

Youth Perspectives on the Schools, the Community and Themselves:

Results from the Lynn Middle and High School Survey

Summary of Findings

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About the Lynn Middle and High School Youth Survey

The Lynn Middle & High School Youth Survey is part of United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley (UW)'s work to engage and mobilize the Lynn community in a comprehensive, community change effort. This initiative aims to improve community-level indicators, such as third-grade reading proficiency scores, graduation and poverty rates, by bringing together all segments of the community - businesses, providers, political leaders, parents, schools and youth - to spark ideas, gather input, and create a vision for the community's future. UW believes that for true change to happen, everyone needs to play a role in the change process.

In this spirit, the Lynn Middle & High School Youth survey was developed during the summer of 2011 in collaboration with 30 Lynn youth. The survey development process began by first engaging youth in a focus group discussion to identify issues relevant to the youth of Lynn, which served as a guide for designing the questions to be asked in the survey. Youth then met four times over the summer to review the survey, test it, and distribute the survey to their peers. In September of 2011, UW engaged the Lynn Public School administration and relevant principals in helping to further disseminate the survey to youth enrolled in Lynn Public Schools. Finally, in November of 2011, a diverse group of 25 youth, including many of the youth who had initially helped to design the survey, gathered for a meeting to hear survey results. The youth who participated included both males and females, and youth representing all grades from 6-12, as well as two Lynn youth attending community college. Youth were able to see detailed survey results, provide feedback, and offer a more in-depth perspective to some of the findings. This helped ensure that the results were indeed on-target for Lynn youth and enabled the evaluators to get information "beyond the numbers."

What topic areas did the Lynn Middle and High School Survey include?

Youth were asked about...

- ✓ Their personal strengths and aspirations for the future
- ✓ Quality of their relationships with peers, parents, teachers and other adults
- ✓ How they are spending their out-of school time, and access to programs and other supports
- ✓ Their perceptions of educational, community & safety, and health issues
- ✓ Ideas for what they need to succeed
- ✓ Hopes and ideas for improving their community

Lynn Middle & High School Survey Results

The National Institute on Out-of-School Time at Wellesley College analyzed the results of the Lynn Middle & High School survey using both quantitative and qualitative analysis. These analyses suggest four key findings:

Key Findings

1. Lynn youth report many internal strengths and high aspirations for the future.
2. Lynn youth perceive many formidable challenges in the community ranging from the incidence of gangs, crime, and drugs to concerns about teen pregnancy, peers dropping out of school, and bullying.
3. Lynn youth perceive some immediate supportive relationships, but other external supports, programs and resources, in many cases, are more limited.
4. Lynn youth are invested in the community and have many ideas and solutions for creating a better Lynn.

Who responded to the Lynn Middle and High School survey?

A total of 1,881 youth completed the Lynn Middle and High School Youth Survey representing 27.6% of all middle and high school youth enrolled in the Lynn Public Schools. Youth responses were collected from youth attending 12 Lynn schools, including all public middle and high schools, 4 parochial schools, and 1 charter school. The sample was large and diverse—including nearly equal numbers of boys and girls, both middle (31%) and high school aged (68%) youth, and East and West Lynn neighborhoods. Youth who responded to the survey represented all major race/ethnicity categories, reflecting the diversity of Lynn youth enrolled in the public schools.

The sample was large and diverse and reflected the racial/ethnic profile of Lynn youth enrolled in the public schools.

Racial/Ethnic Profile of Lynn Youth Survey Respondents Compared to Youth in Lynn Public Schools

Race/Ethnicity	Lynn Youth Survey Sample	Actual Lynn Public School Population
White/Caucasian	25.7%	24.5%
Black/African American	16.8%	12.4%
Hispanic	46.7%	49.4%
Asian	11.6%	9.9%
Native American	1.6%	0.4%
Multi-racial, Non -Hispanic	2.6%	3.3%

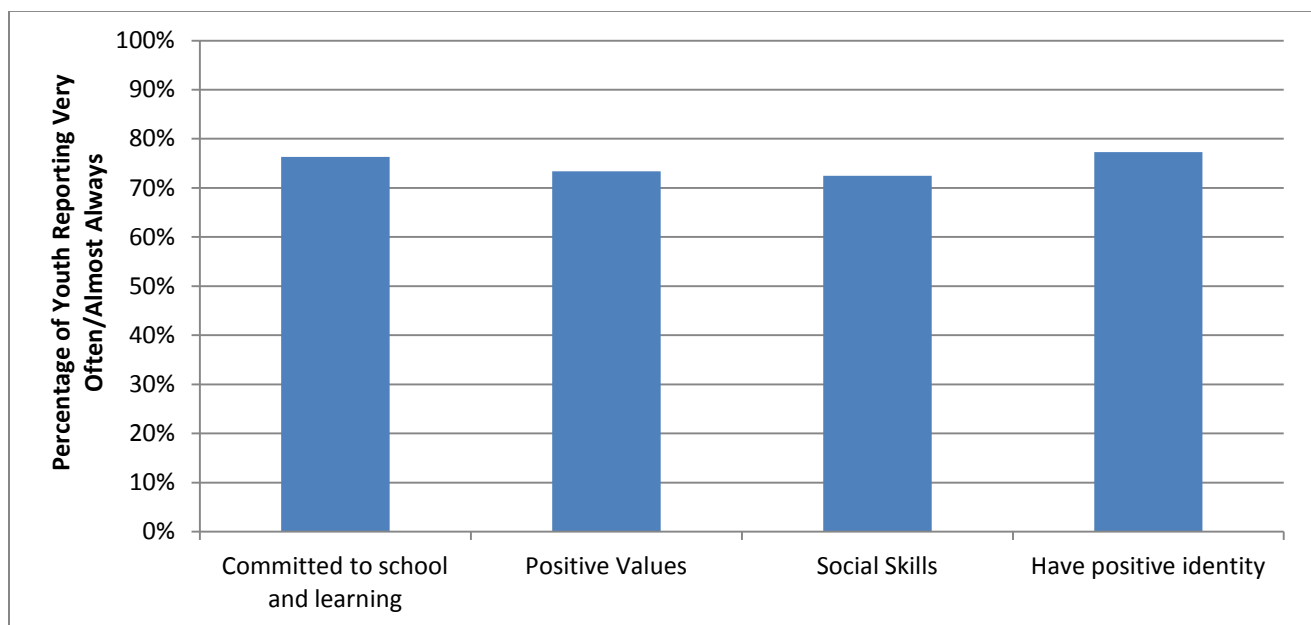
Key Finding 1:

Lynn youth report many internal strengths and high aspirations for the future.

A. Internal Assets

Research suggests that young people who possess particular internal strengths or *assets* are more likely to be resilient and better able to overcome adversity (Werner, 2000)¹. When asked to rate their internal assets, Lynn youth perceive themselves as having many strengths. For instance, 73% of youth reported that they are “committed to school and learning” and 74% report having a “positive identity and hope for the future”. Other internal strengths reported by youth include strong social skills, such as the ability to make decisions, resolve conflicts and understand other cultures (70%); and positive values, such as responsibility, respect for others, and social justice (71%). An exploration of any variations in youth’s self-perceptions by age or race/ethnicity yielded few differences among youth; however, males reported somewhat lower internal assets compared to females in all areas except positive identity.

**Percentage of Youth Who Report Internal Assets
Very Often or Almost Always**



1: Werner, E. E. (2000). Protective Factors and Individual Resilience. In J. P. Shonkoff & S. J. Meisels (Eds.), *Early Handbook of Childhood Intervention* 2nd Ed. (pp. 115-132). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

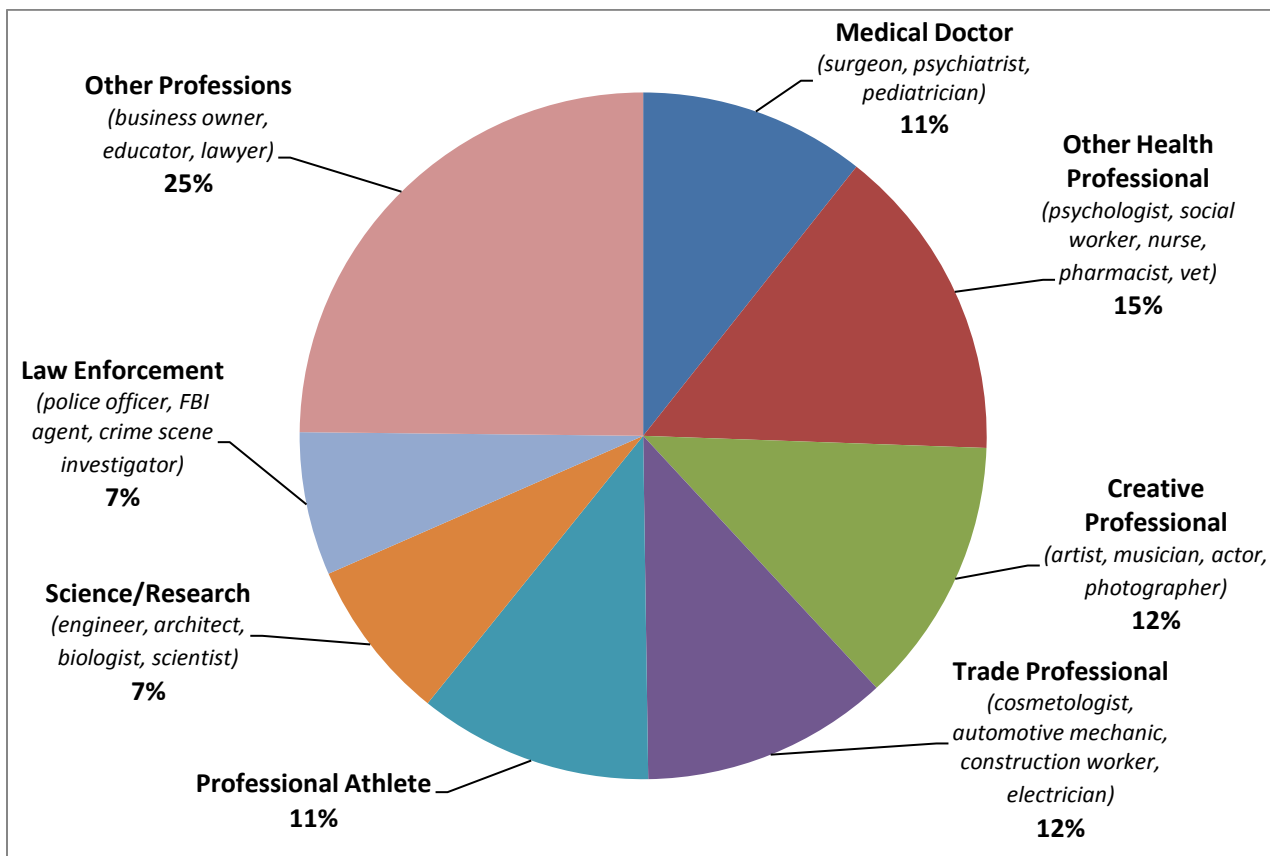
B. Youth's aspirations for their future

Youth were asked to share their thoughts on their own future by answering the question “What would you like to be when you grow up?” Youth responses reveal that the vast majority of Lynn youth have high aspirations for their future, with ambitious professional interests that in nearly all cases will require post-secondary education and training ranging from a two-year associates degree to a medical degree.

There are many things that I have in mind. Although my main strength is in music, I am profoundly interested in either mechanical or biomedical engineering.

- Quote from Lynn Youth

What would Lynn youth like to be when they grow up?



Key Finding 2:

Lynn youth perceive many formidable challenges in the community.

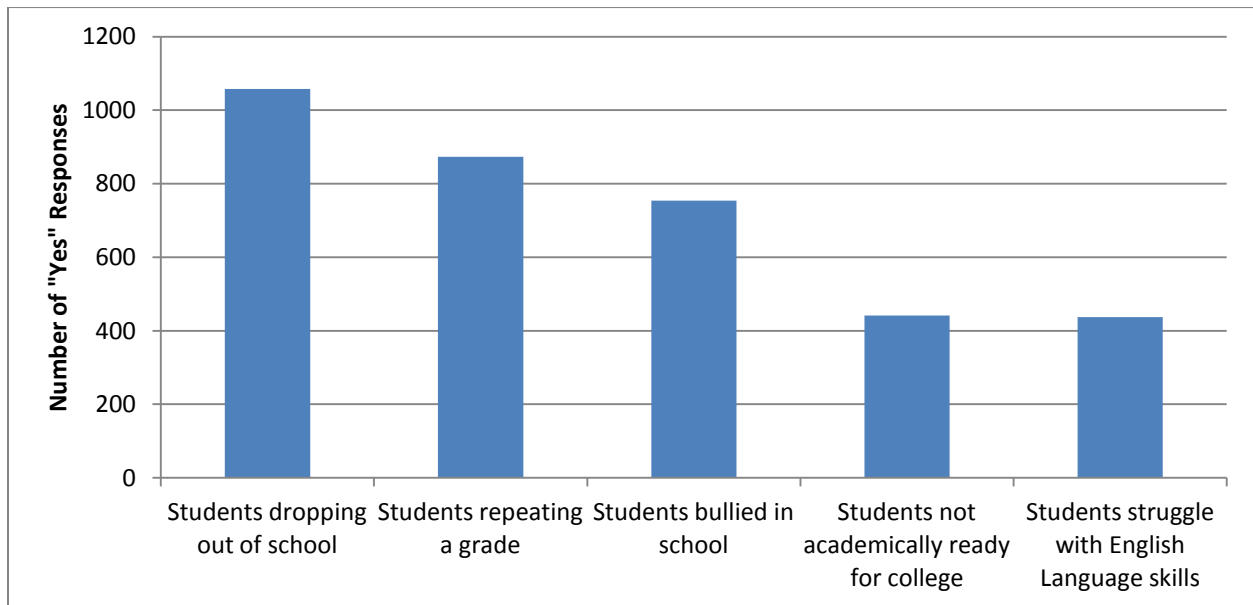
Youth Perceptions of Education, Community & Safety, and Health Issues

Youth were asked “Which problems do you think are the most urgent to address in Lynn?” Responses suggest Lynn youth perceive many formidable challenges ranging from the incidence of gangs, crime, and drugs to concerns about teen pregnancy, peers dropping out of school, and bullying.

A. Education Issues

When asked about perceived community educational issues, youth ranked youth *dropping out* and *repeating a grade* as their top two concerns with *bullying* as a close third.

Youth’s Top Ranked Educational Issues



Trends in youth comments suggest that youth have other important concerns about education in Lynn. Some youth reported that they are surrounded by other youth who are unmotivated and this can make it hard to concentrate and do well academically, particularly in classrooms with too many students and teachers who are not always able to effectively manage youth behavior. Others, while recognizing the challenges faced by their teachers, still perceive their learning environments as unsupportive due to teachers who are not setting expectations high enough; not using engaging teaching strategies that are suited to their learning styles; and not providing enough access to extra academic support. Some youth raised concerns about how youth involvement in drugs and alcohol and the prevalence of teen pregnancy affects their educational experience.

Teachers need to be more understanding, but not easy.

-Quote from Lynn Youth

What do youth believe they need to succeed in school?

When youth were asked to rank the top five educational resources they need to succeed in school, the following five categories were consistently selected across all subgroups of youth.

Youth's Top Ranked Priorities for *What they Need to Succeed in School*

- Newer books and better materials
- Teaching styles that adapt to various student learning need
- After school homework help
- More in-school electives (e.g. arts, music, and theater)
- More hands-on curricula

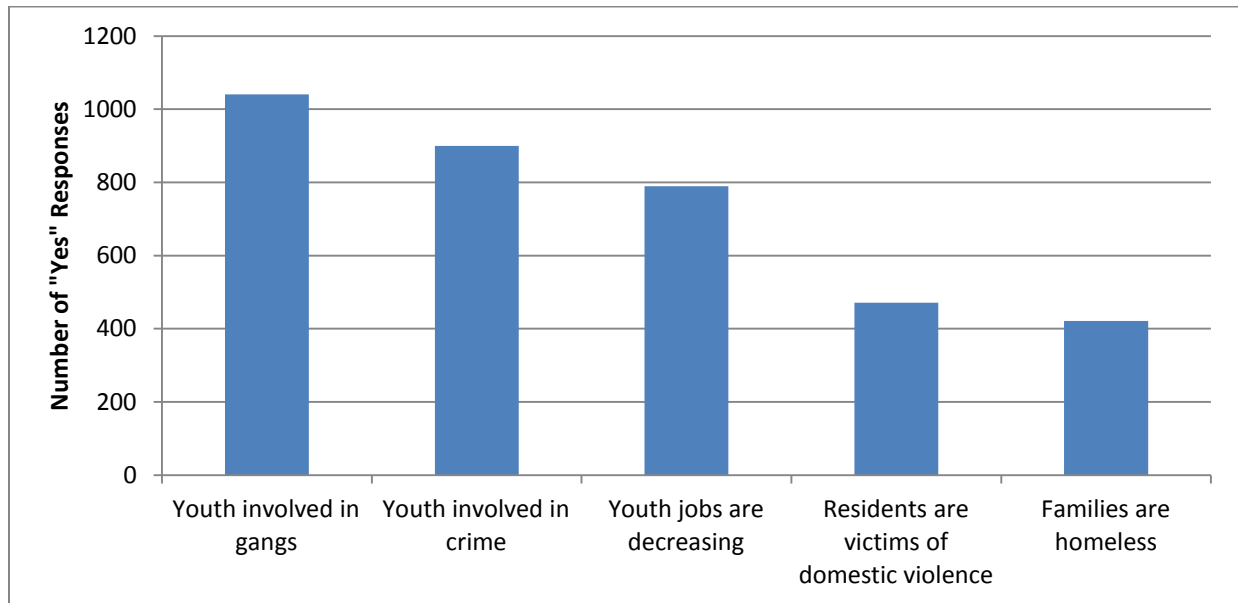
Other Educational Improvements Suggested by Youth

- More understanding teachers who set higher expectations
- Less crowding (e.g. more schools, fewer students per class)
- Better school lunches
- Safer schools and less bullying
- Classrooms that are less distracting, more conducive to learning

B. Community & Safety Issues

When asked about perceived community and safety issues, youth ranked youth *involvement in gangs*, and *crime* as their top two concerns. *Decreasing youth jobs* was a close third for all youth and it was the number two issue for high school aged youth.

Youth's Top Ranked Community & Safety Issues



Other community and safety concerns raised by youth include: drug and alcohol use; bullying; the community's appearance and reputation; and the need for youth to have more opportunities for something fun and active to do after school.

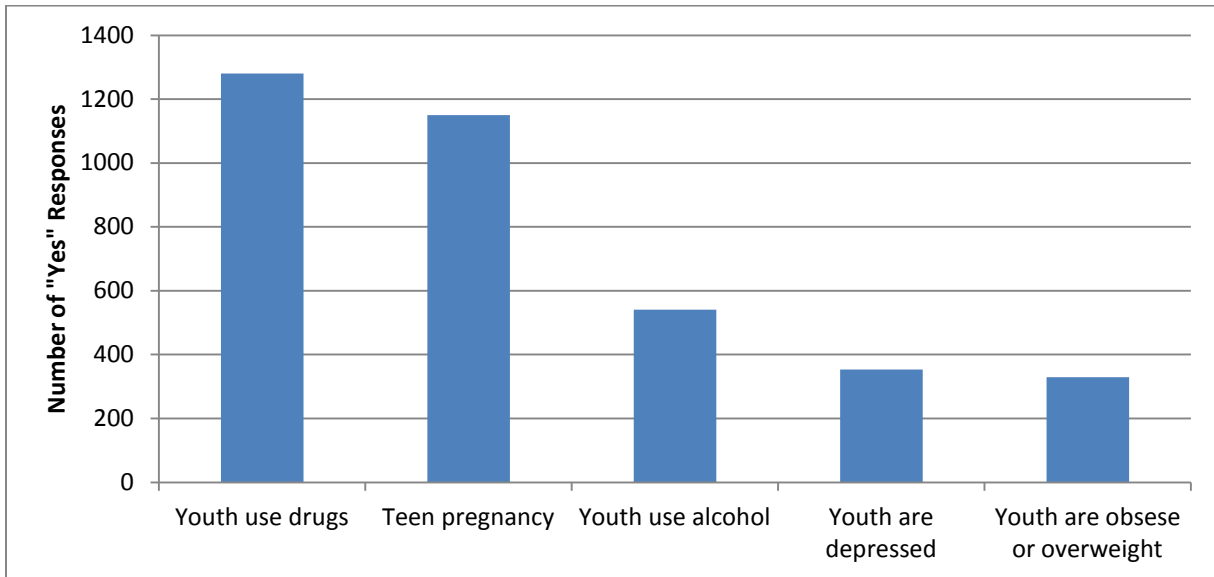
When youth jobs decrease it gives kids in Lynn less of an opportunity to experience work, and feel as if they are doing something right. Jobs can also be time consuming--in a good way--to occupy the teen's time so that they don't get involved in unhealthy things, such as drugs, fighting, and gangs.

- Quote from Lynn Youth

C. Health Issues

When asked about perceived community health issues youth ranked *drug use* and *teen pregnancy* as their top two concerns. These two categories were consistent across all sub groups, with females and black youth ranking teen pregnancy as their number one concern.

Youth's Top Ranked Health Issues



Trends in youth comments suggest that youth see a complex and adverse relationship between health issues whereby one health challenge contributes or exacerbates another to create a negative spiraling effect in youth's lives. In particular, many youth expressed concern about the number of girls becoming pregnant, and how this leads to depression, drug use and ultimately, dropout rates. Other youth commented that violence, weight concerns, peer pressure and stress from school are some other health concerns. Overall, health issues may not be as important to youth as education and community and safety issues since far fewer youth elected to share additional comments, concerns and ideas on this topic.

When girls are pregnant or already have a baby, they are depressed but won't admit it and use drugs and alcohol to try to drain their problems away.
- Quote from Lynn Youth

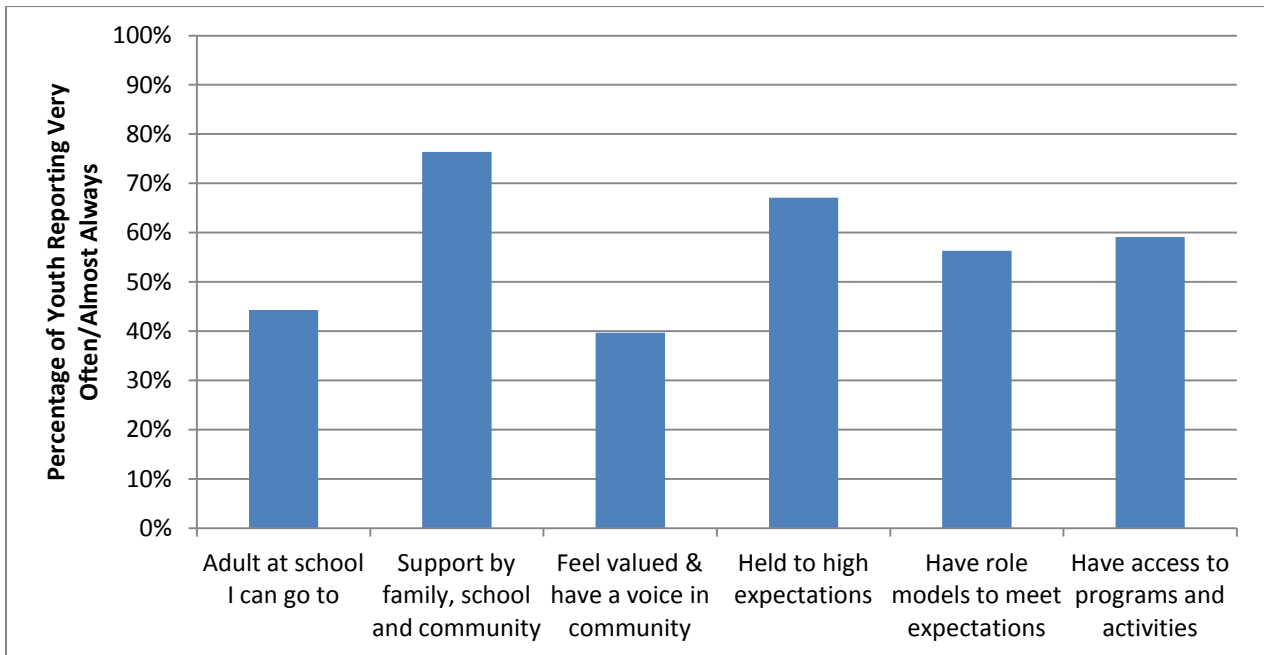
Key Finding 3:

Lynn youth perceive some immediate supportive relationships, but other external supports, programs and resources, in many cases, are more limited.

A. External Assets

Research in the field of resiliency suggests that young people need both internal and external assets in order to overcome adversity. Youth were asked to rate the strength of key external assets—or supports—across six categories. Overall, youth rated external assets lower than internal assets (see page 4). For instance, 60% of youth report not feeling *valued or having a voice in their community*. Over half of youth feel that they do not *have an adult they could go to at school when having trouble*. There were a number of differences in youth reports of external assets by gender, age, and race/ethnicity. For example, middle school aged youth, females, and whites perceive themselves as having greater external assets than high school aged youth, males, and other races. Asians report the lowest external assets, compared to other races, across all 6 external asset categories.

**Percentage of Youth Who Report Having External Assets
*Very Often or Almost Always***



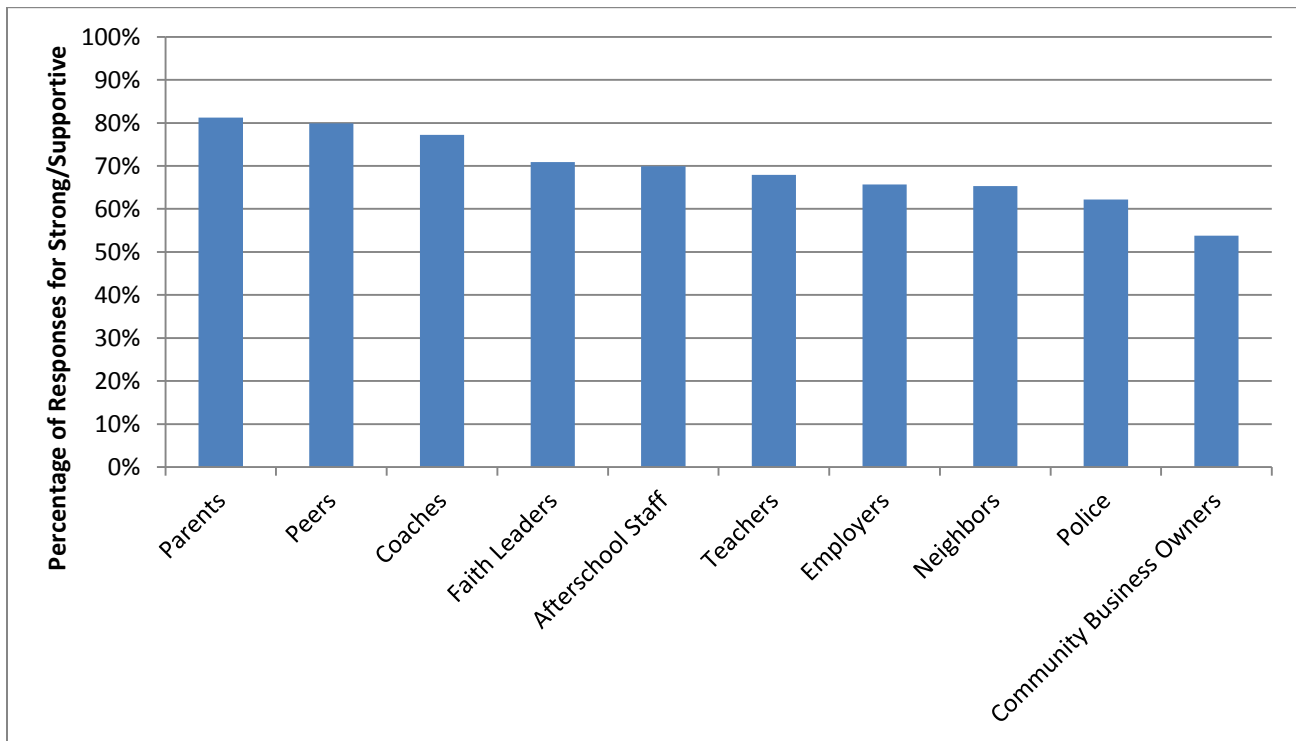
Key Finding 3: Lynn youth perceive some immediate supportive relationships, but other external supports, programs and resources, in many cases, are more limited.

B. Supportive Relationships

Having the opportunity to form lasting, supportive relationships with caring adults is among the most critical of the external assets for youth. Lynn youth were asked to rate the strength of their relationships with peers and adults.

Survey results suggest that immediate relationships, such as those with parents and friends, are strong and supportive for the vast majority of youth surveyed. A smaller sample of youth reported on other adult relationships. Some of these relationships were relatively strong, such as with coaches (77%), faith leaders (71%), and after school staff (70%). Ratings of relationships with other adults such as teachers, neighbors, police, and employers were somewhat lower, but, for nearly two thirds of youth, were also considered “strong and supportive”. The strength of relationships with community business owners was rated the lowest, with nearly half of youth reporting strained relationships. This was especially true for high school age youth. Overall, middle school youth reported more strong and supportive relationships with adults than did high school aged youth with differences ranging between 6 to 19 percent lower for these older youth. This difference was particularly true for relationships between high school youth and police with nearly half reporting strained relationships.

**Percentage of Youth Reporting Strong/Supportive Relationships
With Parents, Peers, Teachers, and Other Adults**



Key Finding 3: Lynn youth perceive some immediate supportive relationships, but other external supports, programs and resources, in many cases, are more limited.

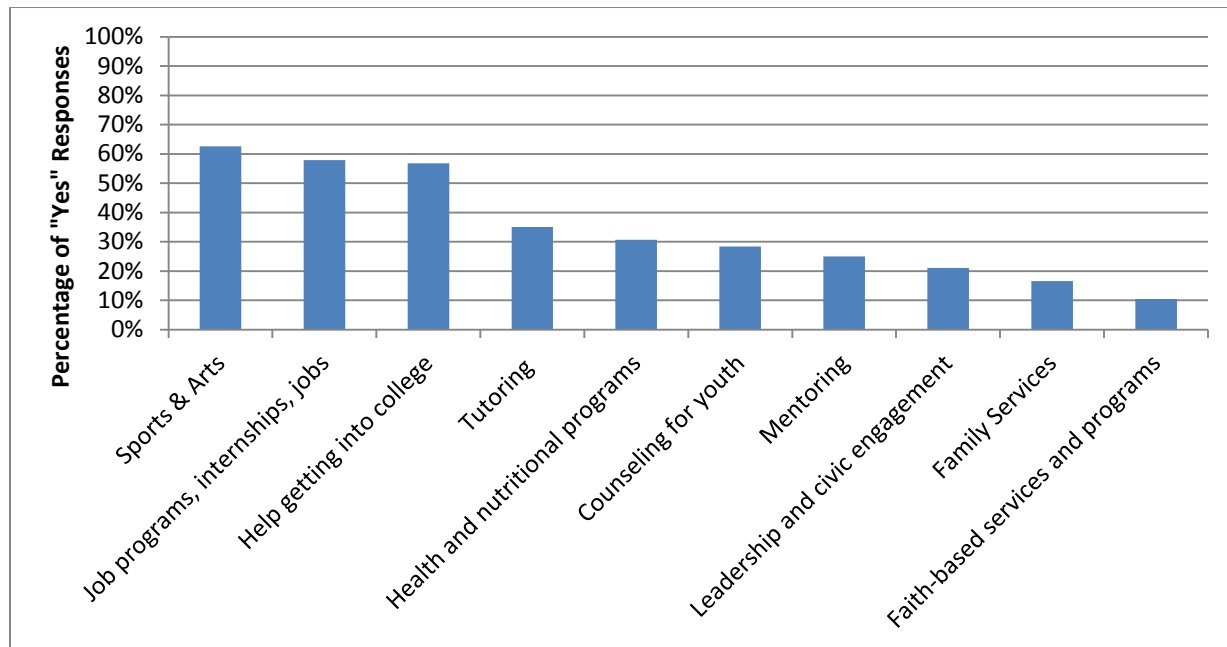
C. Access to Out-of-School Time Activities, Programs & Places

Many youth believe that Lynn does not have enough out-of-school time programs and recreational facilities to offer youth a positive alternative to risky behaviors. In fact, creating more out-of-school time opportunities was among youth's top three priorities for improving the community.

There are not really a lot of places for teens to go to after school, like a Boys and Girls club and other stuff like that. If there were more places, maybe teens wouldn't be in gangs or get into crime here.
- Quote from Lynn Youth

When youth were asked to rank community services they need to succeed, youth reported the need for *sports, arts, and cultural activities; job readiness programs, internships and jobs; help getting into college; and tutoring*. These top 4 categories of desired community supports were consistent across all subgroups, with slightly different priorities for some groups.

Percentage of Youth Reporting Community Services Needed to Succeed



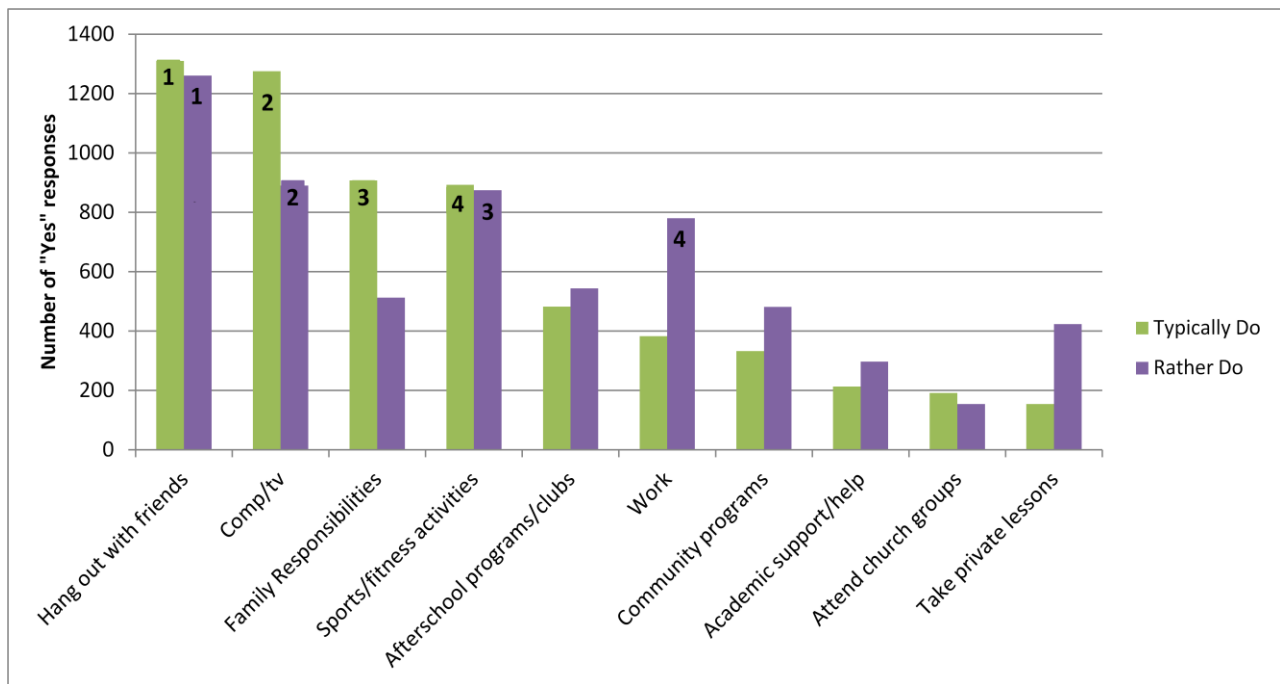
Youth comments suggest a strong interest in adding more homework help; health, wellness, and nutrition programs and prevention programs for drugs and alcohol, teen pregnancy, and bullying. Trends in comments made by youth suggest that *diminishing youth employment* is a particularly big concern, and 42% of youth report that they would like to be spending their out-of-school time working. Other youth would like to see more local recreation options, such as a movie theater, mall, and pool.

Key Finding 3: Lynn youth perceive some immediate supportive relationships, but other external supports, programs and resources, in many cases, are more limited.

How are youth spending their out-of-school time?

Youth were asked about the activities they do during after school hours. The top four activities include: hanging out with friends, going home to computer/TV, family responsibilities, and playing sports/fitness activities. Other activities youth report doing after school include sleeping and homework. When youth were asked what they would *rather* be doing after school, *hanging out with friends*, remained the top priority for youth. While *going home to play on the computer or watch TV* remained the second priority, the number of youth choosing this as a preferred activity dropped, while time spent in sports/fitness activities moved up to the third spot, from the 4th ranked position. Finally, while youth currently spend much of their after school time *fulfilling family responsibilities*, nearly half of youth would rather be *working*. Few differences were found among gender, age range, and race/ethnic subgroups.

What activities do you do/want to do most often after school?



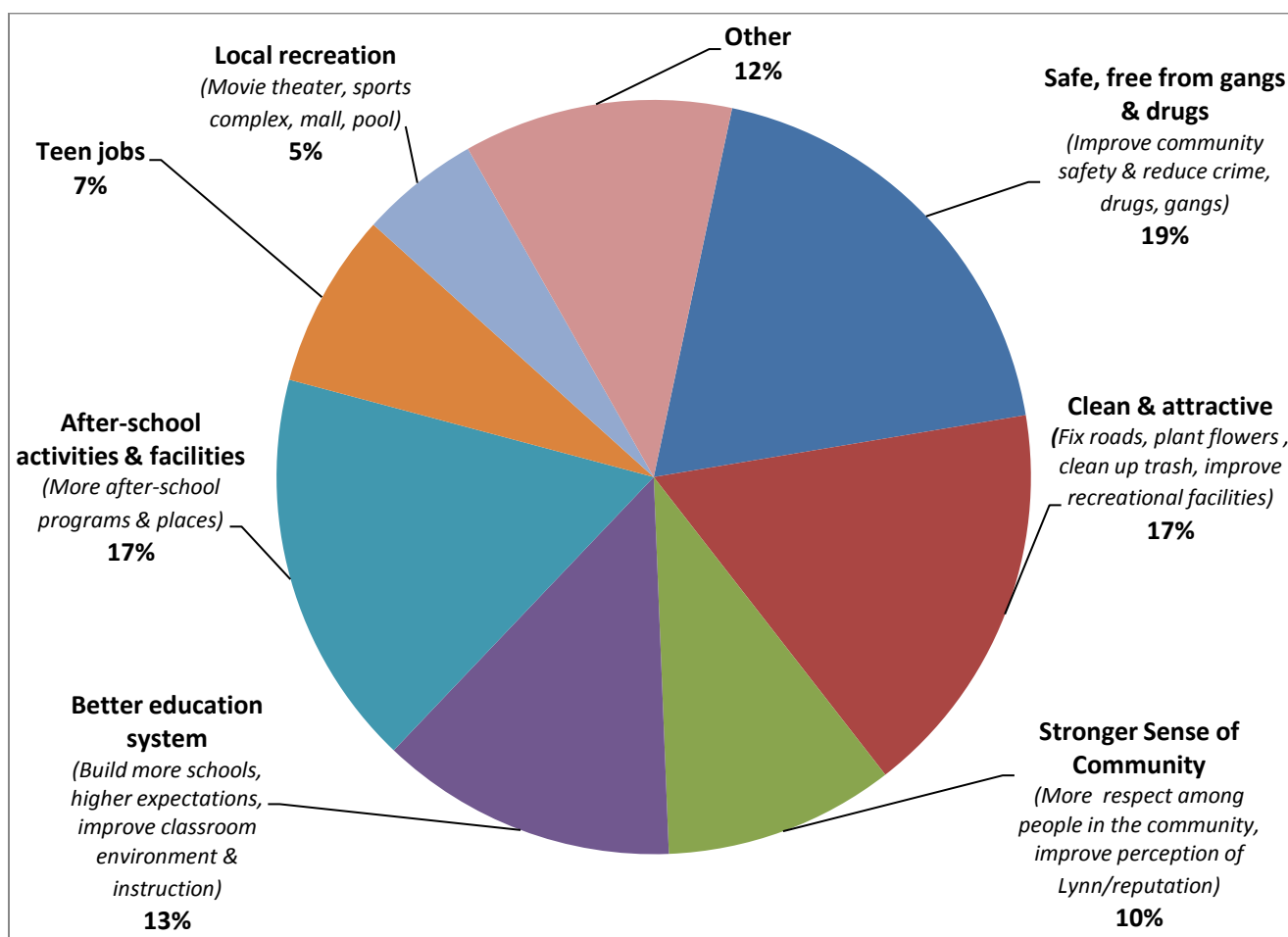
Key Finding 4:

Lynn youth are invested in the community and have many ideas and solutions for creating a better Lynn.

Youth's Ideas and Solutions for Changing Lynn

Youth were asked "If you could change one thing about Lynn, what would that be?" Nearly 3/4 of youth's suggestions fell into just 4 main categories—revealing a high degree of consistency in what youth would like to see changed in Lynn. Creating a safer community with fewer gangs and drugs was youth's number one priority, followed by cleaning up Lynn to help make it more attractive and give it a better reputation. Creating more out-of-school time opportunities and making school improvements were youth's other top priorities. Quite a few youth offered more than one solution, bringing the total number of solutions to 2,064. This extremely high response rate, and the community-minded nature of so many comments, suggests that youth have a keen interest in improving the community.

If you could change one thing about Lynn, what would that be?



Where do we go from here?

The Lynn Middle & High School survey has enabled us to hear from nearly a third of youth enrolled in the public schools. The high degree of consistency in youth survey responses across age groups, gender, and racial/ethnic groups, helps us to gain a clear picture of the strengths, concerns, and challenges experienced by Lynn's youth. The survey results also show us that many Lynn youth are invested in the community, and have many ideas for creating a better Lynn. Yet, the majority of young people who answered the survey report not feeling valued and do not believe that they have a voice in the community. Given these survey results, there appears to be an opportunity for harnessing youth interest, and engaging youth as partners in Lynn's comprehensive community change effort.

I would change the streets and clean Lynn up. We have a beautiful city but because of the way it's been treated it looks like a bad city. I would do that to make it safer in Lynn for our children. They play in the parks and if they see weed, alcohol, or broken glass they get a bad influence. I want to change that and honestly that's what I've been trying to do. I see this as an opportunity to make a difference ... please make a change.

- Quote from Lynn Youth