
Youth Development

Description

Monroe County is fortunate to have a wealth of productive opportunities and resources available to young people outside of school. These include formal after school activities (music, clubs, organized sports), recreational activities and classes at local agencies (YMCA, Boys & Girls Club, etc), libraries, parks, museums, and music and art centers. Indiana University and Ivy Tech provide cultural enrichment opportunities as well. The school corporations and the Chamber of Commerce sponsor school-to-work programs and internships that provide some students with valuable work experience. Many faith-based organizations also have youth development activities. Through the Lilly Endowment, CAPE is sponsoring asset-building projects by a number of community youth-serving agencies. (For a listing of current projects see www.monroe-county-cape.org.)

Participating in these types of activities can help develop valuable competencies and social skills while contributing to self-esteem and a sense of purpose. Research shows that youth who are involved in activities with caring adult role models and mentors are more likely to complete school, do better academically, make healthier life choices, and engage in fewer destructive activities.

Yet not all youth are able to access these opportunities equally. Dance, music lessons and other classes often have instructional fees. Some youth may live in outlying areas and have difficulty getting transportation to activities. Working parents may not have the time or means to take youth to classes, lessons or sports. While some parents and peers may not encourage youth from participating in educational activities, others are simply often not aware of existing opportunities.

Youth living in households experiencing socioeconomic ills may suffer from a lack of basic necessities (food, sleep), or be subject to the effects of anxiety, stress, and other unhealthy behaviors and choices. Truancy, involvement with the juvenile justice system, and other self-destructive behaviors can further alienate youth from the people and activities that could help them follow a more productive course.

Youth development in our community should encourage and support all youth in their efforts to succeed academically and to take advantage of the many opportunities for engaging in productive activities outside of school. Low academic attainment and a lack of life skills and competencies have a demonstrable, negative impact on quality of life and future earnings potential. Education and participation in productive activities can help “break the cycle” of persistent poverty. Special efforts should be made to reach out to youth and families in crisis, to those who are underserved, to those who are at-risk, and to remove or mitigate barriers to participation and achievement.

Monroe County Fast Facts

- There are 21,664 persons under the age of 18 living in Monroe County (2000), which represents 18% of the total population.
- There are 12,156 households with children (25.9%).
- Monroe County has 4,971 children living in single-parent households.
- About 366 individuals, or 3% of the population between the ages of 16 to 19, are high school drop outs.
- Just over 20% of children live in neighborhoods where 20% or more of the population is below poverty.

For additional statistics please see the Supplement.

Key Findings

Finding affordable after-school programs for children and recreational activities for teenagers was a greater problem for lower-income families:

Finding affordable after-school programs for any children in your household?	Major Problem	Minor Problem
general households	4%	15%
households with income < \$25,000	14%	22%
households with income < \$15,000	20%	20%
provider clients	16%	16%

Finding recreational activities for any teenagers in your household?	Major Problem	Minor Problem
general households	3%	14%
households with income < \$25,000	8%	22%
households with income < \$15,000	1%	28%
provider clients	22%	17%

Key informants identified the following challenges to youth development:

YOUTH FROM FAMILIES EXPERIENCING POVERTY

- There are not enough appropriate, consistent role models.
- Basic needs, like hunger and family disruption, need to be addressed for youth to maximize their learning opportunities in school and elsewhere. For some students, the free and reduced lunch programs available during the school year may be their only daytime meal.
- Organizations are frustrated at the growing need due to increasing poverty as families lose their jobs and face crises. They find themselves having to spend too much time on fundraising instead of programming.
- Many believe that the community should focus on continuing to strengthen efforts and fund programs and organizations that are already working instead of creating new programs.
- Organizations want to reach out by including activities for other cultures, especially the Asian and Spanish-speaking populations, but do not have multi-lingual staff.
- It is difficult for some agencies to find volunteers. There are more single-parent households, and many adults have less time to commit to such activities. Short-term volunteers are helpful, but do not provide the longer-term role models and mentoring some youth need. For example, programs like the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and Big Brothers/Big Sisters require a substantial commitment for volunteer training due to the nature of the work.
- Child and family services are not seen as a funding priority at state or federal level. There is a lack of leadership and comprehensive community resources that prioritize supporting families and children, including families at risk.
- Transportation to and from activities is an issue, especially for youth in outlying areas of the county.

Program Area Needs

- There is a shortage of affordable after-school activities and tutoring, especially between the hours of 3 pm and 6 pm. Tutoring is viewed as a means of helping low-income youth bridge the academic gap that separates them from some of their peers. Locating more programs (including counseling) at the schools would be convenient for families, and possibly more comfortable for families who know the school, although these programs would probably be more expensive to provide.
- Organizations working with youth believe some of the most pressing needs are for health services (wellness and weight control, healthy choices), the supervision of youth by adults outside of school hours, and more positive adult mentoring/role modeling. Some who see youth dealing with violence and abuse believe that there are not enough opportunities for youth to connect with natural and other environments.

- Some would like to see more activities for youth ages 13 - 18, including apprenticeship and internship opportunities with businesses and the arts community.
- Greater support and recognition of the challenges of parenting is required, along with efforts to develop parenting skills, regardless of income level.
- Some organizations would like to see greater involvement of youth in planning activities to help them develop organization and leadership skills. Many are seen as lacking life skills and having passive attitudes toward their futures.

Community Resources

- The Monroe County Step Ahead Council is a collaborative effort among agencies that promotes safe and stable families, provides a vehicle for communication and cooperation among service providers, and advocates for the children of our community.
- The YMCA provides youth activities and educational opportunities that promote a healthy lifestyle and a positive attitude, as well as preschool services and health-related parenting classes.
- Monroe County's Wrap-Around program can be effective for some families experiencing a multitude of challenges, but is currently meeting only part of the need. Its ability to provide comprehensive family services is limited by the need to protect confidentiality, and in some cases, the inability of participating agencies to agree upon the appropriate course of action.
- The Indiana Prevention Resource Center conducted a study (PREVSTAT) of 6th, 8th, and 10th grade students in Indiana. They found that 3pm-6 pm is the time when these students are most likely to use drugs and therefore need after school prevention programs.
- The Boys and Girls Club offers a range of supervised after-school activities including tutoring and access to computers for homework and skill building.

Places to Start

- Expand the current capacity of high-quality mentoring and youth leadership programs, including a focus on low-income youth, and promote areas of professional interest. These programs should include opportunities for youth to be involved in planning and implementation.
- Create stronger networks of the organizations and agencies serving youth, including the juvenile justice and social service sectors. This network could help to recruit informed and committed volunteers, improve information sharing mechanisms and provide greater coordination and communication, while allowing agencies to maintain their individual identities and missions. A major

focus should be making sure that families and youth have current information about available programs and opportunities. Two such sources are the IRIS Manual (www.bloomington.in.us/iris/) and the City of Bloomington's *Youth Directory* (www.city.bloomington.in.us/cfrd/).

- Seek additional sources of potential adult volunteers, including IU students and the elderly.
- Schedule activities for youth ages 13 - 18 during the mid to late afternoons.
- Seek ways to provide transportation for youth to participate in activities, and concurrently look at more accessible locations for programs and activities.
- Develop scholarships for low-income youth to participate in high quality, productive activities available in the community.
- Commit to making more activities and programs available to youth from other cultures who may not speak English as a primary language.