



Youth Safety and Well-Being

In the summer of 2021 The Columbus Foundation carried out a design sprint with Columbus youth in an effort to better understand how young people were feeling about their own safety and security in their neighborhoods.



THE PROBLEM

As gun crime picked up at the start of summer 2021, we wanted to understand how young people in Columbus were faring. We sought to learn how young people were making sense of the increased violence and how it was impacting their lives or day-to-day activities. After getting a better sense of how they were feeling, we wanted to work with young people to co-create potential solutions that might address the drivers of increased violence.

THE APPROACH

The design team was composed of four community members: two recent high school graduates and two restored citizens who had committed crimes when they were teenagers. Also joining the team as designers were Morgan Vien and Angie McKee Brown. Heather Tsavaris and Mark Lomax, II led the project for The Columbus Foundation. Over the course of the project, the team conducted approximately 15 hours of interviews with young people throughout Columbus. The community co-designers were key in getting the young people we interviewed to share openly and honestly about their experiences navigating their neighborhoods and keeping themselves safe.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Throughout the interviews, all of the young people we spoke with discussed how carrying guns or participating in crime and gang culture is seen as a way to stay safe themselves and/or gain respect or clout from their peers.

“If I’m a 14-year-old and I want to be known, I just kill the baddest dude on the block. Then I’m known.” —20-year-old, explaining how to feel safe

“They are inflicting harm on others so that they can feel safe.”—18-year-old teenager explaining what people do when they’re afraid

When we asked young people, why do you think other people carry guns or why do you carry, below is some of what we heard:

“For the attention. Just to fit in. They tote guns for fun.”—18-year-old Columbus City Schools (CCS) graduate

“Maybe it’s about power. Feel like they are something they are not. It’s a fit in type thing.”—17-year-old CCS student living in Linden

Beyond carrying guns, many of the interviewees spoke about how they “hide” to stay safe. “Hiding” could look like going directly to school and then to work and then home. “Hiding” meant limiting time on the streets as much as possible. Young people seemed to feel the more they kept themselves out of public, the more control they had in maintaining their safety.

“I am 18. I don’t go to parties, I don’t hang out with a lot of people. You have to watch who you are close with and who you are around... In the neighborhood I live in, there are shootings or somebody getting robbed. It’s about staying protected. I stay at home and do not let people know where I live.”—18-year-old describing how she tries to stay safe

“I was the target of a drive-by. I ride a bus and have to know what streets I am on. I slink down in my seat... I never sit with my back to the door. I never give anyone my address. I go to the Little Caesars to be picked up.”—18-year-old CCS graduate

Some of our co-designers shared how poverty was linked to their and other’s youth crime.

“90% of people in prison—money being the main reason that they were in there. Nobody enjoys selling dope. It’s dangerous. No one wants to do that, [but] being broke is paramount to being a leper. You at the bottom, ready to do anything to not be there. It does not seem like a crime, it seems like the obvious decision. What is the path that gets you out of this situation... [you will do anything] to get out of this situation.”—20-year-old who had previously served time in prison

WHAT SOLUTIONS WE CO-CREATED

When our team of young people and designers thought about the poverty that drove some of the crimes and how lucrative the “street path” could be, we wondered if it might be possible to offer an equally lucrative opportunity that focused on taking skills one would need for the street and showing young people how those could be redeployed into traditional fields, like real estate, investment, or stock trading. The prototype included young people being selected to participate in a multi-week academy, being paid for their time--the same amount they might be making on the street--and then being connected to jobs. With the prototype, we were trying to determine if young people might be interested in getting the same amount of money but choosing a “safe career.”

- When we tested this concept with young people, their number one response was: “This is cool and the money is interesting, but how would you get your clout?” Our team thought these responses suggested that taking a “street path” was about more than just making a significant amount of money. In many cases, young people revealed it was also about being respected by your peers or your community, which was a pathway to safety.
- Because we heard so much about the need for clout and respect, we wondered if there might be a creative, safe, and credible way that young people could attain clout and recognition without carrying guns or participating in gangs.

- One concept that emerged was a “Give Good Tickets” scheme. What if young people could be “called out” for doing good? What if someone witnessed a good deed they did, like holding open a door for someone, and they received a “ticket” in return. What if a certain number of tickets could earn you a Cedar Point Pass or tickets to a sporting event? When we tested this concept with young people, we were surprised by how overwhelmingly positive they were about it. Indeed, they liked it so much they started playing around with features, wondering if “the most wild kid” could actually be the ticket giver. What if he was challenged to see others doing good? How might it change his world view to be on the lookout for good?

Below are young people’s responses to this idea:

”You get negative reinforcement for doing something negative. Beat somebody up- suspended- they get more popular. Always something that happens when you’re bad. An incentive to do something good would be good. You could give it to the kid doing the wild stuff [to give it away to others], especially because that person has the clout. It would be higher magnitude. They will seek out good stuff in other people.”—17-year-old CCS student

“That’s not a bad idea. If you do something legendary you get a ticket. How would it feel to be the one to give someone a ticket? It would probably feel good in your soul. What about give the most wild kid all the tickets to give out? This is smart because they will have an attitude change. They would have to pay attention to the good and it would make their mind feel good and they would want to keep doing this.”—18-year-old CCS graduate

IMPACT

Findings from this project have been shared across the city – with community leaders and social service organizations.

The most significant, immediate impacts were those felt by the community co-designers, many of whom had experienced violence in their lives. Some of these individuals were directly impacted by murders that happened during the project. Despite this, each participant saw the project through to the end, telling us that their participation in the project made them feel like part of the solution.

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