

CHAPTER 7

Invest in Families, Communities, and Health





When facing issues of violence, crime, and public safety, lawmakers and District leaders too often look away from the communities and the District’s role in those communities. Instead, they may focus on the individuals without reference to their context and life experiences. That must change. **DC’s communities with historical disinvestment and systemic inequity have been underfunded and overlooked for far too long.** The 2020-2025 YRA strategic plan called for investing in families, communities, and health (see Appendix A).

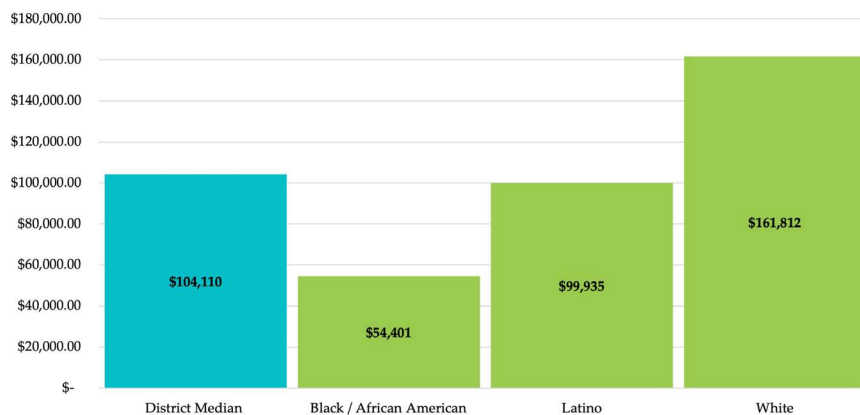
FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND HEALTH NEEDS

Investing in communities is violence prevention and a public good. Addressing public safety issues must include focusing on public health and recognizing the true impact that poverty has on communities. One study found that “juvenile incarceration results in large decreases in the likelihood of high school completion and large increases in the likelihood of adult incarceration,” meaning that strengthening communities must focus on prevention and investment as a way to increase levels of education and decrease levels of crime and incarceration. Family, community, and health support must be present to provide the full spectrum of services to ensure that emerging adults are able to thrive.

POVERTY

In 2023 in the District, there were 13,000 families who were living below the poverty line. Poverty correlates strongly with race, in the District and around the nation. As of 2023, the median household income for Black households in the District was \$54,000, compared to white households, which had a median household income of \$161,000.

WHITE HOUSEHOLDS EARN THREE TIMES MORE THAN BLACK HOUSEHOLDS IN THE DISTRICT



Source: DC Health Matters, Median household income by race (2023).

Poverty is concentrated in neighborhoods that have experienced historical disinvestment. Housing may be subpar or insufficient, with too many people in small spaces. Communities may lack basic food, health, and other service amenities. According to the most recent data available, **32% of DC’s residents experience food insecurity.** Jobs and training may be scarce or inaccessible, as the District has the highest Black-white unemployment gap in the country. Schools, after-school programming, recreation centers, summer camps, and other resources for youth and emerging adults often fall significantly short of their counterparts in higher-income neighborhoods.



TRAUMA

Young people in communities with many unmet needs may experience trauma and instability as they move through childhood and into emerging adulthood. Higher numbers of **adverse experiences correlate with increased interactions with the criminal legal system**. Adverse experiences may include the loss of a parent or close family member, serious illness, abuse, neglect, and having an incarcerated family member. Not only do these deficits emerge as difficult episodes, they can be **transferred from one generation to the next**. Such trauma also impacts emerging adults in other ways. For example, trauma responses associated with past experiences may interfere with a young person's ability to deal with common stressors in the workplace, resulting in strained relationships or emotional reactions. Interactions with the criminal legal system may build on or constitute new trauma that negatively affects employability. Trauma is also associated with **fewer educational attainments, higher incidences of poverty, and poorer mental health**. Urban trauma, specifically, has been described as a **chronic recurrent disease** that manifests itself in both mental and physical symptoms. As a result, these young peoples' needs for increased mental, social, and physical health support are greater and must be addressed alongside the priority areas of housing, education and training, and diversion.

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation to services, amenities, education, and employment may feel limited, unfeasible, and unsafe. Between **22% and 47% of households in the District do not have a vehicle**. Many rely on public transportation; however, emerging adults may be hesitant to use public transportation due to safety concerns and the sense of being too visible and vulnerable in those settings. If resources are not available in their communities, they may not go beyond their communities to access them.

We don't like leaving our neighborhood for anything. If we don't have a grocery store in our neighborhood, we don't go. – Tariq

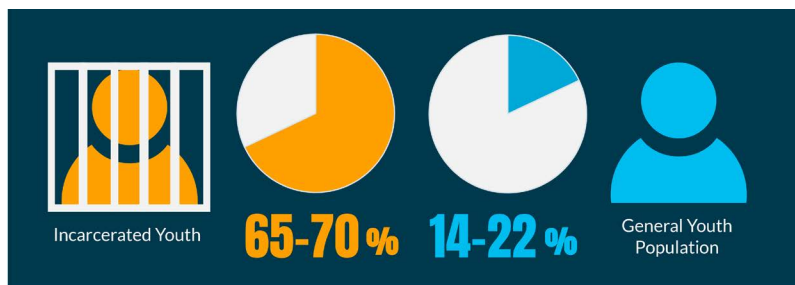
HEALTH

Health is an issue among system-impacted emerging adults. Individuals who are incarcerated have **higher instances of high blood pressure, asthma, cancer, arthritis, and infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, hepatitis C, and HIV** than the general population. Residents and advocates in DC have advocated directly about the need for **better medical care** for residents at the DC jail.

Several key indicators of youth mental health are worsening. A **2022 report** found that 36% of emerging adults (ages 18-25) reported anxiety, compared with 18% of younger teenagers. Additionally, 29% of the emerging adults surveyed reported depression, while 14% of younger teens reported depression. **For youth with system involvement, the likelihood of a mental health disorder can be three times more than their non-incarcerated peers.**



PERCENTAGE OF YOUTH WITH MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS



Source: National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform, Youth Data & Intervention Initiative Report (2022).

A qualitative study of mental health needs in Wards 7 and 8 found **multiple barriers to accessing mental health treatment**, including stigma, lack of patient-centered care, poverty, and lack of social support. The Department of Youth Rehabilitative Services indicated that **more than 90% of the young people in their care had a mental health diagnosis**.

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN PUBLIC SAFETY MODELS

Community public safety investment recognizes that strong communities are safe, healthy, and vibrant. Strong communities are **created among a variety of partners**. It is the antidote to a top-down, punitive approach. Programs must give community partners the opportunity to develop strategies that address unique needs and assets in a manner that most effectively serves that community. Community partners who reflect the populations they serve can be catalysts, creating momentum for change. People directly impacted by the criminal legal system must be central to public safety resource conversations. These relationships – across agencies, communities, and people most impacted by the criminal legal system – are the key to success.

Community-driven public safety investment is defined as “directing public resources to local community-driven public safety strategies that extend beyond traditional law enforcement and corrections players.” This budgeting strategy calls for divesting from ineffective policies and practices while investing in interventions identified by community members. A key component of community-driven public safety is that residents and local stakeholders are empowered to come together, identify concerns, and highlight their needs. It is a partnership between government and the governed, but one that is equal, two-way, and brings all impacted individuals to the table to share their perspectives. Most importantly, this strategy works, making communities safer and empowering residents to get involved in local issues. This reordering of priorities can have a profound impact on relationships, as people overcome skepticism and mistrust to work together on common goals. This is, in short, the very definition of community.

Some examples include **Measure Y/Z** in Oakland, California, which redirected some tax revenue and parking fees to violence prevention programs. The **Credible Messenger Initiative** here in the District invested \$3 million in savings from reduced out-of-home placement of youth into a mentoring program. The **No Cop Academy** in Chicago is a campaign to take the \$95 million budgeted for a new police training academy and invest it in housing, schools, and job training. Colorado provides the **Work and Gain Education and Employment Skills**, which invested \$1 million from the parole budget to award to community-based organizations providing reentry support for people returning home from prison.

LIVED EXPERIENCE: DC'S SYSTEM-IMPACTED EMERGING ADULTS

WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT IN YOUR LIFE RIGHT NOW?

My family is what's most important to me right now. - Dario

My life, my health, and my family are the things that are most important to me right now. These keep me going, and without them, I wouldn't be as persistent as I am. - Deion

Getting my life in order, being more active with my daughter, getting a plan in action, and deciding what I want to do career-wise. - Amir

The most important thing to me is family. - Darius

My daughter. I recently got to meet her for the first time, and she's beautiful. - Micah

My dad, mom, and my family. I never really saw how getting locked up affected them. Recently, I talked to my dad, and he started crying. - Keon

My success is most important to me in my life right now. Rehabilitation. I've been away from the community for a while, so I have to adjust to it and do the right thing. - Lamar

I really need money to support myself. Friends are really important and so is family, even though we don't always get along. - Malik

Stop getting locked up and go do something positive. - Idris

WHO IS MOST SUPPORTIVE OF YOU?

I say my family because since I've been incarcerated, they have been my only support system. None of my friends whom I was hanging with on the streets, none of them have been giving me any type of support. - Jamal

My mother is my biggest support system. - Tariq

My mother. I give all the props to her. Without her, I wouldn't be able to have the mindset, the courage, the strength, the confidence. She taught me a lot and put me in the schools I've been in to see what makes me different as opposed to what I'm around 24/7. - Trevon

My dad and girlfriend are there for me. - Keon

I have a big family, and they all support me. I'm the youngest. - Darius

My mom first, then the YME community as a whole. They really support me. Everyone is pushing me to do better. Good is not good enough. They are pushing me to do even more. - Tyree

My mother. She has my back no matter what, no matter the mistakes I make. She knows I'm not a bad person. Everyone needs that in their life. - Lamar



PRIORITY: INVEST IN FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, AND HEALTH

- 1. Work with community partners.** Collaborating with community partners is essential and will enable the District to go much further in strengthening communities. This begins with connecting with and listening to communities to understand their needs. Develop formalized communication pathways and partnerships between community groups, city and county leaders, state government, and business groups. Work with community partners to identify investment priorities, then make fiscal investments to support their work.
- 2. Commit to sustainable funding.** Identify and establish sustainable funding sources to ensure support for both immediate and long-term investment. Sustainable funding is essential to better enable community partners to plan, grow, and intentionally respond to current and future needs in a consistent and contiguous manner.
- 3. Invest in violence prevention.** While investing in system-impacted emerging adults is essential, investing in young people, communities, and those at greatest risk of being exposed to violence is a key form of strengthening communities. Supporting children and youth through robust services, after-school programs, extracurricular activities, highly accessible recreation centers, mentors, and tutors can go a long way. Credible messengers and violence interrupters have repeatedly noted the need for a recreation center in each individual neighborhood that is open regularly and for long hours, with programming that is relevant and appeals to children and youths.
- 4. Measure impact.** Set metrics for expectations of what good looks like from District agencies and community partnerships. Measure impact and produce annual or regular reports that can be used to inform budget decisions and prompt changes and improvements.

FIRST STEP: PROVIDE FAMILY AND HEALTH SERVICES FOR EMERGING ADULTS

- 1. Assess existing services for emerging adults.** Examine, improve, and hold accountable existing services for emerging adults. Evaluate the existing health needs of emerging adults and assess the extent to which available services are meeting those needs and, in areas where they may be falling short, whether it is due to lack of capacity, insufficient resources, lack of access, suffering for ineffectiveness, or other factors.
- 2. Account for family needs in all existing emerging adult services.** Take a multi-generational approach to services that allow families to receive similar services. Invest in family units so they can provide strong support for emerging adults. Recognize that emerging adults may have an expanded definition of family beyond their nuclear family to incorporate their children and significant others.
- 3. Prioritize health services.** Address the impact of lived trauma with mental and physical health services. These services should address substance abuse, mental health, and physical health.



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.