

SAVING OUR CHILDREN

Increases in violent crimes in recent years, especially in metropolitan areas, have taken a toll on residents, particularly the youngest and most vulnerable. In the Pittsburgh region, school and city officials along with nonprofit organizations are trying new initiatives in communities and schools to help keep children safe. By Julia Fraser





A bullet-shattered window was a stark next-day reminder of a shooting in April that killed two teens and injured eight others during a party at an Airbnb on Pittsburgh's North Side.

As many as 200 people, many of them students from a swath of Pittsburgh-area school districts, flocked to an Airbnb rental in the city's North Side neighborhood the night before Easter this year. Attendees expected a lively house party, but by the end of night, shots had ripped through the house leaving two teens dead and eight others injured.

A Pittsburgh police officer looks for evidence near an Airbnb house on Pittsburgh's North Side where two teenagers were killed during a party.



About a month later, in an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, an 18-year-old took his AR-15–style rifle, entered the building through an unlocked side door and shot to death 19 children and two teachers.

Such shocking high-profile acts of violence attract the public’s attention but don’t adequately define the scope of the danger to America’s young. Less visible threads of violence weave through local communities. Shootings on their streets, bullying on social media, fights in school hallways and group chats leading to after-school conflicts are among the threats they face.

“There’s a lot of stress, drama, rumors spread around,” said Javian Rodriguez, 16, an 11th-grader at Pittsburgh Creative and Performing Arts 6–12. “People can say some really nasty things.

“And then there’s violence outside of school. I’ve been physically attacked outside of school at my bus stop. There’s been kids who have gotten beat up by kids from other schools, and it’s been so bad they’ve had to be hospitalized. It’s all close by. Near my bus stop, there was a robbery and another fight where a gun was pulled out and someone was shot. Hearing that kind of stuff is shocking, but it’s one of those things that we know about and experience.”

In Pittsburgh and across the U.S., violence tends to be selective.

“Homicide victimization is concentrated demographically, geographically, socially,” said Nick Cotter, an analyst at Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS). “What that looks like is we have 30,000 census blocks in Allegheny County. In any given year, violence occurs in just 0.3 percent of them. That’s how concentrated that is.”

Violence has roots in poverty, systemic racism, identity, joblessness and other factors. It’s a problem that’s challenging local communities and schools to come up with effective, sustainable solutions. The approaches to addressing violence take a range of angles including school-code-of-conduct reform and alternatives to suspension, coordinated local government efforts to sustainably fund evidence-based violence prevention programs, and even opening up a gym in the community for kids to play basketball after school in the winter.

“It’s going to take a lot of money and commitment to undo more than a century of harm that’s led to these concentrations of violence,” Mr. Cotter said. “We’re talking about sustained commitments for a decade or more. It needs to be prolonged and comprehensive.”

The rising homicide rate in Allegheny County (where Pittsburgh is the county seat) amplifies the critical nature of the problem young people are facing.

Homicides held steady or declined from 2016 through 2019 in Allegheny County and the City of Pittsburgh. But rates jumped 27 percent in the county and by 43 percent in the city from 2019 to 2021, according to DHS data.

Each year on average, 66 percent of county homicide victims are Black men. Most are ages 18 to 34. About 12 percent of victims countywide are under the age of 18, according to a recent report by Allegheny County Department of Human Services.

Homicides are higher in certain communities, including the city’s Homewood and Larimer neighborhoods and the county municipalities of Penn Hills and McKees Rocks, according to the DHS report. But numbers paint a misleading picture, Mr. Cotter said.

“Within these communities, 99.9 percent of the population is not involved in the violence,” he explained. “They’re deeply affected by the violence—they lose loved ones because of it—but they’re not involved.”

Last June, Pittsburgh officials announced a broad initiative aimed at reducing violence in the city under Mayor Ed Gainey’s “Plan for Peace,” including a program that pairs police officers with social workers to serve as first responders if the situation does not require an armed officer.

DHS announced a comprehensive violence prevention initiative in highly impacted communities, including working with communities to put together violence plans that tap evidence-based programs. One program, “Becoming a Man,” hires full-time counselors to provide peer support, cognitive behavior therapy and organized counseling to at-risk young men during the school day.

Reductions in homicides, aggravated assaults with a weapon, nonfatal shootings and shots fired won’t be the only measures of progress the county looks at, said DHS Director Erin Dalton.

“We’d love to see changes in perceptions of hope and opportunities,” she said. “It matters that people care, even if it’s not super easy to measure and hard to achieve.”

Schools, too, are rethinking their approaches to stemming violence.

Security cameras, metal detectors, private security guards and police officers placed inside school buildings come standard in many local schools. But many districts in the past few years have added social workers and youth engagement specialists trained to de-escalate and not sanction altercations during the school day.

Pittsburgh Public Schools and other districts in the county used some of their share of money from the federal Elementary

and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER), which was part of the American Rescue Plan, to add more social workers, fund out-of-school programs, and provide training in restorative practices or ways of solving conflicts that try to repair the harm inflicted.

In the Penn Hills School District, located in a municipality east of Pittsburgh, three students died from gun violence within a month in 2021. It created an urgency around how to support students and create alternatives to violence. Crisis resources were deployed to help students deal with trauma. Long-term changes included hiring consultants to help develop policies for mediating conflicts in school and working with families after school.

The district also changed the model used when suspending students. Instead of a three-day out-of-school suspension, a student is assigned to three Saturdays of tailored programs.

“We’re going to give you specific programming that’s targeted to your needs, partner with community mentors and try to build you up, follow up with you after you complete your three Saturdays and see how you’re doing,” said Penn Hills Superintendent Nancy Hines.

In the Pittsburgh Public Schools, Rodney Necciai said conflict resolution strategies have “evolved tremendously” since 1998, when he became an assistant principal. Part of that approach is to identify risks early, such as when a kid skips class or is chronically absent, and try to work with the student to address the issue.

“It’s trying to figure out interventions and building systems that work,” said Dr. Necciai, now an assistant superintendent. “Restorative practice doesn’t mean no consequence. It means sometimes we’re going to have consequences that look a little different. Every fight isn’t going to be a three-day suspension.”

Violence in school tends to be rooted elsewhere.

“School violence oftentimes begins in the community, and schools become the place where violence makes its way,” said Stanley Thompson, senior program director for Education at The Heinz Endowments, which funds a number of efforts

that are emerging to provide a range of support to students while helping to prevent the violence that threatens the region’s children.

An example is 1Nation Mentoring, which offers programs that take place in school and focuses on building relationships with teens.

“We have an opportunity to tap into these kids when they’re in school and support them, so that when they leave school they’re connected to support. Some people don’t know who to ask for help,” said Kevin McNair, co-founder and executive director of 1Nation, which provides mentoring at the city’s Brashear High School and has received funding from the Endowments.

But while 1Nation works primarily with students who may not have interest in or access to after-school programs, Mr. McNair noted that many young people would benefit from activities and support outside of the classroom.

“A lot of the kids who get in trouble aren’t involved in programs once they leave school,” he said. But because outside of school, safe spaces can be elusive, “youth feel like they don’t have places where they can go to have fun, to be themselves.”

Center of Life, a nonprofit in Hazelwood, has over the years developed a wide menu of services and opportunities for kids and families around music, art and education that has helped it earn support from the Endowments and other funders.

“It’s not always the programs,” said founder and CEO Tim Smith. “It’s building the relationships with them. What they really need is attention and [for us to] show them that we really care about them, give them a sense of belonging, significance, security. What we’ve found is that once that happens, we can talk to them about continuing their education, changing what they’re doing. We can have influence.”

Even having a neighborhood gym, which Hazelwood once had but no longer does, can make a difference, he said. “You’d be surprised by how many lives I saved just from having a gym,” Mr. Smith said. “Just from being able to do indoor soccer or basketball during the winter.”

What the Center of Life does offer the community is a sophisticated space replete with a music studio and mentors willing to work with young men and women to express themselves through the arts. Such programs hit a high note with students.

“It just feels good to be around people that love and have the same passion as you,” said Elijah Hale, 15, a 10th-grader at Perry Traditional Academy, who attends The KRUNK Movement program, Center of Life’s year-round music youth production company for high school students. “I feel more comfortable being here than I’ve ever been.” **h**

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Jay White Digital



Sharnay Hearn Davis, standing and leaning center, and K. Chase Patterson, lower left corner, guide a group of boys ages 9 to 12 in a discussion about pain, healing and forgiveness during the 2017 1Nation Black Excellence Summit at the Jeron X. Grayson Community Center. 1Nation provides mentoring services and support activities to youth in a safe setting.

CREATING SAFE SPACES

Micha Pinnex, 16, a rapper and writer in the Center of Life's student-led, hip-hop music program KRUNK Movement, performs at the community nonprofit's Summer Music Festival & Annual Fund Drive. Micha says his philosophy is, "Change in the world starts with changing yourself."

Image courtesy of Center of Life

