science interest. *Education Week,* May 4, 6. http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/05/04/34gender.h24.html.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2006). Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2005. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. 55*(SS-5), June 9, 2006.

Children's Bureau. (2004). Child Maltreatment. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/cm02

Citizens for Juvenile Justice. (2005, June). Girls in the Massachusetts Juvenile Justice System. *Fact Sheet.* Boston, MA. Retrieved from http://cfjj.org/Pdf/Girls-FS-6_9_05.pdf

Clay, D., Vignoles, V.L. & Dittmar, H. (2005). Body image and self-esteem among adolescent girls: Testing the influence of sociocultural factors**.** *Journal of Research on Adolescence***.** *15*, 451-477.

Collins, C. (2001*). Girls and their bodies*. New York: Girls Incorporated.

Collins, C. (2002a). *Girls and juvenile justice*. New York: Girls Incorporated.

Collins, C. (2002b*). Girls and substance use*. New York: Girls Incorporated.

Collins, C. (2002c). *Girls and sports*. New York: Girls Incorporated.

Crick, N.R., & Grotpeter, J.K. (1995). Relational aggression, gender, and social-psychological adjustment. *Child Development, 66*(3), 710-722.

Crockett, L.J., Petersen, A.C., Graber, J.A., Schulenberg, J.E., & Ebata, A. (1989). School transitions and adjustment during early adolescence. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 9*(3), 181-210.

Cummins, J. (1996). *Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society*. Ontario, CA: California Association for Bilingual Education.

Debold, E., Wilson, M., & Malave, I. (1993). *Mother-daughter revolution: From betrayal to power.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.

Denner, J., & Griffin, A. (2003). The role of gender in enhancing program strategies for healthy youth development. In Villarruel, F.A., Perkins, D.F., Borden, L.M., & Keith, J.G. (Eds.), *Community youth development: Programs, policies, and practices* (pp. 118-145). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Dickinson, A. (2002, May). Dads and daughters. *Parenting*, pp. F9-F10.

Dishion, T, Nelson, S. & Yasui, M. (2005). Predicting early adolescent gang involvement from middle school adaptation. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 34(1),* 62-73.

Donnerstein, E., & Smith, S. (2001). Sex in the media: Theory, influences, and solutions. In D.G. Singer & J.L. Singer (Eds.), *Handbook of children and the media* (pp. 289-307). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.

EDK Associates. (1996). *Teenagers under pressure.* New York: Ms. Foundation for Women.

Eagan, M. (2005, Feb. 22). Old adult taboo no match for teen cynicism. *The Boston Globe.* Retrieved September 10, 2006, from Lexis Nexis Academic.

Eder,D., Evans, C.C., & Parker, S. (1995). *School talk: Gender and adolescent culture.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Ely, M., Vinz, R., Downing, M., & Anzul, M. (1997). *On writing qualitative research: Living by words*. Washington, D.C.: Falmer Press.

Estes, R.J., & Weiner, N.A. (2001). *The commercial sexual exploitation of children in the U.S, Canada and Mexico*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work.

Feuereisen, P. (2005). *Invisible girls: The truth about sexual abuse*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.

Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Fine, M., & Zane, N. (1991). Bein' wrapped too tight: When low-income women drop out of high school. *Women's Studies Quarterly, 19* (1&2), 77-99.

Freiwirth, J. & Herrington, W. 2006. *Voices of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in Worcester County: Needs assessment report of the GLBT Partnership*. Worcester, MA: Greater Worcester Community Foundation. Retrieved from http://www.greaterworcester.org/GLBTVoices.pdf

Friedman, S.A. (2005*). How the system fails sexually exploited girls in the United States: Examples from four American cities*. Retrieved from http://www.ecpatusa.org/documents/whoistheretohelpus.pdf

Gagné, M.H., Lavoie, F., & Hébert, M. (2005). Victimization during childhood and revictimization in dating relationships in adolescent girls. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 29(10),* 1155-1172.

Gilligan, C. (1990a). Joining the resistance: Psychology, politics, girls and women. *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *29*(4), 501-536.

Gilligan, C. (1990b). Teaching Shakespeare's sister: Notes from the underground of female adolescence. In, C. Gilligan, N.P. Lyons, & T.J. Hanmer (Eds.), *Making connections* (pp. 1-29). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gilligan, G. (1996). The centrality of relationship in human development: A puzzle, some evidence, and a theory. In G. Noam, & K. Fischer, K. (Eds.), *Development and vulnerability in close relationships* (pp. 237-261). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Gilligan, C., Brown, L.M., & Rogers, A. (1990). Psyche embedded: A place for body, relationships, and culture in personality theory. In A.I. Rabin, R.A. Zucker, R.A. Emmons, & S. Frank (Eds.), *Studying persons and lives* (pp. 86-147). New York: Springer.

Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. (2002). *The net effect: Girls and the new media*. New York: Girl Scouts of the U.S.A.

Greene, M. & Way, N. (2005). Self-esteem trajectories among ethnic minority adolescents: A growth curve analysis of the patterns and predictors of change. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 15(2),* 151-178.

Greenfield, T. (1997). Gender-and grade-level difference in science interest and participation. *Science Education, 81*(3), 259-275.

Greenstone, J.H. (2006). *The role of dress, labeling and media in girls' negotiation of the tension between "hot" and smart and restrictive models of girlhood.* Unpublished masters thesis, Cornell University: New York.

Harris Interactive/Girls Incorporated. (2006). *The supergirl dilemma: Girls grapple with the mounting pressure of expectations.* Retrieved from www.girlsinc.org/ic/page.php?id=2.4.30

Harter, S. (1998). The development of self-representations. In W. Damon (Series Ed.) & N. Eisenberg (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of Child Psychology: Vol. 3 Social, emotional and personality development* (5th ed., pp. 553-617). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Harvard Prevention Research Center. (2002*). Play across Boston: Summary report*. Boston: Harvard School of Public Health.

Herrera, V. (Fall 2002/Winter 2003). Girls at risk: Physical and sexual abuse as a path to delinquency. *Girl Matters: Girls' Coalition Newsletter*, p. 6.

Jekielek, S.M., Moore, K.A., Hair, E.C., & Scarupa, H.J. (2002). *Mentoring: A promising strategy for youth development.* Washington, D.C.: Child Trends Research Brief. Retrieved from http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2002_02_01_RB_Mentoring.pdf

Kane, M.J. (2007). *Letter from the Editor: Fostering Girls' Physical Health.* Retrieved from http://girlscoalition.org/journal/article.asp?issueID=26&id=133&catID=18

Kelly, J. (2002). *Dads and daughters*. New York: Broadway Books.

Kilbourne, J. (1999). *Can't buy my love: How advertising changes the way we think and feel.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Kluger, J. (2006, May). Taming wild girls. *Time,* pages unknown.

Lamb, S., & Brown, L.M. (2006). *Packaging girlhood: Rescuing our daughters from marketers' schemes.* New York: St. Martin's Press.

Levick, M.L., & Sherman, F.T. (2003). When individual differences demand equal treatment: An equal rights approach to the special needs of girls in the juvenile justice system. *Wisconsin Women's Law Journal, 18, (1),* 9-50.

Liang, B., Tracy, A., Taylor, C. & Williams, L. (2002). Mentoring college-age women: A relational approach. *American Journal of Community Psychology. 30(2),* 271-287.

Lopez, C., & DuBois, D.L. (2005). Peer victimization and rejection: Investigation of an integrative model of affects on emotional, behavioral and academic adjustment in early adolescence. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 34(1),* 25-36.

Machoian, L. (2005). *The disappearing girl: Learning the language of teenage depression.* New York: Dutton.

Massachusetts 2020.(2002*). No time to lose: Children and their after-school hours*. Retrieved from http://www.mass2020.org/finalparentsummary.pdf

Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy. (2006). Birth rates among women, aged 15-19: Massachusetts vs. United States. Retrieved from http://www.massteenpregnancy.org/data/birth_mass.html

Massachusetts Coalition on Youth Violence Prevention. (2006, October). *Preventing youth violence through the promotion of mentoring and youth employment*. Presentation.

Massachusetts Community Health Information Profile (MassCHIP). (2007). Teen Births by Race/Hispanic Ethnicity: Worcester. Retrieved from http://masschip.state.ma.us/InstantTopics/three.asp?Rptid=289&Geo=1771&lvl=2#Births1

Massachusetts Department of Education. (2000). 1999 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) results. Retrieved from http://www.doe.mass.edu/cnp/hprograms/yrbs/99/letter.html

Massachusetts Department of Education. (2006). 2005 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) results. Retrieved from http://www.doe.mass.edu/cnp/hprograms/yrbs/05/default.html.

Massachusetts Department of Education District Profiles (2006). Worcester – Enrollment indicators. Retrieved from http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/home.asp?mode=o&so=&ot=5&o=1906&view=enr

McHale, S.M., Crouter, A.C., & Tucker, C.J. (2001). Free time activities in middle childhood: Links with adjustment in early adolescence. *Child Development, 72*, 1764-1778.

Mead, M. (2001). Gender matters: Funding effective programs for women and girls. Retrieved from http://www.dallaswomensfoundation.org/docs/gendermatters.pdf.

Merskin, D. (2004). Reviving Lolita?: A media literacy examination of sexual portrayals of girls in fashion advertising. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *48*(1), 119-129.

Miles, M.B., & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Milkie, M. (1999, June). Social comparisons, reflected appraisals, and mass media: The impact of pervasive beauty images on black and white girls' self-concepts. *Social Psychology Quarterly,* 190-210.

Miller, B.M. (2007). Personal communication.

Minnesota Women's Fund. (1990). *Reflections of risk—Growing up female in Minnesota: A report on the health and well-being of adolescent girls in Minnesota.* University of Minnesota.

Moore, K & Zaff, J. (2002). Building a better teenager: A summary of "what works" in adolescent development. *American Teens Series.* Washington, D.C.: Child Trends Research Brief.

Morry, M.M., & Staska, S.L. (2001). Magazine exposure: Internalization, self-objectification, eating attitudes, and body satisfaction in male and female university students. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science, 33.4*, 269-279.

Ms. Foundation for Women. (2000). *The new girls movement: Charting the path*. Retrieved from http://www.ms.foundation.org/user-assets/PDF/Program/HGHW.pdf.

Ms. Foundation for Women. (2001). The new girls movement: Implications for youth programs. Retrieved from http://www.ms.foundation.org/user-assets/PDF/Program/hghw_girlsmovement.pdf

Murnen, S.K., Smolak, L., Mills, J.A., & Good, L. (2003). Thin, sexy women and strong, muscular men: Grade-school children's responses to objectified images of women and men. *Sex Roles 49(9/10),* 427-437.

National Institute of Justice. (2003). Youth victimization: Prevalence and implications. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice.

National Women's Law Center and Harvard Prevention Research Center. (2004). *Keeping score: Girls' participation in high school athletics in Massachusetts.* Retrieved from: http://www.nwlc.org/pdf/KeepingScoreGirlsHSAthleticsInMA2004.pdf

Nieto, S. (1999). *The light in their eyes: Creating multicultural learning communities*. New York: Teacher's College Press.

Noam, G. & Fiore, N. (2004). Relationships across multiple settings: An overview. *New Directions for Youth Development*, *103*, 9-16.

Orfield, G., Losen, D., Wald, J. and Swanson, C. (2004). *Losing our future: How minority youth are being left behind by the graduation rate crisis.* Cambridge*:* Civil Rights Project at Harvard University.

Orenstein, P. (1994). *Schoolgirls: Young women, self-esteem and the confidence gap*. New York: Anchor Books.

Petersen, A.C., Sarigiani, P.A., & Kennedy, R.E. (1991). Adolescent depression: Why more girls? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 20,* 247-271.

Pollastri, A., & Cardemil, E. (2006). Unpublished data.

Porter, G. (2000). Detention in delinquency cases, 1988-1997. *OJJDP (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention) Fact Sheet*, 17. Retrieved from http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/fs200017.pdf

Rayman, P., & Brett, B. (1993). *Pathways for women in the sciences: The Wellesley report—Part I.* Wellesley, MA.: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women.

Rhodes, J., Grossman, J. & Roffman, J. (2002). The rhetoric and reality of youth mentoring. *New Directions for Youth Development, 93,* 9-20.

Rhodes, J., Reddy, R., & Grossman, J. (2005). The protective influence of mentoring on adolescents' substance use: Direct and indirect pathways. *Applied Developmental Science, 9(1),* 31-47.

Rublin, H., Douglas, K., & Halverson, L. (2004). *Coming of age in Boston: Out-of-school time opportunities for teens*. Boston, MA: The Boston Foundation.

Sabo, D.F., Miller, K.E., Farrell, M.P., Melnick, M.J. & Barnes, G.M. (1999). High school athletic participation, sexual behavior, and adolescent pregnancy: A regional study. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 25*(3), 173.

Sadker, M., & Sadker, D. (1994). *Failing at fairness: How our schools cheat girls*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Saul, J. & Audage, N.C. (2007). Preventing child sexual abuse in youth-serving organizations: Getting started on policies and procedures. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

Schoenberg, J. (2007). Personal communication.

Schoenberg, J., Riggins, T., & Salmond, K. (2003). *Feeling safe: What girls say*. New York: Girl Scouts of the U.S.A.

Schoenberg, J., Salmond, K., & Fleshman, P. (2006). *The new normal: What girls say about healthy living.* New York: Girl Scouts of the USA.

Schooler, D., Ward, L.M., Merriwether, A., & Caruthers, A. (2004). Who's that girl: Television's role in the body image development of young white and black women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 28,* 38-47.

Seahill, M. (2000). Female delinquency cases, 1997. *OJJDP (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention) Fact Sheet*, *16*. Retrieved from http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/fs200016.pdf

Sherman, F. (Fall 2002/Winter 2003). How girls enter and move through the juvenile justice system. *Girl Matters: Girls' Coalition Newsletter*, 7.

Shields, V.R., & Heinecken, D. (2002). *Measuring up: How advertising affects self-image.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Simmons, R. (2002). *Odd girl out: The hidden culture of aggression in girls*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books.

Simmons, R.G., & Blythe, D.A. (1987). *Moving into adolescence: The impact of pubertal change and the school context.* Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter Press.

Spencer, R. (2006). Understanding the mentoring process between adolescents and adults. *Youth & Society*, *37*(3), 287-315.

Spencer, R., Jordan, J.V., & Sazama, J. (2004). Growth-promoting relationships between youth and adults: A focus group study. *Families in Society, 85*, 354-362.

Stein, N. (1993). No laughing matter: Sexual harassment in schools. In E. Buchwald, P. Fletcher, & M. Roth (Eds.), *Transforming a rape culture* (pp. 311-331). Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.

Style, E. (1988). Curriculum as window and mirror. *Oak Knoll School Monographs: Listening for all voices—Gender balancing the curriculum.*

Sullivan, A.M. (1996). From mentor to muse: Recasting the role of women in relationship with urban adolescent girls. In Leadbeater, B.J.R., & Way, N. (Eds.), *Urban girls: Resisting stereotypes, creating identities* (pp. 226-249). New York: New York University Press.

Tansi, R./Department of Youth Services (2006). Personal communication.

Tatum, B.D. (1997). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria*? New York: Basic Books.

Taylor, J., Gilligan, C., & Sullivan, A. (1995). *Between voice and silence: Women and girls, race and relationship.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

The Governor's Prevention Partnership. (2004). Preventing girls' aggression and violence: A report of the girls and violence task force. Hartford, Conn.

Theokas, C., & Bloch, M. (2006). *Out-of-school time is critical for children: Who participates in programs?* Washington, D.C.: Child Trends Research-to-Results. Retrieved from http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2006_12_18_FS_OSTCritical.pdf

Tolman, D. (2002). *Dilemmas of desire: Teenage girls talk about sexuality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2000a). QT-P2. Single years of age under 30 years and sex: 2000, Worcester City, MA. U.S. Census Bureau: American Fact Finder.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2000b). Census 2000 demographic profile highlights: Worcester City, MA. U.S. Census Bureau: American Fact Finder.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2000c). QT-P1. Single years of age under 30 years and sex: 2000, Worcester County, MA. U.S. Census Bureau: American Fact Finder.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2000d). CT-P21. Place of birth by citizenship status: 2000, Worcester City, MA. U.S. Census Bureau: American Fact Finder.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2000e). CT-P145H. Sex by Age, Hispanic or Latino Population: 2000, Worcester City, MA. U.S. Census Bureau: American Fact Finder.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2000f). CT-PCT39. Families: Median Family Income in 1999, Worcester City, MA. U.S. Census Bureau: American Fact Finder.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2000g). DT-P160A-H: Poverty Status in 1999 by Presence of Children Under 18 Years of Age. 2000, Worcester City, MA. U.S. Census Bureau: American Fact Finder.

Vandivere, S., Tout, K., Zaslow, M., Calkins, J., & Capizzano, J. (2003). *Unsupervised time: Family and child factors associated with self-care.* Retrieved from http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=310894.

Villarruel, F.A., & Walker, N.E. (2002). *Donde esta la justicia?: A call to action of Latino and Latina youth in the U.S. justice system*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Institute for Children, Youth, and Families.

Ward, J. (2000). *The Skin We're In: Teaching our teens to be emotionally strong, socially smart, and spiritually connected.* New York: Fireside.

Wellesley College Center for Research on Women (CRW). (1992). *How schools shortchange girls.* Washington, D.C.: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation.

Wheeler, K.A. (1997). *Girls navigating middle schools: Creating resonant spaces.* Unpublished qualifying paper, Harvard University: Cambridge, MA.

Wheeler, K.A., Oliveri, R., Towery, I.D., & Mead, M. (2005). *Where are the girls?: The state of girls' programming in Greater Boston.* Retrieved from http://www.girlscoalition.org/uploads/pdf/COPY%20FOR%20PRINTING--Where%20Are%20the%20Girls%20report%2012.29.05%20FINAL.pdf

Wiseman, R. (2003). *Queen bees and wannabes: Helping your daughter survive cliques, gossip, boyfriends, and other realities of adolescence.* New York: Three Rivers Press.

Wiseman, R. (2006). *Queen bee moms and kingpin dads.* New York: Three Rivers Press.

Worcester Public Schools. (2005). Worcester public schools efforts to address increased violence among female students. Worcester, MA.

Worcester Regional Research Bureau. (2004). *Benchmarking municipal youth services in Worcester: 2004*. Worcester, MA: Center for Community Performance Measurement.

Worcester Regional Research Bureau. (2005). *Benchmarking municipal youth services in Worcester: 2005.* Worcester, MA: Center for Community Performance Measurement.

[1] Predictor variables explored included:

1) *girls:* age, grade, neighborhood, and race/ethnicity

2) *parents:* daughter's age, daughter's grade, neighborhood, ages of other children, parent gender, marital status, parent age, parent race/ethnicity

3) *providers:* provider gender, provider age, provider race/ethnicity, direct contact with girls or not, role vis-à-vis girls, ages of girls served, neighborhood of girls served, race/ethnicity of girls served, SES of majority of girls served, and program structure (i.e. coed or girls only).

[2] Financial issues were defined on the surveys used in this study as money for day-to-day living; money for college; money for extracurricular activities and programs; getting a job; supporting/helping to support family.

[3] Recreation was defined on the surveys used in this study as: not enough out-of-school time programs for middle-school girls; programs are hard to get to (transportation issues); programs and activities cost too much; it's hard to find out what programs are available; not enough programs of interest.

[4] Community tension was defined on the surveys used in this study as: tension between different racial/ethnic groups; lack of understanding/support for immigrants; tension between religious groups; tension between parents from different families with different values/parenting styles; tension between parents and school and/or out-of-school time programs.

[5] The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently defined child sexual abuse as "any sexual activity with a child where consent is not or cannot be given" (Saul & Audage, 2007). This definition includes sexual contact that is accomplished by force or threat of force, regardless of the age of the participants; all sexual contact between an adult and a child, regardless of whether there is deception or the child understands the sexual nature of the activity; and sexual contact between an older and a younger child if there is significant disparity in age, development, or size, rendering the younger child incapable of giving informed consent. The sexually abusive acts may include sexual penetration, sexual touching, or non-contact sexual acts such as exposure or voyeurism.