Youth Safety
Co-Design Project Summary

In early 2024, the Central Ohio Teen Collaborative (COTC)— comprised of Columbus Metropolitan Library, Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Ohio, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Ohio, YMCA of Central Ohio, Columbus Recreation and Parks Department, Junior Achievement of Central Ohio, and AmeriCorps—approached The Columbus Foundation about engaging in a human-centered design project to help understand how young people were thinking about their safety, security, and development and how they were spending time outside of school.

Seven young people joined as "co-designers" for this project. The role and purpose of a co-designer is to provide lived expertise throughout the process and provide feedback and comments on what we think we're learning and insight into what can be created. The Columbus Foundation also conducted empathy interviews with other young people over multiple weeks alongside co-designers to lay the groundwork of understanding of the problems to address.

In-person sessions were then held with COTC implementers and co-designers. This included two days of ideation, prototyping, and testing the first round of "solutions."

With co-designers, The Columbus Foundation conducted additional ideation sessions to iterate the first round of solutions, created additional prototypes, and conducted more testing rounds to refine learnings.

WHAT THE TEAM HEARD FROM PARTICIPANTS

- Safety is always top of mind. Young people feel a need to be "ready" for whatever might come, often times citing violence.

- Many prioritize isolation to stay safe. They prefer to be out of sight in order to stay safe.

- Their days are dictated by walkability. If they can't get somewhere by walking, they often do not go.

- Family ties are complicated, and siblings/cousins figure prominently.

- Basic needs did not seem to be met for many of the young people we spoke to.

- Trauma was prevalent and readily shared in interviews.

WHAT THE TEAM LEARNED

Young people are constantly toggling between four things: **staying safe, fitting in/being connected, being known, and not being seen.**

The team distilled what they learned into two key insights:

1. Security guards seem to be doing a job not done by others for young people. For many young people, security guards seemed like a guaranteed safe adult who they could always count on. Young people didn't necessarily always love all security guards, but they were grateful for the consistency and connection they provided. Sercuity guards, in their uniforms, also provided an obvious safe touchpoint.

   "I'm safe at the library because there's security guards."

   "I hate that man, but he's the reason I'm here... why I'm safe."

   "I trust security guards do their job even though they may have attitude."

   "They all hate the security guard until something goes down and then they are like ducklings hiding behind him."

   "That security guard is strict. People don't like her but she's good at her job."

   "The security guard at the library is my favorite. We recommend books to each other and have become like best friends."

   "The security guard Joe gives me anything he can find to eat because my lunch is at 11. He knows I'm hungry when I get here."

2. Young people prefer visible security.

   "When I see security that makes me feel safer."

   "I come to the library because they have metal detectors here."

   "I'd like it better if the Rec Center had a metal detector."

   "I feel safe at school because of the metal detectors. Same at library."

   "Can't nothing happen to me at school. There's a lot of teachers that won't let stuff happen and security, metal detectors. I feel safe there. There's a lot of people."

   "I feel safe at school. They got metal detectors and security."

   "I feel really safe at school. Because of metal detectors and security."

WHAT PROTOTYPES THE TEAM DEVELOPED

Looking at this feedback, we looked at prototyping around the idea of **SAFE ADULTS**.

How might we make safe adults more obvious?

How might we extend the reach of safe adults?

How might we provide safe adults with more resources to better serve young people?

IDEAS:

1. **RENT A SECURITY GUARD**

   We heard young people say they trusted security guards; could we extend their reach and make them "on-call" for when young people felt like they needed them most? We wondered: what if a young person could have a security guard escort them to places they need to go? Escort them home? To school?

2. **SECURITY GUARD NETWORK**

   We heard that young people appreciated the role security guards played for them; we wanted to see if there might be benefit in connecting security guards across places to provide more continuity in young people's lives?

3. **GIVE "GOOD TICKETS"**

   We heard that many security guards would hand out snacks or sometimes cash to kids they thought might need it. This seemed to happen in impromptu ways. We wondered if a more systematic way of giving young people resources—such as "good tickets"—would both help young people and give security guards more levers to use.

SAFE ADULTS: KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Security guards felt like the ultimate "safe adult"

- There is a uniform and predictable rules of engagement

- Security Guards have a job to do that serves young people well when they need it most

- Each young person could easily detail the job description of a security guard and tell a good one from a bad one

- The job is expected and connected to a place

- Young people may not always love the people in the role, but they do love the job they do for them (it's not a nice to have; it's a must have)

- Putting security guards in unexpected places (i.e. on the street, on the walk home) was not welcomed by young people

- Young people were not willing to trade feeling "weird" (i.e. having a security guard escort home) with feeling more "safe" (i.e. having a security guard escort home)

- Young people welcomed security guards giving out "good tickets"

CONCLUSION/NEXT STEPS

The young people we engaged with are concerned about their safety and are constantly making decisions based on this. Visible security measures put young people at ease. Young people know there is risk involved in their day-to-day lives and that 100% safety is impossible.

They recognize and appreciate security that improves, if not completely mitigates, the risk, though. Security guards play an important role in young people's lives because of their predictability, clear job tasks, and the vitalness of the work they do. Young people toggle between wanting to "be seen," as any teenager might, and wanting to hide to stay safe. This is applicable to physical, social, and psychological safety.

Young people are navigating honor and shame culture; sometimes they feel like they need to engage in "beef" in order to maintain their honor no matter what scaffolds/skills have been put in place to support them alternatively.

1. **Amp Up Security Guard Net**

Set up a "Safe Adult" Academy

- Train security guards in youth development concepts.

- Allow security guards to connect to each other (beyond buildings) to share their experiences and provide continuity for the young people they work with.

- Facilitate best practice sharing for security guards across organizations.

- Allow security guards to inform other staff about connecting with young people.

- Place more security guards where you want youth to be. Add security guards to places like YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs, Rec Centers, etc.

- Systematically resource security guards with non-monetary resources to distribute. Resources could include food vouchers, snacks, sanitary products, etc.

2. **Make Security More Visible**

Have obvious metal detectors in spaces you want young people to be. Metal detectors for EVERYONE means that young people can breathe a bit easier, because they think there is less of a chance of guns being in that specific space.

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