



# The Issues and Assets of African Youth on Staten Island's North Shore:

## A Community Assessment Report

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On the cover: Braving the cold, Deontee Baysah waits to march in the Staten Island Black Heritage Parade on October 18, 2008. Photograph by Sara Rowbottom.

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# The Issues and Assets of African Youth on Staten Island's North Shore:

A Community Assessment Report



## COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT COLLABORATION

African Refuge • Catch a Falling Star • Century Dance Complex • Clifton/Stapleton Coalition • Cromwell Recreation Center • Curtis High School • International Rescue Committee • Island Voice • Mosaic Coalition • New Life Church • New York Center for Interpersonal Development • Park Hill Tenants Association • Roza Promotion • Staten Island Liberian Community Association • United States Sierra Leonean Association • Wagner College • World Association for Community Empowerment • Youth Task Force

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## Executive Summary

“Now we see the problems that we face in our community – where we went wrong and what we need to do to improve it – and we feel like we’re doing something. We’re trying to help our community, and it brings up our self esteem, you know.”<sup>1</sup>

African youth are a large and growing population on the North Shore of Staten Island, especially since 2000, with recent waves of refugees from Liberia and Sierra Leone. Many of these youth and their families fled violent conflicts or brutal civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Nigeria, which have displaced millions since the 1990s. Years of war, sometimes multiple displacements, and living for extended periods in refugee camps mean these youth have endured poverty, hunger, disease, psychological trauma, family separation, and more before emigrating to the United States. Many had very little opportunity for education or have had significant gaps in their formal education.

Upon arrival, West African refugees and immigrants in Staten Island received little support to adjust to American life. Today community members are concerned about the numbers of youth who drop out of school, join gangs, become involved with drugs, and even go to jail. What are the problems that African youth in the North Shore of Staten Island face to ‘making it’ and becoming contributing members of the community? How can their likelihood for success be improved?

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<sup>1</sup> Youth intern, Taking a Stand Youth Project video, presented by International Rescue Committee at the Issues & Assets of African Youth Conference: Towards an Empowering Community for All, September 30, 2008.

This report presents the findings of a community assessment, which sought to answer the question: What are the issues and assets of African youth in the North Shore of Staten Island? The purpose of this assessment was to better understand the situation of African youth living in Staten Island’s North Shore, and with this understanding, improve the community’s capacity to empower African youth, including increasing cooperation and coordination among community-based organizations.

As opposed to outside analysis or an academic research project, this assessment was a multi-method participatory project, which prioritized the perspectives of African youth, their parents, local service providers, community associations, activists and others. Representatives from 18 community organizations and agencies joined the International Rescue Committee and its Community Empowering Youth Project (CEY) partners, African Refuge and Century Dance Complex, to form the Community Assessment Collaboration (CAC), and coordinate the assessment.<sup>2</sup> The assessment was designed and implemented in partnership with North Shore community members and involved participatory activities (such as brainstorming, role playing, and community mapping) and a survey with youth, focus group discussions and individual interviews with parents, and a questionnaire with organizations. Key findings of the assessment and recommendations are summarized below.

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<sup>2</sup> The CAC was a temporary committee dedicated to participating in the design and implementation of the community assessment. CAC members included representatives from IRC, African Refuge, Century Dance Complex, Catch a Falling Star, Island Voice, Mosaic Coalition, New Life Church, New York Center for Interpersonal Development, Park Hill Tenants Association, Park Hill Coalition, Roza Promotion, Staten Island Liberian Community Association, United States Sierra Leonean Association, Wagner College, World Association for Community Empowerment, and the Youth Task Force.

**Key issues of North Shore African youth:**

**Dealing with anger in productive ways:**

- Youth feel they have few ways to let out the anger and frustration they carry
- Not knowing how to handle anger in positive ways, some resort to violence or other negative behaviors

**Lack of money:**

- Youth want to work but few jobs exist close to where youth live
- Some employers do not want to hire Park Hill youth
- Lack of jobs increases the pressure on youth to earn money through other, often illicit, activities

**Poor relationships between parents/guardians & children:**

- Parents and youth integrate differently into American culture and find it difficult to understand and communicate with one another
- Parents feel helplessness against American child protective laws banning corporal punishment; and youth exploit their parents ignorance, leading many parents to give up trying to discipline their children
- Long work schedules mean parents have little time to spend with their children

**Living in an unsafe environment:**

- Youth, especially those living in Park Hill, do not feel safe in their community
- Youth are exposed to gang fighting, gun violence, overt drug dealing, public drug and alcohol use, and dirty, overcrowded neighborhoods and apartment buildings

**Tensions between the African and African American communities:**

- African and African-American community members distrust one another, perpetuate stereotypes and feel they are in competition for resources

- Youth appropriate negative attitudes and these tensions can escalate to violence
- Community organizations stay away from activities specifically to help African youth in order to avoid alienating the African American community

**Peer pressure:**

- Youth face peer pressure to do/use or sell drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, skip and/or drop out of school, join a gang, have sex, and acquire material things other youth have
- Parents doubt youths' ability to withstand peer pressure

**Overcoming educational challenges:**

- Youth are behind their American peers in school, especially in reading, and have significant difficulty with homework, standardized tests, and understanding teachers.
- Bullying in school is rampant and demoralizes youth
- Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, impaired cognitive development, and cultural adjustment stress compound academic and social challenges in school to frustrate youth and hinder learning
- Schools struggle to meet African youth needs
- Parents have limited ability to help children with school issues due to low education, in familiarity with the American schools; and long work schedules

**Few opportunities for constructive activities during out of school time:**

- Existing youth programs tend to overlap services and there are many gaps
- Youth and parent awareness of resources and opportunities is low
- Parents hold many negative perceptions of programs they do know about
- Youth programs struggle with low parent involvement, short-staffing and not enough funding

**Key assets of North Shore African youth:****Successful young Africans and their parents:**

- There are numerous young adult Africans and parents who struggled and overcame many of the same issues today's youth and parents face
- These successful young adults and parents can serve as role models, mentors, and inspiration for others

**Visions for an empowering community:**

- Youth, parents, and organizations, and others have creative and relevant ideas and desires for how youth programs and the physical community can be improved to develop the community into a more empowering place for young people, which can and should be supported

**Strength of culture and networks of support:**

- African culture is strong in the North Shore, and a source of comfort and support, particularly for parents
- Culture can be a vehicle to
  - Improve relationships between youth and parents
  - Increase youth feelings of belonging and positive bicultural identity
  - Promote intercultural understanding and appreciation
- African culture embraces non-family adults (teachers, youth service providers, family friends, neighbors) to play positive, guiding roles in their children's lives

**Educational supports:**

- There are some educational supports for youth, including a program for students who have had their education interrupted at IS 49
- A number of school personnel are working with the African community, helping to create links between community members and schools, and to expand the academic horizon of African students

**Youth creativity, energy, interests and resilience:**

- Many youth are passionate about improving the community they live in, and improving their lives
- Youth have a diverse array of interests, including sports, performing and visual arts, job training, academic support, and more, and want more opportunities

**Neighborhood nonprofits and religious institutions:**

- There are several community-based nonprofits and religious institutions operating in the North Shore, including –African-led organizations
- African-led organizations have unprecedented reach into the community, and critical cultural understanding
- These organizations create rare safe spaces for youth and families, and provide links to mainstream services

## Summary of Next Steps and Recommendations

The findings presented in this report are meant to catalyze critical discussion, help to guide action, and serve as a benchmark against which to judge progress. Taken together these findings indicate that creating a more empowering community for African and other disadvantaged youth requires:

- Improving the quantity, quality, and relevance of free and low-cost youth programs
- Improving the quantity and quality of outreach to parents and youth to:
  - Increase parent involvement in their children's education and other activities
  - Increase awareness of, and comfort with, youth programs
  - Improve parent-youth relationships
- Improving community safety in the North Shore
- Increasing the capacity of schools to meet the needs of African immigrant youth far behind their American classmates, especially in reading and comprehension
- Increasing vocational and job training opportunities for high school and out-of-school youth
- Generating additional knowledge about the issues and assets of African and other subgroups of youth within communities in order to improve strategies to address them
- Creating spaces for dialogue on community issues where youth and parents are key partners; expecting this engagement to take time and resources, to be worth the investment.

There are many ways to positively impact the future of the North Shore as a diverse, safe, vibrant, viable, and more empowering community. Organizations, schools, policy makers, parents, youth and others should consider their role in responding to the findings of this assessment and seek ways, individually and together, to improve the North Shore for its newest residents and others. How will you contribute?



Figure 1: Youth designed t-shirts for the Taking a Stand event on August 2, 2008. Photo by Sara Rowbottom.

## Background:

### What are youth issues and assets?

Increasingly, researchers, program specialists, and even policy makers, are taking an asset-based approach to youth development. Instead of focusing on the problems youth have, these approaches focus on building the assets that youth need to be successful throughout life. Assets are personal resources, which are both desirable on their own and useful in obtaining other desirable things.<sup>3</sup> For example honesty and responsibility are desirable assets in their own right, but they can also be leveraged to develop other assets, such as job opportunities.

YouthAction's Positive Youth Development manual summarizes the types of assets youth need to thrive<sup>4</sup>:

- **Safety and Basic needs:** Food, shelter, and safety
- **Preparedness:** Knowledge and skills to be ready for work and adult life, including academic, social, emotional, vocational, and cultural competencies
- **Connectedness:** To feel connected to their family and community
- **Engagement:** Opportunities to take part in meaningful activities, be responsible, have a voice, and participate in civic discourse

Youth assets are frequently categorized as either internal (personal capabilities) or external (opportunities), recognizing the roles that individual agency and the external environment both play in youth development. The Search Institute has developed a list of 8 categories including 40

<sup>3</sup> Stephen F. Hamilton, Mary Agnes Hamilton, and Karen Pittman. "Principles for Youth Development." In S.F. Hamilton and M.A. Hamilton (Eds.) *The Youth Development Handbook: Coming of Age in American Communities*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc. (2004) p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Jutta Dotterweich. *Positive Youth Development Manual*. Act for Youth (2006). Pp. 7-8.

assets that contribute to positive development of young people and help them avoid risky behaviors.

Table 1: Search Institute Findings on Assets

Categories of Developmental Assets	
<b>External</b> (provided by family, school, and community) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Support</b></li> <li>• <b>Empowerment</b></li> <li>• <b>Boundaries &amp; Expectations</b></li> <li>• <b>Constructive Use of Time</b></li> </ul>	<b>Internal</b> (to individual youth) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Commitment to learning</b></li> <li>• <b>Positive Values</b></li> <li>• <b>Social competencies</b></li> <li>• <b>Positive Identity</b></li> </ul>
Categories of High Risk and Thriving Youth Behaviors	
High Risk Behaviors	Thriving Behaviors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem alcohol use</li> <li>• Tobacco use</li> <li>• Illicit drug use</li> <li>• Sexual intercourse</li> <li>• Depression and/or attempted suicide</li> <li>• Antisocial behavior</li> <li>• Violence</li> <li>• School problems</li> <li>• Driving and alcohol</li> <li>• Gambling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Succeeds in school</li> <li>• Helps others</li> <li>• Values diversity</li> <li>• Maintains good health</li> <li>• Exhibits leadership</li> <li>• Resists danger</li> <li>• Delays gratification</li> <li>• Overcomes adversity</li> </ul>
Source: Search Institute, <a href="http://www.search-institute.org/assets/">http://www.search-institute.org/assets/</a> ; Sesma and Roehlkepartain. 2003. Fig. 1 and 2, p. 3.	

The freedoms approach, or capabilities framework, introduced by Amartya Sen centers on improving the capabilities of people to seek lives they value.<sup>5</sup> Sen deliberately avoids defining what type of life individuals should value. Definitions of "success" and the needs, wants,

<sup>5</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Anchor Books: New York, 1999.

and barriers to achieving it may be different for different populations of people.

Research consistently shows that the more developmental assets youth have, the fewer high risk behaviors they engage in and the more “thriving behaviors” they exhibit.<sup>6</sup>

Certain assets may be particularly important for refugee and immigrant youth, who in addition to the normal challenges of adolescence, must adapt to a vastly different culture, lifestyle, and family dynamics, cope with traumatic stress, overcome consequences of malnutrition and disease on physical and cognitive development, and catch up to their American peers academically. Cultural identity, for example can be an important asset. Research shows that refugee and immigrant youth who develop positive bicultural identities, such as considering oneself Liberian-American, adjust better than youth who feel they have to choose between their home culture and being “American.”<sup>7</sup> Being bicultural – and being accepted and encouraged to be bicultural – can contribute to feeling more connected to both family and community and to higher self-esteem.

Asset-focused approaches empower stakeholders to take action by focusing on the assets that can help youth to overcome obstacles and make positive choices, rather than only on negative outcomes (such as what to do about gang violence or dropping out of school). In this light, responding to the assessment becomes a more manageable matter of

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6 Arturo Sesma, Jr. and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain. “Unique Strengths, Shared Strengths: Developmental Assets Among Youth of Color.” *Insights & Evidence*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Search Institute (November 2003): p. 3.  
7 Dina Birman. *Mental Health of Refugee Children: A Guide for the ESL Teacher*. Denver: Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning. (2002): pp. 15-17.

supporting youth to build the assets they need to achieve a life they value.

**Refugee:** A refugee or asylee has left his or her country of nationality and is unable or unwilling to return to that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political group.

Source: Immigration and Nationality Act Sec. 101(a)(42).

## Research Methods

This assessment is a mixed methods exploratory study, which emphasized collecting and triangulating information from different sources in order to understand the community’s perspective of the issues and assets of African youth in Staten Island’s North Shore. Three main

strategies were used:

1. A multi-method, youth designed and implemented project, including a survey, participatory action and qualitative research methods with youth
2. A questionnaire with organizations that serve African youth (among other youth). and
3. Focus groups and individual interviews with African parents.

## Youth project

Between May and September 2008 youth designed and implemented a portion of the assessment. A workshop series at four local organizations with 38 youth challenged youth teams to propose a project to learn about the problems they and their peers face and how they can be solved. At the Youth Project Design contest on May 31, 2008, five teams (15) youth presented their project ideas to peers and a panel of judges.

A group of four youth executed the winning project design during the summer of 2008. After learning about research techniques, analyzing issues and assets they and their peers

have, and designing research tools (including body mapping, interviews, role playing, group discussion, mapping, cartooning, and a survey) they planned an event called "Taking a Stand" for August 2, 2008. The group marketed the event to youth ages 10 to 21 through flyers, a MySpace page, and word of mouth. Though rain fell the day of the event, 24 youth participated. The youth shared their project findings in a short video presented at The Issues & Assets of African Youth Conference: Improving the Community for All on September 30, 2009.<sup>8</sup> CAC members and youth continued to collect youth surveys until the total youth surveyed reached 110.

### Interviews and focus groups with African parents

Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with parents to learn about the challenges they feel their children face, the challenges they face raising their children, what the resources in the community are that help them to overcome these challenges, and how the community could do better to support African youth.

Recruiting parents to participate in focus groups proved difficult. Many work long hours and/or were skeptical about the intent and benefits of research activities. Limited availability of CAC members to facilitate also made organizing groups challenging. By September 30, 2008, 10 parents had participated in four groups. Feeling that this number was insufficient to well represent parents' views, the CEY partners decided to continue engaging parents. IRC's Adama Kromah recruited and interviewed parents individually and in small groups through April 30, 2009. Ultimately, 40 parents participated.

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<sup>8</sup> Figures presented in the video were preliminary estimates. Final results are presented in this report. Please contact the International Rescue Committee to request a copy of this 10-minute video.



Youth Project Interns (clockwise) Anthony Tucker, Michael Brent, Tedinkay Jawara, Louise Chea, and Michael Frank at the Taking a Stand Event on August 2, 2008. Photo by Bill Lyons, *Staten Island Advance*.

### Questionnaires with organizations

Fifteen youth-serving organizations on Staten Island's North shore completed a questionnaire as the third avenue of information-gathering.<sup>9</sup> The aim of the questionnaire was to:

- Learn about the resources that exist in the North Shore of Staten Island, including what resources African youth use
- Hear organizations' perspectives about the challenges youth and parents face, identify community assets and service gaps, and compare this information to data from youth and parents
- Foster good relationships between organizations, so that they can share information, strategies, and create action plans together.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> A list of participating organizations is included in the report Appendix.

At the outset, the CAC intended to engage school personnel alongside organizations, but school participation was limited throughout the assessment. Most activities had to be completed (because of funding restrictions) during the summer of 2008 when school staff are less available. However, some interviews had been done with schools in 2005 regarding challenges of African youth in school by the Consortium of African Service Providers. This data was provided for use in the assessment.

### Limitations

There are several limitations to this assessment. The scope of this project is not sufficient to identify and exhaustively explain the issues and assets of African youth on the North Shore. Time and funding limitations restricted the number of stakeholders involved, the sophistication of the survey, and depth of analysis. The CAC was most successful in recruiting participants of Liberian descent, and therefore the results are most representative of the perspectives and experiences of Liberian youth. Given the Liberian community's large size relative to other African nationalities in the North Shore, this bias may not significantly misrepresent the broader African youth experience, but only more research could ascertain how closely this experience mirrors the experience of youth of other African heritages.

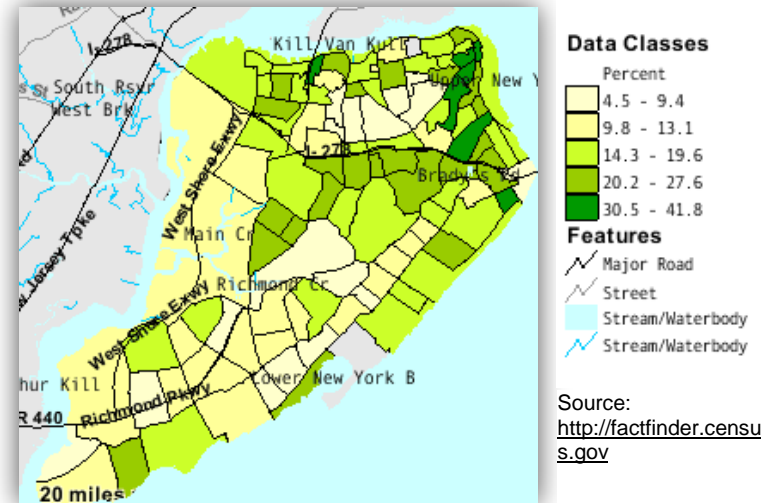
In spite of these limitations this research has significant potential to illuminate the scope, prevalence and dynamics of issues and assets of African youth living on the North Shore. It is the first exploration of its kind to be completed

10 The CAC planned to follow the questionnaire with a coverage exercise with organizations – a simple survey to find out who is reached in a geographic area, and with what services. Data would be collected for 2 weeks with results produced for individual organizations and the group. However, gathering questionnaires revealed that coordinating a coverage exercise required more time than was available for the assessment.

and disseminated in the community, and can provoke critical discussions and additional research. It also effectively makes the case for understanding the factors that influence development of different subgroups of youth in Staten Island and begs further work in this area.

### Setting: North Shore, Staten Island, NY

Figure 2: Concentration of foreign born population (percent of population)



### Staten Island, NY

Staten Island is a unique borough of New York City. It has the smallest but fastest growing population.<sup>11</sup> Unlike New

11 "State of New York City's Housing and Neighborhoods 2008 – Staten Island." Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy New York University (2008) Staten Island, p.138.

**Figure 3:  
The North Shore in Staten Island – key statistics**

	North Shore (CD 1)	Staten Island
Population	182,833	481,613
Poverty rate	16.2%	9.8%
Foreign-born	40,428 (25.5%)	99,638 (21.8%)
Racial diversity index	0.70	0.52

Source: Furman Center, 2008; ACS Community Snapshot, 2008.

York City's other boroughs, poverty is concentrated in the neighborhoods closest to Manhattan (the North Shore). It is overall the least diverse and the most isolated borough. One cannot access it by subway, only by Ferry from Manhattan, a bridge to South Brooklyn, and three bridges to New Jersey. Travel to Staten Island from many parts of the city can take two hours or more.

The North Shore of Staten Island is generally defined as the area bounded by the northern coastline of the Island and the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. The North Shore is approximately represented by Richmond County Community District 1, including zip codes 10301, 10302, 10303, 10304, 10305, 10310, and parts of 10314.

### Growing diversity

Though overall Staten Island is the least diverse New York City borough, the North Shore is growing increasingly diverse. The foreign born population in Community District 1 grew from 19.1 percent in 2000 to 25.5 percent in 2007

(making the greatest jump between 2000 and 2005).<sup>12</sup> As the map at right shows, North Shore foreign-born residents are concentrated in zip codes 10301 and 10304 – the neighborhoods of Clifton (including Park Hill), Stapleton, and St. George.

### West African refugees & immigrants

The North Shore, especially the Park Hill neighborhood in zip code 10304, is the heart of New York's Anglophone West African community, including one of the largest Liberian communities outside of Africa. Although consolidated African communities have been present in Staten Island since the mid 1990s, the population has exploded since the last Census (2000) when large numbers of West African refugees were resettled here, and many have subsequently sent for their children or other family members.

Estimates of the African population reach upwards of 15,000, suggesting that the 2000 Census and more recent projections by the American Communities Survey vastly underestimate the true size of the community (see figure 5).

The histories of Staten Island's North Shore African individuals and families are diverse. The smaller Ghanaian community, for example, is well established. Many came undocumented a decade or more ago and were granted amnesty or otherwise gained citizenship. There are few newcomer Ghanaians, and many now come through the immigration lottery. Liberians and Sierra Leoneans, on the other hand, are more likely to be refugees or family members of refugees, many of whom have resettled in Staten Island in the past five to 15 years.

<sup>12</sup> Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy.140.

**Figure 4:  
Staten Island's African Community: Population  
Estimates**

	2000 Census	2007 American Community Survey 1-year estimate	Unofficial estimates from community leaders
Ghanaian	600	513	2,000
Guinean	n/a	n/a	40-60
Liberian	n/a	2,120	6-9,000
Nigerian	1,433	1,045	n/a
Sierra Leonean	188	n/a	4,000
Other Western Africa	2,042	419	n/a
Total Western Africa	4263	4097	10-15,000

While diverse in experience, the histories of the West African communities represented in Staten Island also intertwine. West Africa has historically experienced movement of people. However, the succession of civil wars and conflict in the past several decades mean that many refugees have been displaced multiple times and lived in several different countries.

This assessment is focused on the issues and assets of African youth up to 25-years-old living in Staten Island's North Shore, including:

- Refugee and asylee youth, non-refugee/asylee immigrant youth born in Africa, and
- Youth born in United States or elsewhere to African immigrant parents.

### Youth Survey Basics

The community assessment youth project interns designed a survey to find out about the opinions and experiences of their peers, including stress, their community, and their interests. The survey was implemented in the summer and fall of 2008.

Who participated in the survey?

Gender and age

- 110 youth: 54 females and 52 males
- Aged 9 to 24-years-old
- Mean age: 14.16-years-old

Identity (option of up to 3 nationality identifications)

- Primary identity (number of youth, out of 105)
  - American: 35
  - African: 64
    - Liberian (primary identification): 52
    - Ghanaian: 3
    - Nigerian: 3
    - Senegalese: 2
    - Sierra Leonean: 2
    - Guinean: 1
    - Other African 1
  - Others: 9
- 80 youth identified as African (at all, out of 105)

Residence and living arrangements

- 57 reported living in Park Hill
- 48 reported living with both parents
- 41 reported living with mother only

School and work

- 101 would be in school for the 2008-2009 school year
  - 16 reported having reached elementary school
  - 35 reported having reached middle school
  - 37 reported having reached high school
    - 11 reported having some college or more
- 30 were working in a job or internship

## Findings: Issues and Assets of African Youth in Staten Island's North Shore

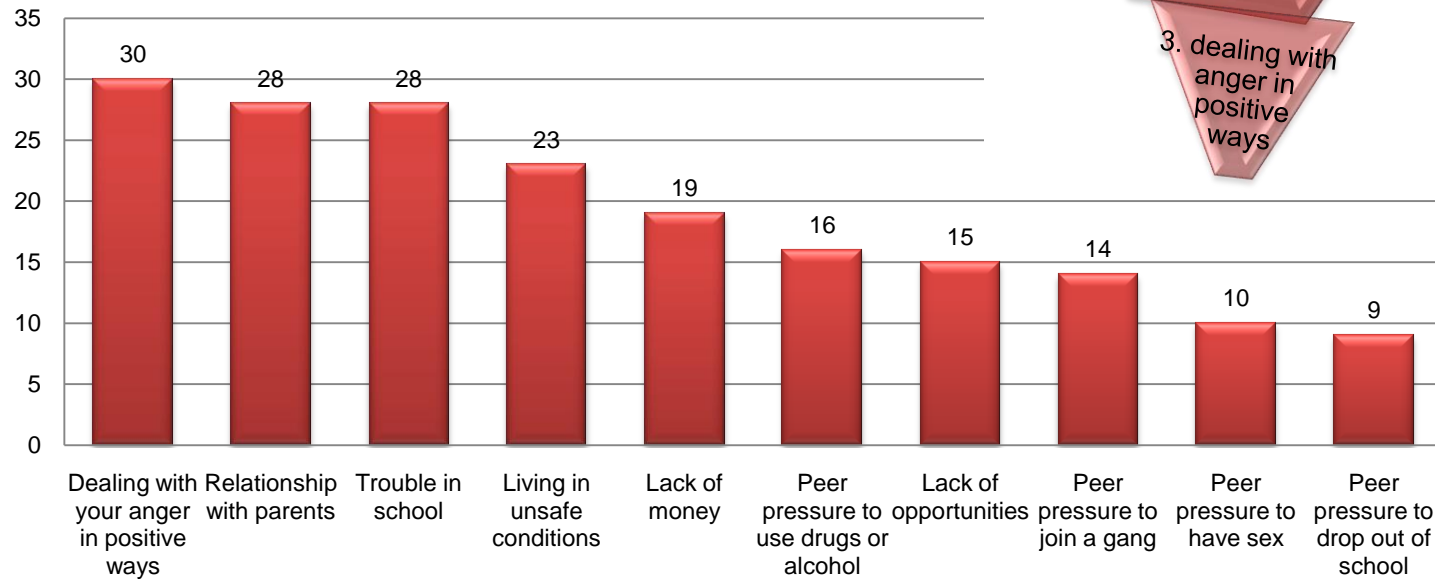
### Issues overview

Of 110 survey participants, 107 youth ranked 10 stress factors in order from 1 to 10 (with 1 being the most stressful and 10 the least). The graph below shows the number of top 3 ranks that each stress factor received, revealing that overall dealing with anger in positive ways, relationship with parents, trouble in school, living in unsafe conditions and lack of money cause more stress than various types of peer pressure and lack of opportunities.

Figure 6

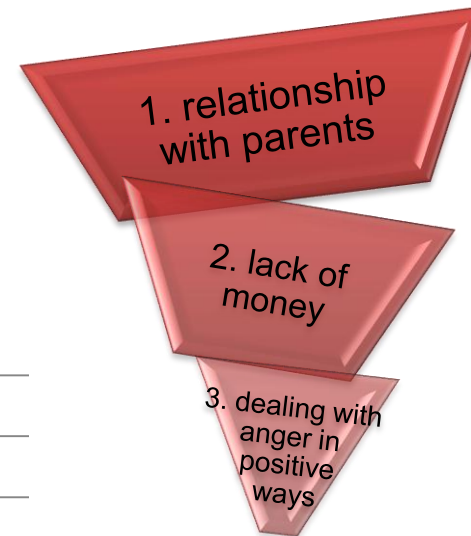
### YOUTH STRESS FACTORS

Number of top 3 ranks



However, weighting the results (giving the most weight to #1 ranks, less to #2s and the least to #3s), shows that the factors *most often* giving survey respondents *the most stress* are: relationship with parents, lack of money, and dealing with your anger in positive ways.

Figure 5: Weighted top 3 youth stress factors (*most often giving the most stress*)



### Let Go Your Stress!

The winners of the Youth Project Design Contest, titled their project: "Let Go Your Stress!" quickly translating the adult-defined question about the issues that youth face into questions about stress. The youth project interns brainstormed and ranked stress factors that they and their peers face, and the youth survey asked about the importance of those factors.

### Issue: Dealing with anger

Each issue that youth face can cause some level of stress, frustration, or anger, but this assessment found that dealing with anger is an issue on its own, especially for girls. More girls ranked dealing with anger in positive ways highly as a stress factor compared to boys.

Youth revealed that they feel a great deal of anger but do not know how to deal with it in productive ways, which can sometimes get them into trouble. Youth said that they do not know how to handle anger in nonviolently, and when they are angry they care less about the consequences of their actions.

During the Project Design Contest youth were asked to brainstorm why they would participate in the Contest. At CDC, several of the reasons the group stated were related to dealing with anger<sup>13</sup>:

- "[To learn] how to deal with anger issues

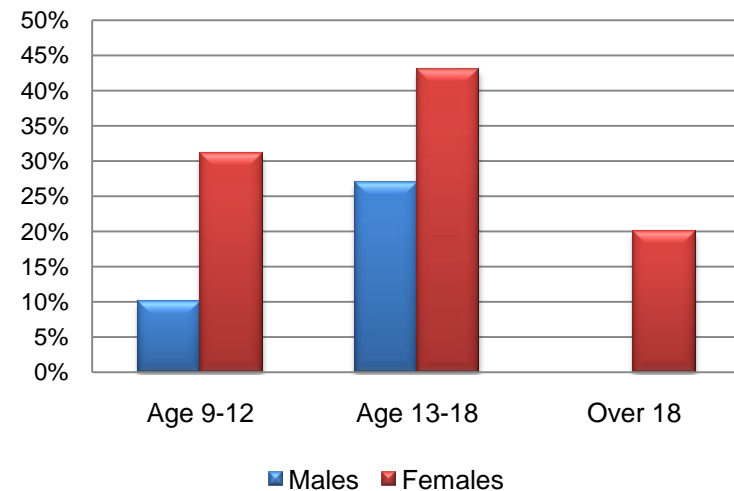
13 Project Design Contest Workshop, Century Dance Complex, May 9, 2008.

- Good to learn about other people and how they face their problems
- To let feelings out and feel better about yourself"

One youth linked anger to relationship with parents, explaining that sometimes parents do not understand you, they hit you for no reason and you pass that on to someone else without any reason.<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 7**  
**Who ranked "dealing with anger in positive ways" highly?**

(percent of survey respondents)



14 Body mapping, Taking A Stand event, August 2, 2008.

## Issue: Lack of money

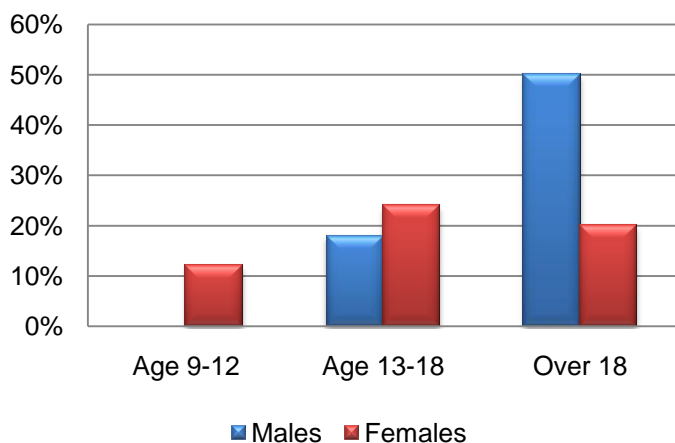
The second most highly ranked cause of stress for youth participating in the survey was “lack of money.” Many youth did not feel they had the money to buy things they wanted or needed. Young men over 18 were the most likely to be stressed about not having money, with more older males than younger males ranking lack of money highly, where there was less difference among how females in different age groups ranked the stressor.

The pressure they feel to obtain money leads many to consider getting involved in illicit activities, such as selling drugs. While some youth saw getting a job as an alternative to getting involved in gangs and selling drugs, they reported there are few job opportunities for youth on Staten Island – many saying that more jobs were desperately needed. Some community members reported employers often do not hire youth once they realize they live in Park Hill.

Figure 8

### Who ranked "lack of money" highly?

(percent of survey respondents)



Over 40 percent of youth surveyed said that they thought “more jobs” was a way to improve the community, and highly valued youth programs that provide paid work opportunities to both youth and adults.

Youth also reported that adults and some parents are not setting a good example for kids by living beyond their means and being focused on material things (like having the “latest gear”). Youth felt these parents are not helping kids understand the reality that life is hard.

## Issue: Poor relationships between African youth and parents<sup>15</sup>

Relationship with parents is a major cause of stress for African youth. Among survey respondents, preteen boys and girls (all ages) most frequently ranked “relationship with parents” in their top three causes of stress.<sup>16</sup>

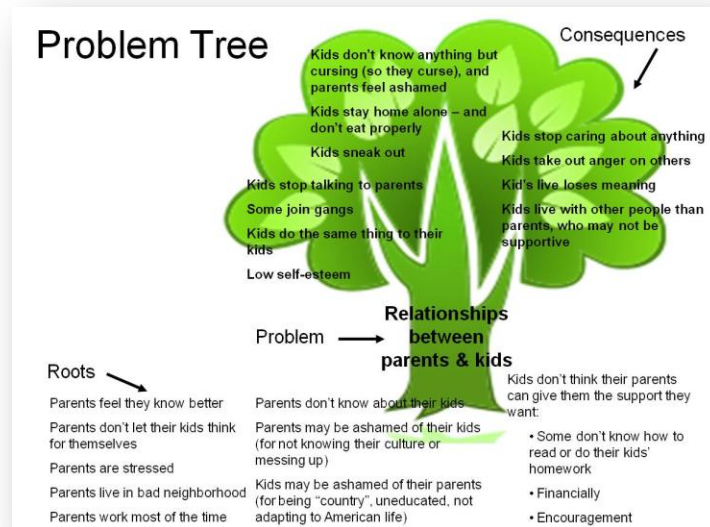
Youth defined the problem of “relationships between parents and kids” to mean:

- Parents giving up on kids when something goes wrong (e.g. a girl gets pregnant or a boy gets involved with drugs)
- Parents screaming, cursing at, or discouraging kids
- Parents not listening; always thinking kids are wrong
- Parents favoring younger siblings
- Parents not spending time with kids
- Parents being overprotective
- Parents putting pressure on youth to be “better than them”
- Parents replacing time with money and things
- Parents kicking kids out of the house to live with relatives, friends, in shelters, or on their own

<sup>15</sup> In this report, “Parents” refers to biological parents, other family or non-family guardians taking care of African youth.

<sup>16</sup> Female preteens and teens ranked relationship with parents almost equally, while 40% of preteen males ranked it highly compared with 27% of male teens.

The Problem Tree chart shows how youth conceived the roots and consequences of a poor relationship with their parents.



Poor understanding and communication are important aspects of poor relationships between African parents and youth, particularly related to their different perspectives and experiences with integrating into American culture. Parents often feel frustrated, sad, disappointed, and even ashamed that their children have forgotten or do not know and appreciate their African heritage. Many parents expressed frustration about their relationship to their children:

"Yes, my relationship has changed greatly because children coming to this country change too. You don't know when to talk to them, what to say to them, and it all make[s] it so difficult to adapt."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Parent interview, February 10, 2009.

As a matter of fact my daughter and I do not have a relationship anymore due to the fact that she does not listen to advice, and she goes about doing what she thinks is best for her, and who gets hurt in the process is none of her business... Right now God is the only one who can help me, and help my child with her issues. Everyone and everything that I know has failed.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, youth emphasized that their parents do not understand them and their struggle to fit in as both Africans and Americans:

"... a lot of Liberian people or parents don't listen to what the kids have to say. They don't like when their kids speak their minds. They think it is disrespectful. They also bring their kids down. The kids can end up doing things they are not supposed to do, for example these kids go out doing drugs, getting pregnant and also dropping out of school."<sup>19</sup>

#### At risk at home

Many African youth in the North Shore may have come to the United States to live with non-parent relatives or family friends. These youth may not be treated the same as their guardians' biological children. Assessment participants agreed that youth in this situation are more at risk for being kicked out of their homes and having to live with friends, on their own, or in a shelter.

<sup>18</sup> Parent focus group, December 2, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> CDC Junior Company Project Design Contest Presentation, May 31, 2009.

Youth and parents may perceive “talking” to one another differently, as African parents are used to a culture in which youth are expected to maintain complete deference to adults and not expected to share their feelings. Meanwhile youth learn quickly that American culture values sharing and two way discussions between parents and may desire that relationship with their own parents.

Parents work long hours with little time to spend with children or get involved in their schooling and extracurricular activities, compounding communication problems. North Shore African parents often support both their family in the United States and family and friends back home. To meet these demands many parents work one or more low-wage jobs with long or irregular hours. Many cannot access better-paying jobs with more regular schedules for one of the following reasons:

- They did not receive extensive formal schooling in their home country and cannot access jobs that require high school or higher credentials
- They are highly educated but their credentials were lost during the war, on the refugee camp, or otherwise before coming to the United States
- They are highly educated and worked in highly skilled professions (such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc) at home but their credentials are not accepted by American systems
- (Whether or not they came to the United States legally) their current immigration status does not allow them to work formally

Many parents do not have the time or money to do what would be necessary to work in a satisfying job, with a good salary and comfortable schedule – such as taking tests, requesting long-lost documents, or going back to, or in some cases repeating years of, school. Gaining immediate income is a priority. Beyond that, many do not have the energy to do what it would take, such as redoing years of higher education, to regain their professional status.

When parents work long hours, to meet their immediate and extended family’s needs, they have little time to spend with children. Many organizations and parents complained that children are left unsupervised much of the time. Some youth are unable to engage in positive activities, or frequently miss activities because they have to care for younger siblings.

Many youth resented their parents for not spending time with them. Some youth said that their parents try to buy them things to make them happy instead of spending time with them or supporting them to participate in activities they like.

Parents and social service providers alike cite disciplining children as a major problem. Many parents feel helpless against the American legal and child protection systems that outlaw corporal punishment, which is the norm in many African cultures. Their children learn in school and/or the community that it is illegal, and that they can call 911 to report incidents. However, parents are not educated about methods of discipline accepted in the United States. Some children do call 911 (in some cases perhaps not understanding the full implications of doing so), and stories circulate in the community about parents being sent to jail and having their children taken away.

Without traditional means of discipline, parents do not know what to do. Many expressed that they had tried to discipline their children, but the ways they knew failed, and there seems to be no one who can help. Parents expressed that they feel undermined, defeated, and angry at schools or other American care-taking institutions for not disciplining their children when they are under their supervision – feeling that it makes their job even more difficult. A few parents resort to (and many more contemplate) sending their children back home to live with relatives. Many give up on discipline altogether or in large part:

“When I talk to [my children], they feel that I am not good enough, or I don’t know what I am saying. They say things like, “this is not Africa, and things are not the same.” How can a parent discipline the kids without the police and social worker getting involved, especially in a place like Park Hill where people have the notion that African parents are mean to their children? With these low expectations of us there is not much we can do, so sometimes you sit there and see your children or child go astray.”<sup>20</sup>

Youth in this assessment exhibited differing attitudes towards their parents’ use of disciplinary tactics. Some felt parents should continue to be very strict with their children – even suggesting that the governor of New York should give special permission to African parents “to discipline their kids the way we do in our country, Liberia.”<sup>21</sup> The group of four boys proposing this solution felt that this was a way to stop African youth from joining gangs and going to jail. Others expressed their relationship with their parents was strained by their parents screaming and cursing at them, not listening to them, and giving up on them when something goes wrong (such as a teenage girl getting pregnant or a boy getting involved with drugs).

### **Asset: Successful young Africans and their parents**

The length of time since West African refugees started to be resettled in Staten Island means that there are now young adults in their 20s and early 30s who have ‘made it’. They have been through many similar struggles, such as coping with strained relationships with parents and figuring out how to be both African and American, and how to overcome

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20 Parent focus group, November 17, 2008.

21 Youth Project Design Contest participant, May 31, 2008.

challenges in school. Youth expressed desire for these role models. The ability of these individuals to relate to youth and offer them inspiration is an opportunity to grasp.

Just as there are successful young Africans, there are parents who successfully adapted their relationship with their children in their new country, and helped them to succeed. These parents can be an important resource for other parents who need help to adapt their relationship to their children. Asked if and how their relationship to their children has changed since they came to the United States, some parents reported positive changes:

“Yes, but in a good or better way. There are some things I did not enjoy with my own father, this is what I have with my children, and it is all because I came to the USA. Coming to this country helped me a lot, I can talk to my children about anything and my children can also talk to me. I enjoy this kind of relationship I have with my children.”<sup>22</sup>

“The relationship changed when we came to the US because back home the relationship between a parent and child is strict. Parents dictate to their children... In America it is different. You can love child and be able to tell them you love them. Instead of dictating to them you can discuss with them and just by letting your child know you love and care for them. You can make a whole lot difference in that child's life, even if you discipline that child and explained to them why it would make a difference.”<sup>23</sup>

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22 Parent interview, April 17, 2009.

23 Parent focus group, October 8, 2008.

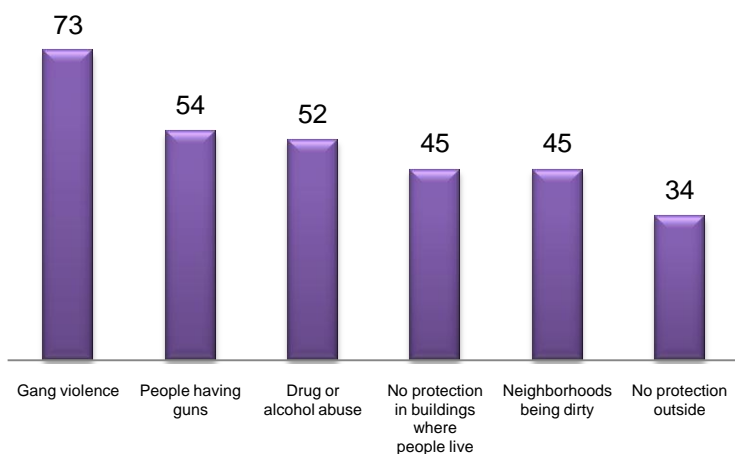
## Issue: Living in unsafe conditions

Youth living in Staten Island's North Shore – and particularly in Park Hill – face daily threats to their health and security. Of youth surveyed, 58 percent of females and 35 percent of males reported that they do not feel safe in their community some or all of the time or being unsure if they feel safe.

Youth surveyed agreed with a number of reasons that their peers might feel unsafe, as shown in figure 10. Gang activity was the reason most frequently listed by youth for why they feel unsafe in their neighborhoods, followed by people having guns, and drug and alcohol abuse.

Figure 9

### Why might youth feel unsafe living in the North Shore?



Statistics show that North Shore youth are at risk, as of 2004, zip code 10304 had<sup>1</sup>:

- **The second highest homicide rate in Staten Island at 1.8 per 10,000 population (almost double the NYC average of 1.0)**
- **More than twice the Staten Island average for youth violent crime arrests and youth [non-violent and non-property] crime arrests**
- **Two and a half times the Staten Island average for youth drug arrests (almost 3 times the NYC average)**

Safety will be an ongoing concern. Though crime rates decreased from 1990 to 2001, since 2001 crime in several categories in the North Shore (the 120 Precinct) is on the rise. From 2001 to 2008: murders increased 85.7 percent; rapes increased 66.7 percent; robbery increased 16.9 percent; and, grand larceny increased 7.1 percent.<sup>24</sup>

Constant exposure to unsafe conditions impacts psychological, in addition to physical, health of African youth, as well: One young man explained that when you see things like smoking, prostitution, drinking and drugs every day, you get used to it. If his grandmother, who he lives with, wanted to move, he would gladly do it to get away from these things.<sup>25</sup>

Parents overwhelmingly said that the North Shore is not a good place to raise children:

"[In the North Shore] the environment is just not right to raise children... there is almost no security in the buildings, people are in and out of the building twenty four hours a

<sup>24</sup> NYPD CompStat Unit, *Compstat*, Volume 16, Number 25, accessed June 30, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Male youth, 15 years old, interview at Taking a Stand Event, August 2, 2008.

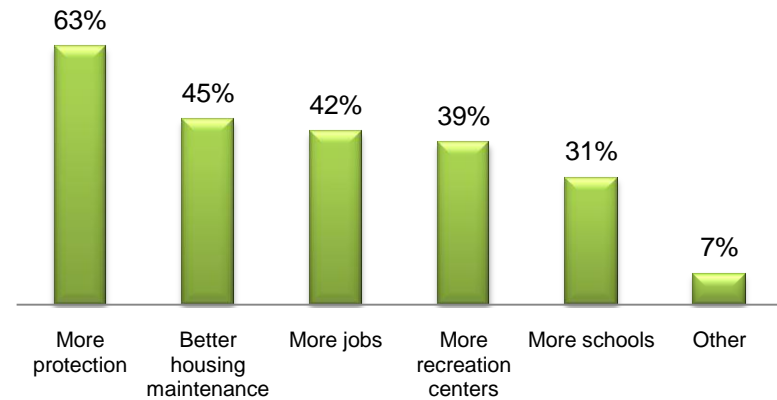
day without proper identification. On the other hands, there are drugs, guns, and people smoking on the street and in the buildings..."<sup>26</sup>

"Safety is most challenging for me, safety for my children. I live in 160 [Park Hill Avenue]; before there was security in the building, now we don't have any... Anything could happen to our children on their way out of the building and you would not know until it is late. Recently I heard that a girl was raped in one of the buildings..."<sup>27</sup>

Park Hill-base youth-serving organizations pay close attention to keeping participants safe, and those located outside Park Hill must address how youth get to and from their program. After several youth from Century Dance Complex were physically and verbally attacked on their way home from the program by youth near the Stapleton Houses, CDC's staff organized its youth participants living in Park Hill to walk in a group and take a longer route home to avoid the Stapleton houses, at least until the organization reaches its goal to provide consistent pick up and drop off service.

Figure 10

**What do youth think will help improve their community?**



26 Parent interview, African father, February 7, 2009.

27 Parent interview, April 17, 2009.

## Asset: Visions for a more empowering community

Youth, parents, and organizations have creative and relevant ideas and desires to improve the North Shore for African and other disadvantaged youth. These visions embody several themes, including safety, unity, opportunities, and support and outlets for stress.

When asked to draw their dream neighborhood, many youth illustrated cleaner communities with more space to play, a community center, a pool, more security, parks, and sports fields.

Youth, parents, and organizations agreed on the need for more youth centers to offer job training and vocational programs and more recreational activities, such as sports and the arts. Female youth wanted programs targeted specifically to them.

Figure 12

### Top 10 Female Program Interests (number that indicated interest)

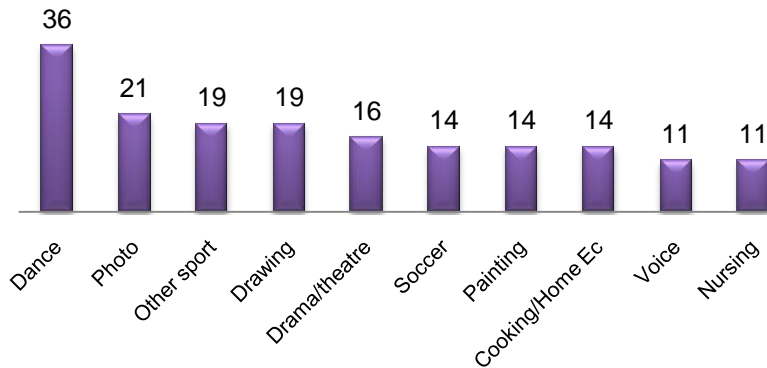


Figure 11: Youth community mapping participants at the Taking a Stand event, August 2, 2008. Photo by Lori Weintrob.

Parents frequently described the ideal youth program to include a high number of teachers/staff and vocational training, including trades such as construction, auto mechanics, carpentry, interior decoration, nursing, cooking/home economics, sewing, and embroidery.

“This after school program would have computers, it would have games of all kinds to bring people together, and most importantly it would have job training for youth.”<sup>28</sup>

Organizations want to be able to provide more activities and services and have more and better qualified staff - especially staff that could focus on the whole family, and increase family involvement in programming.

<sup>28</sup> Parent interview, March 24, 2009.

## Issue: Tensions between the African and African American communities

Relations in the North Shore between the African and African American communities are tense. In general, tension results from the two communities feeling that they are in competition for resources, the perpetuation of stereotypes about each other's culture, and genuine cultural differences. In response, community organizations and schools hesitate to focus on programs, services or other activities targeting African youth because they believe it will alienate the African American community and further exacerbate existing tensions.

These tensions can escalate to serious consequences, including verbal and physical harassment in school (see section on Overcoming Educational Challenges on page 24) and gang violence. Even non-gang members may be affected. For example, one young man said that he was wrongly identified as a gang member and jumped (physically attacked and robbed).<sup>29</sup>

The most common reason stated by assessment participants for African youth joining gangs was protection: One teen male described his reason for joining a gang was to deter other youth from bothering him, and to gain respect by cultivating fear.<sup>30</sup> An 8-year old boy said that he was in gang because he wanted to know that he could call someone to "have his back" in the event he was threatened<sup>31</sup>. Other reasons youth reported they did or might join gangs included to feel popular and be more attractive to girls, or to feel like they belong. Whatever the reason, youth said joining is not an easy decision. Youth discuss the pros and cons with friends, but do not feel they could talk about it with their parents.

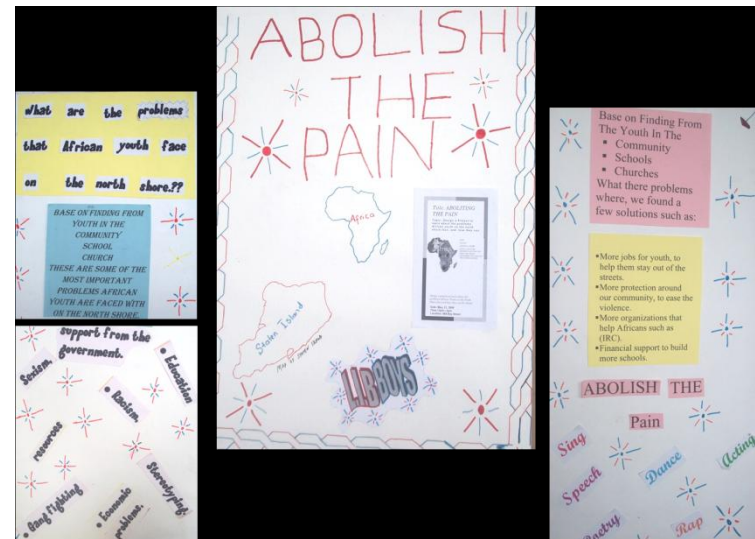
29 Youth interview, Taking A Stand event, August 2, 2008.

30 Youth interview, Taking A Stand event, August 2, 2008.

31 Group discussion, Taking A Stand event, August 2, 2008.

Even African youth who do not join gangs often stick together in cliques to avoid getting beat up, jumped, or harassed. A Parole Officer attending the first Issues & Assets of African Youth Conference: Improving the Community for all reported, "What many people don't know is that gangs often start out innocently (as non-violent partnerships) among friends."<sup>32</sup>

Figure 13: Youth Project design contest poster



32 Tevah Platt, "On Staten Island, a community unites with goal of making life better," Staten Island Advance, October 9, 2008.

### Asset: Strength of culture and networks of support

The North Shore, and Park Hill especially, is home to a wealth of African culture. This culture is visible and accessible from women selling African goods on Sobel Court in Park Hill, to African food vendors, the annual Miss Liberia Pageant, the Century Dance Complex Junior Company performers and drumming club, and more, helping many community members to feel at home. Both youth and adults enjoy the sense of community.

Figure 14

#### What do Park Hill youth like about their community?

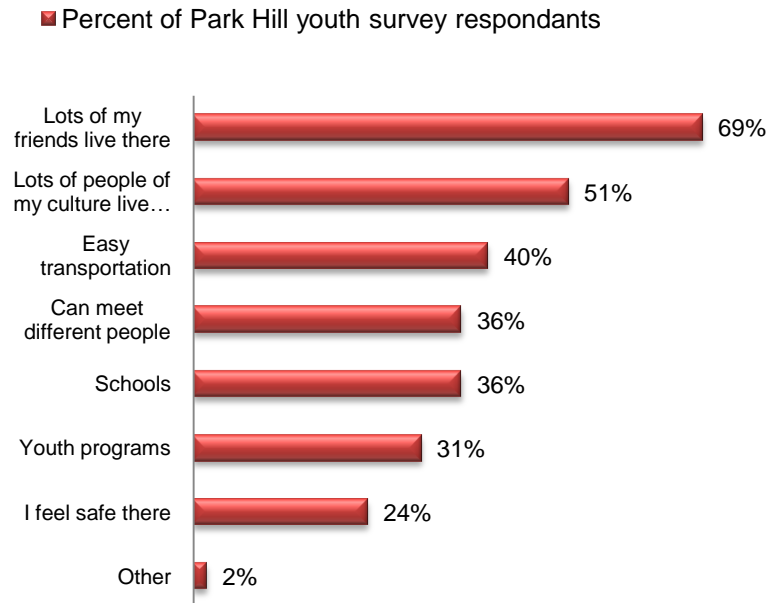


Figure 15: Youth wave Liberian flags and wait for the African Heritage Parade to start in 2008. Photo by Sara Rowbottom.

The community's closeness provides valued support networks to parents. Parents said that African parents help each other. There are people to leave one's children with if needed. Community associations also pool money for families in need, such as when there is a death.

Local organizations that incorporate culture into their youth programs report good results. They help youth understand and take pride in their heritage, build self-esteem and a sense of belonging. The JCC Satellite Beacon said teaching Caribbean youth steel pan drumming and performing in public was "well attended and exciting" to the kids. Century Dance Complex, which teaches African dance, drumming, and history to youth. Of the organization's annual Dance Festival, one student said she was excited: "Because people can see me dance and see my talent. It's nice – it makes

people laugh and have fun and scream for the nice dancing.”<sup>33</sup>

### Issue: Peer pressure

Peer pressure impacts youth in school and in the community and includes being influenced by other youth to smoke, drink alcohol, steal, lie, take drugs, sell drugs, fight, drop out of school, have sex, join a gang, or to have material things that other youth have.

Many parents indicated that peer pressure was the most challenging thing about being a parent on the North Shore, feeling that it plays a significant role in why youth “go astray.” Many parents were pessimistic about their and other children’s ability to withstand peer pressure:

“Kids on Park Hill do not follow the right crowd; they will follow the wrong ones, no matter what you do. I believe children spoil because they want to, not because they have not been [taught] right from wrong... Almost everyone will tell you the same thing... Don't get me wrong, not all the children are bad, but those who want to go astray will go astray”.<sup>34</sup>

“Everyone agrees that peer pressure affects children in Park Hill and [the] North Shore because children are most likely to do what other children do or say... The older ones introduce the younger ones to unsafe things, such as, selling drugs, robbery, and many others.”<sup>35</sup>

33 Non-assessment youth interview, Century Dance Complex, July 21, 2009.

34 Parent interview, March 5, 2009.

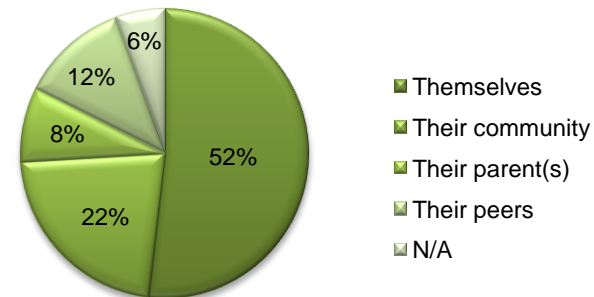
35 Parent focus group, September 17, 2008.

“It is especially in the school were both the good and bad kids meet. They sit in the class together, go to lunch, and play together and give the bad kids enough time to pollute the minds of other good children around them.”<sup>36</sup>

However, few youth surveyed blame their peers for the problems that they face. Figure 17 shows that although more youth blame peers than parents for their problems, most youth blame themselves, and many blame the overall community.

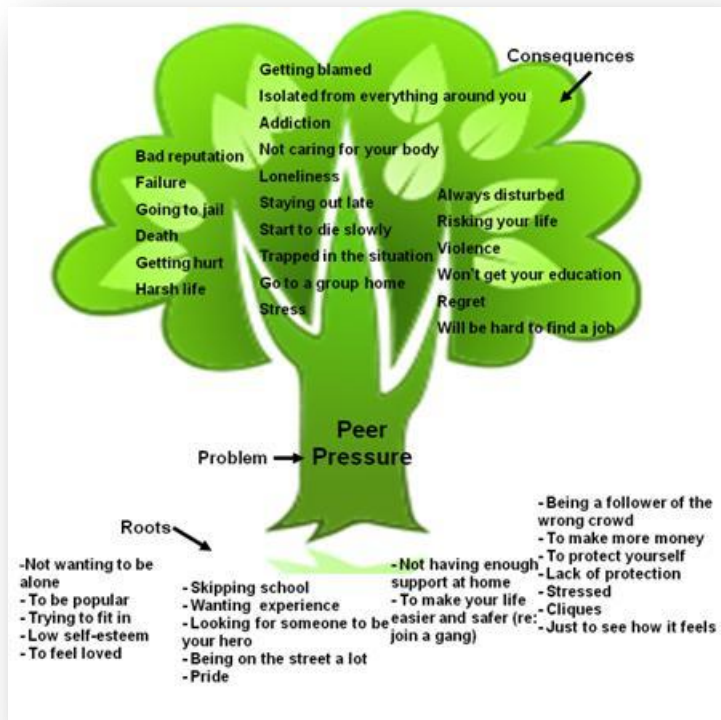
Youth felt that low self-esteem and wanting to fit in and belong to a group sometimes lead youth to submit to peer pressure. But sometimes the decision may relate to other needs, such as having protection to “make your life easier and safer” (and therefore joining a gang) or feeling the need to make money (and therefore selling drugs). The problem tree (figure 18) shows how youth see the problem of peer pressure.

Figure 16  
Who do youth blame for the problems they face?



36 Parent focus group, November 17, 2008.

Figure 17: Peer pressure problem tree



### Issue: Overcoming educational challenges

School is particularly challenging for many North Shore African youth. Moving and adjusting to a new school is extremely stressful for all children. The experiences of many West African youth with war, displacement, malnutrition, disease, other traumatic events, can multiply the stresses normally associated with school transitions. Post Traumatic Stress may contribute to problems with schoolwork, behavior

issues, and cause difficulty paying attention.<sup>37</sup> Those who have suffered malnutrition may have memory or concentration problems, in addition to not understanding or not being able to keep up with what is expected of them in American schools.<sup>38</sup>

Participants in this assessment highlighted the following significant challenges North Shore African youth face to succeed in school, including:

- Insufficient preparation for American academic expectations and language barrier
- Low capacity of schools to meet youth academic needs
- Physical and verbal harassment (bullying)
- Low parent involvement

Many North Shore African youth are not prepared for American academic expectations and struggle with American English. Though each individual's situation is likely to be different, African youth may have not ever been to school, have had their schooling interrupted, or gone to a poor school.

“Because of the civil war many of the children have not been in school (or their schooling has been interrupted), when they come here they are placed in classes according to their age and they are falling behind their American counterpart.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Birman 2002, p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> See: Olga Tuchman. “Refugee Students in American Classrooms.” Indiana Department of Education. No date.; R.J. Apfel, Simon B. *Minefields in Their Hearts: The Mental health of Children of War and Communal Violence*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.; Office of Global Health Affairs Humanitarian and Refugee Health Affairs. “Background on Potential Health Issues For Liberian Refugees.” Bridging Refugee Youth & Children’s Services, US Department of Health and Human Services. Updated on January 30, 2004.

<sup>39</sup> Parent focus group conducted by Consortium for African Community Service Providers, April 17, 2005.

Even those who went to good schools in Africa can have trouble adjusting to the American school system as the type of school work required, relationships between teachers and students, and general education expectations may be different. For example, in Africa it is not uncommon for 21 or 22-year olds to still be in high school.

While most Africans on the North Shore speak English, differences in dialect seriously challenge youth in school. They have trouble understanding the teachers, who often speak fast and struggle with important standardized tests, like the Regents Exams and SATs. Reading & comprehension difficulties are particularly pervasive. Embarrassed by their accent and low skills level, some youth avoid activities that could help, like reading aloud.

“...Our children face reading problems. It is very difficult for the kids to catch up in school because of that, and it is even more difficult when other children in school are laughing at them and calling them names. Their accent is another issue with our children.”<sup>40</sup>

North Shore schools have low capacity to meet youth academic needs of African immigrant youth. Parents complain that youth may be placed in a particular grade because of their age and but which is inappropriate for their ability.

“What I do know is that the school system does not help our children when they come to this country. As a matter of fact, these children are coming from a war-torn country, where there has been years of fighting and blood-shed. And during all these years children were not going to school, so by the time they get to the USA [they are far

behind]. Example: the child might be the age of a fifth grade student, but have the understanding of a first grade student. Now because of their age they are placed in the fifth grade with regular fifth graders. What do you expect this child to do in this class?”<sup>41</sup>

Schools explained that placing newcomer youth is a struggle since older youth may not be able to keep up in the same grade as their age-mates, but the converse (for example, putting a 15-year old in the third grade) also presents problems. At the 2008 Issues & Assets of African Youth Conference, a teacher reported that the Board of Education is aware of the problems but does not have the resources to address them.

Physical and verbal harassment (bullying) makes school even more difficult. Youth and parents reported African youth being beat up, called names, and made fun of because of their accent or trouble reading. Some assessment participants even reported instances of teachers calling youth names. Some youth are bullied to such an extent that they don't want to go to school anymore.

“...My daughter was always laughed at in school and called names. It came to the point that she could no longer take it and decided to fight back. When that happened the school called to inform me that my daughter was being suspended from school for fighting in school. How does this feel to my child?”<sup>42</sup>

Youth also complained about gang fights, other youth bringing weapons to school, and kids doing drugs before and

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40 Parent interview, February 3, 2009.

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41 Parent interview, February 9, 2009.

42 Parent interview, February 3, 2009.

after school. When asked about his body map, the artist (at right) explained:

“Even if you are quiet they push you to fight, people are always trying to put something else on you.”<sup>43</sup>

Low parent involvement in their children’s education means that they cannot help youth to overcome their academic and social challenges in school or communicate with teachers to address them. Many youth-serving organizations said that lack of parental involvement in their child’s life or with the program is the main challenge they face in meeting the child’s needs. This assessment identified three primary factors limiting parent involvement in their children’s activities in school and after-school programs.

- Low educational levels and low confidence in their ability to assist their children
- Economic demands and long working hours
- Cultural notion of complete authority over/responsibility for children by whomever they are in the care of (i.e. school personnel, youth service providers)
- Distrust that involvement will help their children

#### Education levels

Many African parents and guardians living on the North Shore do not have high levels of education, and many, especially women, have low literacy or are illiterate. The chart at right shows literacy rates in the home countries where many of the North Shore immigrants are from. In addition, some parents do not speak English, or speak dialects of English with a very thick accent which makes it difficult for them to communicate with American English speakers. Some parents are ashamed of their education level or communication difficulties and find it too challenging or do not try to overcome them.

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43 Taking A Stand Event, 08/02/08.



**Figure 18: Artist explains his body map to IRC’s Refugee Youth Program Director at the Taking a Stand event, August 2, 2008. Photo by Lori Weintrob.**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Female (% 15+) 1995-2005</b>	<b>Male (% 15+) 1995- 2005</b>	<b>Human Development Rank (out of 179 countries)</b>
<b>Liberia</b>	<b>45.7%</b>	<b>58.3%</b>	<b>176</b>
<b>Sierra Leone</b>	<b>24.2 %</b>	<b>46.7%</b>	<b>179</b>
<b>Guinea</b>	<b>18.1 %</b>	<b>42.6%</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>Ghana</b>	<b>49.1 %</b>	<b>66.4%</b>	<b>142</b>
<b>Nigeria</b>	<b>60.1 %</b>	<b>78.2%</b>	<b>154</b>

Source: UNDP, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/>

Economic demands and limited options

Many African parents have very limited time available to interact with their children’s teachers, after-school program leaders, and others because of the financial demands on them are large compared to their earning power. They are supporting not only their family in the United States, but also immediate and extended family back home. Many work long hours and/or multiple jobs.

A significant number of parents work in the home health field. These jobs offer relatively competitive wages and opportunity for overtime for individuals without a high level of formal education, and social networks provide a link to jobs.

“Kids are left alone in apartments to care for themselves while their parents are out working. Some of these parents do live-in [work] and are gone for days.”

Parent focus group, 3/24/09.

Home health jobs play a vital role in the economic well-being of the North Shore African community. However, the reliance on this sector strains families and the community. Home health jobs are physically demanding and characterized by very long hours, overnight shifts or live-in arrangements. Some assessment participants reported that home health employers exploit their African employees, who they know have limited job options.

Some parents may prioritize work over being involved in their children’s activities because of their life experience. Many who lived through war or in refugee camps were separated from their families and had to find ways to support themselves and others at an early age. One father concluded that the war’s impact on Liberia parents when they were young is having secondary impacts on their children on the North Shore:

“...Most of the kids who traveled to the USA from various refugee camps were left alone to take care of themselves, or the entire family. Therefore most of these kids became adults before they were even kids. And this is all due to the civil war in Liberia; this is also affecting even the kids that are born today to parents who parented themselves during the war, and in refugee camps around the world. During the war parents could not afford to support their family, so their young girls became the breadwinners for the family, they used their body for money; I am talking about girls ages 10 and above, sleeping with grown up adult men who could be their fathers. Those very kids are adult today and having children of their own, and because of their upbringing, they cannot raise kids of their own.”<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Parent focus group, African father, March 24, 2009.

### Culture of communal responsibility for children and youth

For many West Africans, it is a matter of respect to let a teacher do their job and not interfere.

“Back home in school the teacher would discipline the children. When you send the children to school they are in the teacher’s charge. The teacher cannot say that they will send the child home to the parent to discipline. What the child did happen[ed] in the teacher’s presence and the teacher will correct it...”<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, any adult in the community has the authority *and* responsibility to discipline another’s children if they are not behaving according to culturally accepted standards.

“Our old people have a saying that “it takes one woman to give birth to a child, but a whole village to raise that child” and I truly believe this.”<sup>46</sup>

For this reason, many parents assume that the school and other authorities involved with their children will guide the children on the right path without the parents’ involvement.

### Distrust that involvement will help their child(ren)

Many parents do not believe that getting more involved in their child’s schooling or other activities could help, even when the child is having problems or the parent feels the school or program is failing them.

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45 Parent focus group conducted by Consortium for African Community Service Providers, April 17, 2005.

46 Parent interview, February 2, 2009.



**Figure 19** Body mapping participant at the Taking a Stand event, August 2, 2009. Photo by Lori Weintrob.

“The American school system... they can teach but there is no discipline.... Then when they come home, they want to call 911 on their parents because they are taught this in school. The American schools lack discipline. This is the problem.”<sup>47</sup>

“Well truly speaking there is no one person or group that I know that caters to the needs of [African] youth... so most of the time parents go to the church. There they find comfort. Also, African parents would rather talk to other parents than a total stranger because talking to a social worker or the teacher of the child could create more problems than it would help. Some issues could be: the social worker or teacher might call the police. Once the police are involved the parent could get arrested and the child could be taken away from the parent. You could have a social worker asking questions you could never answer. How is this going to help?”<sup>48</sup>

### Frustration and dropping out

The educational challenges African youth face can compound to distract, frustrate and discourage students, and reduce their self-esteem and motivation. They may seek to avoid school by skipping class and eventually dropping out. One student rationalized skipping class, saying: “Even if you are trying, it doesn’t make a difference.”<sup>49</sup> Another young man reported feeling that school was a waste of time and not seeing any clear way to go to college.<sup>50</sup>

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47 Parent focus group conducted by Consortium for African Community Service Providers, April 17, 2005.

48 Parent interview, February 2, 2009.

49 Youth interview #1 at Taking A Stand event, August 2, 2008.

50 Youth interview #3 at Taking A Stand event, August 2, 2008.

Fourteen percent of survey respondents said they have considered dropping out of school but don't think [they] would do it, while one respondent reported that he or she is thinking about dropping out.

"I have two sons that came to America on a [Diversity Visa] and all was well until they were introduced to the school system. Everything started going wrong, the boys were failing in their school work, coming home late, and at one point they refused to go to school. This was due to the fact that they could not understand the lessons, the teacher called them names, and other students bullied them and so on".<sup>51</sup>

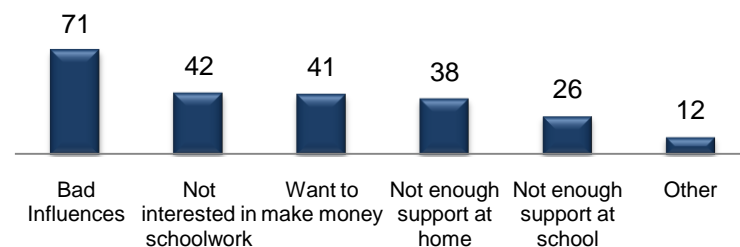
"Remember, when you put a 5th grade student in the 9th grade you do not expect much out of him. But the kids do not see it that way... If you were to ask that kid to read a 9th grade book he may not be able to do so. And if he does it, he might not do it the same as a regular ninth grader... Other kids in the class [start] to laugh at him, calling him names. The next thing you know the kid does not want to go to school any more. He may leave his parents' home in the morning with the pretense that he is going to school but he doesn't. He hangs on the streets with friends... and comes home as if he came from school. It wouldn't be long before this kid starts selling and doing drugs. By the time you as a parent realize what he is doing, it may be too late. He may have joined the Gang. How do you try to help your Child with these problems?"<sup>52</sup>

51 Parent focus group, October 8, 2008.  
52 Parent interview, October 9, 2008.

**Figure 20**

### Why do most youth drop out of school?

■ Number selecting yes (out of 107 who answered the question)



### Asset: Education supports

Though there are too few, some services are available for students whose education has been interrupted. The Students with Interrupted Formal Education, or SIFE, program is funded by the New York City Department of Education to help students acclimate and catch up to their peers. In 2008, IS 49 Bertha A. Dreyfus (middle school) is the only Staten Island school with this program.<sup>53</sup>

Recognizing the need for improved relations with the African community, many teachers, principals, and other school personnel have taken the initiative to get involved with community organizations and collaborative initiatives. This has improved the capacity of local schools to educate African youth and opened lines of communication to parents and community advocates.

53 New York City Department of Education, Summary of School Allocation, Memorandum No. 65, FY08.

**Issue: Few opportunities for constructive activities during out of school time**

Beyond school youth have little access to resources and opportunities for structured, productive, asset-building activities.

Most youth are limited to their immediate community to find opportunities as the African community is relatively isolated and African parents (especially those living in Park Hill) often do not like or feel comfortable traveling far. Few parents can drive their children to and from activities. Many youth rely on public buses (which they may not be able to afford regularly) or walking (which is not always safe).

Neither parents nor youth are well informed of what programs and opportunities are available. Many indicated there is nothing for teens to do afterschool for recreation or job-training, homework help, SAT or other exam preparation. Some youth also indicated they do not understand how to access higher education, especially without a high grade point average and/or ability to pay.

There are relatively few youth programs. The Figure 22 compares the services and programs available and the desire youth surveyed expressed for different types of programs.

Several organizations offer similar services, and many are trying to do so on very small budgets. The most widely available services fall under counseling/discussion, information & referral provision, academic support, and

visual arts. Though five organizations' responded they offer vocational skills training four of the five responses were "cooking/home economics" and one was medical billing.

Clear gaps exist to meet demand for sports, vocational skill development, and money management. In addition, few organizations have licensed teachers as tutors or homework helpers, and many of the counseling services provided are informal (not provided by a licensed social worker). Several organizations indicated that they would hire qualified teachers and social workers if they had the budget to do so. Furthermore, 43 percent of responding organizations said staff or volunteers normally provide information or services on reproductive health topics (such as HIV/AIDS, STIs, family planning/contraception, and pregnancy). Seventy-nine percent said they provide information or services regarding physical health (such as health and safety, drugs and alcohol, exercise and nutrition, and physical education). Eighty percent said they provide information or services on parent/child communication.

**Youth Programs in the North Shore**

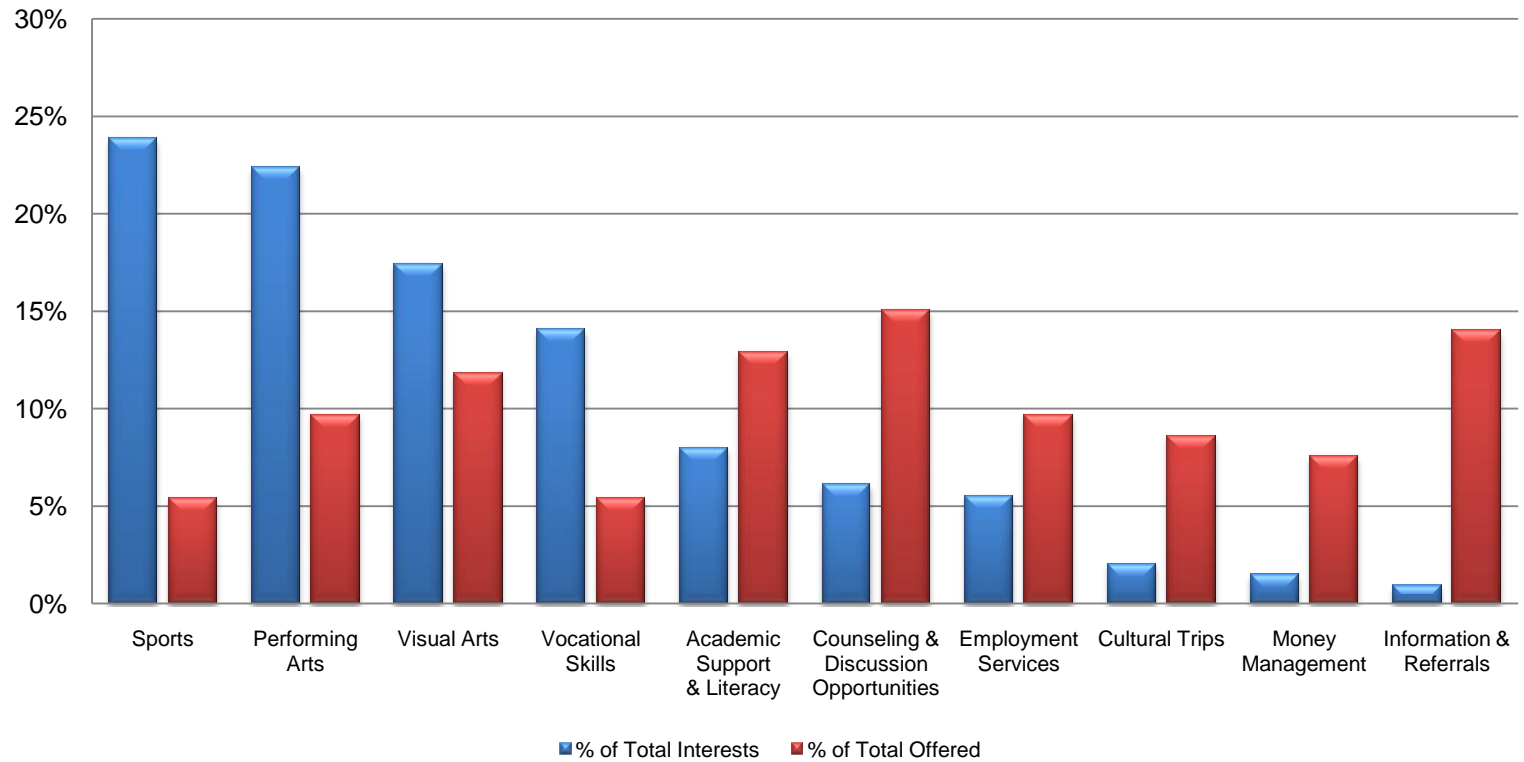
The assessment identified 25 community-based organizations (not including schools) with youth services in the North Shore neighborhoods of Park Hill, Stapleton, Clifton, and St. George. Five programs operate in Park Hill, including:

- African Refuge: drop in center, occasional after school program (target 30 youth)
- Catch a Falling Star: after school program (maximum 20 youth)
- Police Athletic League PlayStreets Program: Summer only (open to all)
- Roza Promotion: computer center (capacity of approximately 25 youth per day)
- Staten Island YMCA Counseling Service (various programs)

Figure 21<sup>54</sup>

**North Shore Youth Programming: Desired vs. Offered**

(based on the youth survey and questionnaire with 15 organizations)



54 Academic support & literacy collapses homework help, tutoring, literacy, English language training; sports collapses soccer, football, baseball, basketball, and other sport; performing arts collapses drama/theatre, dance, musical instrument, voice, and other; visual arts collapses drawing, painting, photo, other visual art; employment services collapses employment seeking help and job training; vocational skills collapsed cooking/home ec, nursing, electrician, plumbing, automotive, construction, other vocational skill; counseling & discussion opportunities collapses individual discussion, group discussion, and counseling services; information and referrals collapses information giving and referral to other services.

Finally, access of African youth to after school and other youth programs is also limited by parental perceptions that after school programs are not necessarily positive places for their children.

Reasons parents do not send their children to afterschool programs:

- Lack of confidence that child will attend: Parents report that they cannot know if their child is actually in the program – they may say they are going there but then do not.
- Feel there are not enough staff to support the number of youth
- Feel that staff do not pay enough attention to participants
- Feel that other youth in afterschool programs will negatively influence (peer pressure) their child
- Feels child is not safe from getting beat up by other youth

“It is especially in the school where both the good and bad kids meet. They sit in the class together, go to lunch, and play together and give the bad kids enough time to pollute the minds of other good children around them. So sending them to an after school program is like helping to introduce your kids to many different things. The kids are left alone in the after school programs. There are not many teachers to meet the needs of the children. Sometime the kids do not go to the programs; you may be thinking your child is in after school, but they are out on the streets. And before you realize your child could be in so much trouble.”<sup>55</sup>

**Asset: Youth creativity, energy, interests and resilience**

Some of the most striking and essential assets in the North Shore are youth’s creativity, energy, interests, and resilience. When given the opportunity to have a voice, youth who participated in the Project Design Contest awed the youth and adult audience with their ideas, preparedness, and ability to articulate their perspectives.

Though they said staying away from negative and unsafe situations is not easy and they get normalized to things they see every day, such as drug dealing, youth reported several positive strategies to deal with their problems and living in unsafe conditions, including:

- Talking to adults who will listen
- Avoiding negative people or situations and not being out in the community much
- Getting a job
- Going somewhere the youth feels safe (such as YMCA or other community center)
- Concentrating on school
- Reading to escape

These strategies and the diverse interests can be built upon to help youth succeed.

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55 Parent interview, November 17, 2008.

## Asset: Community support - neighborhood nonprofits and religious institutions

The community-based nonprofit organizations and associations are important sources of support and opportunities for youth and families, and links to mainstream services. As most organizations serve multicultural groups of youth, they provide spaces to develop intercultural understanding and reduce community tensions. While respecting and protecting the cultural assets of the community, they also help families understand, adapt to, and access American culture and institutions. These organizations provide critical connections between African families and schools, the local police precinct, social service agencies, and externally-based organizations.

These organizations:

- Have in-depth knowledge and understanding of the community
- Can reach community members that do not access mainstream services
- Are accessible (located in the North Shore, and provide free or low-cost services)
- Create rare safe spaces within the community
- Pay attention to youth issues

In addition to organizations offering youth programs and services, there are nationality associations that advocate and support their respective communities, including:

- United States Sierra Leonean Association (USSLA)

- Staten Island Liberian Community Association (SILCA)
- Ghanaian Civic Association of Staten Island
- Nigerian American Community Association

Churches and mosques are also trusted and frequented by African families. Parents overwhelmingly responded that they seek the advice and support of religious leaders – particularly pastors – when they have problems with their children:

**The Park Hill Youth Task Force** is an example of willingness of local stakeholders to collaborate to improve the community for youth. African Refuge organized the Task Force in late 2007. Community organizations, schools, social service providers, the 120 Police Precinct, and concerned community members came together to discuss the needs of community youth with the aim to address and mitigate tensions between the African and African American communities that have resulted in numerous incidents of youth violence and gang activity. Many Youth Task Force members participated in this assessment process. With increased coordination and focus, the Task Force represents an opportunity to build on the commitment many have pledged to addressing youth issues.

“First and foremost we talk about things. I call a family meeting and we discuss whatever the issue is. If that doesn't help then we go to the Church and talk with the pastor”.<sup>56</sup>

“The religions leaders, pastors, the Liberian community association, and social workers...These are people you could go for assistance, instead of calling the police, who will not teach the children the right thing or educate them, or calling ACS, who will take away your children from you...if [youth] go to the religious leaders, they will help give them self-esteem. They will tell them about good and bad, and what are the affects. They will ask the youth leader in church to work with them because every child needs a role model. The social worker will help find programs that help them. They look up to the community leaders too for help.”<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Parent interview, February 7, 2009.

<sup>57</sup> Parent focus group, October 8, 2008.

## Conclusion

This assessment was exploratory in nature – being the only such assessment completed to date on African youth in the North Shore. There are as many new questions as answers, and further investigation is merited to pick up where this assessment has left off, and improve on it.

Nevertheless, this assessment makes clear many of the barriers African youth in the North Shore face to achieving their potential, and many opportunities to build their assets to break those barriers. It also shows that taking the time to involve and listen to youth and parents is extremely valuable and empowering in itself.

Negative outcomes, such as gang involvement, violence, alcohol and drug use, drug dealing, dropping out, and unsafe sex are not caused by one factor alone, and a single approach alone will not create a more empowering community. Coordinated, complementary initiatives have the potential to increase positive impact. Policy makers, schools, service providers, parents, and youth themselves all have a role in creating a more empowering community and should use this assessment as a catalyst for critical dialogue and action.

Table 3 reflects on the basic types of assets that youth need and the status of these assets in the North Shore, and suggests actions to take to build youth's personal assets and community assets.



**Figure 22: Zubah Gizzie, 18, draws his dream community at the Taking a Stand event on August 2, 2008. Photo by Bill Lyons/Staten Island Advance.**

<b>Table 3: Status of African Youth Assets in Staten Island's North Shore</b>			
<b>Types of Assets</b>	<b>Based on assessment, level of youth assets</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Asset-building ideas</b>
Safety & basic needs	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many youth have little parental supervision; some youth do not eat properly when parents work long hours or overnight(s)</li> <li>Youth do not feel safe in the community</li> <li>Crime rates are high</li> <li>Apartment buildings have no or little security</li> <li>Apartments are overcrowded</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create/enhance collaborative community safety initiatives</li> <li>Increase adult literacy and economic diversification initiatives</li> <li>Expand immigration assistance and outreach</li> <li>Serve youth healthy snacks and meals</li> </ul>
Preparedness for work and adult life	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youth are unprepared for American school; schools are not meeting youth academic needs to catch up</li> <li>There are few opportunities to gain marketable skills, especially for out-of-school youth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop school capacity to assist African youth</li> <li>Expand youth leadership opportunities</li> <li>Expand vocational and job training programs targeting North Shore youth</li> </ul>
Connectedness to family and community	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youth have strained relationships with parents</li> <li>Youth have few sources of emotional support</li> <li>Tensions between African and African Americans create an unsupportive atmosphere</li> <li>Youth value rich culture, but have conflicted relationship with it as part of their identity</li> <li>Community sees youth as a problem</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mediate parent-youth conflicts</li> <li>Celebrate multiculturalism and unity</li> <li>Develop participatory cultural history and traditions programs</li> <li>Create and celebrate youth opportunities to lead community improvement and unity projects</li> </ul>
Engagement	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youth have poor access to meaningful non-school activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop programs that offer non-school activities</li> <li>Strategize on how to provide free/low cost, safe transportation to youth</li> <li>Help youth to access opportunities outside the community</li> <li>Educate youth and families about non-school opportunities</li> <li>Take action to improve after-school program quality and address negative parent perceptions</li> <li>Create plans to hire and retain quality youth program staff</li> </ul>

## Next Steps and Recommendations

This report is intended to be a tool for organizations, schools, local officials, parents, youth and others to improve the North Shore for its newest residents and others. For example, the CEY partners will use this report to:

- ➔ Improve the quality and reach of current programs by revising parent/family outreach strategies
- ➔ Decide future program plans based on identified gaps
- ➔ Promote understanding of North Shore African youth among organizations, schools, policy makers, and community members by disseminating this report
- ➔ Facilitate discussions with interested groups wishing to develop action plans in response to the assessment

## You Can Empower North Shore Youth!

Everyone can make a difference to strengthen youth assets and contribute positively to the future of the North Shore as a diverse, safe, vibrant, viable, and more empowering community.

## Ways to use this report:

- ☆ **Reflect!** Consider how your work is helping to address the issues and assets of African youth, and how it could have more impact.
- ☆ **Respond!** Add, drop, or reorient activities to increase the impact of your program.
- ☆ **Collaborate!** Look for opportunities to coordinate with other organizations, schools, and parents and youth to create a more empowering community.
- ☆ **Advocate!** Bring this information to local officials to press for changes that really impact the North Shore.
- ☆ **Compel!** Use the results of the assessment in funding proposals to demonstrate the need for programs that will address the African youth issues and strengthen their assets.
- ☆ **Communicate!** Spread the word about this report and its findings to increase awareness.

**Contact CEY!** Assess how you can help to create a more empowering community for African and other disadvantaged youth: Contact the CEY team to facilitate a discussion with your group to discuss the assessment and plan a response: (347) 934-3886 or [sara.rowbottom@theirc.org](mailto:sara.rowbottom@theirc.org).

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## Appendix

List of Organizations that participated in the questionnaire:

1. African Refuge
2. Catch a Falling Star
3. Century Dance Complex
4. Central Family Life Center
5. Covenant House, Staten Island Community Resource Center
6. Jewish Community Center, IS 49Beacon Program
7. New York Center for Interpersonal Development
8. New York Foundling
9. NYC Parks and Recreation, Cromwell Center
10. Police Athletic League (PAL) Playstreet Program (Bowen Street)
11. Roza Promotion
12. Stapleton UAME Church
13. Staten Island YMCA Counseling Services
14. Teen R.A.P. (Risk Assessment Program) Staten Island University Hospital
15. United Multicultural Center (formerly Liberian Cultural Center)



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