

## CHAPTER 3

# Invest in Credible Messengers and Violence Interrupters



## TRAUMA IN SYSTEM-IMPACTED EMERGING ADULTS

System-impacted emerging adults experience trauma at much higher rates than their non-system-involved peers. A 2020 report examined system-impacted District youth from 2016-2018 and found that these youths are more likely to be housing-insecure, experience family instability and abuse, lack positive experiences with education and learning, and have physical and mental health challenges. Specifically, the report compared system-impacted youth to their non-impacted peers and found the following:

### Housing and Family Instability:

- **10.7%** have **experienced homelessness** compared to 4.6% of their non-involved peers.
- **49.1%** have **reported neglect** compared to 18.9% of their non-involved peers.

### Education and Learning Challenges:

- **50%** were **suspended from school** compared to 13.5% of their non-involved peers.
- **38.2%** were eligible for an **Individual Education Plan (IEP)** compared to 16.3% of their non-involved peers.

### Physical and Mental Health Challenges:

- **6.4%** had a **psychotic disorder** compared to 1.2% of their non-involved peers.

## SYSTEM-IMPACTED EMERGING ADULTS EXPERIENCE SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER TRAUMA THAN NON-SYSTEM-INVOLVED PEERS

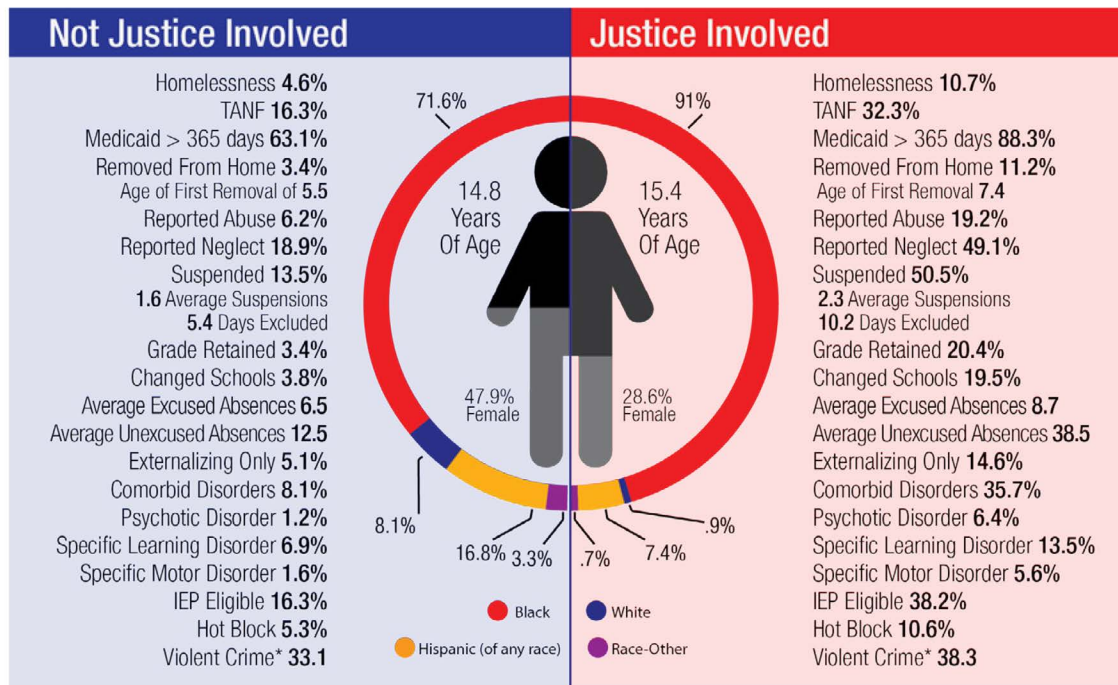


Figure 2: Significant Differences Between Not Justice Involved and Justice Involved Youth

\*Reported incidents within 1/4 mile of residence

Source: Kathryn Sill, Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, A Study of the Root Causes of Juvenile Justice System Involvement (2020).



One of the most important ways to provide trauma-informed and healing-centered restorative services to the District's system-impacted emerging adults is through Credible Messengers and Violence Interrupters. **Credible Messengers and Violence Interrupters work closely and directly with system-impacted youth and emerging adults to support them and promote public safety.** Credible Messengers and Violence Interrupters often come from the same background of having been system-impacted. They understand the experiences and challenges of system-impacted youths and emerging adults and are able to guide them in a different direction. They are knowledgeable about public safety issues in each neighborhood and have the trust of families and individuals, which allows them to intervene to provide care, support, and guidance at a critical juncture for youths and emerging adults.

## CREDIBLE MESSENGER MODELS

In 2016, DC launched a **Credible Messenger initiative** to support system-involved youths and emerging adults under the oversight of the Department of Youth Rehabilitative Services (DYRS). Credible Messengers serve as mentors and are an essential point of contact for these young people. They work with families and local communities, connecting their mentees to available services and acting as a constant resource for young people.

DYRS lists the **guiding principles of Credible Messengers** as:

- Promoting family and community engagement;
- Engaging Parent Peer Coaches, who are Credible Messengers in their own right as they help other families navigate the criminal legal system based on their own involvement and family experiences;
- Connecting young people to services available in their communities;
- Promoting healthy family and community engagement;
- Enhancing the agency's role in city-wide violence prevention efforts;
- Improving services to youth in the community;
- Connecting youths to resources and relationships to ensure their success; and
- Creating job opportunities for DC residents that build on the strengths of natural community leaders (Credible Messengers).

In short, the Credible Messenger program seeks to address multiple factors of instability that so many justice-involved youths experience. The concept came out of a broader effort in New York, the **Credible Messenger Justice Center**. Participants in that program described positive outcomes including **promotion of individual and community healing, empowerment, and effecting change in policy and public safety.**

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*I would say that certain people who are locked up, when they come home, they need a big brother who has been where they were. A lot of people don't like asking for help, but when someone is giving them help, they will listen. A mentor to show them the steps to changing their life, taking them to job interviews, practicing with them the proper way to go to a job interview and just being there for them the whole step of the way. That would help me - that one person to believe in me. - Jamal*



## VIOLENCE INTERRUPTER MODELS

Violence Interrupters work in neighborhoods that experience the highest incidence of violence. They build relationships, promote restorative justice techniques, de-escalate and mediate conflicts, mentor those most at risk of committing violence, and promote peace and public safety. Similar to Credible Messengers, Violence Interrupters are often returning citizens or others who know these neighborhoods from direct experience.

Violence intervention in the District dates back to the 1990s and early 2000s through community groups like **Cease Fire: Don't Smoke The Brothers & Sisters** and the Peaceaholics. These organizations taught new ways of responding to stressors that could lead to violence and were led by those with lived experience and deep understanding of the neighborhoods they served. **Cease Fire** continues this work.

In 2018, two new violence intervention efforts were started by the District's government. The DC Office for the Attorney General (OAG) created **Cure the Streets**, which brought Violence Interrupters to neighborhoods in need. By 2022, Cure the Streets had ten sites across Wards 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. Their **data dashboard** demonstrates strong engagement of Violence Interrupters in priority neighborhoods and regular mediation interventions to support peaceful resolution of conflict. Also in 2018, the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement started a **violence intervention initiative**, which expanded to 22 neighborhoods in the District and contracted with community-based organizations to coordinate efforts.

Nationally, **Cure Violence** is a groundbreaking **public health approach** that treats community violence like a communicable disease – preventable with the right interventions. In partnership with 25 cities, Cure Violence promotes Violence Interrupters as community peacemakers. Through relationship-building, they identify situations that could lead to violence, like unresolved disputes or potential retaliation, and provide support services and interventions to help move neighborhoods away from violence. This strategy has been **rigorously evaluated** in multiple settings and found to be effective at reducing gun violence, saving lives, and changing the culture of communities.



## PRIORITY: INVEST IN CREDIBLE MESSENGERS AND VIOLENCE INTERRUPTERS

While the Credible Messenger and Violence Interrupter programs are making progress, more is needed. Current budget cuts threaten these programs' long-term viability and success. **Stalled action on the Neighborhood Engagement Achieve Results (NEAR) Act** of 2016 has meant that some Violence Interruption programs are either on hold or unevenly implemented. **Nor has the Mayor's Office created the Office of Violence Prevention and Health Equity** the NEAR Act called for. In order for the District to ensure the sustainability and impact of Violence Interrupter programs, it must create pathways for upskilling, education, and promotion and invest in the care of these providers, especially since most employees in these roles are citizens with prior legal involvement. These steps should include:

- 1. Professionalize Credible Messenger and Violence Interrupter roles.** Clarify job descriptions and be cautious about the continual expansion of duties and expectations without adequate resources or compensation. Carefully select, train, and support Credible Messengers and Violence Interrupters so that they are held to high standards and prepared to excel in their roles. Regularly offer professional development through programs such as the DC Peace Academy to increase Credible Messengers' and Violence Interrupters' skills and understanding and help them be more effective.
- 2. Include medical and retirement benefits.** These roles often do not have medical benefits or retirement offerings. In order to signal investment in providers who work to prevent violence, funding to the organizations holding the contracts should include funds for benefits and retirement, and the District should require contract holders to provide these benefits affordably. A review should occur of comparable roles across DC that are considered high-risk and how these roles remain competitive in attracting and retaining employees.
- 3. Provide mental health and trauma-informed support.** Credible Messengers and Violence Interrupters deal with the impacts of violence and trauma on a daily basis, which is not easy. The District should provide services, such as counseling to promote strong mental health.
- 4. Provide pathways to promotion and education.** Provide leadership training and skill development in related fields that can increase opportunities for promotion and upward mobility. In the absence of such pathways, the District will experience continual attrition of these important roles due to burnout and limited opportunities for career progression. Offer funding for Credible Messengers and Violence Interrupters to gain formal postsecondary education in the form of certificates and degrees. Collaborate with colleges and universities in the District and region to support the development and sustainability of career and education pathways.
- 5. Evaluate impact.** Without impact or outcomes data, the case can not be made for the benefit and utility of these programs. The District must develop performance metrics to assess programs and study their effectiveness.



## FIRST STEP: PREVENT ATTRITION AND PAY EQUITABLY

In the short term, the District must act to prevent attrition of these critical providers. Too much is being asked of them, and not enough is given. Provide support in the following ways and help lay the foundation for longer-term investment and sustainability:

- 1. Fund generously and sustainably.** DC needs to ensure sustainable funding for these programs, particularly when federal resources end in 2024, and increase funding when needed to further address community safety. Sustainable funding should also spur the District to move beyond providing one-year contracts to community organizations that lead Credible Messenger and Violence Interrupter initiatives. This should be changed to multi-year agreements in order to provide job security.
- 2. Pay equitably.** Starting pay for a Credible Messenger or Violence Interrupter is about \$40,000 a year or about \$19/hour, which is not considered a **family-sustaining wage in the District**. The work is extremely high-risk, as these providers are in regular contact with neighborhoods that have a high incidence of violence, specifically gun-related violence. The salary should include hazard pay. However, wages are set by the community organization holding the contract, so there is no standard minimum required for paying a family-sustaining wage.



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This is a single chapter from the full report, **Building a Brighter Future: A Plan to Invest in DC's Emerging Adults**. Please visit the [report's landing page](#) to access other chapters and the appendices for each chapter.