



CLARK COUNTY YOUTH COMMISSION

POLICY REPORT

2019 - 2020

Discussing Youth Violence
Prevention in Relation to
Mental Health



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All members of the Youth Commission participated in discussing policy and forming recommendations. The 2019-2020 Youth Commission in its entirety is comprised of 31 members: Uruwa Abe, Sophie Albright, Gelila Alem, Clara Bledsoe, Jatin Chand, Krishneel Chand, Charmony Chhing, William Clark, Eddie Coberly, Daython Cooper, Drevon Cooper, Ollie Cox, Shalaka Deshpande, Charlie Fisher, Kalyn Flatt, Jay Gorrepati, Rishi Gorrepati, Katie Huynh, Tim Jokela, Kevin Juarez, Wilson Keller, Adam Larson, Raquel Nelson, Ben Omnes-Norton, Nizhara Peavy, Valerie Shoker, John Stryker, Ava Town, Josie Underwood, Taylor Wagner, and Jasmine Wu.

Introduction

The Youth Commission is an advisory board established in 1998, composed of youth ages 11-19. Together, we share our diverse perspectives to Clark County policymakers. A part of our duty is publishing an annual policy report focusing on an issue that is important to youth. In this report, we present the findings about the issue that we have learned about throughout the year along with our personal recommendations.

In the summer, a group of Youth Commissioners meet with the Clark County Councilors to discuss a potential policy focus. During this meeting, Youth Commissioners share some of the issues they have seen in their daily life that have a great influence on youth in our county. Our policy report the previous year was about youth homelessness, mental health, and transitioning to adulthood. Josie Underwood mentioned that she would like to dive deeper into the topic of mental health. Many other Youth Commissioners, including Katie Huynh, felt it was important to cover mental health and reduce the stigma around receiving care. In addition to our unanimous concern about mental health, Timothy Jokela stated that he wanted to learn about youth violence. These two topics sowed the seeds for what would be our policy report for the 2019 - 2020 season. After several meetings with the Clark County Councilors, we decided to focus on youth violence and mental health as our policy assignment. Here is a comment from a Youth Commissioner present when determining the topic of our policy assignment:

"I feel like this year's report was important because we discussed more in depth on a small portion of last year's report which only went over mental health briefly. Last year's report was more about youth homelessness. This year, we suggest(ed) ways of making the resources more accessible to the public and how to create more of an aware and cautious environment for those who are experiencing mental health issues or youth violence. Our process this year ran very smoothly, with a lot of really good information being brought to the meetings. It did get a bit disrupted due to the pandemic."-Kevin Juarez

After determining the subject of our policy report, we began breaking out into groups at our general meetings to learn more about this topic. Typically, we would be given an article to read and analyze in groups. Then, we would share what we learned to our large group. In addition to general meetings, Youth Commissioners had the opportunity to attend subcommittee meetings, coined "deep dives," to read additional articles and formulate policy recommendations. These provided commissioners the opportunity to work individually or in smaller groups. In addition, it gave us more time to deeply analyze the resources provided. After we had drafted some preliminary recommendations, Youth Commissioners were able to compile the recommendations into this policy report.

Section compiled by Katie Huynh (HeLa High School)

Overview of Protective Factors

Protective factors are characteristics in an individual's life that help to mitigate the effects of risk factors. For example, emotion regulation training can decrease the likelihood of youth violence (Bushman et. al, 2018). Youth Commissioner Taylor Wagner mentioned that "learning emotional regulation skills can be hard and that she also works to limit her exposure to things that make her sad or angry." Similarly, "developing skills such as empathy, perspective-taking, social problem-solving, and conflict resolution" reduce the risk that youth turn to violence.

Having a Support Network

Clark County can play a large role in creating and providing these protective factors to youth. For instance, there are many supportive substance abuse prevention programs in our community. One example is another Youth House program called Strong Teens Against Substance Hazards and Abuse (STASHA). STASHA is a non judgmental group of teens that aims to prevent youth substance use through peer-to-peer suggestions [education]. With a supportive community like STASHA to educate and advise youth, they can stray away from risk factors such as substance abuse. In addition, members of STASHA have also benefited from being involved in the program. For example, Kianne Bell, a freshman at WSU, has learned how to express her vulnerability through STASHA. Therefore, our Youth Commission highly encourages the creation of more programs that can provide teens with protective factors. Another example of these programs are Clark County Teen Talk and West Van for Youth.

Diving deeper into protective factors involving mental health, Clark County Teen Talk is a peer-to-peer support line for teens in the county to share their problems and concerns. Many Youth Commission members, like Josie Underwood, have expressed the need for more mental health services for youth. These mental health services allow for teens to feel like they are heard and accepted by their community, something that protects them from risk factors. A possible risk factor that can result from feeling unheard is social isolation. Therefore, if more support groups are provided and advertised to youth, we can expose them to protective factors. These protective factors are significant in reducing the risk of teens turning to violence and self-harm.

Section compiled by Katie Huynh (HeLa High School)

Environmental Protective Factors

Another important protective factor is access to a safe, equal, and positive learning environment, which includes encouraging role models and positive social norms that reduce the stigma around mental health. Mental illness is a challenge that affects a sizable amount of our youth population. As stated in the “Voices from Minority Youth on Help-Seeking and Barriers to Mental Health Services” article, “While approximately 22% of US youth aged 13 to 18 years are affected by mental health disorders with severe impairment, less than half receive mental health services” (Ijadi-Maghsoodi, Roya et al. 2018). The disparities among low-income youth of color are even greater because they are less likely to receive treatment because of higher exposure to poverty, violence, and trauma. Youth Commissioner Katie Huynh mentioned that there are many misconceptions about youth violence and mental health. For example, people often believe that those who experience mental illness are more likely to be the perpetrators of violence. However, they are more likely to be the victims of violence. Another Youth Commissioner, Charlie Fisher, mentioned how youth should have access to school counselors or supportive adults of their choice that are more representative of different backgrounds, both racially and ethnically. By providing a diverse range of mental health counselors and resources, Clark County would be taking a step towards creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment in schools.

As Youth Commissioners Ollie Cox and Kevin Juarez Reyes have stated, the current system of counseling in the case of school-based mental health programs is not ideal. Currently, students are sometimes called out of class for counseling which can be embarrassing given the stigma around mental health. An alternate solution would be designating an after-school peer hangout where mental health support is available, which is more welcoming and creates a safe environment.

Section compiled by Valerie Shoker (Union High School)

Family Protective Factors

While addressing the effects of mental health on youth through safe spaces and community discussions is a step in the right direction, a more holistic view of stressors within an individual’s life requires opening up the topic of mental health in households. According to SAMHSA, one of the most prominent factors that influence an adolescent’s risk for seeking violence is family relationships. The stigma surrounding mental health is much more destructive for young men than young women. The quote “Some boys who can’t cry, cry bullets,” from the “Depression and Violence in teens” article, was brought up by Taylor Wagner, which serves as a reminder of the violent epidemic that plagues our schools, partly because of the expectations that society places on men (Udesky, 2020). Another Youth Commissioner, Ava Town, pointed out that discussions of mental healthcare are often geared towards women, and that society

puts the expectation on men to not experience mental health difficulties, which is something that we should work to change.

In society, men are often encouraged to bottle up their feelings and to remain stoic in the face of adversity. Youth Commissioners Eddie Coberly and Jay Gorrepati acknowledged difficulty in expressing their emotions with others. Eddie mentioned that many of his friends find it even more difficult and that this could lead to a build up and violence. As a solution, Youth Commissioner Eddie Coberly recommends the idea of dreaming big and creating support programs that teach openness and communication in father figures. Programs such as these would enable more parents to express their vulnerability in a healthy way and act as a protective factor. Eddie writes: "Fathers tend to be the parent most associated with home violence and child abuse. These support groups are intended to help in eliminating that stereotype, eliminating abuse from fathers, and encouraging the next generation of boys to grow up to be gentle, protective fathers."

Youth Commissioner Jasmine Wu recommends that school coaches and teachers be trained to normalize the conversation of mental health. She spoke about the powerful impact sports teams can have on each other and that if a coach gets a whole team on board with talking about mental health, normalizing it, it creates a feeling of - we are in this together. Clark County can work to prioritize mental health training and interventions as well as supporting programs that allow access to youth to caring and responsible adults that they may lack in their lives.

Clark County does not necessarily have to create more youth community programs. Another mode in which they can facilitate youth development of protective factors is through effective advertising of the resources already available. For example, the county could compile a list of resources/programs that could be distributed to counselors at schools. Through these methods, we can utilize the benefits of protective factors to our advantage in preventing youth violence.

Section compiled by Katie Huynh (HeLa High School) and Valerie Shoker (Union High School)

Overview of Risk Factors

Risk factors are things that individuals have exposure to that increase the likelihood that they turn to harmful behaviors, like violence (Bushman et. al 2018). Examples of these factors are social isolation, poor family connections, and media. Simply put, risk factors are the leading reasons why teens engage in risky behaviors. These risk factors can be divided up into personal and environmental factors. Personal risk factors are things that are associated with a specific individual while environmental risk factors are associated with our situation and surroundings. Examples of personal risk factors are gender and personality, while environmental risk factors

are things like the stressful events youth experience or a teen's school environment. Our policy report will have a focus on environmental factors, which are often changeable.

Lack of Social Support

Being ostracised by peers is a factor that can lead to youth violence (Bushman et. al, 2018). When youth do not feel like they are respected or included in their school environment they may refrain from seeking counseling. Charlie Fisher, a Youth Commissioner said “ that as a person of color she wanted (and) would have found it helpful to address a concern she had with the only counselor in her school who was also a person of color - but that individual was assigned to a different grade level.” A strong support system to fall upon can be a great protective factor against risky behaviors. Likewise, a lack of support is a risk factor. When teens do not feel comfortable reaching out to an adult or peer because they feel like that person will not understand what they are feeling, the teen has lost a very important coping strategy.

Youth Commissioners have also learned that teens refrain from seeking mental health support if they do not feel connected with their community (Wisdom et. al, 2006). Mental health is something that is often stigmatized and seen as a weakness. Teens will not seek medical care out of the fear that they will be rejected from the majority even more. As a county, the best way that we can address this issue is through recruiting racially diverse counselors in schools and providing culturally competent training. For example, the Youth Commissioners were trained at their summer retreat to practice inclusivity, diversity, and equity. A standardized course on inclusion and diversity is something that the county can seek to provide for teachers and other trusted adults, like sports coaches. Charlie also spoke about the importance of peer-to-peer connection. In her work with Clark County STASHA, Charlie cited an event where youth could ask questions to a panel of Clark County youth about coping strategies and further connect with them. This is an opportunity for the youth in our county to feel more connected with each other. With this connection to an individual with a similar background as them, they are more likely to get help from others in the face of challenges. This event was hosted by STASHA and was called “ We Are Still Learning Too: A Youth-to-Youth Panel.”

Section compiled by Katie Huynh (HeLa High School)

Lack of Family Support

Similarly, another source of support is from parents and family members. Ollie Cox mentioned that how families view the issue of mental health can have a big impact on whether a youth feels comfortable seeking help. If a youth does not feel accepted by their family, it cuts off a support system for them. Consequently, the lack of a strong support system to turn to may cause a youth to make risky decisions. To address this problem, it is important to normalize healthy mental health conversations between youth and parents. Similar to this topic, substance use prevention experts have encouraged families to have a conversation with their youth to set standards within the family. This is a very good opportunity for parents to share their expectations, but also for youth to share their perspective. These healthy conversations have been very effective in substance abuse prevention and can be applied to mental health (United

States, Department of Health and Human Services). Eddie recommended that support programs should be established that focus on the family and father-figures where they can role model vulnerability and emotion expression. Another factor that puts a youth at risk is if the family has experienced divorce, child maltreatment, or domestic abuse (Bushman et al, 2016). Growing up in an unhealthy family may foster a youth's violent behavior. Youth model the behavior of their parents, who they often perceive as their role models. Therefore, adults that model bad behavior will have a negative influence on youth. To counteract this problem, it is important to provide other supportive adults in the youth's life. For example, advertising about school counselors more and also training sports coaches and teachers on supporting their students.

Section compiled by Katie Huynh (HeLa High School)

Violence in Media

Media can also be a risk factor to youth. Violent content in the media can cause impressionable youth to make poor decisions. Similar to role models in the family system, youth model the behavior of those that they see on their computer screens. Therefore, exposure to violent content may inspire youth to engage in violent behaviors themselves (Bushman et. al. 2018). Youth Commissioner Ollie Cox thought it was important to note that not all youth who are exposed to violent content on media become school shooters or bullies; the individuals who seek violence after being exposed to violent content do not constitute the majority. Youth Commissioner Jasmine spoke about how sometimes things like violent video games are the scapegoat because adults can latch onto that instead of looking at the real and harder issues to mental health in school shootings. On the other hand, some youth commissioners felt differently. Krishneel Chand wrote:

“Most ways violence is caused by playing violence video games. I feel like parents need to watch how much into games their kids are so they can prevent violence happening themselves. Violence can also be caused by bullies in school or not getting enough attention you need in school or from your parents. Some ways to prevent violence from happening is playing less violent video games, and having supportive people around you or that stands up for you in any situation.”

In addition to exposing youth to violent content, media can also be the platform where cyberbullying occurs. Individuals can hide behind a screen and share hurtful content to their social community. These messages can cause youth to feel excluded, which may result in social isolation. To address the risk factor of media, parents should encourage their children to avoid watching violent content and schools should teach students how to responsibly use social media. Many schools already have lessons on cyberbullying and social media use. The county could also generate infographics that can be spread in public spaces about this topic.

Media coverage of violence such as street shootings and school shootings also creates stigma and fear around going places, as Taylor, Ollie, and Valerie spoke about at the protective factors meeting on June 8th. Ollie also spoke about shooters being motivated by the media coverage on shootings. A solution would be to change media coverage on violence and shootings somehow.

Section compiled by Katie Huynh (HeLa High School), Krishneel Chand (Covington Middle School) and Jay Gorrepati (Shahala Middle School)

Gender as a Risk Factor

As for personal risk factors, gender can be an important one. According to Bushman et. al, males are more aggressive and violent than females statistically (2018). This is likely due to the pressure of the social norm surrounding the idea of masculinity. Ava Town pointed out that society puts pressure on men to not experience mental health difficulties. Teenage boys may feel the need to conform to this and seek other ways, perhaps more risky ways, to express themselves. To address this problem, Youth Commissioners have recommended that the county advertise coping strategies and ways to regulate emotion. [A thorough discussion about coping strategies can be found on pages 8 through 11.]

In conclusion, the county should work towards mitigating the effects of these risk factors. Ways to do this include advertising and providing training in inclusion and social media use. It is best to prevent things rather than try to amend problems when they arise. Therefore, a good investment in preventative resources will be the most ideal way that the county can seek to help youth.

Section compiled by Katie Huynh (HeLa High School)

Our Recommendations

The Youth Commission has spent our entire term researching this topic. We had the opportunity to review various resources and formulate these recommendations. We want to acknowledge that mental health and youth violence are very complicated issues. Youth Commissioners are by no means experts in this topic, but here is our youth perspective on these issues.

Teaching Peer-to-Peer Support Skills

Josie Underwood, a Youth Commissioner, mentioned that it would be useful if there was a resource to guide teens on how to have supportive conversations with their peers. As mentioned above, it is incredibly important for youth to feel included in their school and social environments. This can be a protective factor that mitigates the effects of risk factors. Hence, it is very important to consider ways that our county can make youth feel included and heard. One way is to provide a resource for youth to guide them in having supportive conversations with each other. Effective communication is perhaps the first step to connecting with each other. A resource that is already available for teens to talk to each other is "[Good Friends in Hard Times. Friendship: Own It.](#)" facilitator guide [available upon request]. This guide is focused on having a

conversation with a peer you know about cannabis use. Our county could use the tips provided in this facilitator guide and change the context to cover how to have a conversation about mental health. Many youth feel uncomfortable sharing their feelings with an adult, they feel more comfortable talking with someone their age. Therefore, a guide to facilitate a meaningful conversation is something that may be very useful.

Section compiled by Valerie Shoker (Union High School) and Katie Huynh (HeLa High School)

Reforming Social Norms

Ava Town, a Youth Commissioner, commented that there is a competitive social norm to live an unhealthy life. She stated that she has seen many students at her school brag about their poor sleeping habits and sleep deprivation. It has become normalized in the school setting that students lack sleep, and if you slept the recommended eight hours a night you were an outlier. Katie Huynh mentioned that there is a social norm that teens have low self-esteem and self-deprecating personalities. Teens often joke about hating themselves and it has become completely normal to hate oneself. A social norm reform is necessary. Norms are the standards that we compare ourselves to, therefore a fundamental change in a social norm will also change how we perceive ourselves. Clark County can facilitate this change by highlighting healthy habits like a good sleep schedule and creating promotional infographics to put in community spaces that youth frequent.

Section compiled by Valerie Shoker (Union High School)

Teaching Coping Strategies

The advent of the digital age has placed the entire world in the pockets of young people around the globe. Increased personal connectedness can both emphasize emotions and make it harder for youth to disconnect digitally. Even when youth are physically alone, they are never truly emotionally alone due to the constant notifications on their phones about what their friends have been doing on social media, if their teacher has posted new assignments on virtual classrooms, and more. Being constantly connected makes managing emotions - particularly negative ones - difficult and can lead to substance abuse and significantly impact mental health.

Coping skills are methods for tolerating and minimizing stressful situations. They are especially important for adolescents, as they are in a very fragile phase of life where they are both emotionally immature and socially and culturally fragmented. Teens are more open to making bad decisions from their lack of experiences (Sharifi, 2013). Being unacquainted with the mental changes and increased emotional stress occurring throughout adolescent years have been shown to correlate to family and social conflict, addiction, robbery, and all types of corruptions in

adolescents (Milanifar, 2004). Academic research has shown that coping skills minimize social and interpersonal conflict by increasing mental health and reducing depression and anxiety (Sharifi, 2013).

Despite the fact that coping skills have been repeatedly proven to decrease teen violence and improve youth mental health, coping skills are not commonly taught or promoted in neither the home or the classroom. [Most people naturally develop some strategies to cope with stress, though they may or may not be healthy strategies.] In a general meeting on 5/7/20, Youth Commissioners discussed various coping strategies they implemented in their daily lives but particularly in times of great stress or sadness.

- Posting inspirational thoughts, clippings, and quotes around their rooms
- Cleaning up workspaces and trying out new hobbies
- Using exercise as a method of de-stressing and possibly unleashing some negative anger in non-harmful methods
- Connecting with friends and family members
- Taking cold showers
- Taking the day off to relax and understanding that the day is only meant for them to recover and destress by doing nothing
- Listening to music
- Picking flowers
- Using art as a means of expressing emotion

If we want to delve into why a coping skill can help us manage stress, we can look into art and determine the following.

- It can help let out your feelings such as sadness, anger, or even happiness in a healthy manner
- It can let you into your own personal “world”
- It can help you gain self confidence as you keep improving on your skill
- It doesn’t have to be only a coping skill, it can also be a nice, quiet, and fun activity to just “unwind” and draw your favorite things. It can just be fun!

Art in general can be an amazing coping skill due to its easy translation into a distraction from just about everything. Therapists encourage using art as a way to avoid SH (self harm), lower stress levels and so participants can enjoy themselves and their own company. If participants are in public and need something to do to bring down and control anxiety levels, they could consider bringing a journal/art book with them to sketch, write and doodle.

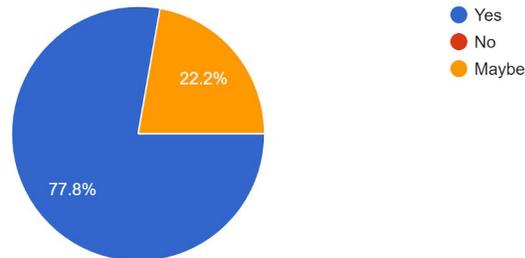
After coming to a consensus that coping skills were an underutilized segment of mental health, the Youth Commission hosted a week long Coping Skills Challenge. Participants of the Coping Skills Challenge chose up to 3 coping skills that they would implement for one week, while documenting changes in their overall mood and mental health. There were 21 coping skills that participants could choose from ranging from rituals to mindfulness.

[The YC Coping Skills Challenge is available upon request.]

22 participants took part in the challenge with 9 participants completing a full debrief at the end. 77.8% of participants noted that they felt a change in their stress levels throughout the challenge and 22.2% noted that they might have felt a change in their stress levels. Notably, no participants said they didn't experience a change in stress levels.

Did you notice a difference in your stress levels this week?

9 responses

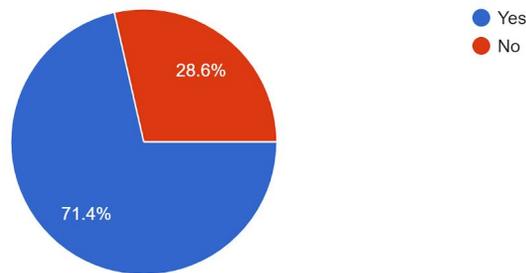


When asked if the coping skills helped the participant function better during times of stress, one participant who chose to practice mindfulness, kindness and positivity said, "Absolutely! Without doing any of these strategies, I would be unpleasant rather quickly." Another participant who practiced mindfulness, gratitude and movement said, "I think that movement definitely helped in soothing myself when I was really stressed. During the week that I did my challenge, I was more stressed out because of personal factors as well as the current events in our country." Almost every response was positive about the experience but the main issue was that it was hard to implement coping skills into daily life suddenly and that it may take a more gradual implementation in future applications.

Another question in the YC Coping Skills Challenge asked participants where they learned their coping skills they already utilized before the challenge.

Significantly, 85% of the people who answered "Yes" to the poll learned about their coping skills from family members and friends - not teachers or academic environments. Youth Commissioner Taylor pointed out that depending on the strategy the coping skill can be acquired, developed, or taught in a few different ways and places. They can be acquired from parents or other family relatives, school, counseling/therapy programs, or they can be self-acquired. However, the teens most likely to struggle with mental health and engage in youth violence tend to not have the kind of familial support systems that might help them develop healthy coping skills. Therefore the school system must act as a crucial intervention to teach about coping skills.

Has anyone in your life recommended a coping strategy before?
21 responses



After reviewing participant written feedback and polls, the Youth Commission can successfully determine that coping skills are a positive force for mental health in Clark County adolescents.

Therefore the Youth Commission recommends the following:

- Youth Commissioner Valerie recommends making sure youth are taught or have access to effective coping strategies that can help with what's going on.
- Youth Commissioner Ollie points out that it is important that youth/children have opportunities to learn about building empathy. Examples include helping young children understand how their peers or any other person in their life is going through struggles, so that they can learn to help each other.
- Youth Commissioner Katie points out that important programs and opportunities that focus on substance use prevention are really effective, and recommends supporting those and other positive support programs that can help at-risk youth.
- Youth Commissioner Rishi recommends including short workshops or programs in middle and high schools where students learn about coping skills and ways to manage stress. Coping skills should be a part of a modern education because they are crucial to success and better mental health.

Section compiled by Rishi Gorrepati (Union High School), Taylor Wagner (Union High School), and Sophie Albright (NWAP online school)

Improving and Diversifying School Mental Health Resources

Mental Health Counseling In Schools

In many schools there are designated people for students to go to when in need of a schedule change or just someone to talk to, and these people are the counselors. The counselors hired by the school act like a sort of medium from the teacher to the student and make the student be heard, or to listen and console the students. In this day and age there seems to be a stigma around going to get help, and students feel either embarrassed or ashamed to get help for issues that need to be heard and talked about. [From the point-of-view

of many youth commissioners,] some of these issues are mental health issues which a lot of the counselors in public schools don't know the correct way of dealing with or helping with the issues. Another reason students avoid getting help from their counselor is confidentiality. Rules around confidentiality are not carefully explained before treatment. This makes talking to the counselor hard for some students because the information that the discussion is very personal to them. Youth would feel more comfortable if they were informed that this conversation remains confidential. It is also important to express that counselors are often mandatory reporters.

Section compiled by Keven Juarez (Fort Vancouver High School)

General Limitations to Guidance Counseling in Schools

The Youth Commission has dedicated portions of general meetings and specific deep-dive meetings [small-group discussions that thoroughly cover individual aspects of the policy assignment] to cover the state of current resources within our school and broader community.

The first part of a deep-dive meeting held in May of 2020 was spent discussing the limitations of school counselors (or counselors in school settings). It was a widely held view across the group that most of these staff functioned more as guidance counselors, who many felt they did not have a personal connection with. While the traditional definition of a school counselor is a "counselor who works in a school and gives professional advice to students on what curriculum track and course of high-school study that compliments their educational and professional goals to their interests and abilities" (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987), their impact on students' ambition and achievements has been widely measured (McDonough, 2006; Adelman, 1999; McDonough, 1997 and 2004; Orfield & Paul, 1993; Plank & Jordan, 2001). Youth Commissioner Charlie stressed the importance of having trustworthy and supportive adults around that youth can reach out to, whether or not they are a counselor. To overcome the barrier in attaining a personal connection with counselors, the Youth Commission recommends:

- *Education of youth with regard to their rights - what is confidential, and what is not - in order for youth to feel safer seeking support (Ollie).*
- *Staff need to be taught more about mental health awareness - how the staff, as adults, can improve their understanding, offer guidance, help, and console struggling students (Kevin).*

A transition to offering a wider variety of services to better support mental health, especially in an era of slight de-stigmatization, would better support students. Many communities have made the shift to offering counselors in schools for different services, as one Youth Commissioner noted in a general meeting on February 20th: "My school really promotes their drug and alcohol counselors, and I feel like they should promote their counseling services a little bit more [like] other counseling services."

However, mental health is still being left behind. Several Youth Commissioners have cited continued difficulty and stigma around receiving counseling services at school. Youth Commissioner Charlie spoke out about how there is still a lack of openness about mental health. As it remains a stigmatized issue, it limits people's willingness to seek help and so effort should be taken to normalize it, especially in our schools. Youth Commissioner Ollie discussed that sometimes youth are called out of class to receive support, and how there is a stigma associated with this. This was supported by Youth Commissioner Kevin, as being called out of class is not ideal, especially in a room full of your peers. Additionally, Youth Commissioner Jatin noted that "Many students usually don't go to their counselors to seek help for any type of issue

whether it's physically, mentally or something personal to you. This could be out of fear of getting bullied or even lack of trust and being scarred from past experiences.” Youth Commissioner Jay noted, “Kids can also be demotivated to ask for help...if they have to go out of their way to find assistance.” Commissioners recommend the following:

- *The county should prioritize mental health services in schools as one of the easiest and most effective ways to reach kids and help them with their mental state (Jay)*
- *In the case of school-based mental health programs, it would be beneficial if it could be designated as a place to go hang-out instead - it would be more appealing if it was more welcoming and felt more normal (Ollie).*
- *Greater promotion of mental health services across the school - this would allow for counselors to directly address the stigma. Whether it be through more regular promotion to classrooms or through digital communication, all of these can help normalize this service (Jasmine).*

Cultural Competency

Charlie spoke about the socio-cultural barriers to receiving support from counselors, citing her own experiences at her school. As a person of color, she would have found it helpful to address a concern with the only counselor who was a person of color in her school, but that counselor was assigned to a different grade level. A study interviewing new school counselors (where the majority of participants identified as people of color) gave clear examples of how staff in their schools held a “culturally deficient” view of students who differed from them in ethnicity. In addition, these new school counselors did not clearly know “when to speak up when dealing with inappropriate comments by school staff”(Robinson et al., 2018).

In order to better connect with all students and address cultural differences, special attention needs to be paid to school counseling. The Youth Commission recommends:

- *Specifically prioritizing the importance of recruiting people of color into mental health roles and guidance counseling (Charlie).*
- *Culturally-specific services (“cultural competency”) (Charlie).*
- *Youth choice in who they see and talk to - eliminating assignments of counselors based on grade level or last name, instead allowing greater choice and transparency into who our counselors are (Charlie, Jasmine)*

Additionally, a study conducted by sociology graduate student Nicole Little at Wayne State University examined racial differences in seeking guidance counseling at school. Black students generally sought more guidance counseling, and found it to be more helpful than white students (Little, 2015). This claim is supported by a study from Cholewa, an assistant professor at the University of Virginia, Burkhardt, a school counselor; and Hull, a doctoral candidate, in which African-Americans were 1.85 times more likely than white students to cite their high school counselor as the most influential person to them in education (Burkhardt, Cholewa & Hull, 2015). It reaffirms the importance of having enough school counselors, especially in schools where a disproportionately high number of black students attend, and how having enough counselors can help close the racial gap in education and help reach minority students equally.

Section compiled by Jasmine Wu (Union High School) and Jay Gorrepati (Shahala Middle School)

Identifying and Promoting Programs that Support Youth

The Clark County Youth Commission believes that it is very important to support the programs that believe in all diverse youths from our community. Our community already has many initiatives that believe in youth. Some programs and groups of people in Clark County that support the youth are: Strong Teens Against Substance Hazards and Abuse (STASHA), Teen Talk, Safe Communities Task Force, the people at the Clark County Youth House, and the Clark County Youth Commission.

Clark County Youth Programs:

1. Safe Communities Task Force: The Safe Communities Task Force exists to positively affect the youth and their families who have been impacted by violence in order to create a safe and healthy community.
2. Clark County Youth House: A youth empowerment center developed by Clark County Community Services intended to support all Clark County youth by helping them gain developmental assets in a safe, non-judgmental environment.
3. STASHA Peer Educators: They help prevent substance use and encourage Clark County youth to make healthy decisions through nonjudgmental, youth-to-youth advice and/or suggestions.
4. Clark County Youth Commission: Members provide a youth-oriented point-of-view to the work of the Clark County Councilors, county departments, and community organizations.
5. Teen Talk: A warmline offering nonjudgmental peer-to-peer support for a variety of topics, including but not limited to: depression, anxiety, LGBTQ+, family and friends, school, STIs and health issues, and sports.
6. Options Youth Program: A multidisciplinary team of therapists, transition specialists and an employment specialist who focus community based services to help prepare and support youth during their transition from youth to independent adulthood.

People involved in these programs are passionate about the work they do every day. These programs and projects, with the support of dedicated staff and community members, work to address the needs of youth and their families throughout Clark County. The focus of their work is youth-driven. These programs are designed to promote the health of youth by building on their strengths.

Section compiled by Shalaka Deshpande (Skyridge Middle School)

Conclusion

Moving Forward to Combat Youth Violence

Our research was centered upon the prevention of youth violence through a mental health focus. Through addressing both protective and risk factors, the Youth Commission was able to apply root-cause analysis, allowing for recommendations based upon reducing risk factors and promoting protective factors. This longitudinal approach will allow for prevention of violence in the future. The mitigation of events that increase the likelihood of engaging in violent behavior can be achieved through policy - by boosting adult support (culturally competent training, counseling improvements), and reducing stigmatization and ostracization from other

youth (increasing opportunities for peer-to-peer support, raising awareness, reducing stigma, addressing personal risk factors). Through improving protective factors, the county can take steps towards complete destigmatization of mental health and provide greater opportunities for peer support.

While this year did not go as expected with the current crisis, our transition to an online meeting structure has allowed us to remain connected. We were able to still maintain our general meetings, and host more deep dives than years prior. Many of us took on a new perspective on mental health during the pandemic, allowing for richer insight into the issue at hand.

The Clark County Youth Commission is dedicated towards bringing youth voices into the spotlight, showcasing issues commonly faced by youth in the community. Our collective concern about both mental health and violence in youth has transformed into the policy report seen here today. Throughout our season, all of our general discussions, deep dives, and remote collaboration, as well as our discussions with community guests, have allowed us to emphasize education, destigmatization, and prevention of youth violence. In order to combat youth violence and make the community a safe space for all youth, it is important to consider all measures and recommendations made by community members. This policy report has been compiled by the members of the Youth Commission, offering a diverse range of voices from all around the county, leading to a range of recommendations and firsthand witness accounts of youth life. Our year has been dedicated to improving our county, and ensuring the welfare of our residents.

We would like to thank all of our community members who have made this year's policy work possible. Special thanks to Councilor Medvigy, Councilor Blom, and Councilor Lentz for helping to identify and formulate this year's policy area; and to DeDe Sieler, Program Manager for Behavioral Health Prevention/Treatment Services for the Clark County Department of Community Services, for insight on existing community services. Our work would not be possible without the information and expertise of these community members.

Section compiled by Jasmine Wu (Union High School)

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