

# **MAPPING THE LANDSCAPE: A COMMUNITY-WIDE INVENTORY OF PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS FOR PREVENTING YOUTH VIOLENCE IN A RURAL COUNTY**

*Presented by Sebastian F.G. White and Karen L. Porter, Ph.D. to the Council on Undergraduate Research's "Posters on the Hill" session, United States Congress, Washington, April 2003.*

*Sponsored by the Rural Justice Institute and the United States Department of Justice*

In spring 2003, researchers from the Rural Justice Institute at Alfred University conducted a regional resource inventory for the Coordinating County Services project, a Department of Justice-funded project aimed at linking resources and agencies in rural Allegany County in order to improve detection of troubled youth and intervention for at-risk populations.

This project documented these linkages using a diagram to map the "services terrain" as it intersects home, neighborhood, school, and faith-based organizations. The research needed to construct the map involved locating the major points of contact youth and their families have with outside institutions or situations external to the home. We identified eight: neighborhood, school, faith-based organizations, health services, social services, law enforcement, probation, and the courts.

For each institution or place on the map, we analyzed data on the problems experienced there. We also provided information on each venue that attests to the linkages between places on our diagram.

This project represented a first attempt to locate in a single presentation a community-wide assessment of both the problems and the possibilities for improving intervention and service delivery for at-risk youth.

The following summaries depict some of the types of challenges facing the people of Allegany County in various contexts and underscore the continuing need for the establishment of creative collaborations between agencies and resources.

## ***LAW ENFORCEMENT***

### ***Problems***

- Adolescent Arrests, Property Index Crimes—11.9 per 1000 youth ages 13-15 (<state rate).
- Adolescent Arrests, Violent Index Crimes—2.9 per 1000 youth ages 13-15 (<state rate).
- Arrests for Drug Use/Possession/Sale/DUI—75 per 10,000 youth ages 10-20 (<state rate).

- DWI Arrests—44.1 per 10,000 youth ages 16-20 (>state rate).
- Intoxicated Youth Involved in Auto Accidents—19.6 per 10,000 youth ages 16-20 (>state rate).<sup>5</sup>
- Only 16% of practitioners agree that the criminal justice system deters juvenile delinquency; 30% were undecided.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Prospects*

- Law Enforcement agencies in the County participated in the formulation of and agreed to adopt the “Law Enforcement Protocol” for use in response to domestic incidents. It was developed by the Allegany County Domestic Violence Collaboration Project involving representatives from all police agencies, social services providers, victims advocates, and the District Attorney’s office.
- Law Enforcement personnel have attended special training sessions provided by local and state agencies providing domestic violence victim services.
- A special response team will be on call to accompany police officers when responding to domestic incidents.

### **COURTS & PROBATION**

#### *Problems*

- Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS) Cases Opened for Services—25.7 per 1000 youth ages 10-15 years (>state rate).<sup>5</sup>

#### *Prospects*

- A Youth Court program links area middle school and high school students with judges, area attorneys, and representatives from the District Attorney’s Office.
- According to survey results, 19% of practitioners in the county thought that family court does a good job with troubled kids and their families who appear before the court, though 40% were undecided on the job family court is doing.<sup>3</sup>

### **SOCIAL AND HEALTH SERVICES**

#### *Problems*

- Adolescent Pregnancies—37.2 per 1000 15-19 years (<state rate); Infant Mortality (Three Year Average)—3.6 per 1000 live births (<state rate); Low Birth Weight Births (Less than 2500 grams)—8.2% of live births: (> state rate); Children and Youth in Foster Care—8 per 1000 children ages birth to 17 (<state rate); Indicated reports of child abuse and maltreatment—28.4% of total reports received (<state rate).

- Among practitioners in the county whose clientele is under the age of 18, two thirds of them see clients, most or all of whom have experienced divorce, relocation, or some other family disruption. Two-thirds of practitioners who see clients under age 18 report that most or all of their clients lack parental supervision or discipline. In addition, 53% of practitioners see clients, most or all of whom experience problems at school.
- According to the Census, while 17% of all families with children in the county were classified as poor, 44% of female headed households with children under 18 and 60% of female headed households with children under the age of 5 were classified as poor.<sup>4</sup> The percentage of county children and youth living below poverty is 26%, higher than the state rate. 11% of children and youth, ages birth to 17 years, receives food stamps.<sup>5</sup>

### *Prospects*

- The practitioners' survey demonstrates a high level of interagency collaboration. For example, a county-wide consortium of professionals from allied fields in operation for nearly a decade meets regularly to oversee cooperation between agencies and to conduct program evaluation. Their goals are to implement a domestic violence intervention and prevention system to enhance safety for victims and their families, hold abusers accountable for their actions, and create a climate of zero tolerance for domestic violence. The Consortium coordinates services provided by a number of agencies, including law enforcement, social services, medical, judicial, and victim services.

## **HOME AND NEIGHBORHOOD**

### *Problems*

- According to police reports, nearly 3/4 of domestic incident calls involved married couples or intimate partners. Over 60% of the cases were witnessed by other family members, typically children.<sup>1</sup>
- 15% of a sample of high school students reported poor discipline in the home, meaning they thought they weren't likely to get caught drinking alcohol, skipping school, or carrying a weapon by parents. 1/4 of the high school sample were found at risk for community disorganization, defined as describing their neighborhoods as crime-filled, places where fighting takes place, and/or marred by vacant houses and graffiti. 1/5 answered in such a way that they were classified at risk because they perceived community laws and norms to be favorable to drug and alcohol use.<sup>2</sup>
- According to a practitioners' survey, 68% of respondents agreed that the overall problems facing county youth are more serious than they have ever been. Another 67% believed that families today are not being held accountable when children break the law. Fully 88% agreed that families need to do a better job of raising kids these days. And 84% felt that irresponsible parenting is a major factor in youth violence.

### *Prospects*

- “Communities That Care” is a trademark for a planning system that communities can adopt to scientifically evaluate the levels of risk and protective factors that indicate alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse among area youth. In Allegany County, the Children and Youth Unified Services Partnership, under the leadership of the Allegany Council on Alcoholism and Substance Abuse, began this work with a survey of 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> graders in the county. The Allegany Council members, in conjunction with the Unified Services Partnership, local schools, and the wider community, are using survey results to develop a strategic plan for preventing alcohol/drug abuse and youth violence.

## **SCHOOLS**

### *Problems*

- Annual Dropouts, Public Schools—3.4% of students in grades 9-12 (<state rate).
- H.S. Graduates Intending to Enroll in College—73.6% of public school graduates.
- 17% of county residents do not have a high school diploma.
- Children Receiving Free/Reduced School Lunch, Public Schools—46.7% children K-6.<sup>5</sup>
- 16% of the high school sample reported few opportunities for participation in special projects or activities outside the classroom; only 12% of the middle school students felt the same.
- According to a survey of practitioners in the county, only 14% agree that the schools are handling juvenile delinquency appropriately while 32% were undecided about the job the schools are doing handling troubled youth.<sup>2</sup>
- According to a national survey of public school students in grades 7-12, the potential for lethal violence varied by location of residence: 70% of rural students said they knew someone who could bring a gun to school; 34% said they could get a gun, compared to 23% of those who live in urban areas and 20% who live in suburban areas; and 44% of rural students said there are students at their school capable of lethal violence, significantly more than suburban and urban students.<sup>6</sup>

### *Prospects*

- Linked with the Children and Youth Unified Services Partnership, one school district in the county has announced a “Call to Action.” A committee of concerned citizens, including parents, teachers, social and health services providers, law enforcement, law makers, and students is exploring strategies to increase safe and enjoyable activities for teens, mentor students, support parents, enforce rules that promote a safe environment, and coordinate related events in an effort to demonstrate the community’s commitment to its youth.

- Schools reach out to parents through several ongoing programs. Parent Education Programs provide special programs, workshops, and support groups to promote healthy families and child abuse prevention. Some programs provide home visitation.
- In several communities in the county, a police officer conducts D.A.R.E. training with elementary schoolchildren.

## **FAITH-BASED GROUPS**

### *Prospects*

- Two “para-church” programs are in operation in the county. These programs provide services for hundreds of county youth each year, involving them in center-based activities as well as various field trips. According to the practitioners’ survey, 54% of respondents felt that religious organizations do a great deal of good for area youth. Furthermore, 28% of practitioners have formal contacts with the church-based youth groups in the county and nearly three-fourths of respondents have informal contacts with church-based youth services programs.<sup>3</sup>

## **REFERENCES**

1. “A Detailed Summary of the Domestic Violence Incidence Reports Filed by the New York State Troopers in Allegany County, 1996-1999,” a report to the ACCORD Corporation, August 17, 2000, Karen L. Porter, Rural Justice Institute, Alfred University, Alfred, NY.
2. Allegany County Resource and Data Book, Children and Youth Unified Services Partnership, provided by Allegany Council on Alcoholism and Substance Abuse, Inc., and “Communities That Care.”
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4. Allegany County Data Book, 2002
5. New York State Touchstones/KIDS COUNT 2002 Data Book
6. “Lethal Violence in Schools: A National Survey,” Final Report, Edward Gaughan, Jay Cerio, and Robert Myers, August 2001, Alfred University, Alfred, NY.

### **ABOUT THE RURAL JUSTICE INSTITUTE**

The Rural Justice Institute is a research unit of Alfred University committed to helping improve the lives of rural residents by encouraging scholarly research, collaboration between social service agencies, and effective outreach by members of the University community. The Rural Justice Institute is funded by the United States Department of Justice and Alfred University.

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